

Trials and Temptations

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 May 2020

Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It's good to be with you this morning. It's nice to see the sunshine. I hope you've enjoyed some of the beautiful weather this weekend. We're going to continue this morning in our series in the book of James.

I'm going to pray before we start, so will you pray with me as we look to God's word together? Lord, we thank you this morning for the opportunity to gather virtually.

We thank you that by your grace, Lord, we are able to together hear your word this morning. And I pray that your spirit would be at work in us, that we would be those who sit under it.

And Lord, that you would teach our hearts. Lord, that you would bend our wills. Lord, that you would renew our souls. Lord, I pray that you would give me words this morning.

Lord, that you would help me. Lord, that I might proclaim your word clearly, faithfully. Lord, that you might use these words in all of our lives, we pray in Jesus' name.

[1 : 17] Amen. Amen. I can remember it was my sophomore year in high school, spring. I played high school lacrosse.

Our season was already not going well midway through. We were not going to make it to the playoffs. And yet, our defensive coach, Graham Standish, pushed us every day in practice.

If you've ever played lacrosse, you know what a ground ball drill is. It's kind of like a fumble drill in football, except you have two guys with six-foot sticks trying to pick up a ball while the other person is beating on them with said stick.

And so, it's quite a challenge. And we would do this over and over and over again. We had to go get the ball.

He would chuck it down the field 30 or 40 yards. We had to sprint down, get the ball, pick it up, and get it back to him. And we would do this over and over again.

[2 : 20] And as the spring got warmer and the practices got longer, and as the playoffs faded, it became a great trial. And he was unyielding, pushing us daily, seemingly unaware or uncaring of the trial that we were facing.

We weren't going to win the title that year. What was the point? And as we went on, I began to doubt Graham Standish. Did he just enjoy torturing us?

Was this punishment for not doing well this year? Or was this just a big ego trip for him? And we were the pawns upon which he was building his reputation.

In the midst of that trial, I doubted his goodness and his intentions for us. And I wonder if we do the same thing in the midst of trials with God as well.

It can be easy at times as we face various trials to think that God is unyielding. We wonder, is he punishing us?

[3 : 32] Is he ignoring us? Does he care? Is he good? It is to some of these questions that the book of James speaks to us this morning.

We're in James chapter 1. If you want to turn there in your Bible at home or on your app, however you're reading along with us this morning. James chapter 1.

We're going to start in verse 12 and read through verse 18. So let's read together. James 1 verse 12. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.

For when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, I'm being tempted by God.

For God cannot tempt with evil, cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

[4 : 37] Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. As James is writing this letter to the church dispersed throughout the Middle East, as he's writing to encourage them to be steadfast in trials, today we see that in the face of trials, he gives us a promise, a problem, and a provision from God as we walk through trials together.

A promise, a problem, and a provision from God. So let's look at these three things in order. First, in verse 12, we see the promise from God.

The promise is that there is a crown of life that God will give to those who are steadfast in the face of trials, steadfast in loving God.

[6 : 03] Now, this imagery of a crown of life, a crown would have been probably not a heavy metal thing that maybe we think of from European history, but it would have been back from the original Olympics, it would have been a wreath, most likely.

And it would have been a living wreath made of vines or of ivy or something like that. And it would be given for those who win the race.

Now, for James, winning the race is not coming in first, but winning the race is finishing it to the end. It is remaining steadfast in our love here.

And for those who are able to stand fast in loving God, then God comes and, like the emperor would come in the ceremony, at the end of life, for eternity, God will come, and like the emperor, he will bestow upon those who are steadfast this crown.

And this crown is characterized by life, life from God, life that extends for all eternity. Life that comes from being with him, the author of life.

[7 : 24] And we are the ones who, not creating this life, but who receive this from God as a gift, as a blessing, as a sign of God's favor.

And so, blessed are those who stand fast in trials. And friends, we need to remember that the Bible tells us that standing fast in the midst of trial does not mean that we will have success.

We think of the book of Hebrews, chapter 11, where it tells of great stories of people who, by faith, saw God do amazing things to provide for them. And yet, at the end of that chapter, if you remember, but there were others who, with the same faith, trusted God.

And rather than seeing God's work in their lives, they suffered great trials and did not see the salvation in this life.

They did not see the success in this life. And yet, there is a future hope, an eternal hope that James is pointing us to here. That is for all, for all of us who are steadfast in our faith in loving God.

[8 : 39] So, there is hope that the end of the race, at the end of the race, there is something worth hanging in there for. I wonder whether you've lost sight of this.

I know sometimes I do. Times I'm overwhelmed by the moment. Sometimes the pain of the trial feels beyond my capacity to bear.

Sometimes I just am afraid that I'm going to fail. And I feel like I lack the ability to endure. And sometimes I just lose sight of it.

I lose sight of the prize. I lose sight of where we're going in the midst of all the stuff that's right in front of me. I can't see the crown of life that God has promised me.

So, James reminds us this morning that blessed are those who, with steadfastness, continue on in loving God because there is a crown of life for us.

[9 : 50] Why is it so hard to stand firm with such a good prize waiting for us? Well, this is what James addresses in the next couple of verses because he says we have a problem in that perseverance, don't we?

We have a heart problem. Look with me in verses 13 through 15. The problem is that our hearts doubt God's intentions and His goodness in the midst of our trials.

See, James is a wise pastor and he knows that he set before us this great hope. Run the race. Blessed are those who stand firm because there's something at the end.

But we all know that when things get really hard, our human hearts, our first desire is to look outward to blame someone else for it.

The devil made to do it. It wasn't me. It was the drink. Or you made me do this. You were the one who made me sin, fail, stop loving God, continuing to be.

[10:56] James looks deeper and he says that this impulse to want to blame others for a Christian is particularly acute because we know that God is sovereign in all things. And so when we look externally at these circumstances and we know that God is sovereign over all of them, then our hearts turn to this.

You are tempting me, God. You are the one pushing me to failure and to sin. We want to blame him and accuse him for our responses.

We doubt his good intentions and we look for a way to pass the buck to him. But as verse 16 reminds us, we have to think rightly about these things.

We have to think rightly about both God and ourselves in this trial. James does this as we walk through this passage. First, James clearly says, God is not the source of our temptation, though he may give us trials.

And it's important to know that in the first century rear, if you were reading this, you would recognize that the word for trials, that's both in verse 2 and in verse 12, has the same root as the word that's translated temptations in your translation here in verse 13.

[12:16] So it's going to sound like, it's going to look like it's maybe the same word. But what James is doing is drawing on the richness of this word to distinguish between a trial, which is something external, and a temptation, which is internal.

Because we know from the Bible that God does test his people. That God does give trials. Think about Genesis 22. God comes to Abraham, and having provided with Abraham a son who is the fulfillment of a promise that he will be the father of many nations, he then says, Abraham, I want you to come and offer up this son.

And Genesis 22 says, God did this to test Abraham. Or we read in Deuteronomy chapter 8, as God is recounting his faithfulness to his people in the wilderness, he said, I put you into the wilderness to test you, to see what was in your hearts.

God puts us at times through trials, but his intention is always that we would steadfastly persevere, and that we would succeed. Look back in verses 2 through 4.

God gives us trials so that we might grow in character, so that it might produce good in us, so that we might know more about his faithfulness, and his power, and his strength.

[13:36] God's intentions are always good. He does not tempt us to sin. One commentator puts it this way, what must be understood is that temptation is an impulse towards sin, and since God is not susceptible to any such desire for evil, he cannot be seen as desiring that it be brought about in man.

This is contrary to his very character, that God would lead people into sin. And so, though he may create and sovereignly oversee our external circumstances, the power of temptation comes from somewhere else.

And this is what James goes on to say in verses 14 and 15. The temptation comes from within. It comes from our own hearts, our own desires. Look with me in verse 14.

Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Now look, we need to be careful here. Not all desires are good. We are meant to desire God. We have the capacity to desire good things, but the word here, and often in the Bible, when it talks about our desires, it's laying bare our sinful desires, our desires for things that are outside of God.

And to think more carefully about this, we need to recognize that the pull of temptation is not the same thing as being captured by temptation.

[15:11] And so, Martin Luther has this famous quote. He says, you can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair. We may see things that will flit in front of our faces that we think, oh, I'm tempted to sin in response to that.

But if we let it fly by, if we resist that temptation and it goes by, we have not sinned. We have actually withstood the temptation. But we know that in our hearts, the pull to sin is met with a desire. We desire things apart from God that will be our salvation. Things that give us ultimate satisfaction. Things that we think will give us fulfillment or comfort.

Friends, think back over the last 10 weeks as we've been walking through this pandemic and the trials that it's been. Where has your heart turned? And look, it can turn not to evil things, but to good things in bad ways.

Maybe you've had a couple too many Oreos on a bad day. Or maybe your bingeing of Netflix has gone beyond what maybe is healthy for you.

[16:34] And some of us are battling turning to real evil that enslaves us. Addictions that maybe we have overcome are lurking again to capture us again.

Whether it be pornography or alcohol or substance abuse or other ways in which we seek to find life in things apart from God.

things that we treat as God substitutes. And when we take these things and not only do we fight against them and even sometimes fail, but when we cherish them, when we coddle them, when we excuse them, and when we keep them rather than taking them and giving them back to God and saying, God, help me.

when we abandon faith in God's goodness and in His provision for us and reach out for these things instead, then, like in verse 14, we are like the trout in the stream and we see the big fat worm float by or we see the well-tied fly traipsing on the top of the water and we strike.

And when we strike at that thing with our desire, it hooks us and it drags us away into sin. And then, James, his image changes from fishing to childbirth.

[18:01] He then says that there is this inevitable process just as in a human body conception leads to the growth of an embryo which in time produces a baby that then grows to a mature person.

So also, when we allow desires to implant themselves in our will, we engage in a natural process that will lead us to sin and it gives birth to sin and the final result, the maturity of sin, if you will, is death.

Spiritual death. Eternal death. Distance. Separation from God because we have turned our back on Him and turned to these things instead.

dead. So when we're facing trials and we feel the pull of temptation, we need to take responsibility for the fact that our, the pull and the power of that temptation and the result of it, if we give into it, is our own responsibility for which we are answerable to God for.

Now, look, friends, there is a proper place for us to lament and cry out to God when we don't understand what He's doing and when it's really hard.

[19:25] But we must not allow our hearts, as James says here, to turn from that lamenting and crying out to Him to turn into a heart of accusation and doubt and bitterness.

This is where James goes in the last couple of verses of our passage today. If in trials our hearts are so prone to doubt and blame God and pursue our sinful desires, where is there hope for us? And verse 16 through 18 gives us the provision, the provision that God's goodness is sure and certain to deliver us from such doubt because He has given us new life in His Word.

Rather than thinking that God is tempting us towards sin, we ought to think of Him as it says in verse 17, God is altogether good and He is unchanging in His goodness to His people.

God is like the sun. The sun cannot cast a shadow because it is the source of all light. So there is no shadow and the sun, although now we know that cosmologically there would be some variation, for all of human existence, our sun has not changed and will not change and so we know that the sun is an image of this unchanging reality that rules over all of the world and brings life to all who receive its blessing of light.

[20:57] And James says this is what all of the images in verse 17 mean. every good and perfect gift comes from God above, the Father of lights who is unchanging and who is without shadow in His goodness.

When trials arouse, doubt in our hearts about God's goodness, God stands firm and says no, I am good.

And then James says, and if you doubt that, because if the circumstances around you look too hard, verse 18 then, this is where we can look to know how to walk through this.

Verse 18, of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth. God initiated with us, God came and pursued us so that we might choose Him in faith.

Now I don't know about you, but I know that when I came to faith in Christ, I thought I was choosing God. I thought I was deciding to believe in Him and to put Him in the center of my life.

[22:10] And at one level that was very true. But as the great Bible commentator Alec Maudier says in his, we learn that behind our choice, making it possible and making it real, is the wonder that He first chose us.

God initiated and pursued and wooed us with the message of the gospel. And He took the message of the gospel and He implanted it in our souls.

And from that, this gospel word of truth, He then brought forth a new life. And just as in verse 14 and 15 talks about how our desires implant something that leads to sin and death, but that that is in our souls, what God brings to us is a different thing.

The word of truth implanted in our lives that then brings us new and eternal life with Him. And not only eternal life with Him, but that we might be a part of His eternal family, the first fruits of His creation.

Friends, this is the good news, is that as we are held forth this crown before us, this crown of life, God does not require that we be good enough to save ourselves or that we be strong enough to stay steadfast and endure on our own power.

[23 : 41] That would be a terrible tease if God asked us to do that. But God instead has come to us, initiated with us, worked in us who believe in Christ, He has given us a new life, a life without which we won't make it on our own.

Our hearts won't allow us. But because we know that Jesus came to earth, was tested and tried as we are, and then died on the cross for our sins, that Jesus was raised to new life so that all who are joined to Him experience this new life, a spiritual life now, and an eternal life with God.

This, then, is the great hope that we have. This is how we know that God is good, and this is the power that we find to be steadfast in the midst of trials.

we throw our helpless selves on God's goodness to us in this. Friends, do you doubt that God is good?

Do you wonder if in this season of pandemic, He is tempting you to turn? Turn from Him to sin? Turn from Him to indulge your sinful desires?

[25 : 12] Have you begun to doubt His goodness and to accuse or to blame Him for your faults, for your failures? The good news of the gospel, the mercy of God, calls us to stand fast in believing in His goodness.

And the eternal salvation that we have in Christ stands as a monument, like an unchanging pillar of truth, that God is good, and that He is worth trusting.

Rather than trusting in our own hearts, let us find in Jesus the unchanging reason to love Him forever. And in Him, we will find the power to remain steadfast and to endure to the end and gain that crown of life that's promised for us.

let's pray. Lord, we confess our weakness to You. How easily we doubt Your goodness, how quickly we turn from You to ourselves.

us. Lord, how we trust our hearts rather than trusting in Your Word. Lord, how often we allow our desires to rule us.

[26 : 45] But God, we thank You that in Your mercy and grace, Lord, that in Christ there is a salvation and a life that is not from us but is from You. And Lord, that in that we will find great comfort and hope.

we will find the strength to endure and hold on to Your goodness, to be steadfast in trial and loving You. Lord, as we look forward to this crown of life that we anticipate, may You help us today to take hold of these things.

In Jesus' name, Amen.