

Trials & Triumph

James 1:12-18

People easily fall into one of two opposite errors when suffering. The first distances God from what is going on: perhaps He doesn't know or doesn't care or doesn't exist. The second acknowledges that God knows—that He is God—but blames Him as the author of evil, bent on our demise. The so-called problem of evil is really the problem of someone's pain and sin. James frees us from deception. Our lusts lead us into sin and death, but God is the Father of lights, good all the time. He provides grace to endure temptation and receive the crown of life.

Summary of the Text

The man who endures temptation is blessed because, when approved, he will receive the crown of life, the eternal life God promised (v. 12; cf. 2 Tim. 4:8). The one tempted must not say God tempts him because God cannot be tempted by evil Himself nor tempt anyone (v. 13). People are tempted when lured and led by their own evil desires (v. 14). Indulging these inner lusts produces outward sin, and when the throttle of sin is opened, the highway to hell arrives at death (v. 15). Beloved brethren ought not to be deceived (v. 16). God is the Father of lights. Every good and perfect gift comes down from Him in whom there is no change (v. 17). He fathered these first-century believers with the word of truth to begin the harvest, the firstfruits of His new creation (v. 18).

The Crown of Life

The psalter begins *“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful”* (Ps. 1:1). James speaks of not just avoiding evil, but overcoming it. He returns in these verses to trials (v. 2 *peirasmos*) again because the twelve tribes need the instruction if they are going to suffer faithfully. Jesus said, *“Blessed are you...”*, addressing a group (Matt. 5:11). James addresses the singular person, the one who endures suffering and is blessed. Much of the modern church thinks that Jesus came to die so we don't have to, so we can get out of here and go to heaven when we die. But Jesus didn't die so that we would live. He died that we might die and lived that we might live (Rom. 6:2-9). To be a *“little Christ”*, a Christian, is to conform your life to His. This passage is all about Him. Jesus is the one who endured temptation, was approved, and received the crown of life (v. 12). Of course He saved us and we cannot duplicate His work. But we must imitate Him. John tells the church in Smyrna, *“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* (Rev. 2:10). James has us look to the end of the trial both in the sense of temporal finish and the goal. The temptation won't last forever. It feels like it will, but it won't. There's a wordplay in that Stephen was *“stephaned”*, crowned at his martyrdom which caused these Jewish believers to scatter in the first place (Acts 7:58, 8:1). The one who endures will be crowned with righteousness, the kind you long for as you love the God of righteousness now. The ultimate temptation is to deny God instead of remaining steadfast to the end, but every lesser victory along the way prepares you for the coronation to come.

The Source of Temptation

So Christians count themselves blessed in temptations and therefore may not accuse God of tempting them (v. 13). It is not in His nature to be tempted, and therefore He does not tempt others. We can distinguish between testing, putting someone through a trial, and tempting them in the sense of causing or prompting them to sin. The distinction is not found in the word *“tempt”* which just like the word *“desire”* (*epithumia*) has both lawful and sinful examples. Jesus had strong desire to eat the Passover with the disciples, and Paul desired to depart and be with Christ (Lk. 22:15; Phil. 1:23). But the desires James addresses are sinful: the

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desire to blame, envy, show favoritism, doubt God and so on. Because we are fallen, we face ungodly inner desires which must be mortified (Col. 3:5). When consistently confessed and repented, your desires change. No one wakes up one morning and decides out of the blue to murder their grandmother or commit adultery or slander their neighbor. All sin begins in the heart, with a willingness to indulge rebellion against God. Gross pride, funny because it's so absurd, blames the circumstances for our sin rather than taking responsibility. It goes back to Adam in the garden when after watching the serpent deceive Eve rather than protect her, he takes the fruit from her and eats, covers himself in fig leaves, hides from God in the trees, and then responds to the Lord's question about whether he ate from the tree which he was commanded not to: *"The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."* (Gen. 3:12). Moses asks Aaron what Israel ever did to him for him to lead them into idolatry and make the golden calf. He responds: *"You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods....' And I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.' So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out"* (Ex. 32:22-24). It was Eve, the people, even the fire that really caused all this sin! It was him, her, the circumstances, the sun, the clouds, the sister or brother, the teacher, the student, the money, the lack of money, ad infinitum. It's a sin to excuse our sin. Sin is never reasonable, despite our best efforts to make it sound reasonable. James describes the process. The word "drawn" connotes a forceful, dragging away, and "entices" suggests an attraction offered by the bait (v.14). These terms were used in a fishing context. It's not that the hook and bait bear no responsibility, but it's our desires that draw us after it. When we repeat the process with regard to a particular sin it's called "addiction", but the Bible names it slavery (Rom. 6:20-23; 1 Cor. 6:12).

Father of Lights

Know the play, the lie behind the temptation, the ungodly desire, and the destination it's headed for, which is death. You are loved, James says, so don't be deceived (v. 16). This beautiful description "Father of lights" is unique in Scripture to James. Every good and perfect gift comes down from Him in heaven, the same place where He set the lights on the fourth day for signs and seasons, to rule over the day and night (v. 17; Gen. 1:14-16). Seasons change and days go by, but as Blind Willie Johnson sang, "God don't never change." He rules like the sun, moon, and stars, and we are told to "shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). We are to be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of Lord. This was hard to do when women and children were being dragged off to prison, tortured and executed (Acts 8:3, 9:1-2). But these trials were their triumph, the occasion for receiving the crown of life. So will yours be.