

Testing, Temptation and the Good Giver

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[0 : 00] Friends, just while you remain standing, I'll pray. Father, we do pray today that you'd help us understand your word and that understanding it, you'd help us to live rightly in response.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, in Luke chapter 6, verse 26, Jesus says, Woe to you when all people speak well about you.

Well, I think the book of James escapes that woe. You see, the book of James has been under suspicion from the very beginning of the history of the church, really.

The most famous detractor, of course, is one Martin Luther. Luther says of the book of James these things. It is an epistle of straw with no tang of the gospel in it.

He says that he doesn't regard it as being the work of an apostle at all and his grounds are that it doesn't touch on, teaches works righteousness, he says, and doesn't mention the sufferings or the resurrection of Christ.

[1 : 02] In his Genesis commentary, he actually speaks about James raving. Here are, and he's in good company, you see, in many ways, because many other people say some not so negative thing, not so positive things about James.

Let me read you just some sample statements. One, there is nothing specifically Christian in James. It is merely a Jewish writing job that has been given a superficial Christian editing job.

Or, it is representative of a Christianity that is limited and narrow, with no understanding of Paul's missionary zeal. Or, the epistle of James is representative of the ethos of a lower middle class and working class Christianity that can't rise to the heights of a Paul or John.

Do you want to take a guess what class in society that writer was from? One theologian summed it all up in his words this way. He said, However, let me tell you, it's not quite as bleak as all of that, because a few scholars have been a little more positive.

So, if we go from Martin Luther to the other great reformer, John Calvin, he said, It is full of instruction on various subjects, the benefit of which extends to every part of the Christian life.

[2 : 43] Adolf Slater said, Churches have done themselves serious injury in giving to James only an altogether superficial hearing. Over the next number of weeks, we are going to be looking at the epistle of James, and my intention is to listen more to the advice of Calvin and Slater.

We'll give James a solid hearing, and we'll find it, I'm confident we'll find it, to be extraordinarily relevant to living at the beginning of the 21st century.

Today, we're going to have a look at the first half of James, chapter 1. My own view is that, to understand it, we're going to have to do a lot of background work, and so I want you to come with me as we do some background work, which will be long away from the book of James, and then we're going to come back to James.

So, why don't you start with me? And I want to start by looking at the Old Testament view about God and his people, or one aspect of it. The Old Testament picture of God is that God is a God who relates, and he enters into relationship with his people, and that relationship is often pictured in sort of almost contractual terms, and the contract has two parties in it, God and his people.

And each party has obligations within that relationship. On the one hand, God, for example. For his part, he promises that he will be their God, they will be his people, and he will be near them.

[4 : 07] He promises actually to be in their midst. He will bless them, he will give them life and health and power and food and fertility and riches and protection and victory, and all good things that you might expect from a God who is benevolent and kind and loves his people.

And so you can see that throughout Scripture in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, a whole host of other places. But he is just one member of this relationship, one party in this relationship.

There is another party in the relationship, and that is the people of God. And the people of God, they see, if you've been coming to the summer series, we saw them do this in the book of Exodus, they see that they have obligations as well, and they sign on to them.

They undertake to love God, fear God, listen to every word that comes from his mouth, worship him, honour him, be faithful to him, listen to his voice, obey his word, walk after his commandments, and so on.

The people of God are to have faith in God, they're to treat him as being faithful, and they're to have only him as God, and have no other gods but him. Living like this, they find, will mean a life full of blessing, and a life which is really life.

[5 : 23] And refusing to live like this, will mean cursing and death. And if you want to see that outline somewhere, you can see it in Deuteronomy chapter 32. Now, within that context of this contractual relationship between God and his people, the Old Testament also tells us something about that relationship in one particular detail.

You see, it records for us how each of the participants in this relationship at some point test each other. First, we regularly hear how the people of God test tempt God.

Even though it's a grossly inappropriate way to treat God, they do. For example, let me give you one reference. Psalm 78, verses 40 to 41, says this, How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the wasteland, and here it comes, again and again, they put him to the test.

They vexed the Holy One of Israel. Can you see, so it's possible for the people of God to test out God. But the people of God are not the only ones involved in testing.

The Old Testament also tells us that God tests his people. God, for example, the classic example of God testing someone is his testing of Abraham in Genesis 22.

[6 : 49] He commands him to offer his one and only son, Isaac. There's another case, Exodus 16. Here God tells Moses that he's made a decision to let bread rain down from heaven for his people to gather every day but one.

And then he explains why he's doing it. Exodus 20, verse 20, says this, Moses said to the people, Don't be afraid. God has come to test you so that you might fear God, so that the fear of God might be with you to keep you from sinning.

You see, there's actually a case where God tests his people. In other places in the Old Testament, God tests his people to see whether they're truly his people or not. That is whether they will really love him or whether their love is a love that's at the core of their being or really just a love that does it for sake of reward.

Moses tells his people, for example, that false prophets are going to come amongst his people. He says this in Deuteronomy 13. And then he goes on to explain why those false prophets are coming and what should result as they do.

He says, The Lord your God is testing you through these false prophets to find out whether you will love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow and him you must revere.

[8 : 12] Keep his commands, obey him, serve him, hold fast to him. Can you see what's being said? These false prophets are coming and in one sense God has allowed them to come in order that they might provide an example of testing.

Do they really love God more than all else? So God tests his people to see whether they'll be true to the relationship he has established with them. He tests them to see whether their love is genuine or not.

But he also tests his people to strengthen their faith in him. And you can see that also throughout the Old Testament. There's one more bit of background I need to do. I need to teach you about wisdom in the Old Testament.

You see, if God is a God who relates to his people, if there's a sort of different way in which people and God respond, the second bit of background is about wisdom.

The idea of wisdom is very important in the Old Testament. You see, there are four things we can say about it. Here's number one. Wisdom is a quality that begins with fear or reverence for God.

[9 : 18] You can hear this in Proverbs 9 verse 10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Second, wisdom is about seeing the impact of the fear of God in your daily life.

Anyone who's read the book of Proverbs knows that this is the case. If you read through the book of Proverbs, it'll drill down your fear of God into the very basics of life. How you use your money, how you relate to your spouse, how you treat someone who's gossiping, and so on and so forth.

It works right down, the fear of God is to work right down into practical daily living. Third, wisdom is about applying the fear of the Lord to thinking about the enigmas of life.

Book of Ecclesiastes, Book of Job, do this, don't they? They have people confronted with enigmas in life and they try and drill down to see what does my fear of God mean for these things, for the problem of evil, for suffering, and so on.

And so, in the Old Testament, the wise person is the person who has this ability to understand the ways of God in the world and to make practical decisions in the light of that understanding.

[10:35] If we were to give a modern word that is closest to the word wisdom, it might be insight. So, wisdom is insight into the ways of God and how they apply to life.

Insight to the ways of God and how they apply to life. Now, there's one question about all of this that's still unanswered, isn't there? That is, where do I get this wisdom from? How is it obtained? Let me read it to you from Proverbs 2, verse 6. For the Lord gives wisdom. From his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

In other words, if you want to know where wisdom comes from, it comes from God. It is a gift from him. So, friends, that's all the background. So, thank you for sticking with me in that. Let's now turn to the book of James.

So, open it up in your Bibles and I'm going to look at verses 2 to 4. You might follow with me. James says this, Consider it pure joy, my sisters and brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance and let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.

[11:57] Now, do you notice a few things about those verses? First, there is the word trials there. Now, in the New Testament there's sort of two basic meanings for trials.

Trials can mean the inner enticement for sin, that is, towards sin, something that comes from us, but it can also refer to external affliction and I think that's probably what's meant here.

So, what sort of external afflictions might James mean? Could be persecution, could be just the plain difficulties of living in the world, could be things such as poverty, stress, pressure, humiliation, suffering in general or just general affliction and what James is saying is that these sorts of things as they happen to us as Christian people are to be an occasion for rejoicing and it's here our Old Testament background that we've done can come to our age.

You see, we've already read in the Old Testament that God can and does use such things. He often uses trials as a means of testing and therefore strengthening our faith and because of this they can be a means for joy.

You see, we can rejoice when trials come upon us because they are the means God has, a means that God has provided of producing in us deeper, stronger and more certain faith and because of this they can be a means for joy and we can rejoice because God is achieving within us these great things.

[13:39] Friends, I need to say that here at Holy Trinity I have seen a number of our Christian brothers and sisters, some from this congregation who have experienced great trial in life and yet as I've looked at their lives I have seen great godliness come out of it and it is possible you see for trial to produce godliness.

James says it here and we can rejoice because it does do that so though we are in the, it's not that we're masochists but though that we are in the midst of affliction we can rejoice because of what it is going to accomplish in us and the New Testament echoes that itself.

If it's easy to flip to in your Bibles go to Romans chapter 5 verses 3 to 4 so just go back to Romans chapter 5 verses 3 to 4 and look at what Paul says he says not only so but we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance perseverance character and character hope can you see this movement here now in your Bibles again flip over to 1 Peter chapter 1 6 and 7 so back to near James 1 Peter 1 6 to 7 so look at it with me in all of this Peter says you greatly rejoice though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials but these have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire may result in praise glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed can you see the hint of this that is that our difficulties in life actually are producing character and therefore praise and glory and honour for God himself when Jesus Christ is revealed

so in this way trials in life can be viewed very positively and as James says the outcome will be endurance and maturity so trials viewed properly can produce godliness ok let's move to verses 5 to 8 first thing to say is that we need to be very careful I think to read these verses properly these verses are the continuation of what we've just read and verses 2 to 4 talk about trials heading toward maturity but I think that's not the natural way we humans view trials is it most of us I think when we face difficulties in life we don't naturally see them in the way James has talked about trials and difficulties

I think for most of us look like a purposeful purposeless mess don't they you know something disastrous happens today and then it continues for the rest of the day and then it happens the next day as well and then life happens and we often talk about it in that way don't we where we mean bad things keep happening to us and we think it as we think it as of it as this sort of purposeless mass of events that happen that really are just out of control and we have no control over them and no one else does as well and to see things any other way than that I think requires special divine insight doesn't it it needs God's wisdom and that is exactly what verses 5 to 8 are about verses 5 to 8 tell us where we need to go rather than seeing things the way the world sees them to find see of them in a godly way they tell us to go to God look at verses 5 to 8 again so if any of you lacks wisdom you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault

[17:38] I think the wisdom he's talking about is the wisdom to see things rightly and it will be given to you but when you ask you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like the wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind that person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord such a person is double minded unstable in all their ways try and grasp what's going on here I think James is saying something like this if you might listen to my paraphrase if any of you is lacking wisdom or insight to see how the trials of their life fit into God's purposes for them fit into their growing maturity then why don't you ask God to give you wisdom about this he gives to people particularly this wisdom generously and ungrudgingly he'll give it to you let me be assured because he wants you to see how these trials are forming your godliness and maturity you see James is telling us how to understand how these trials fit into those things so God being generous will give us that insight

I think that's what it means not just general wisdom but wisdom to understand what's happening in our lives now let's see how James pushes on look at verses 9 to 11 in this these verses he does a case study about I think what he's said so far think about two trials in life now you would only think one of these trials is a trial but think about two trials in life the trial of being poor which none of us want is it and the trial of being rich which all of us really would want that trial wouldn't we but James appears to me is talking about both things as trials I think it's flowing on from verses 2 to 4 let's see what he has to say in those two circumstances in life you see the wise or the godly person can give you a very different perspective on wealth and on poverty for example a wisdom which begins with the fear of the Lord will tell you that the great goal in life is godly maturity and it is true then if that is true then the poor sister or brother can reflect on that and as they do they'll they'll reflect on the fact that they actually in their poverty have a very high position now what do I mean by that they'll see that if they are poor then in their lowly position they're like the Old

Testament righteous and like the Lord Jesus himself you see because of their low position it is far more easy for them to see their need of God and of God's help friends is this not true when you're in desperate straits either financially or in any other way there's only one person to turn to isn't there and that is God and so the poor person is actually in a great position in life whether poor in circumstances or poor in wealth because they have no one to cling to but God which is what godliness is all about and the rich person what about them how can they learn godly things from their riches well you see the godly person might remember that the only lasting security comes through identification with the man of sorrows despised and rejected of men can you see that wisdom will then drive them to not glory in their wealth but to glory in the humility of their Lord Jesus Christ and that will give them an entirely different perspective can you see what's happening here James is saying what you need is wisdom to see things as they truly are and to arrive at true understanding and to cease by living living by experiences and appearances but to live by truth if you are wise then you'll see things from God's perspective and consider your circumstances to be pure joy they are the way to Christ likeness for you the way to maturity now I don't know about you but I find this an incredible approach to life that slips from my grasp quite regularly but I think it's the approach of all wisdom writers in the Bible I want you to listen to

Proverbs chapter 30 verses 7 to 9 don't look it up you can write it down if you like Proverbs 30 7 to 9 it's on the same topic of riches and wealth listen to what he has to say he says two things I ask of you Lord don't refuse me before

I die keep falsehood and lies far from me then he goes on give me neither poverty nor riches but give me only my daily bread otherwise I would have too much and disown you and say who is the Lord or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God can you see him grappling with the same problem please rescue me from this so that I might be like that he's got godliness as his goal and so he wants to try and understand how to deal with the circumstances of his life but now let's turn to verses 12 to 18 we return to the idea of trial and temptation the language is slightly different here for example look at verse 12 he talks about receiving the crown of life he talks about the test it's not just any trial

[23 : 14] I think so I think up until this point he's been talking about the trials of circumstance and now he's talking about a particular test that's common new testament language it talks about god trial is about god testing and and so on us in normal circumstances of life but testing is often about passing that great test on the last day on the day of judgment and it explains that on that day god will welcome all who have done what kept the faith god i i think that's probably what's being referred to here now with regard to that test the christian ought to know this that while god may test people in order to strengthen their faith he never seeks to induce sin or destroy faith he will never tempt us to give up the way of faith you see god is good james makes this clear here it is impossible by for him to be tempted to plot to harm us or our status with him there is no room in him for anything that would bring disaster on his people he's not inclined to bring the end of his people when he tests us it's so that we might inherit a blessing and not the curse of eternal damnation that's what

I think verse 13 is about the temptation to sin to fall away to unfaith never say that that comes from God but verses 14 and 15 tell us where it does come from have a look it comes from us from within us from our innate tendency towards sin and we're on the home run now James turns to look away from humans and their disposition to sin and turns to God and his nature and disposition and he tells us God is good God is great he is unvaryingly good and he doesn't direct his goodness at unbelief and death he directs it to belief and new birth he says do not be deceived God is God he does not give birth to sin and death he is not fickle you see he gives birth to new creations and to life now let's just summarize what we've learnt and then wrap it up

James has led us I think in some very deep Christian truths he has revealed God's truth to us and he's told us that in God's world God's people are often faced with difficulty and pain and we know that in these difficulties might take many shapes and sizes and friends as I look around the room today I see people have experienced difficulties in life and I know they've taken various different shapes difficulties can be our financial situation our work situation or lack of it we might it might be even the body or the brain that we think that God has given us or the illnesses that come upon us or those close to us or the seeming injustice of our circumstances or it may be family or relationship difficulties such as the absence of long term stable relationships or the way that our relationships always seem to go wrong or families not working out the way that we'd hoped our children not treating us the way that we thought they might or a host of other things and let me tell you friends that the pagan way to approach these things is to blame chance or fate or just an out of control nature of the world but the

Christian way is very different the Christian way is to see God as good and great and therefore what happens in his world is not just random God and the God in God God means for an opportunity for our growth and change James urges us that viewing these things requires a choice of us it might require us to have special divine insight or wisdom and he urges us to opt for that and to ask God for that wisdom so that we might have that approach. But James also opens up to us the question of faith difficulties by talking to us about that great test. And each of us knows the sort of difficulties I mean. Questions about God's goodness. Questions about God's existence.

Questions about God's character. Questions about his faithfulness. Each of those difficulties often comes out in the midst of those other trials of life, doesn't it? The circumstantial sorts of things that press us and push us to the edge.

[28 : 38] And when they happen the great danger for us is to blame God. For example one might blame God for him not meeting our expectations. And when that happens some people opt out of the Christian faith friends you know it. You know that there are some people not here with us today because circumstances have overwhelmed them and they've said I've had enough of this God and

they've deserted the faith.

And when that temptation comes upon us that temptation to opt out let me tell you where it doesn't come from. It doesn't come from God because God's desire is only for our goodness and God is only unvaryingly good.

Our good he knows is to be in relationship with him. He will never tempt us to leave him. And so we ought to recognize the source of our temptation our own sinful nature our desire to be independent of him.

Let's do something else instead rather than passing the blame toward God let us look to God and his goodness particularly his goodness displayed on the cross and let's ask him for his mercy pray for his help pray that he will lead us not into temptation in that sense reflect on his nature as revealed in Jesus in his word and God promises he will help us and give us the wisdom to get through you see because his wish is for our good so let us pray Father we thank you for your great goodness that you are not like a shifting shadow it just passes over very quickly and then is gone and then might come back later Father thank you that you are the God of all goodness and we know that you are good and because we have seen your great deed in the Lord Jesus Christ your great love displayed in him

Father please help us to cling to your goodness even in the midst of great turmoil in life and trial in life and Father we pray this in Jesus name Amen