

# Which path will you take?

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[ 0 : 00 ] So I'd like to imagine that as you're walking along in a wood you arrive at a fork in the road. ! Can you see that? And before you there are two paths, two directions you could take and you stop to consider your way. To the right there is an easy route, it's broad and easy and it gently slopes away.

To the left it's a narrow and winding path with rocks and it's steep and there are roots and so on.

And you pause a touch, you've got to make a quick decision and then off you go.

And as you stand there a man comes up to you beside you and he leans over and he speaks in your ear and he says, know this, take one of these paths. Take one of these paths and you will die. But if you take the other you will live. Choose very, very wisely. Now adults have got a bit of an advantage over children because adults in here, we've been reading James 1 over these past few weeks, which is written by the brother of Jesus to Christian people who are going through all sorts of things.

[ 1 : 14 ] They've been scattered throughout the empire, they're trying to make life work in a hostile world. They're normal people like us, adults and children, trying to make ends meet and proud and angry and happy and sick and sometimes half-hearted.

And these Christians are facing all sorts of trials in a broken world. Some of them are oppressed, some of them poor, some of them almost so rich it's killing their faith.

Others of them are facing illness and disability and loneliness and not being able to have children and maybe a tense marriage or someone has died or a dead-end job or a seemingly dead-end life. Trials that hurt people like us. Trials that hurt people like us and if you like in this verses that Miranda read to us at the start of his letter James leans over and speaks in our ear and says, as you face trials of many kinds, you're at a fork in the road and there are two paths you could take, choose very wisely.

And verses 1 to 12 that we read over this past couple of weeks are called the pathway to life. And as a church we spent two weeks here. So wonderful.

[ 2 : 30 ] To start to think that your trials that you endure are not just very bad, but God can use them to strengthen your faith as you trust in him.

A Christian is someone who has a father in heaven who's good, who doesn't pamper us like babies, but he does want to see the muscle of our faith grow through difficulties.

He wants people like us to keep going when life is really tough and trust him. And as we do that, eventually he wants to make us mature people and grown up like his son.

I didn't say this to the children last week, you weren't here, but we used to live in London next to a woman from Guyana called Josie. And she had next to nothing. Her flat was completely bare. She had a mattress but no sheets.

And she faced trials in her life. She was 80 and going blind, but she was a Christian and she knew God and loved Jesus. And she learned to trust and treasure her father through her very hard life.

[ 3 : 35 ] And she was such a beautiful, beautiful Christ-like woman. And she would wander down the corridor singing songs to Jesus that she'd made up herself. And the trials that can hurt us can, if we face them rightly, with God's help, humble us and change us.

And be a pathway to life. So that when you've persevered under trial and you've kept going, having stood the test, eventually you'll receive like the laurel that you've got there at the end.

And there will be a day when Jesus will give you a crown of life to everyone who's loved him and kept going. That's what we want for ourselves.

But our verses today say that there is another way you can react when life is hard. Because in the middle of trials, there is a pathway to death.

Let me read these verses again. Listen in with your ears. When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me. Because God can't be tempted by evil.

[ 4 : 49 ] And nor does he tempt anyone. But each person is tempted when they're dragged away by their evil desires and enticed. And then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.

And sin gives birth to death. Do you know what? The word for trials and temptations, it's kind of the same word. Maybe verse 13 should read, when you're being put to the test and tried in your life, no one should say, God is tempting me.

Because the truth is, when something tough happens in your life, temptations can be all entangled up with the hard thing you're going through.

When trials and difficulties happen, you can so often experience temptation. Tempted to doubt God and turn away from God and sin.

What I'd like us to do is just think of a few examples. James says that being poor can be a real trial, when you haven't quite got enough to live on.

[ 5 : 56 ] James says being rich, very rich, can be a trial and can tempt you to move away from God. Being the odd one out as a Christian, at your school for example, is a trial.

And it can start to lead you to be tempted to turn away from God and sin. So what I'd like us to do, just for a couple of minutes, I won't get us to give us lots of answers.

I wonder if you might, with the person next to you think, pick one of these and go, When you're poor, how might you start to be tempted to sin in what you think and in what you do and in what you say?

Or when you're rich, or even if you're the odd one out. Can we try that? Let's do that for a couple of minutes with someone next to us. When you face a trial like this, how can you be tempted to sin?

Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Thank you.

[ 7 : 28 ] Thank you.

If you haven't got very much money, that's a trial. You can be tempted to steal. You might be tempted to envy others. You might be tempted to become hard and bitter and feel very sorry for yourself.

You might be tempted to doubt God's care. If you've got lots of money, you might be tempted to think you're all secure by yourself.

You may be tempted to look down on other people who haven't got as much as you. You might be tempted to hoard and fret over all your stuff. If you're the odd one out at school, say your mum or dad brought you up to follow Jesus, and as you start to become a teenager, you look around and realise, I'm the only one who's meant to say I'm a Christian.

And you can be tempted to want other people to think you're really good and nice and you'd be their friend. And when they say that Christianity is a bit silly and what on earth are you doing, you can be tempted to want to be approved of by them.

[ 9 : 05 ] You can be tempted to want to be a Christian. Is that right? There's all sorts of temptations attached to our trials.

Say you're quite tired and stressed and overloaded in your life. That's hard. When you're tired and hungry at six o'clock in the evening after a long day and your children feel the same, that's just life is like that.

How tempting to explode and shout and put your foot down and get your way so you can have peace and quiet. When you are alone and lonely, when your relationships are not working out as they should, when you're in a relationship and you feel it's not going as it should, when you're not in a relationship and you really wish you were, that is hard.

How tempting to try and find love in some way that you shouldn't. Do you know in any hardship, in any suffering, when tough times come along, how tempting to turn to drink and drown your sorrows or eat yourself to comfort or question his love for you or get anxious or become bitter.

Now here's the thing, when you're tempted, it is so easy and tempting to want to blame God. Yes, I did gorge myself.

[ 10 : 42 ] Yes, I did get drunk. Yes, I looked at something I shouldn't. But life is hard, you know. I'm not to blame. I don't understand why he's making things so hard for me. I am really struggling to think he loves me and cares for me.

But it's not my fault he's pushing me into this. He's being cruel. He's tempting me. Listen to what James says. In these verses, James says, no. When you're being put to the test and tried, don't say, God is tempting me. You mustn't blame him. Because the truth is, the temptations you feel are much, much closer to home. So in the middle of tough times, when you're the odd one out at school and you're tempted to fit in with everyone else, when you're tired and stressed and overburdened and you're tempted to lash out, what is drawing you to doubt God, to self-pity, to drink, to anxiety, to bitterness? Well, here's what James says. Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

[ 11 : 56 ] That's the source. That's what draws us away from God, our evil desires. Grownups and children, we're created in the image of God.

We're made like him to know him. And yet at the same time, within ourselves, there is evil desire. There's a longing and a yearning to do not what God says. And that means the responsibility for blame for temptation and sin, even when life is tough, lies right here. Look at this, verse 14. You're enticed and dragged away. So the image is a bit like a fishing line. You ever been fishing? Anybody been fishing? You go fishing and you've got a fishing rod and you've got a worm on the end and you entice the fish with the worm on the end.

The worm looks juicy and you can't really see the hook at all. And then the fish nibbles onto it. James says here that our evil desires inside us entice us.

[ 13 : 07 ] So the voice that says, how juicy and good it would be to take a bite. How satisfying it would be to drink more or to shout or do what I shouldn't.

How tempting. Go on. It's okay. Allow yourself to explode at your family. You'll feel better. They will know how you feel. You should feel sorry for yourself.

You've every right to wallow and doubt his care. And as your mouth closes over the bait, let's take the worm away. You're enticed.

You're grabbed by your own evil desires. And verse 15 takes another image, but it should be just as scary. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.

And sin, when it is full grown, leads to death. See, when you're struggling with something, if you won't nip your sinful desires in the bud and abort them, they will grow and they will give birth to sin in your life.

[ 14 : 20 ] And if sin is left to grow and grow and take over, it will take you finally down the path to death.

James is talking in these verses about someone who's been grabbed and enticed and eventually starts to push God aside so far that their sins lead to eternal death, to hell itself.

So let me try and draw together these serious words here that we're looking at. James is saying that in the middle of trials, when you're facing trials, there is a pathway that leads to death and it's our desires that take us there.

And I want to say this morning to adults and children, if this makes sense, this is really true. So it can happen in a big moment of suffering. Like when someone you love dies suddenly or a close relationship falls to bits, something horrific and tragic, and in grief and anger, instead of turning to God, you become a bit harder with him.

What is he doing? I thought he loved me. And you draw away from him a little bit and slowly but surely, your desires kick in and you find yourself less interested in living to please him.

[ 15 : 44 ] Why should I? And you become more and more attracted to living like everyone else does. You become enticed and dragged off until eventually you don't follow Jesus anymore.

What kind of monster was he, that God I followed, to have let that happen in my life? I am living for me now. There are lots and lots of people who start off as children or young adults whose desires grab hold of them in a moment of awful suffering and they use that moment to entice and lure that person away from him.

That is tragic and it happens. When tested, desire grows to sin and leads to death.

Not just after a big moment of hardship though. Because sometimes in the slowly growing trials of life, our desires can gently drag us away. Maybe a clever and career-minded person gets successful and slowly richer as they approach middle age and their life becomes just a touch more comfortable and they feel increasingly secure and control in their life and straightforward love for

God gently fades away.

A trial that leads to them being rich and not Christian and dead. Or maybe a young married couple, lovingly committed to God and one another and disappointment slowly comes and their relationship slowly loses its shine and bit by bit they become more bitter and sorry for themselves and angry with God till really there's not much living Christian faith left.

[ 17 : 30 ] A trial, desire, ultimately death. Or the child growing up who becomes a teenager and is so much more aware of what other people think of them and you're the only one because mum or dad said let's follow Jesus and by the time you're 25 you've given up on all that because you want to be approved of by other people and it slowly drags you away until you die forever.

This is James chapter 1 this morning. It's almost too much to talk about when we're young and all together. James is about trials that hurt us.

When we face trials of many kinds and we live in a church that all of us together will face hard things, we do stand at a fork in the road. Grab hold of this.

And there are two paths we can take. See trials in our lives can make us better when in hardship you turn to God and trust him and persevere.

That is a route to life. And yet at the same time trials can make us become bitter where our desires entice us away from God to anxiety and self-pity and sin.

[ 18 : 52 ] And that really is a route ultimately to death. So here's the question as we finish. How can you and I and us together take the path to life? Because I guess if you hear this this morning and you think, okay, this is serious, I do want to be in verses 2 to 12.

And I will face tragedies and hardships and disappointments and there are temptations inside. I want to consider my trials joy if they move me towards God and to life.

And I know how easily the smallest things can start to make me enticed and sinful. Now here's a thing just finally from James 1.

Very briefly from verses 16 to 18. In the middle of life there is a pathway to death. But above us right now there is also a giver of life.

Our God and Father. Look, don't be deceived, verse 16, my dear brothers and sisters. Listen to this. Every good and perfect gift is from above.

[ 19 : 57 ] Coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. Who doesn't change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth. That we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

Do you know this today? You're not alone in your trial. Above you there is a good giving Father. He's a fountain of giving goodness to you.

He's a Father who does not change like shifting shadows. He's reliable. He's consistent. He will give good gifts to you as you ask him. If you're tempted to be enticed away by sin, don't go down there. God is for you. And he's generous. And he does not change. And he is a father, lastly, who gives new birth. Like when we're struggling, doesn't just give us a helping hand in life.

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth. That we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. When you hear gospel truth about the Lord Jesus, this great king and saviour, he gives us birth.

[ 21 : 08 ] Like a Christian is someone who's been given a brand new life. Where God puts his life in you and gives you a new heart and a new life.

And he starts to change you from the inside out into the likeness of his son. That's his gift to us. He's committed to you. He wants you to trust him and turn to him in the middle of trials.

So that instead of desire giving birth to sin and death, we might together instead walk the pathway of life. God is for us.

He is really for us. James 1 is a deep and personal chapter about the trials of life that do and will come to us.

And every trial we face is an opportunity to decide to walk God's way. If you are here this morning and you're not yet a Christian and you know about trials, and you know how tempted you are to disappear into behaviour that God hates and that will destroy you, if you need help in life, pray to him and ask him to give you new birth.

[ 22 : 23 ] And if you are a Christian this morning, as so many of us are, this God we know as our Father is not looking to trip us up. He knows our hardship.

He knows our hearts. And right now he is absolutely focused on giving wisdom and mercy and help and life to those who ask him in the middle of the deepest trials.

So trust him and walk with him and keep going until the day when, having persevered, you will receive the crown of life.

Not like a plastic thing off Amazon that looks a bit silly. But you'll be fully like Jesus and you'll be rewarded and you will see your God forever and ever.

Don't go that way. Go this way. Well, I'm going to pray and ask our God to help us. Let's pray together.

[ 23 : 28 ] Almighty God and Father, you know and we experience how hard life can be for us. The sufferings that we face, the hardships we endure.

Sometimes we're struggling to keep our heads above water. We know and you know how easily we can be dragged away by our desires and turn from you, become bitter towards you and move away from life.

We're so grateful that really you hear us this morning and you're a good giving father. And we look forward to the day when we will be crowned with life.

And so we pray that you would help us right now today, whatever we are going through. Please give us wisdom. Help us to desire and know you more than anything else.

And help us decide to trust in you and live for you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.