

Tempered Faith

James 1:12-18

Introduction

There are two quotes that have stuck with me that have helped me over the years: The first is from AW Tozer who said, “It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.” The second is from John Bunyan who said,

“Conversion is not the smooth, easy-going process some men seem to think... It is wounding work, this breaking of the hearts, but without wounding there is no saving... Where there is grafting there will always be a cutting, the graft must be let in with a wound; to stick it onto the outside or to tie it on with a string would be of no use. Heart must be set to heart and back to back or there will be no sap from root to branch. And this, I say, must be done by a wound, by a cut.”¹

Throughout the Bible, I see the wisdom of Tozer and Bunyan’s counsel as it relates to the hard stuff we experience in life. As much as God has used AW Tozer and John Bunyan, the real question is this: What has God said about the trials that will come and do we trust and believe Him enough to turn to Him even when we do not understand how He will work it out of our good? It is to James that we now turn our attention to discover what God has said about it.

God’s Will for the Christian’s Life is to Finish Well

God’s will for the life of the Christian is to receive the crown of life. What is the crown of life you ask? Ironically, it is a type of “victor’s crown” that the Christian will receive after he/she has died. During the Isthmian games a crown in the form of a wreath would be awarded the victor who finished whatever event a Greek male athlete participated in. Like the Olympics of today, only the best of the best would compete after training harder than anything else in their lives in the hope that they could receive the coveted crown. Borrowing language from the games, Paul wrote of the Christian life: **“Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. So they do it to obtain a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way as not to run aimlessly; I box in such a way, as to avoid hitting air; but I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified”** (1 Cor 9:25–27). Just before he was executed, Paul wrote to Timothy: **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is reserved 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”** (2 Tim. 4:7-8). The crown of life is eternal life with Jesus.

¹ John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2001), 65.

At first glance, it sounds like James is telling us that in order to receive the crown of life, we have got to dig deep and persevere. This makes our salvation sound like we have to work for our salvation. This is not what James is saying at all, and we know this because of verse 18, which states: **“In the exercise of His will He gave us birth by the word of truth...”** The “word of truth” is the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves. It is of this gospel that Paul wrote in Romans, **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”** (Rom. 1:16). It was because of God’s will that we went from spiritual death to spiritual life, and the evidence that we are now spiritually alive is with the life we are living today. Listen to what Jesus said in John 1:12-13, **“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.”** In John 10:16, Jesus said that the evidence of those who belong to Him is in how they respond to Him: **“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice; and they will become one flock, with one shepherd”** (John 10:16).

So here is the rub that is very important that you not only hear me say, but that you take it to heart. The one who perseveres to the end... even under and through various trials, is the one who was truly born again when they heard the gospel of Jesus Christ; it was in the moment that you were born again that you went from being spiritually dead to being alive with Christ! The crown of life is given not based on your merit, but because of your relationship with Jesus. It was His sinless life, His sacrificial death, and His victory over death that secured, secures, and will secure your salvation. The crown of life is awarded on the basis of your relationship with Jesus with the understanding that His merit is all that you need! The crown of life is not given to those who have good intentions, it is not given to those who are religious, it is not given because of some prayer you said, it is not given because you started out well, for it is given because you have been born again! Here is what the apostle John said of those who do not persevere until the end: **“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be evident that they all are not of us”** (1 John 2:19).

If you are wondering how you can know that you belong to Jesus and that you are indeed born again, James provides us with four words: **“...those who love Him.”** The evidence that you have been born again besides the fact that you will persevere under trial, is that you love Him. This is why Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, **“If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed”** (1 Cor. 16:22). If you have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and have been born again as a result, you will love Jesus... which is evidence that God first loved you (1 John 4:9-19).

Now, when it comes to the trials in life (v. 12) and the temptation(s) we all face, what purpose do they serve in the Christian life? James seems to indicate that “trials” are both allowed and designed by God while temptation comes from within and is used by the devil and his demons. What you cannot see in your English Bible is that the root of the Greek word for “trial”

(*peirasmōs*) and the root for “temptation” (*peirazō*) comes from the same Greek root and both words can be translated “test” or “tempt.”

Trials are Designed by God to Ultimately Bless the Christian (vv. 12-13)

So how do we make sense of these verses? Permit me to offer you an alternate translation of verse 13 that I think will open these verses up for you in a way that ought to help. Here is what I think is a better and more helpful way to translate James 1:13,

No one is to say when he is tested, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.”

How do we know that God does not tempt us? We know because He is a God of love, we know because He is good, and we know because He is holy! Because God is infinitely good, James states in verse 17, **“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”** Not only is God good, but because He is God, He has not, does not, and will not change.

Because God is good, every trial that God brings or allows into your life is designed to strengthen your faith... not destroy your it. This is why James can say in verse 12 that when the trials do come, you can receive them knowing that such trials will ultimately serve for your blessing. How do I know that? For starters, it is the pattern we see with God in the way that He has always dealt with His people.

Consider Abraham as one example of how God will use and bring trials into the lives of His people to do the kind of thing that needs to happen in the life of the one who belongs to Him. After Isaac was born and old enough to know better, God told Abraham to take his only son and to offer him as a burnt offering (Gen. 22). What was the purpose of the testing? For starters, to show Abraham that his identity was not to be found in the son he and Sarah had longed for and prayed for their entire lives. Did God make Abraham go through with the slaughtering of his only son? Nope. Abraham would have done it, but God stopped him and then said to him: **“For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me”** (v. 12).

For most of Abraham’s life, he struggled to trust God. All throughout Abraham’s life God used the various trials in Abraham and Sarah’s lives that God brought, allowed, and even the trials Abraham brought upon himself to temper his faith to the point that by the time we come to Genesis 22, he knew he could trust God even when doing so did not make sense, such as God’s instructions to sacrifice Isaac. How do I know this, besides the fact that Abraham was so committed to obeying God that God had to stop him from following through with sacrificing Isaac? Here is how I know: When Abraham, Isaac, and his servants arrived at the mountain where Abraham was to follow through with God’s instructions, Abraham said to his servants something that reveals that something had changed in his heart; here is what he said: **“Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and**

we will worship and return to you” (Gen. 22:5). God told him to sacrifice Isaac, and the reason why Abraham was willing to go through with it was because over the years God was tempering Abraham’s faith to the point that he knew God well enough to know that the God who told him to kill his son was both good and able to raise the dead. Abraham’s action was the evidence that his faith in God was not just lip service (see Jas. 2:20-23).

Temptation to Sin Comes from Within and Is Used by Satan to Destroy the Christian

When the trials come, the primary danger we face in such moments is from within. Suffering can serve as a catalyst to deepen your relationship with God, or it can cause you to doubt the wisdom, goodness, and sovereignty of God.

To be tempted is not sin, but it is what you do with the temptation. Notice what James says in verses 14-15, **“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it has run its course, brings forth death”** (Jas. 1:14–15).

God does not tempt, but He does test. His testing often comes in the form of trials that serve to temper our faith for the purpose of making it stronger. Sin comes from within us, and whatever forms the temptation is that we are faced gives birth to sin when we are **“carried away and enticed”** by our own sin nature. Facing the temptation is not the sin, but giving into the temptation is. James tells us that when temptation comes (and it will), the downward progression leading to the act of sinning begins with a decision that involves both the mind and the heart. Giving into the temptation to sin begins when you decide to dwell on the temptation instead of run from it. The next step is to be **“carried away and enticed”** by your own lust (this is when both your heart and mind are lured by your own lust). Our lust comes from the sin nature that is within all of us, and when left unchecked... it gives birth to sin. Robert Plummer put it this way in his commentary on James: “...just as conception leads naturally to childbirth, giving free rein to sinful inclinations naturally results in discrete moral transgressions. Just as water runs downhill, so evil desire, if allowed to pursue its “gravitational inclination,” runs down into sinful activity.”² Where does unchecked sin inevitably lead? It leads to death.

Listen, most of the temptation we face comes by way of our own doing because of our own lustful desires. The devil is just one person and can only be at one place at a time. His demons are many, but they are also limited by their number and ability. However, Satan is also known as the “Tempter” for a reason. He is real and he wants to use temptation as a way to destroy your faith. The greater threat you face through is not the devil but your own heart and passions. To “follow your passion” is horrible advice if it is not tethered to the will of God for your life that you can only know and discern through His word and prayer.

² Robert L. Plummer, [“James,”](#) in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. XII, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 234.

Conclusion

Every time Abraham trusted his own heart or caved to his own fears, he was “**carried away and enticed by his own lust.**” The same can be said about Adam and Eve, the Hebrews in the wilderness, King David, and every other person we read about in the Bible. It wasn’t until Abraham trusted in a good and sovereign God to lead him that he experienced the blessing God wanted for him. For Abraham, that blessing did not come when he wanted, but arrived when God knew Abraham was ready for it. All sin comes by way of trusting what you think is right, instead of believing God and trusting Him for what He has declared is right.

So, how do we face the trials of life and at the same time resist the temptation to sin? James offers us some help in verses 16-17.

1. **Don’t be deceived.** Instead of trusting in what you desire, trust in the goodness of God and what He had declared to be good. “**Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above...**” (v. 17a), so trust the One who is good and wants good for you.
2. **Focus on God’s unchanging character instead of your desires.** James tells us that all that is good comes from, “**the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow**” (v. 17b). We change all the time, our emotions ebb and flow, what we think is right one day may change the next day, but God does not change! His character remains the same. Instead of being carried away by your sin, turn to the God who does not change and trust Him.
3. **Trust God’s Word.** It is because of His word that you have been born again when you heard the gospel. Tony Evens put it this way: “For many, the Bible is like the queen of England. It’s held in high esteem but wields no power over them personally. What Scripture accomplished for your salvation, though, it can accomplish for your sanctification.”³ When faced by temptation, Jesus used the Word of God to combat the devil; you can and ought to do the same.
4. **Know that God loves you.** God called you by the “**word of truth,**” and He did it because He loves you. According to James 1:18, God gave you a new birth for the purpose of being His “**first fruits among His creatures.**” God instructed His people to give the first fruits of their possessions back to Him; for the Hebrew people, the first fruits were the best and first from their harvest. To be God’s first fruits among His creatures means that you are loved and treasured by Him! What He is doing in your life today, is for the purpose of something greater tomorrow that will ultimately lead to your sanctification and then glorification as His son/daughter. His “no” from His Word is for your good, your joy, and ultimately your thriving.

³ Tony Evens, [*The Tony Evens Bible Commentary*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1339.