

**A Faith That Works: “The Christian and Trials, pt 2,” James 1:9-18
BCF 2010-06-13**

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:9-18 ESV)

This is the second part of one section dealing with trials, from verse 2 to 18.

Background: who were they... Jewish believers in the Messiah Jesus, who once lived in Jerusalem, came to faith, and were now relocated elsewhere. Why were they scattered... initially due to persecution by the larger orthodox Jewish community who did not accept that Jesus was the Messiah (AD 32-33, onward, Acts 8). Also famine came upon that area and economic decline in AD 45-46 (Acts 11), about when this letter may have been written. I believe this letter was written before the Jerusalem council of AD 49, making it one of the earliest NT books. Why they were experiencing trials... they were a small sect of Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah, a believing minority within a larger minority. Socially and economically they were at a disadvantage - they were displaced, marginalized, and being taken to court and scorned for their faith (2:6, 7), and oppressed by wealthy landowners (5:1-6).

“When he writes about ‘trials,’ he means hardships and sufferings that Christians encounter even as they are following the Lord.” (Douglas Moo)

What is this today? “Trials of various kinds” would include such things as job loss, sickness, loss of a loved one, having a spouse leave you, injustices toward you, slander, etc. But also those trying circumstances that are experienced because we are Christians. For example, a medical professional dismissed because he/she did not want to be involved in an abortion; a scientist being dismissed from a foundation because of his view of creation; or being rejected from groups because of your moral standards as a Christian. Not far from our border, in a church-run drug rehab...

MEXICO CITY – Getting treatment for drug addiction has become a dangerous activity in the northern state of Chihuahua, where gunmen allied with drug cartels have staged numerous attacks on rehabilitation centers, including a particularly vicious massacre on Thursday night that left 19 men dead, the authorities said Friday. *We don’t know all the reasons for this, but it is reasonable to assume there were some young men there trying to make a break with gangs and drugs and coming to trust the Lord.*

Further, if we are new creatures in Christ, having new desires and intentions from God, then merely trying to live in the old creation - “the world” - will make for trying situations...

2 Peter 2:7-9 and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his

righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment...

For example, men who are seeking to be sexually pure in a sensual world, women being faithful to the marriage covenant when it would be easier to find someone else; to be speaking well when others are gossiping; or speaking truth when everybody else is lying; to work hard when others are cheating; to be straightforward and not play the office politics to get ahead; to use finances to give and to bless others rather than to spend and gratify self.

Don't tune out just because, "things aren't so bad—I'm not going through any major stuff." Realize: all of us a) are going through trials, b) will go through trials, or c) know someone who is going through trials. And we need to be equipped to be an encouragement to those going through deep waters or a dark night of the soul.

Last week, part 1. David highlighted the first four responses to trials:

- Adopt a joyful attitude. ("consider", 1:2)
- Realize the benefit, that testing produces perseverance. ("know", 1:3)
- Persevere in the process. ("finish", 1:4)
- Ask God for wisdom regarding how to respond ("ask", 1:5-8)

NB. *"What is promised here is wisdom, not knowledge. The spiritual wisdom promised is the ability to make good and God-honoring choices in our lives, and especially the ability to use the trials that God sends into our lives and to turn them into spiritual growth."* (David Kingston)

Today, four more points on how to survive (remain steadfast) in your trials, part 2...

- Get a right view of your circumstances. (1:9-11)
- Understand God's ultimate purpose in your trials (1:12)
- Know the source and dynamic of your temptations. (1:13-15)
- Don't doubt the absolute goodness of your God. (1:16-18)

1. Get a right view of your circumstances (1:9-11)

As Jesus taught it, a number of ironies exist for his people: those who are last will be first, those who seek to save their lives will lose them; and you must die in order to live. (Cf Luke 9:24-25) In other words, sometimes, down is the way up. **"Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation..." (1:9)** [exaltation = his high and favored position]

Of what does this exaltation exist? We learn that, *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."* (1:12) They would be objects of "more grace"... (James 4:6) *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."*

Those going through serious trials feel forgotten and unnoticed by God. If we respond humbly to our trials we actually receive more care and more grace, whether it is felt or not. He knows our fragility and vulnerability and gives greater grace. Further: we are united to Christ and by him will be raised from the dead, spared eternal judgment, and will share in his inheritance in the new heavens and new earth.

Conversely, some have felt that if you are materially rich in this world it is a blessing and sign that God is rewarding you. Not necessarily:

“...and [let] the rich [boast] in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.” (1:10-11)

We should not be quick to assume because someone is suffering they have done something wrong and God is against them, nor should we be impressed with those who have wealth and power. James has more to say about this in chapter 2 and 5.

James does not qualify the rich as to whether they are believers or unbelievers. And in a sense it doesn't matter, because what is said applies to both: “your power and beauty will soon fade; what you pursue will be in vain,” or another way: “you will leave it all behind soon enough.” So in a sense the rich are ultimately more vulnerable, because they have more to lose physically and eternally!

Is James saying all wealth is bad? No, it is here only for a while to be used for God's glory and the advance of his kingdom and will soon be gone. Anyone who lives for his work, money, wealth and prestige will leave all that behind.

James uses an illustration that is as relevant today as it was then: the passing beauty of flowers. We enjoy these beautiful cut flowers each week arranged by our flower committee. But within a few days these flowers will be in a trash can in the kitchen. So those who pursue possessions, power or prestige should know that they are quickly passing and will soon be gone. This should help us loosen our grasp on what we have and enable us to use what we have with wisdom. We can enjoy things properly by giving thanks to God, and use them to show the goodness of God to others. If my possessions are mainly for me and my enjoyment, then I'll hoard and fight for them. If your possessions and wealth are not bringing about thanksgiving to God, from yourself and others, then there will be a double loss at the end. You will lose your wealth (and strength, and glory) and you will have lost the opportunity to do good by them. Many a man and woman on their deathbed are looking into the trashcan of cut flowers that are gone and cannot ever again be enjoyed or used for good.

So, to those who are in humble circumstances: You have less to lose, you have a great future and glory coming. Relish that and praise God for that. You have learned dependence. You are the subject of many biblical promises. Guard against envy, discontent, unholy ambition, etc., and give thanks to God for your condition. Don't compromise Kingdom principles in order to play the acquisition game.

To those who are well off: don't be smug, proud, or look down on anyone else. You have a brief window of time to be a blessing to others and to use your wealth for the advance of God's purposes. Your turn will come to leave it all behind. So to both he says, “this too will pass”, a comfort to those suffering and a warning to those who are not.

Along with a right view of our circumstances we need a clear view of what God is doing with trials anyway...

2. Understand God's ultimate purpose in our trials. (1:12)

(James 1:12) **“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”**

To “stand the test” means to “prove the genuineness of.” It is to reveal to us what kind of love, faith and dependence we have upon God, that we might fittingly receive the crown of eternal life. God’s design in testing his people is perhaps most clearly spelled out in Deuteronomy chapter 8...

“And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” “...who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end.” (Deut 8:2, 3, 16)

The “crown of life” means that God’s people will receive eternal life as a kind of wreath or victor’s crown for enduring, which is a prize or reward for faithfulness. Other examples...

2 Timothy 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Revelation 2:10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Note, eternal life, when viewed at its inception and its totality, is a gift. The promise here is given to those who endure as a proof of their love for the Lord. Endurance is the proof of one’s genuineness and love for the Lord. Trials reveal what we are, our core identity. God uses trials to show what is in our heart, to lead us to find our adequacy in God alone, and to bless us in the end.

What is important, then, is the need to remain steadfast, to keep going in the correct direction, to not give up, give in, give over to despair. We have only two choices when faced with suffering. Because of our trials we will a) become better or b) become bitter. Better or bitter, those are the results of the humbling process of trials. We will be happy (blessed) if we persevere.

But why do I feel God is against me, that he wants me to fail, that he delights in me suffering? Why am I besieged with evil thoughts and temptation that—if only they were removed - it would make it a whole lot easier to follow God? Is God trying to crush me?

3. Know the source and dynamic of your temptations. (1:12-15)

When going through trials, we may think that God is against us, or that God is trying to make us fail. Or that there are certain temptations, which if only he would remove, we would be successful. By various means we can credit God (or others) with the blame for our failures.

James 1:13-15 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

The answer is, God is never tempted to do wrong himself, and never has a bad motive in his dealing with us. And neither does he tempt us to do evil.

We need to note that the Greek word for “trial, test” is the same word for “temptation”. What determines how it is translated, whether trial or temptation depends upon who the subject (actor) is and what is intended by the action. If Satan is the subject and he is enticing or intimidating, and his design is to destroy or cause us to fail, then it is translated “tempt” or “temptation”. If it is God, and his design is to improve us or reveal a weakness to us that we might be improved, it is translated, “trial” or “testing”.

For example, when General Motors tests their own cars, they do so to find weaknesses in order to improve the line. When GM tests other cars, like Fords or Toyotas, they test them to discover weaknesses and failures that might be exploited for their own company’s gain.

A careful reading of the book of Job makes this clear, that God and Satan have different motivations and different designs, even though God allows Satan to have significant latitude in intimidating Job. James’ point here is that, though God oversees the trials in our life, the actual source of temptation is within us, within our fallen sinful nature that still remains. We need to know that the bad stuff coming out of us is not from God, nor does he delight in it.

Much of our problems during trials is coming from inside of us. We are lured and enticed by our own cravings and desires, and this of course is amplified by the devil and the fallen world we live in. We want comfort, or prestige, or wanting things or people that we shouldn’t have or wanting with too great of a desire. We are drawn away and enticed (lured, baited, pulled) by our own inward lusts. We think (or say), “If only I had a better spouse or better children, I wouldn’t be so angry.” Yet, the anger is there, inside of us, and just because others know how to push the right buttons, we can’t blame them for our bad responses.

Why doesn’t God just remove these temptations and weaknesses within us? The good news is, he will. But not completely in this life, precisely because we are still in this sinful world and in the flesh, and we are still in this process of being conformed to the image of Christ. (Romans 8:29)

The picture, then, is of temptation pulling at us and grabbing our attention, to lure and entice us, and as we yield to the enticement we are in a sense seduced and give birth to sinful action, which results in death. This is stated in a principle form, like wisdom literature. It may be applied to a life of sin after which is eternal death, or it may refer to even occasional sin which results in our estrangement (death) from others, or the fellowship of God... when we sin something dies or weakens - our strength, our relationships, etc.

In seeing the dynamic of sin we need also to take warning: not only do not blame God (or others) for our sin, but also do not yield to sin. We may say to ourselves, “why am I bothering to walk the straight and narrow, why not just drown my sorrows at the bar, or buy whatever I want at the mall...? It is because sin is so serious, that even indulged in smaller portions will grow up to destroy us...

Julie Burris paid \$1,800 for a nine-week-old black leopard. She thought it was *cute and friendly* until the day it attacked her and ripped her head open. The chimpanzee in Connecticut that mauled his owner’s friend, leaving her severely disfigured. The Harlem man (as if one exotic pet were not enough) whose tiger and alligator were discovered in his apartment in 2003 after he went to the hospital for a “pit bull” bite. They’re all lucky to be alive, though. A Pennsylvania

woman died last year after being attacked by her “pet,” a 350-pound black bear she raised from a cub.

Now we read stories like this and we say, “how can people be so foolish to think that a bear or a lion cub will not grow up to be dangerous?” And yet we foolishly play with things that will bring us into bondage, disrupt our relationships, cause hurt and division, and even bring on physical death? As it has been said, *“Sin will take you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay and cost you more than you want to pay.”*

So we must be aware of the source and dynamic of our problems. God is not producing them. He may be allowing the circumstances, but what comes out is from inside you. Do not credit your failure to God or to others. You are your own worst enemy. In your trials do not yield to the easy way out of indulging in sin.

Finally, what is most important is to realize the pure motives and goodness behind God’s dealings with us... First, he is good as to his nature, and secondly, his plan of salvation is good.

4. Don’t doubt the absolute goodness of your God. (1:16-18)

Don’t be deceived, that is, don’t believe a lie (v. 16), that God can’t be trusted, a lie that harkens all the way back to Genesis 3. This relates to the absolute, immutable goodness of God in his essence (nature)(v. 17) and the goodness of his work of salvation (v. 18)

(James 1:16, 17) **“Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”**

Like Adam and Eve in the garden we are tempted to think God is not good and is withholding good from us. That he is not fair; he is too hard, too strict, etc. But God is immutably (unchangeably) good. He is described as “the father of lights” (the creator of light and the light-bearing bodies of the sky, who himself is light). However, unlike his creation which changes and is often unstable (like us) he is stable and permanent in his goodness. He can’t change for the worse, and there is no better goodness he can change to. He has no bad, mixed or shaded motives. There is no darkness in all his plans. This is seen in other Scriptures, as well.

Psalm 145:9 The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.

Nahum 1:7 The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.

Malachi 3:6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”

1 John 1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

We are not to doubt the essential and unchanging goodness of God! This is seen also in his plan of salvation, which is by his sovereign, gracious will, received through the gospel:

James 1:18 **Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.**

Compare with verse 15, “gives birth”... sin gives birth to death; God gives birth to life. God is doing a good thing, with a good heart and intention, and a good plan. Testing may be difficult but it is a proving ground for those who trust God.

“He brought us forth...” James, as different as his book is from others in the NT, does not believe or teach that salvation comes by working hard, by being good or following the Law... it comes about as a sovereign, gracious act of God whereby we are born from above into God’s kingdom. That is the fountain from which true goodness and real righteousness comes from.

And it comes about by “the word of truth.” Compare James with both Paul and Peter:

2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

The Jewish festival of *first fruits* provides a metaphor of something small that is just the beginning of something big. Jesus’ resurrection was the beginning of the new creation and our future resurrections and so he is called the “first fruits” from the dead. But these early believers are likewise called first fruits.

The Jewish believers to whom James was writing... for all they knew, they were a despised minority within a minority, often marginalized and oppressed because of the strange sect they belonged to. They were at this time probably only a few thousand among the teeming millions in the Roman empire. They had no idea how Christianity would grow and circle the globe and come to number a billion adherents around the world. Jesus used the image of a mustard seed to describe this. James says, be encouraged, you may seem small, oppressed, looked down upon, but you are part of something far bigger than you can imagine. You are first-fruits.

This is why - the final and main reason - we can “count it all joy” when we face various trials: it is because of the absolute goodness of God and the wonderful benevolence of his plan toward us. He has a good plan, though it often is painful in the unfolding.

A final illustration, diamond cutting. A diamond is a lump of carbon [picture of uncut diamond] that has been painfully worked into a thing of beauty. As I read about this process I was surprised at how violent it seemed. There is first the “sawing or cleaving”, whereby using lasers and saws the stone is cut to properly-sized pieces. Then there is “bruting”, which is the process whereby two diamonds are set onto spinning axles turning in opposite directions, which then are set to grind against each other to shape each diamond into a round shape. (Are you thinking, “marriage”?) Then the individual facets are cut into the diamond so that light might refract and reflect. “Polishing” is the name given to process whereby the stone is rubbed with abrasives. (Do you have abrasives in your life?) Did you catch those words... sawing, laser, cutting, bruting, grinding, abrasives... If the diamond - a lump of carbon like you and me had a mind and feelings, what do you think it would feel or want to do? To get off that workbench! But if we want to get from here (rough, uncut) to there (finished), in other words if we trust the goodness of the diamond cutter and see the goodness of being shaped into the image of Christ, that we might reflect and refract his glory, then what should our response be? We should remain steadfast, and stay upon the workbench, trusting the master that the painful process will have its designed outcome. The end result is still a lump of carbon, but what beauty, what light streams through, what value there is in it!