

Sermon for Sunday, June 12, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Blessed Endurance
James 1:12-18

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not 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 (James 1:12-18).

This week I met a serious candidate for the president of the United States. I was impressed. He gave an excellent speech, knew his material, looked people in the eye. And clearly he is putting his best effort into the event.

The next day I learned that another candidate's campaign blew up. Two weeks after he announced his candidacy and doing a few things, he went on a long vacation and shopping spree. He didn't seem willing to persevere. The Bible says God blesses us when we endure, when we persevere with him.

Take a moment to think of a task, a mission, a problem, a trial. It may be your own, something that falls to no one but you. It may be one you share – with family, at work, perhaps even with broader society. The question: Do you want to quit or to endure? Hear this: God says it is blessed to endure.

1. Blessed endurance and life eternal (1:12)

When James says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trials," it reminds us of other Scriptures. Psalm 1 blesses the man who loves God's law, bears fruit and prospers. Matthew 5 blesses Jesus' disciples who hunger for righteousness. This blessing is not the fleeting pleasure of a satisfying meal or a good laugh. It is the joy that comes from God and lasts through trials, because God is there.

James 1:2-4 describes the present benefits of trials. If we withstand tests, they strengthen our character and promote endurance and maturity. James 1:12 names the final result of trials: We receive the "crown of life."

Greek cities crowned their heroes to honor them for public service or to reward an achievement. In Scripture, crowns signify glory and honor, given by God. Scripture links them to virtues God approves and to the blessings of salvation:

- Wisdom "will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a **crown of splendor**" (Prov. 4:9).
- "Gray hair is a **crown of splendor**; it's attained by a righteous life" (Prov. 16:31).
- When God's favor comes, He will comfort all who mourn and bestow "a **crown of beauty** instead of ashes... gladness instead of mourning" (Isa 61:3).

These are beautiful promises. But we miss the point if we dream of performing notable deeds in order to gain these crowns. If we perform a sacrifice primarily for the sake of the future reward and only secondarily for those whom we serve, we should label it "deferred gratification," not "sacrifice." If we perform good deeds for the sake of the reward, whom are we serving? The Bible occasionally uses rewards to motivate us for service, but the chief motivation for service is love for God and neighbor.

If we serve God in order to gain a reward, are we loving God? As Bernard of Clairvaux once said, if we demand a reward to obey God, we love the reward rather than God. "The soul that loves God seeks no other reward than that God whom it loves. Were the soul to demand anything else, then it would certainly love that other thing and not God."¹

Occasionally, a believer will say he hopes to receive a certain crown in heaven. But we aren't competing for a small pile of crowns that God will distribute to super-Christians (leaving the rest vaguely sad, which they get over, because it's heaven). Jesus wore a crown of thorns so that all who believe will receive the crown of life. God crowns every believer who remains faithful to the end.

Paul said, "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to *all* who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8). All! Every faithful Christian receives "the crown of righteousness" and "the crown life" (Rev. 2:10).

Our quest for crowns is mistaken if we seek literal bands of gold. Rather, the crown of life is life itself, life eternal, with God. The crown of righteousness is righteousness itself, the righteousness of Christ given in full measure. To wear the crown is to stand in our relationship with King Jesus. God distributes glory, righteousness, and life to all who love Jesus and long for him.

Question: Do you long for him? Do you still seek your glory, or do you want to be crowned with his life, his glory, his righteousness? Can you say, "What I get, who I impress hardly matters, as long as I know Jesus, please him, live with him.

James says we gain a crown of life by enduring trials and by loving God: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (1:12). The source of endurance is not a grim determination to do our duty and collect our reward. Love is the prime motive for married couples, for parents, and for friends, whether times are hard or easy. Love is also the prime motivator for our walk with God.

One of our children called us while urgently having a food reaction. We had a bad connection: "Help; I don't know what to do" and then her phone fell silent. Not a good feeling. We hopped in the car and started driving... It sounded like she said she was at the zoo. Why she was there on Friday and how would we find her – mysterious. But we started driving. Then we reach her again "I'm not at the zoo, I'm in Ladue." Turn around! So why did we race to help our daughter? Not duty, but love. So love motivates all our service.

When James says God promised to give life to those who love him, he uses covenant language. The Lord abounds in love and wants us to love him and keep his commandments" (Deut 5:10). God promises to "keep his covenant of love" with us and bids us to keep it too and to endure with him (Deut 7:12-13, 11:1-22). Believers who are widowed and alone sometimes wonder, "Why am I still here? What does the Lord have for me to do?" The answer is "He may want you to love him another year."

God intends trials to strengthen our love for God and faithfulness to him. Sadly, trials don't always produce maturity. When facing trials, some doubt God's goodness and reject him. Instead of growing deeper in faith and longing for the crown of life, they blame God for their troubles. James addresses this in 1:13-15.

¹ Bernard, On Loving God, 7.17.

2. The alternative to endurance: questioning God's goodness (1:13-15)

A test can be taken two ways. We can view it as a trial and turn to God for aid, so that we persevere. Or we can read it as a tragedy or accident - a failure, on God's part, to love and protect us. Some who meet trials blame and attack God for them. They say he tests them too severely, pushing them toward sin. Believing failure is inevitable, they give up and seek someone to blame: "God is tempting me," they say (1:13). "He is leading me to ruin."

James says no, God never sends tests we are bound to fail. God does not entice us to sin. God is neither tempted to do evil, nor does He entice others to evil.

God does test his people. God tested Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1). God gave Abraham an opportunity to demonstrate the authenticity of his faith. He also tested Israel in the wilderness. He sent one day's supply of manna each day and told them to gather only what they needed that day and to trust God to rain manna again the next day. The Lord said, "In this way I will test them and see if they follow my instructions" (Exod. 16:4).

The test of Abraham revealed the strength of his faith, but the test of Israel revealed their lack of faith. So can God's tests become temptations? Yes and no.

Tests provide the opportunity to endure in faith and to receive a crown. Yet some will face tests and fail. So the same event is a test from one perspective, for one person, and a temptation for another person. A test lets people prove themselves. A temptation plus evil desires can lead to sin. So the same event can be a test or a temptation. In Greek "peirasmos" can mean a test, a trial, or a temptation; "peirazo" can mean to test, to try, or to tempt. Context determines the sense. In 1:12, it means "test;" in 1:13, it means tempt.

James says: if a test becomes a temptation, it's sinful human nature that makes it so. God does not "tempt anyone; but each one is tempted... by his own evil desire" (1:13-14). Jesus teaches us to pray that we not be led into temptation. We should ask the Father to spare us from tests we would be doomed to fail. So then, if we do fail, it is because our sinful desires entice us (1:14).

Desires are not intrinsically evil. We can desire to see someone (1 Ths. 2:17). But many desires are selfish and sinful. And we can readily turn good desires to evil. For example, a woman's beauty is intrinsically good and innocent. Beauty, by itself, never forces anyone to sin. Men ought to be able to notice a beautiful woman with detached admiration - as a visitor to a museum admires a still-life painting of a plate of fruit. But sometimes approval of beauty becomes desire and desire becomes lust.

Where does the fault lie? Not with the beauty, created by God and tended by the woman. No, it lies with the man, whose desire went astray. A well-appointed home is similar. We can admire it or envy it. Same with power. Godly ambition may mean we want more responsibility. But that desire can become greed for power, even a desire to see a leader fall. When we see anything good, and add selfish desire, that good thing can lead to sin.

Ask yourself a hard question: Do I ever spoil good things by adding my selfish desires to them? Do I blame everyone but myself when things go wrong by saying, "I was tempted!" Do you see that your selfish desires sometimes spoil things? If so, repent. Don't condemn yourself. Receive God's grace, pray, and try to grow.

3. Testing and temptation in the Old Testament

Israel's history illumines the issue. Israel faced a great test as it wandered in the wilderness after God delivered them from Egypt. Israel praised God, "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" (Ex 15:1-2). Then, a short time later, they ran out of food. They complained, "If only we

had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve [us] to death" (16:3).

This was nearly blasphemy, yet God graciously promised to supply Israel with food, raining bread down from heaven every morning. But he told them to gather nothing beyond their daily needs. So God tested them, to see if they would trust him to provide the next day. They failed, gathering more than they needed. But it rotted overnight.

Next the people needed water, then demanded, water. They quarreled with Moses and tested the Lord (17:1-2). They accused Moses of delivering them from Egypt in order to slay them in the desert. Despite their attitude, God provided water. Yet Moses called the place 'Quarreling' because Israel quarreled and "tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" After all the signs God provided, the Israelites dared to question God: "What have you done for us lately? We want proof that you are with us, and we want it now" (17:7)!

The people tested God's patience by their disobedience. But he also tested them, and found them wanting. God does test his people. When people have solid faith, they pass the test. Moses passed great tests. He felt the full burden of leadership, but persevered.

A forgotten story: In the wilderness, Moses met Hobab, his brother-in-law. He tried to recruit him to join Israel. Moses had a practical motive: "You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes" (Num 10:30). But he also offered Hobab a motive to seek his fortune with Israel. "If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us."

Moses persuaded Hobab to join him, for he believed the Lord would send good to Israel. Moses faced armies, thirst, complaints, hunger, rebellion. Yet his faith was unshakeable. He told Hobab, "You know, God has promised good things to Israel. You would hate to miss that."

Moses' shows God's tests can make us stronger and stronger. The grumblers said, "All I see is trouble;" Moses said, "I see God delivering us from trouble. He has never failed and we are getting closer to the promised land."

What about you? What do you see in life's tests? Can you stand with Moses, confident in God and say, "I see my problems – and God's provision!"?

Israel's problems in the wilderness – hunger, thirst, weariness, doubt - are common. Why then does Moses pass where the grumblers fail? God is the same; the test is the same. Not that Moses was perfect, but heart attitudes make the difference. Hebrews says the wilderness generation heard God's message, but it "was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith" (Heb 4:2). The faithless falter; the faithful endure.

Thomas Edison was determined to fabricate a light bulb, but he needed to find a substance with the proper resistance to electricity so that it glowed without burning. He tried one substance after another: metals, minerals, and organic matter. Most people would have given up. But every time another filament burst into flame, Edison knew his quest was step closer to its end.

God intends trials to promote endurance, so that we who love him receive the crown of life (1:2-4, 12). If we falter, we should not blame God. If we succumb to temptation, it's because we let our desires drag us into sin. We have no right to blame God for our sin. Instead, let's trust him and persevere.

Note: I stress perseverance because that is James' theme. Yet there is a time to move, to escape crushing burdens especially when we have no duty to carry them and never promised to carry them. Jesus said his messengers can flee if they are persecuted for preaching his message. And Paul said if slaves see a way to gain their freedom, they should take it. The key: No duty, no promise.

Final results of sin (1:15-16)

James says, "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death" (1:14-15). The grumbling, rebellious Israelites showed how evil desires lead to death – most of them did die in the desert.

James personifies evil, saying temptations and desires come together to "conceive." Their offspring is "sin." Sin grows up and becomes a parent. Its child is "death." When we indulge sin, it becomes a pattern. A pattern can become a life-dominating force. Unchecked, the result is death.

So let's watch ourselves. If we indulge anger, self-righteousness, a desire for control or for pleasure long enough, it can lead to death!

There are two options in any test. Testing, met with endurance, makes us mature and complete and leads to life. Or testing, met with selfish desire, leads to sin and death (1:2-5; 13-15). "Death" is more than the death of the body. Rather, just as faith and endurance lead to eternal life, so selfish desire leads to eternal death (Rev. 20:14-15).

This is an idea we might prefer to avoid. Therefore, James commands, "Do not to be deceived, my beloved brothers" (1:16, English Standard Version (ESV)). He hopes we see the truth. Sin begins in our hearts, which are all too willing to follow evil desires. How foolish it is to succumb to temptation, then blame the results on God.

4. The divine goal for testing (1:17-18)

But again God means our tests to bring us good. Tests can be gifts, not curses. But if sin leads us to fail tests, how can we escape? James 1:17-18 answers.

The generosity of God

When James says, "Every good [endowment] and perfect gift is from above" (1:17). Or "Every good gift, every perfect donation is from above." James emphasizes the source of the gifts. They "come down from the Father of lights," God the creator (1:17). God is light. In Him there is no darkness at all (1 Jn. 1:5). There is no variation, no change in His goodness. Therefore, God gives good gifts, not impossible tests. We must view tests that way.

Yet we do succumb to temptations. We fail to persevere in love for our God. So, do our failures thwart God's plans? Do our sinful desires lead to ruin? Yes and no. Yes, sin always causes problems! But no, God won't let one sin ruin us. He knows our flaws. James says, "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13).

The will of God

If an unbeliever fails the test, God can use that failure to lead him to Christ. The prophets call this the gift of a new heart (Jer. 31:31-34). Jesus calls it being born from above (John 3:1-8). Paul calls it a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17, Eph. 4:22-24). It's renewal by the Holy Spirit (Tit. 3:5).

James calls it birth through the word: "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (1:18 New International Version (NIV)). Or "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth (ESV). That is, God took counsel with himself and resolved that he would not leave sinners in their plight (*boulomai*) means to will. But often "to decree" (John 11:53).

He decided to grant us spiritual life by "the word of truth." This rebirth keeps sin from giving birth to death. We become the first fruits of his creation.

The means of God

God will accomplish this spiritual birth by the "word of truth" (1:18) The word of truth is "the gospel." For example, Paul says, you "were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation (Eph. 1:13). (Also: you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you (Col. 1:5b-6a, ESV).

God wills our salvation and achieves it through the gospel. Peter says, "For you have been born again... through the living and enduring word of God.... And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:23-25, ESV). Through the preaching of Christ, God draws men to himself (cf. John 1:13, 1 Cor 4:15). Then, as the gospel wins us we will choose the new life that he wills for us.

So even if we fail in a trial, God has a good plan for us. Christian, you should repent and find grace and comfort. Unbeliever, you should turn to the gospel. Either way, we turn to God, not self, so we rests on God's unchanging goodness.

The result, for God

By trusting in the gospel, believers become "a kind of first-fruits of all he created" (James 1:18c). The first-fruits are the first product of field and flock. The Israelites offered them to God (Exod. 23:16-19; Lev. 2:12; Num 15:20-21; Deut 18:4). The New Testament uses the term first-fruits metaphorically, to describe our new life in union with Christ (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:20-23). But James probably has Old Testament principles touching first-fruits in mind:

- All produce of flock and field come from God. But first-fruits were especially his. Most food was for daily use, but first-fruits came to priests in tabernacle.
- The first-fruits were only the best. So we offer our first and best to God.
- The first-fruits were an annual confession that God had supplied the year's bounty, that he was faithful yet another year.

James says we are God's first-fruits. We are the first and the best of His "produce." He will care for us year by year, even as He cared for Israel in the wilderness. This is what tests should teach us. If we fail, we turn to God for mercy, as He offers it in the gospel. Then as we persevere with Him in love, come what may, we will receive that crown of life that He has promised.