

Trials and Endurance 8am

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[0 : 00] The passage is from James chapter 1, verses 12 to 18, which was just read for us. The reading from the Old Testament was given so that you will understand almost the last words in this passage when it talks about the firstfruits of his creatures and the place that firstfruits had in the understanding of the Old Testament.

So that's, if you want to look at those scriptures again, that's what you need to look for. Now, this passage begins with a beatitude. And you know the beatitudes are, blessed are they, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they that mourn, blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness.

If you look here, you'll see that there is a beatitude at the beginning of this passage in verse 12, which says, blessed is the man who endures trials, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

So front and center in this passage is this beatitude. We live in a society in which religion is a resort to which weak-minded people flee.

The strong-minded in our society have nothing whatever to do with it, but just weak-minded people like you and I. And there may be some vindication of our position if you read closely.

[1 : 33] The successful, and that's how we define blessedness in our society, are the aggressive achievers, the liberated, influential, in-control kind of people that don't mess around with religion.

Well, that's the peculiar balance that we live in in our society, so that the only way to come to church is to come before the light of day is on us, and you can sneak in and sneak out without anybody seeing you there.

Well, this suggests that there may be more reason to be there. This solitary beatitude of James is one conferred on those who have won through trials of poverty, hunger, mourning, insult, meekness, confronted by arrogance.

And this beatitude implies membership in a community that has shared those trials and does not refer to an individual hero type.

In other words, it's not trying to center you out and say, you're the one, I'm the one that has succeeded and has survived in the trials, but rather we belong to a community in which we recognize that trials are a part of your everyday life.

[3 : 03] Every hour of every day, the battle is there. So that in order to have this blessing conferred on you, you would have come to the realization that life involves an internal conflict, one that's going on inside you on a perpetual basis.

It arises from our own self-generated evil desires, and within yourself bringing to the demands of your evil desires a patient endurance rather than a pattern of surrender for purposes of immediate gratification.

Let me tell you that it's a lot easier to talk about this problem when you're 70 than when you're 17, but the problem is the same in some degree. The whole of our lives, then, is a perpetual battle on this unchanging battleground, and we all need help, and help seems hard to come by.

So the special benefit of this beatitude is that it makes a clear statement as to where the battle is to be fought and what the consequences of the battle will be.

And it's suggested that the consequence of the battle is a crown of life or death.

[4 : 34] So that life is more than, and is regarded as something more than, a rearguard action against the encroachments of death. The crown of life is, this concept of the crown, it's like a garland, and it was very gratifying to me, anyway, to see that when the Canadian junior hockey team lost to the Russians last week, the Vancouver Sun did not come out with big black headlines saying, we lost.

It came out and said, what a great thing the Canadian junior hockey team had done, even though they came second in the thing. It was a lovely way of putting it, I thought.

And that's what this is about. It's saying that it's not whether you won or lost, but it has to do with your enduring trials.

Well, the second thing that comes after the beatitude is that there is a no opting out clause. That means that none of us can opt out of this trial situation.

It's there for all of us, and it is perpetual. If you look at the text, you'll see that there's a no opting out clause. The no opting out clause that I refer to is when it says, don't say when you're tempted, I am tempted of God.

[6 : 07] I'm not responsible. God made me do it. And you know how we do, for the most part, try and opt out. You're not allowed to say the devil made me do it.

You can't say God made me this way, so it is his fault. You can't say this derives from a genetic abnormality in me over which I have no control.

The difficulty for me is my family of origin. I'm a victim of somebody else's mistake, or this is society's problem, not mine.

You see, you can see it illustrated in what is almost the intractable problem of drugs in our society.

We ask the question, what agency can we set up to deal with it?

How much money do we have to throw at it? What happens when all our jails are full? And we are dependent on the fact that the person with the problem has to be, in some significant way, a part of the solution to the problem.

[7 : 21] And to generate that reality is hard work. But James says, we are all responsible. We cannot opt out. We have to accept personal responsibility for our situation.

And that that is basic to the whole thing. We're not to opt out. Then he gets down to defining exactly what the problem is.

And in Greek, the word is epithumia. And the reason I give you this bit of Greek is because if I tell you what it is in English, you're too familiar with the word and you won't think about it enough.

So this word epithumia, which as you can see is translated desire, James' beatitude reminds us that every person has to be part of the solution of his own problem.

And James gives us a graphic picture of how it all happens. He says, this is the process that leads to death.

[8 : 33] A clear picture of the same process is given to us in the first epistle of John, where John writes, So that what he's saying is this epithumia, this desire that we have, which interprets itself in an aggressive appetite, is one that has no end in sight.

It only has the immediate present in sight. And if we could only live for the immediate present, then all our problems would be solved. But somehow we are on a journey, and we are going in a direction, and we have a destination in mind.

Well, in James, he says, a man is enticed by his own desires. Those desires conceive and give birth to sin.

Then sin grows up, and when it is full grown, it in turn gives birth to death. It's a strange thing, isn't it, that you talk about, what James talks about.

This is the birth of death. This process, where epithumia takes over and directs our lives. We're told this because the New Testament has a high regard for every individual, and a profound challenge for every individual, to take responsibility for his or her own life, not living in a state of perpetual defeat, but using every trial to learn endurance or steadfastness, like a racehorse, you know, in the gate, who's waiting for the race to begin, or a hockey player who's waiting to get onto the ice.

[10 : 49] We are waiting with joyful expectation of meeting the trial with steadfastness and endurance, in order to win the crown of life.

So, James says, this is an important issue. And he says about it, if you look in the next verse, he says, you are not to be deceived.

Let no one deceive you. And that's in verse 16 of the passage, if you want to see it. You're not to be deceived. Now, we remind ourselves of this every time when in the course of morning prayer, in the confession, we say, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.

We have submitted to being deceived. Deceived. It's interesting to me that the process of desire, conception, sin, and the birthing of death uses the metaphor of human sexuality, which, on the one hand, makes us acutely aware of our own human individuality, and at the same time is taken to be

all that human existence is about.

We live in a culture which seeks to find its fulfillment in some kind of liberated sexuality. But that's all there is in life, so let's find it.

[12:34] And James identifies that kind of thinking as being the way you give birth to death. So, when James makes this clear, that desire, which we have, that it can be short-circuited, and instead of turning all the lights on, you blow the fuses and everything goes dead.

That's how desire works in us. It's for this reason that James tells us not to be deceived, because having been deceived, we heighten the problem by going to enormous ends to rationalize our deceptions.

You know, that we were deceived, and then we work at continuing to be deceived. And we are very much against anybody who wants to break down the carefully balanced structure of our own self-deceptions.

Well, then it goes on to the end of the passage for today when it talks about the endowment. And that Bible didn't say endowment, but your Bible that you have in front of you does.

So I just noticed that as it was being read to us. But do you see where it talks about the endowment? Endowments are an important thing, aren't they?

[14:15] They're something that makes possible for us something that otherwise would be quite impossible. And James comes crashing in on this situation that he's described, of the process of death and deception.

And he says that the source of all goodness and maturity is an endowment from God. The gift you never expected has been freely and unconditionally given to you by the Father of lights.

Which means, I mean, you could say that, the Father of the star-filled skies. He wants you to have not just a sort of an immediate familiar concept of the God who has done this.

He wants you to recognize that this is the eternal God who has left you and I, has provided for you and I, this endowment. Our lives, that God, this God is, and he describes it, is changeless.

God is eternally present to every moment of our lives. You know, we pass through our life and only conscious of this moment in time.

[15:30] But in God's eternal presence, every moment of our lives is a present moment to him. It's interesting. Let me just, you know, you know, Soren Kierkegaard, he's written an article on this very passage.

And, and from it come the words which are famous and associated with his name, fear and trembling. And, uh, Kierkegaard's article reminds us that we need to stand before God with fear and trembling.

And it is this God that provides this endowment for us. Our lives, in contrast to that of God, are marked by change and darkness.

We are double-minded. We lack wisdom. We are deceived. We're ruled by desire, broken by sin, and delivered to death. That's, that's the pattern of our lives.

Apart from the generous endowment which God has, uh, has granted to us. And so, James, in writing about it, he, he explodes in our hands that such a God endowed such a gift to such a people with the expressed desire that all the people of all generation should come to claim from God that gift.

[17:05] Now, what I mean by exploding this in front of us is, is, is a very, is a kind of key statement here. And if you look in verse, uh, verse 18, you'll see what I mean.

You see, we talk about the will of God, but verse 18 says, if you look at it, of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth.

So that, what we're doing here is talking about of his own will. This is God's action, primarily, towards the likes of you and me, in which we delight and rejoice, because, uh, it is his action.

Our action largely comes out of the darkness and changefulness of our own life and the expediency of the moment. But God's endowment comes of his own choice, by his own choice.

And it is God's choice, his will, and his purpose. And then you see, uh, he picks up the same theme that he's just dealt with. He said, desire brings forth sin, sin brings forth death, uh, and now it says, what God does is he gives birth to life.

[18:30] And he does this by the word of truth, which is the testimony to the person of Jesus Christ. He gives us this word of truth, and instead of that being the conception of death, that is the conception of life.

when this word of truth makes its way into your heart and into ours, into mine. So that, you know, to put it, uh, in this immediate situation, what, what he's saying is this, that when you, when you come up to receive communion and you receive the bread and the wine, this is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

it is, in a sense, a physical receiving of the word of truth into your life to mark the fact that you have believed this word of truth, and in believing it, you have come to trust in Jesus Christ.

And in trusting in Jesus Christ, you have, uh, determined that you will undergo the trials and tribulations of this life with patience and endurance, looking for the fulfillment of God's chosen purpose in you and that you, in a sense, abandon yourself to that chosen purpose of God.

So, that's, that, and then he ends with that word first fruits. And, the way I want you just to understand this for the moment is, in the Old Testament passage, which was read for us, it talked about the bringing of the first fruits, the, the careful giving of these to God.

[20 : 20] And, uh, God's purpose is for the whole world, every language, every ethnic group, every people, every culture, not to bring them into the institutional church and let them sign up as members, but to bring them to the place where they receive from the God, uh, who is the Father of lights, that they come into this relationship with him.

And, those who have received this, uh, this word of truth are to be, therefore, the first fruits, in other words, they are to be, uh, the first of a harvest that will include the whole world.

Because God's purpose is not to protect a little covey of people who are huddled together in the face of an alien world, but God's purpose is to bring all of us everywhere to faith and trust in him, to be the inheritors of the endowment which he has provided for us and which we encounter as the word of truth in Jesus Christ.

Christ. And that's the glorious reason that you're here this morning, that you may be assured that this word of truth is here for you right now in the midst of the trials and temptations and tribulations which are the daily diet of all of our lives.

And in those that you are by this beatitude through endurance to hold on that God, not that sin may bring forth death, but the endowment of God may be the means of bringing forth or giving birth to life in you and in us for the fulfillment of God's purpose for the whole world.

[22 : 26] Amen. Amen.