

As I begin this morning, I want to encourage you to look around the sanctuary and consider what you see. Perhaps you look at the stage and see musical instruments, a large Cross, or a stained glass window. If you're relatively new, you might observe a sea of unrecognizable faces. If you've been a part of our community for a while, you may see someone from your small group, a close friend, or the person who prayed for you last Sunday. But what you cannot see, and may not have noticed, are the people who no longer attend our church.

Why did people leave churches? Some move away because of work, while others find a home in a different church. But there are others who have neither moved away nor found another church; if you ran into them on the street they would tell you that they have walked away from faith altogether.

Why do people walk away from faith? There's a variety of reasons. Some people get so busy with other things—good things, innocent things—that they simply don't have time for God any more. They didn't intend to walk away, it was a long, slow, drift. But many others discard their faith in God because something terrible happened in their life and they couldn't reconcile God's goodness with the pain they were experiencing.

Last week we began a teaching series from the Book of James, looking at the first 11 verses. When painful trials comes knocking on our door, we are hit by a tidal wave of questions. *If God is so good*

*then why do I struggle with mental health issues? If God is so good, why do I feel so trapped—by my job, my relationships, my responsibilities? If God is so good, why am I homeless? Or, jobless? Or, sick?*

James invites us to do something counter-intuitive—and impossible—without God's help. He says, "*Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds*". When James connects trials to joy, he's using the word in a way that is foreign to our contemporary usage. In our day the word "*joy*" has come to mean a feeling of intense pleasure or a kind of super-sized-happiness. Biblically speaking, "*joy*" isn't an emotion, it's a state of being."<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight describes joy as a "*confidence in the goodness of God, [and] in God's sovereign control of history and eternity*".<sup>2</sup>

Note also that James uses the word "*consider*," *consider* it pure joy—"consider" is a "thinking" verb, not a "feeling" verb. In other words, James doesn't tell us *how we should feel* about the trials we face, but rather, he tells us *how we are to think* about them. In the midst of trials, when all seems dark around us, we call to mind the faithful character of God.

And so, when God calls us to "*joy*" in the midst of trials, He's inviting us into faith. Every trial is an opportunity to turn to God, to receive His resources (like wisdom), and in our persevering through the trial, the Holy Spirit is at work, shaping us in the image of our

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament: James*, 48.

<sup>2</sup> Scott McKnight, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Letter Of James*, 72.

Lord Jesus Christ. But here's the thing, while every trial, pain, or loss is an opportunity for faith, it's also an opportunity to blame God and walk away from faith.

If you have a Bible with you this morning, or a smartphone app, please turn with me to James 1:12-18. If you are using the Blue Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 977. This morning I'm going to be reading from the New Living translation:

*12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. 13 And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. 14 Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. 15 These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*

*16 So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes, as a shifting shadow does. 18 He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.*

There are three movements that I want to explore in vs. 12-18; the first is a blessing, the second is a warning, and the third a promise. Let's begin with the blessing in vs. 12.

**1. A Blessing On Those Who Persevere Through Trials (vs. 12):** In vs. 2-4, James encouraged perseverance through trials; he does the

same in vs. 12 but with a subtle shift. The emphasis in vs. 2-4 was on the temporal benefit of perseverance, namely, character or moral transformation, but in vs. 12 James addresses the future (eschatological) blessing of perseverance, namely, receiving God's final word of affirmation and approval when we see Him face to face.

**illus:** We all crave affirmation and approval, don't we? Our culture has recognized this profound need and has gone to great lengths to secure affirmation and approval whether it is genuine or forced. Let me offer a simple example.

When I went to Elementary School—a long time ago—we celebrated the end of the year with a school wide "Sports Day." Sports Day was one of the highlights of the year for me, three-legged races, potato sack races, running while trying to balance an egg on a spoon. It didn't matter what the game was, competition was at the heart of it, and ribbons were handed out to those who won the events.

Sports Day is no more, or should I say that it has undergone such a transformation that it is barely recognizable. Sports Day has been replaced by "Fun Day," and while the games continue, and some element of competition remains, the winning and losing has been largely removed. Declaring a winner obviously requires its counterpart—a loser—and with resilience at an all-time low in our schools, and society at large, everyone gets a participation ribbon.

I'm not making a statement on the rightness or wrongness of participation ribbons, I'm merely observing what's driving these decisions. We all crave affirmation and approval and we live at a time when these cravings are rarely satisfied.

Think for a moment about the end of your life, about taking your last breath in this world, and waking up in the presence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When I see God face to face, there are a few specific words that I long to hear, one of which is a word of affirmation:

*“Well done, Mark, my son; you have been a faithful servant.”*<sup>3</sup>

A contemporary of James, the Apostle Peter, wrote the following in a letter he wrote, *“6 There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. 7 These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.”*<sup>4</sup>

James wants us to understand that while we are undergoing trials of many kinds, God is neither absent nor inactive; in our weakness He graces us with the blessing of strength, wisdom, and courage. Not only so, but to quote one author, He is guiding us towards the day when we shall see Him face to face and receive His full and final blessing of approval.

The “crown of life” that James mentions is not *in addition to* eternal life; the crown *is* eternal life.<sup>5</sup> You may have friends, family members, or colleagues who don’t understand your commitment to Jesus—from their perspective, you’re missing out on life, it’s all loss.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Matthew 25:14-30.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 1:6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8; and 1 Peter 5:4 for similar usage of this term/image.

But for those of us who are being saved, following Jesus is far more gain than loss. Immediate gratification is not our aim, we’re living for something more—for something beyond; we live for Him today, in light of the day that is coming.

This “crown of life” will be given to those who love God, which is to say, those who trust and follow Christ. The qualities of trust and perseverance are prime indicators of our love for God.

But trials have a way of discouraging even the most faithful Christian; we have a hard time sensing God’s goodness and care when we are in pain. And so, in vs. 13-15, James offers an explanation of God’s character, followed by a warning about the source and nature of temptation; let’s take a closer look.

## **2. A Warning—the source, and nature, of temptation (vs. 13-15):**

*“13 And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, “God is tempting me.” God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else.*

Trials, difficulty, or loss have no power in and of themselves; they don’t make us or break us—everything depends on our response. A trial can lead us to perseverance and maturity—if we trust God, and rely on His wisdom—or it can lead us into temptation.

It is quite likely that James is responding to a complaint coming from

within a congregation, namely, that God has set us up for failure in allowing temptations to come our way. This kind of accusation assumes a twisted image of God—*He puts obstacles in our way, tempts us to fail, and then blames us when we do!*

James flatly denies that God is the source of temptation; his argument is straight forward: God isn't tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone to do evil. How could God, who is love, try to persuade people to do what will bring them—and others—harm? Trials, difficulty, and loss are the result of living in a world broken by sin.

It makes me sad to hear God blamed for all that is wrong in the world—as though He should be doing more—but He gets none of the credit for all that is good in the world. How many of us feel entitled to a happy, trouble-free-life, as though it were our right. One author writes, “Many people have pondered the problem of pain, few pause to ponder the problem of happiness. Why should a holy God give restful days, a happy home, healthy and dear children, to a sinner like me?!”<sup>6</sup>

**Vs. 14:** *Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.*” We are prone to blaming God for the difficulties we see and the temptations we experience, but James offers a sobering perspective; temptations do not come from God, they come from within. James puts the blame squarely on distorted human desire.

Now, you may have noticed that I've added an adjective that doesn't appear in James's letter—the word “distorted;” let me explain why.

We cannot paint all desire with a wide brush, as though desire itself is a bad thing; this is both a misreading of James, and, a misreading of the Scriptures. Let me ask, who is the Source and Creator of all desire? Is it not God? Our capacity for desire is a part of what it means to be created in God's image.

What James castigates is evil, or distorted, desire; an inappropriate longing that draws us away from Christ. James uses the words “dragged away” and “enticed” to describe temptation, drawing upon analogies from the realms of fishing and hunting. “Dragged away” by a net has the connotation of being captured against our will; the word “enticed” conjures images of a snare—something deadly that appears innocent and appealing. Temptation works in both of these ways.

**Vs. 15:** After explaining the source of temptation—our distorted desires— James warns about its destructive power in vs. 15. The birthing analogy is plain, and the resulting family tree is meant to cause us alarm: distorted desire gives birth to sin, and when we allow sin to grow, it gives birth to death.

Let me take a few moments to highlight 3 words from vs. 15: desire, sin, and death, beginning with desire.

**(a) Desire:** It is difficult to overestimate just how much we are influenced by our culture on the subject of desire. Everyday we are being fed the idea that whatever we desire is right and good. This idea requires a naivety about human desire that is unheard of in the history of the world. Does all desire bring about the good, the right,

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<sup>6</sup> Motyer, 49.

and the beautiful? Or, as James points out, does some desire lead to destruction?

To this point I have not made mention of Satan because James doesn't, but it bears mentioning that while God creates what is good, Satan takes what is good and distorts it:

- Confidence is a good thing but when distorted, confidence becomes pride and pride can destroy us.
- Doing our very best—a job, school, a relationship—is admirable, but when distorted, we can become a slave to being the best.
- A desire to saving for the future can become distorted by fear; the desire for more can become twisted until no amount is ever enough.

Every desire that is not submitted to Jesus will become distorted. Any good pilot will tell you—2 degrees off centre doesn't sound like much, but it's more than enough to get us all lost.

**(b) Sin:** James says that desire gives birth to sin. The Bible describes sin in a variety of ways: as *rebellion*, *infidelity*, and *disloyalty* (all relational terms), as *wandering away*, *breaking God's law*, and as *missing the mark* (legal terms). Most of us tend to think about sin in a one dimensional way, but the Bible presents sin as a multi-dimensional problem.

One author writes, “We live in a world where human beings, left to

themselves, not only choose the wrong direction, but remain cheerfully confident that it is in fact the right one.”<sup>7</sup> Another author writes, “Sin is the act of choosing our own way and leaving God out of the picture”.<sup>8</sup>

**(c) Death:** *Desire gives birth to sin, and when we allow sin to grow, it gives birth to death.* James isn't speaking about physical death, he's referring to spiritual death. Biblically speaking, death doesn't refer to non-existence, it refers to separation from God. This is what sin does...it separates, it us off from God.

The truth of the matter is, we do not have life in ourselves. We have been created by God and for God—shutting the door on God catches up with all of us eventually. To be separated from God spiritually, is to be cut off from the ultimate source of life—every movement away from Him is a movement towards death.

Western culture has removed of God from its collective conscience, and with the removal of God, the notion of a moral centre has also disappeared. In the absence of God, “right” and “wrong” has no foundation—they are simply a matter of personal conviction. Many people I know want a life without boundaries, and choices without consequences. While we might try to pursue a life without boundaries, none of us, whether we believe in sin or not, can outrun the consequences of our choices.

Distorted desire gives birth to sin, and when sin grows, it gives birth

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<sup>7</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary*, 109.

to death. We are helpless unless God acts on our behalf.

James 1:12-18 begins with a blessing, is followed by a warning, and concludes with a promise.

**(3) A Promise—God is the source of every good gift (vs. 17-18):**

*“Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes, as a shifting shadow does. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.”*

**illus:** On Friday, I met with a long time friend for coffee; I hadn't seen him for a few years because he and his family no longer live on the North Shore. He and his wife are in town because they have a child who is in Children's Hospital. Each day has been a roller coaster of thoughts and emotions and as we talked our conversation turned to matters of faith.

It could be expected, given their situation, for them to entertain serious doubts about God's goodness but instead of walking away from faith, they're leaning into Jesus. I asked him about that and he shared a story of a trial that took place years earlier.

Shortly after he and his wife were married, his Dad, who had suffered from Parkinson's for many years, died. It wasn't entirely unexpected but it was a shock to the system. He had been praying for his Dad's healing, so had his family, and their church; how could this be happening?

He took some time off work, went over to the Island to be with his mom and help to plan the memorial service. A few days later he was back on the North Shore and going back to work. At the time he was working construction, not far from here, on Skyline Drive. He arrived at the job site, parked his truck, got out and began to hike up Skyline, thinking about what had happened to his Dad, and fear came rushing in. He remembers a distinct thought coming to his mind: *The world isn't safe. I need to make money and take care of the people I love.*

Trials, difficulty, and loss have no power in and of themselves; they don't make us or break us. Every trial provides an opportunity *for* faith, but a trial can easily become a temptation to blame God and walk away *from* faith. As my friend contemplated the loss of his Dad, he was tempted to build a wall around his heart, to shrink back from trusting God, and embrace the way of fear and self-protection. It took him some time to recognize the temptation for what it was, to reject it, and choose to live in trust-filled-dependence.

James doesn't seek to *prove* that God is good, he assumes it in his response. Everything that is good comes from God, and God is constant in His goodness—He does not change.

The creation account names God as the Creator of the lights; the Sun, Moon, and Stars are a part of God's good gift to sustain creation. But even these good gifts—the heavenly lights—shift and change. The amount of light changes between day and night; the amount of light changes between seasons. But God, unlike the heavenly lights, never changes, there is no shadow in God—because He is constant, we can ever trust Him.

And of all the good gifts God has given, there is none greater than the gift of new birth. The separation that exists between God and humanity required rescue; a bridge had to be built from God's side. God's goodness was made manifest when He became human. Jesus stepped into our world to bring about God's rescue mission; He bore our sin on the cross, experienced death for our sake, and three days later was raised to life.

The cross addresses the broken relationship between God and humanity—God has acted in Jesus Christ to reconcile humanity to Himself. 1 Peter 1:3-4 says, *“In [God’s] great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”*

He asks for our faith, but He is the Faithful One. Do you know this Jesus? Have you put your trust in Him? Are you walking with Him now, in the midst of your trials, difficulties, and loss?

**Prayer**

**Worship**

**Benediction**