

“Blessed.” It’s a funny word. We use it in strange ways. Sit down to eat a meal and you will ask someone to say “the blessing.” Have a sudden moment of success, and you will claim that you’re so “blessed.” If an accident happens and tragedy was narrowly avoided, people will claim that it could have been so much worse and that they’re blessed nothing worse occurred. When good happens, people will claim that they were so blessed. A person who does good to another is “such a blessing.”

When I lived in the States, this word was also used in a strange way. “Bless your heart” was often used in a sympathetic tone. But it could also be used as a backhanded compliment when something was done that was foolish. So someone might say, “Oh, you got caught in the downpour. Bless your heart.”

We use this word “blessing” in so many ways. Yet James wants us to be blessed and not submit to the mindset of this age. Writing to Christians who have lost their influence in this world, James wants them to consider it joy when they face trials of many kinds.

Before we think of the blessings that James has in mind for us, we need to consider who James was writing to. We know that this book is primarily Jewish. James is probably writing after the death of Stephen in Acts 8 when the church was scattered (Jas. 1:1). As a result of this persecution, the church probably had to practice greater generosity and support for one another, selling their possessions and caring for those in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). This trial would have severely tested the church and brought about theological and pastoral questions. I believe James writes into this situation to help believers understand how these trials are a blessing. How can we be “blessed” when we are in a hard season?

Remain Steadfast in Difficulties (v. 12)

Verse 12 functions as a hinge verse. It completes the thought of vv. 2-11 about remaining steadfast in the face of trials and it prepares us for the temptations that are to come. In v. 12, James sounds a lot like Jesus. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you,” Jesus said in Matt. 5:11. But James moves it from the plural to the singular: “Blessed is the man who perseveres....” This takes us back to Psalm 1: “Blessed is the man who doesn’t walk in the counsel of the ungodly, or stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. But his delight is in God’s instruction....” So the person who is blessed is not only the one who resists temptation, but is also the one who remains steadfast.

As much as James wants us to remain steadfast, he probably has in mind the Lord Jesus himself, who faithfully endured persecution at the hands of an oppressive Jewish leadership and waited for God to vindicate him without uttering a bitter word, facing his death, and bursting forth from the grave to receive the crown of life.

For Jesus, he endured a trial that accused him, condemned him and crucified him. For Jesus, he had to stand and face incredible evil. And in the face of this trial, Jesus never budged one inch. He stood firm. He remained steadfast. He held on to the promises of his Father.

And the result was that God exalted him and gave him the highest place. All authority was given to him in heaven and on earth. This is the plan of God – to test his people and prepare them for their rule as kings and queens. God had given Adam the test in the garden, but he would not wait patiently. David was tested, having to wait to receive the crown of the kingdom when he could have taken out King Saul. But Jesus was tempted by Satan to grasp the throne before his time had come, tempting him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:8-10). But instead of seizing power, Jesus, like David, endured and waited for God’s timing.

The result was that both David and Jesus were given the crown – and James says here that if we endure hardships, there is a crown of life that God promises to those who love him. That love is by waiting and enduring and remaining steadfast.

Interestingly, the word for “crown” is the word *stephanos*, and I can’t help but wonder if James wants us to think of Stephen, the crowned one, who was killed for standing fast to Jesus in the face of opposition, resulting in the church’s scattering (Acts 7:54-8:1).

Now James says “Remain steadfast like Stephen. Why? Because God is testing you to prepare you to rule and reign, but this requires maturity and wisdom. Like the young man of Proverbs who has to grow up and learn wisdom to progress from home to the palace, so we have to grow up in God’s wisdom. No, we do not face widespread persecution in North America today. But increasingly Christians are being challenged on basic beliefs, being ostracized, marginalized, and rejected. If we remain steadfast, if we refuse to compromise, if we learn well now, if we grow in wisdom now and pass this test, if we will follow Jesus in the way of suffering by being obedient to our Father, we will be made complete and prepared to rule. Or we can give in to bitterness, jealousy, and want the comfortable life but deny ourselves wisdom and the path that leads to the glory that David, Jesus, and Stephen have walked before us.

Refuse to Blame (vv. 13-15)

James says something very interesting in v. 13. In the ESV, it says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God...’” But this misses something that James is wanting us to see. The word for testing and tempted in vv. 12-13 are the same words. Depending on the context, the word can mean either tempted or tested. We can use the word “blue” to mean something different in the same sentence: “I feel blue even though the sky is blue.” So we can feel down even when the weather is nice.

What James wants us to do is resist the temptation that comes with a trial. James sees that these Christians have suffered persecution, scattered, shared their resources, lost cultural influence, and in the face of the trial are tempted to blame God.

And this is how it is for us. When we face financial pressures, we can question if God will really provide. When someone we love faces health challenges and is suffering, we can question the goodness of God and his love. When we see people get away with injustice, we can question if God is just. Every trial includes some sort of temptation.

The Old Testament shows that God would often test his people. Abraham was tested when he was asked to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1). Israel was tested if they would remain faithful when the nations around them were not (Judg. 2:22).

The difference between God's testing and our temptation is that God does not test us to cause us to fail. He doesn't give us an exam and hope that we fail. Like a good teacher, God is training us in wisdom and helping us to see what we know and don't know so that we can grow into maturity and success.

So James says, "Don't blame God!" We might blame God for several reasons. First, we might have a bad theology of God's sovereignty. Since God is in control of all things, the reasoning goes, God is to blame for evil. But James says that God cannot be tempted, so he doesn't tempt anyone. That is not his nature. Second, we might blame God for putting us in the circumstances. Why did God allow these circumstances for me? He put me in the place of temptation. He's to blame. Third, people say that God made me this way. I have these desires, and God made me this way, so why should I deny my passions? God does not know temptation in his heart.

The way that temptation works is that we find ourselves in a situation where our desires and passions get caught up in the moment. James uses a fishing analogy here. He says that desire sees the bait and goes after the hook.

When I lived in Northern Ontario, I would get out fishing quite often. Depending on what we were fishing for and where we were fishing, we would change up the lure and bait. Different baits worked better on different types of fish. We would often try different colours and types of lures until we figured out what got the fish biting. Then, once we got a bite or two, we'd get a fish on the line and drag it in to the boat.

James says that this is what desire is like. The problem we have is not outside of us, but inside of us. We can't blame God – he is working to teach us to live self-controlled and upright lives that pleases God our Father. And we can't say that the devil made me do it. The problem is within us. We have not learned self-control over our desires.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say it this way: "With irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh....It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire, or ambition, or vanity, or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money....Joy in God is...extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all

reality, and only desire for the creature is real; ...Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God....The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us. The questions present themselves: 'is what the flesh desires really sin in this case?' 'Is it really not permitted to me, yes – expected of me, now, here, in my particular situation, to appease desire?' ...It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God."

(Bonhoeffer, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *James Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 48.)

In the face of temptation, God is not setting you up for failure. He is working to teach you to depend upon him, to learn to have your desires shaped by him, and to trust in him.

The result of submitting to temptation is pictured in the language of growth. But this is not a healthy growth. Temptation conceives, gives birth, and grows fully leading to death. And here is the picture: you can receive the crown of life, or you can give in to death.

Into this situation James writes to people who feel like they've lost their place and influence. He writes so that people do not give up on faith in Christ and go back to Judaism. And he writes to us so that we do not give up on Christ and follow the way of this world. It looks tempting and promises ease. But it leads to death.

The way of the blessed life is to follow the blessed Man. The Lord Jesus, in the face of temptation, did not give in. When tested, he resisted and passed the test. When offered food, security, and power, did not give in. Instead, he faced the trial that led him to the cross. And in going to the cross, he died and rose again and received the crown of life. And now he wears that crown of life as he rules and reigns and intercedes for you and me at the Father's right hand, far above all rule and authority and has been given the name that is above every name.

So, will you take the bait that promises momentary pleasure but will result in you being dragged away? Or will you endure and receive the promise of the rule that God has for those who trust in him?