

# What we need to know to keep going

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Years ago, I had a teacher, and the teacher would always tell us what was going to be on the test that she was going to give us. And at first, I thought this was a very strange thing to do, because in my mind, I thought tests were there to trick us, to get us to fail, as I sometimes did.

And yet, this teacher told us everything that was on the test beforehand, and as you can imagine, everyone passed. And the reason she told us everything that was on the test beforehand was because the test wasn't the goal.

The test wasn't the goal. The goal, in that case, was to get a good job or a good career and to work in industry or that kind of thing. And so she wanted us to know what we needed to know in order to get us there.

So the test wasn't the end goal. And as I reflect on that, there was a wisdom in that, and there was a kindness in that, that this is the way she went about it, because you ended up learning what you needed to know, rather than spreading yourself thin over all this stuff that wasn't that important.

And as James writes these words to the believers that he has in mind, and by extension to us this morning, he is telling us, making us aware, wanting us to know what's going to be on the test, what we're going to be on the test, what we're going to be on the test, what we're going to be facing in the various trials that he has mentioned earlier on in the chapter.

[ 1 : 4 1 ]     Because he knows that this isn't our goal. Living in the midst of various trials isn't our goal. Our goal is found in verse 12. That person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James is speaking to people who have been responded to God's love for them. He's speaking to people who have heard the good news of Jesus, that Jesus died, that they might be forgiven from their sins.

He is speaking to people who have trusted in Jesus, turned from their sin and trusted in Jesus, to whom God has made this wonderful promise of eternal life, life forever, life to the full.

And yet at the same time, these are people who are in the midst of various trials, as he says earlier in the chapter. And so James wants us to know what's going to happen during the various trials that we face, so that we might reach the promised goal.

For these first century Christians that James is talking to, these ones who are scattered among the nations, the trials that they were facing were things like persecution.

[ 3 : 0 3 ]     For some of them, it was poverty. They were under pressure in various ways. And yet James and God, who has inspired James to write, wants us to know what's going to be in these trials, so that we might reach this promised goal, this goal that has been secured for us by the blood of Christ, that has been promised to us in Christ.

And so let's reflect on what James wants us to know. And the first thing he wants us to know is what we should do. What we should do in the midst of various trials. And you might be surprised to know that James wants us to boast in the midst of various trials.

You can see that in verse 9. Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride. Now when James tells us to take pride or to boast, he's not telling us to take pride in ourselves, to boast in ourselves, our own achievements, what we have done, what we will do.

What he's telling the believer in humble circumstances, or in lowly circumstances, or even in poverty perhaps, when we compare it to the rich in verse 10, is to boast in their high position.

And as James says that, you wonder, how can somebody be in a low position, and a high position at the same time? James is a writer of wisdom, and often in the Bible when you encounter the wisdom literature, things are said in a way that you're kind of thrown off guard, and you're wondering, what does this mean?

[ 4 : 53 ] So you may be familiar with Proverbs, where back to back it says, answer a fool according to his folly, and then it says, don't answer a fool according to his folly, and you're left having to wrestle this through, think this through.

And James here is doing something similar. Believers in humble or lowly circumstances should take pride in their high position. But of course, what James has in mind is that even for ones who are in humble circumstances, those who have trusted in Christ, have been exalted, have been raised with Christ, that they are actually seated with Christ.

As it says elsewhere in the New Testament, God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. And so James wants those in lowly circumstances to realize that actually your position in Christ could not be higher, could not be more exalted.

Now as you hear that, if you are feeling the pinch, if you are in lowly circumstances financially, struggling to make ends meet, maybe similarly to James's initial audience as a result of being displaced from your home, being forced to move country, if you hear James saying this, to boast in your exaltation, to take pride in your high position, you might feel like saying, well, who does James think he is to be telling me to do this?

We remember again, as we mentioned last week, that James considers himself to be a servant, one in a lowly position. He describes himself as a servant of God and a servant of Christ.

[ 6 : 47 ] So this isn't one who is lording it over people, telling them, oh, you'll be fine. You're in an exalted position in Christ. Not only does he describe himself as a servant, he also describes the people he's speaking to as brothers and sisters.

So in verse 9, that word believers could actually be translated as brothers and sisters. So he is speaking to them as one who is part of this family of Christ.

And not only that, but he is speaking to them as an apostle. And as Paul tells us in one of his letters, the apostles were not people who lorded it over others.

Paul says that to this very hour, we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. And so when you hear James saying this, for the lowly brother, for the one in humble circumstances to take pride in their high position, he's speaking from inside that experience.

of being in humble circumstances. And what he wants us to hear if we find ourselves in that position is to not allow those humble circumstances to define us.

[ 8 : 08 ] Whether it is financial poverty, or by extension, whether it is poverty in other ways, whether we feel lowly in our temperament, lowly in our emotional life, lowly in our relationships.

He says, don't let that define you. Don't despair. Don't pursue wealth or other things as the solution to that. Whatever it takes, don't pursue these things in a dishonest or unhealthy way.

But rather boast in your high position. Make much of who you are in Christ. See yourself in the way that God sees you.

And so James calls the one in humble circumstances to boast. Now as we hear that, we also need to just keep in mind that this isn't all that James will say about being in humble circumstances, about poverty, or being unable to make ends meet.

He will circle back to this. He doesn't just say this one line and then leave it there. He will come back to it. But this is what he wants us to hear initially. And he wants to hear the rich to boast in their humiliation.

[ 9 : 21 ] In verse 10, but the rich should take pride in their humiliation. As James uses this word humiliation, it's good to recognize that it's the same word that he has just used, more or less.

So the one in humble circumstances, that's the same word as this humiliation word here. James says, the rich should boast in their humiliation.

You know, the temptation that money can bring is, well, this is what makes me secure. The bank balance is what gives me stability. And for these brothers and sisters who've been scattered among the nations, if there were some who had more, financially speaking, the temptation would be to think, well, that's what's going to give me stability.

I can go and buy whatever I need. James is saying, don't boast in that. Don't take pride in that. Riches cannot save you from mortality, from death.

which is why he says in verse 10, they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant, its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed.

[ 10 : 40 ] In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. James wants brothers and sisters who are in a wealthier place to realize that just like everybody else, their wealth, their riches, their fortune, does not add anything to what Christ has done for them.

It is Christ alone who can save them from death. And without him, they are just like the wild flower which will wither and die under the heat of the sun.

Only Christ can save. And for the rich, if they are already a brother or a sister, James wants them to boast in their humiliation, boast in their frailty, I'm nothing before God apart from Christ.

And for the one in humble circumstances, he wants them to boast in their exaltation in Christ. There was, some years ago, back in 2001, there was an author who was invited to give a speech at a university where the class was graduating and the author said this.

He said, what are you going to do, class of 2001? Who will be the doctors, the lawyers, the writers, the painters, the executives, the politicians?

[ 12 : 12 ] What will you do? He went on to say, well, I'll tell you one thing you're not going to do, and that's take it with you.

He says, I don't know exactly how many millions of dollars I'm worth, but a couple of years ago I found out what you can't take it with you means.

I found out while I was lying in the ditch at the side of a country road covered with mud and blood and with the tibia of my right leg poking out the side of my jeans like the branch of a tree taken down in a thunderstorm.

I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in the ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. We come in naked and broke.

We may be dressed when we go out, but we're just as broke. That's what he said to these aspiring young college graduates. And James wants us to hear that very thing.

[ 13 : 15 ] If we're in a place where we have enough in the bank, we may not be on the Sunday Times rich list, but if you're comfortable making ends meet, not under pressure, many in Ireland, many in the West will be unthinkable wealthy compared to people in previous generations, to our parents' generation, or to people in other parts of the world.

But James says be careful to boast not in your riches, not in your bank balance, but in your humiliation. And so he wants us to know what to do in various trials, and this is the first thing he wants us to do, to boast.

If we're feeling the pinch, to boast in our exaltation in Christ. If you're feeling financially comfortable, to boast in your lowliness, your need of Christ. Ultimately, both are ways of boasting in Christ.

And so that's the first thing that James wants us to know. The second thing James wants us to know, to get through the various kinds of trials that we face, to get to that promised goal of eternal life.

The second thing he wants us to know is to know what God is not doing. What is God not doing? Well, James tells us that Christians, followers of Jesus, believers, face temptation.

[ 14 : 38 ] In verse 13, he says, when tempted. When tempted. There's coming a day when we will have the crown of life and we won't be tempted.

But that day isn't yet. James says, it's not an if we are tempted, but a when we are tempted. James recognizes that as we face various trials, with that outward trial, often comes an inward temptation for those who had been scattered in this dispersion under persecution in the first century.

There was temptations along with that trial. Temptations to try and get rich in unhealthy or unethical ways. There was temptations to deny Christ in the midst of it.

There was temptations maybe in lots of different ways that we cannot understand. But what James wants us to understand is that with every outward trial, there is the potential for an inward temptation.

Temptation, in and of itself, isn't a sin. As one author puts it, Christian maturity is not indicated by the infrequency of temptation, but by the infrequency of succumbing to temptation.

[ 15 : 58 ] James wants us to know that when we are tempted to sin, there's another temptation that goes along with that. And the temptation is this in verse 13, no one should say, God is tempting me.

When we are tempted, James says, there's a danger that we think it is God who is tempting us. Now, we may not say it like that, that God is tempting me, but if we have a big view of God, if we see God for who he is as one who is carefully in control of all things, who is actively involved in our lives, who makes the rainfall and the sun shine, when we have this view of God that is biblical, that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from your father, that is right and good.

But sooner or later, then, we are going to ask the question, when we are facing trials of various kinds, why have you let this happen, God? Why have you made this happen, God?

And we can ask that question in a genuine way, in a sincere way, in a wrestling with God way, just like the psalmists do on numerous occasions, but James wants us to be aware of a danger, that we can also ask that question with accusation bubbling under the surface.

where we are pointing the finger away from ourselves towards God. You think of how Adam passed the blame. God, it was this woman that you put in the garden with me, and she passed the blame as well.

[ 17 : 44 ] James is saying we need to be careful that when we are tempted, that we shouldn't say, God is tempting me. As one author puts it, the death of a loved one can tempt us to question God's love for us.

The suffering of the righteous, poor, and the ease of the wicked rich can tempt us to question God's justice or even his existence. Thus, testing almost always includes temptation, and temptation is itself a test.

You think of the people of Israel asking, Moses, why did you bring us out of Egypt? to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst? It seems crazy to think that this is how they were viewing God, that he brought them out to die in the wilderness?

No. He brought them out to bring them into the promised land. But as they faced this trial, the temptation was to think, this is God's fault.

God is trying to get me to fall, to sin. And when that happens, it is not good. James says, God can't be tempted.

[ 18 : 54 ] In verse 13, God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. God is good and holy and pure. He isn't out to trick us. He isn't out to get us to fall into sin.

He may be the one who brings about the outward trial. You think of these first century Christians who are scattered as a result of their faith. But he's not tempting them.

His desire isn't for them to sin or to fall. He hasn't set our lives up as this impossible escape room where we just cannot get out.

There's no way out of the temptation. We're told elsewhere that he always provides a way out of the temptation that we feel. James wants us to know when we face trials of various kinds, God is not tempting us.

So where does the temptation come from? Well, James tells us in verse 14, each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

[ 20 : 00 ] This is where the temptation comes from. As James is saying this, he isn't saying there's nothing external to us that is the cause of temptation, but he wants us to take responsibility to realize that the reason we have these temptations is because of the desires within us, that we don't want always the things that we should want.

And if we allow the desire to conceive, the natural progression of that is that it gives birth to sin in verse 15. And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

If you're familiar with the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, it kind of is reminiscent of the woman in Proverbs, the adulterous woman. It says, with much seductive speech she persuades him, with her smooth talk she compels him, all at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver, as a bird rushes into a snare, he does not know that it will cost him his life.

James is saying something very similar. We need to realize that the desire is within us. If we allow them to conceive, we'll give birth to sin, and sin will give birth to death.

But what he wants us to understand is that in those moments, we are playing both the part of the hunter and the hunted.

[ 21 : 41 ] It is our own desires that are luring us away, enticing us. James is going to circle back to how these sinful desires will play out, but now he wants us to hear this, to know that when we face trials of various kinds, God isn't tempting us, that we need to take responsibility for what we feel, the temptations, the desires that entice us and lure us away.

Now, as you hear that, you need to keep in mind the reason James is telling us this. He's not telling us this in order to condemn us.

He's telling us this because like my teacher all those years ago, he wants us to know what's going to be on the test. He wants us to know what's going to be going on in our own hearts when we face trials of various kinds so that we might move towards this promised, secure goal of eternal life.

So that, as those for whom Christ has died, we might not allow the desires to conceive and give birth, but that we might put to death the deeds of the flesh and the temptations of the flesh.

And the way in which we do that here is to realize that God is not the one who tempts me. And we need to ask this question of ourselves if there is a pattern of sin in our lives where our desires continue to give birth to sin.

[ 23 : 13 ] How can I ensure that stops happening? How can I know my own heart well enough to realize I'm not going to go to the places mentally or physically, geographically, that are going to put to death this desire in me?

That's why the answer to the seventh question, the seventh commandment in the new city catechism is so helpful. It says, what does God require in the seventh commandment?

That we abstain from sexual immorality and live purely and faithfully, whether in marriage or in single life, avoiding all impure actions, looks, words, thoughts, or desires, and whatever might lead to them.

We need to be wise to the fact that there is a reason that desire gives birth to sin and to put it to death before it can do so. But more than that, James wants us to know, when you're going through various trials, God is not tempting you to sin.

Don't allow that thought to enter into your mind. The third thing that James wants us to know, as we face trials of various kinds, as he wants us to move towards this promised, secure goal of eternal life, as he speaks to these dear brothers and sisters who have been bought with the blood of Christ, the third thing he wants us to know is what God is doing.

[ 24 : 47 ] So we've seen what God is not doing, which is he's not tempting us in those moments of temptation, those that are coming from within, but what God is doing is he is doing us good.

He is doing us good. Verse 17, every good and perfect gift is from above. Every good gift.

As you reflect on your life, even today, and you think, this is a good thing in my life, that is a good thing in my life, this is a good thing in my life, every single one of those good gifts that you enjoy each and every day and that I enjoy each and every day are from God.

Every one of them. James says they are from above. Now he's not saying that there aren't secondary reasons why we enjoy good gifts in our lives, but what he is saying is the primary reason that we have any good gift and every good gift in our lives is because they come down from God.

They come down from the Father, which is why we were singing, come thou fount of every blessing. He is the source of every good gift in our lives, which is a wonderful antidote when we start getting into that mindset to think that God is tempting me, God is wanting me to fall, God is wanting me to sing, God is wanting me to stumble, that he's out to get me, to think, no, every good gift in my life is from God.

[ 26 : 25 ] In those moments of temptation to turn our eyes to all the good and perfect gifts that we have and to realize not just the gift, but the giver behind the gift, and to realize that he showers good gifts on us each and every day, not in a hesitant way or a reluctant way, not that he's forced to do it, but because this is his nature, this is his character.

In verse 17, he's described as the father of the heavenly lights. He is the one who has powerfully made the sun, moon, and stars. He's the one who has powerfully sustains the sun, moon, and stars each and every day as the sun rises and sets.

This is a good gift from God, and we can be as certain as the sun rising and setting that we will receive good from our heavenly father.

And even though they cast shadows, sometimes in Ireland, even though the sun casts shadows and the shadows change throughout the day, God doesn't change.

His singular purpose and intention is to continually give us good and perfect gifts, and even to work out the various trials in our lives for our good.

[ 27 : 38 ] God is doing.

He wants us to be alert and on the lookout for the good and perfect gifts that God gives us. an old preacher many years ago put it like this.

Suppose that as you wake up one morning you find lying upon your pillow a precious love token from your unknown friend. A ring sparkling with jewels and engraved with a tender inscription, a bouquet of flowers bound about it with a love motto.

Your curiosity knows no bounds, but you are informed that this wondrous friend has not only done for you what you have seen, but a thousand deeds of love which you did not see, which were higher and greater still as proofs of his affection.

Not only this, but imagine you are further told that it is love for you, your friend fought battles to keep them from you and to keep you safe, that he was wounded and imprisoned and scourged for your sake, for he had a love to you so great that death itself could not overcome it.

[ 28 : 56 ] You are told that he is every moment occupied in your interests because he has sworn by himself that where he is, there you shall be. His honors you shall share and of his happiness you shall be the crown.

The love tokens which he gives, they stay for a while with the assurance of his affection, but they move us onwards with a more unconquerable desire that we may know him.

James wants us to see what God is like even as he writes to these Christians who know what God is like because he knows that we forget. We're tempted to think that God is out against us when actually what God is doing is giving us every good and perfect gift that we enjoy in our lives.

As we eat our food, we recognize it is a gift from God. As we put on our clothes, as we wash, as we meet a friend, as we go to work, as we go for a jog, as we go to school, as we read a book, as we listen to music, every single good gift is from above.

This is his will, this is his perfect purpose. That even in this fallen world, even in the midst of various kinds of trials, that we are enjoying a little taste of what it will be to be in his presence eternally.

[ 30 : 28 ] And so James wants us to know, God doesn't give birth to sin in the way that we do. And in fact, in spite of us giving birth to sin, God instead has given us this new birth to eternal life.

Verse 18, he chose to give us birth. through the word of truth. Nicodemus is amazed as he talks to Jesus about this idea of a new birth, this birth from above.

But here James again tells us clearly what his half brother Jesus had so clearly told Nicodemus, that God is the one who gives us new birth.

And you can be sure that the one who has given you new birth in Christ is not going to let you flounder like so many fish out of water. In fact, you are just the beginning of his good purposes, not just in your life, but in all of creation.

He says that his people in verse 18 are like first fruits of all he created. You think of the farmer going out at the start of harvest time and he's just seeing the first apples or pears or barley on the stalk and he's thinking there's so much more to come.

[ 31 : 44 ] James is saying to us that you are the first fruits of God's creation, of all he created, that he will bring about this good eternal life, this crown of life that he will give us, that he will give all creation, the whole universe.

James wants us to know this. This is what God does. God does us. He gives us good and perfect gifts because he is a good and perfect father. And as we keep that in our minds and in our hearts it enables us to keep going through the trials that we face towards this promise of eternal life in Christ.

James is a very honest guy. He's honest about the trials that we face. He's honest to us about the circumstances that we find ourselves in, whether rich or poor.

But he wants us to know that God doesn't sit there waiting for us to mess up. He tells us what we need to know. He tells us that we should boast in the gospel, boast in Christ.

He tells us that God never dreams of tempting us to sin. He tells us that God continues to give us good and perfect gifts. And he tells us that we are secured into this eternity towards this promise of the crown of life that God has given us in Christ.

[ 33 : 16 ] And so James tells us what we need to know as we face various trials. So let's take a moment to pray and ask for God to help us to impress this on our minds and on our hearts.

Father, we're thankful for your honesty to us, that you speak this word of truth to us, that you acknowledge that we face trials of various kinds, but also this harder word, Lord, that we in ourselves, Lord, we see the temptations, and Lord, this isn't because of something going on outside of ourselves, but it's because of our own desires, Lord, which give birth to sin.

But Father, we rejoice and delight that you are a God who does not tempt us, in fact, that you are a God who gives us every good and perfect gift. And Lord, above all of those good and perfect gifts, you've given us Christ.

Lord, you've given us this crown of life, and that you've promised, Lord, that as you have given us new birth in him, so will you continue to sustain us and keep us until that day when we enter into your presence.

Help us to know this, allow it to sink into our hearts, even in the days ahead. Amen.