James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Three

Trials, Temptation, and the Goodness of God

Why the pull you feel is not coming from God

James 1:9–18

We are in our series on the book of James, titled Truth that Hurts, and if you are just now jumping in, let me catch you up. This book was written by James, the brother of Jesus, a man who did not believe that Jesus was really God until he saw with his own two eyes his brother come back from the dead. Roughly a decade later he would prove to be one of the most devout followers of Jesus in the early church, helping to lead the entire Christian movement on the earth at that time. It was from that seat that he penned this letter, writing to Christians who had been forced to flee their homes, their families, and everyone they loved for fear of being killed for their faith. That is the context we are stepping into.

The readers of this letter are being persecuted, living in a land that isn't theirs, surrounded by a culture that is against them and a people who do not understand them. James knows this is a recipe for disaster. He knows what we now know, that we are most likely to abandon our faith, or at the very least compromise it, when things get hard. Trial is when we question God, doubt God, and blame God. He has a name for it: being double-minded. Believing one thing and living another. This whole letter is written to address that one fact, and everything he says is aimed at calling his people to greater devotion in the middle of trial and challenge.

In the last two weeks we discovered that according to James, we don't just need strength in our trials, we need wisdom. Information doesn't help you when you are in a trial. Wisdom does, because wisdom tells you what to do with the information. I told you in week one that this book at times reads like a proverb, and that it was clearly inspired by Proverbs 1–9 and the Sermon on the Mount. We are going to see both of those themes today. So open your Bibles to James 1, and we will start in verse 9.

i.

The Rich and the Poor

> Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.
>
> James 1:9–11, ESV

This speaks directly to the context of the hour. Back home, before their faith cost them anything, some of these people were rich and some were poor. Now, after salvation and in the middle of persecution, many of the ones who were once rich are rich no longer. And what is James's instruction to them? That both of them have reason to boast. The rich should boast in their humiliation, and the poor should boast in their exaltation.

That feels strange, and it is certainly counterintuitive, but what James is driving at is one of the most essential truths a Christian can settle: we do not live for this age, we live for the next one. This life is temporary. The next one is eternal. For the believer who is lowly in circumstance and lowly in spirit, there is coming a day when they will be lifted up. The day they meet Jesus and step into the coming age, they will find themselves not lowly but exalted by Christ himself, and that is the only day that matters. That is also why he tells the rich to rejoice in their humiliation. For the believer who was rich but became poor as part of the cost of following Jesus, they can rejoice, because they have now become the lowly, and therefore exaltation awaits them. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

What James is helping the formerly rich to understand is that had God not brought them low, they likely would have lost themselves. I need you to understand this, because the Bible speaks to it clearly and often. The love of money and the pursuit of materialism can corrupt and destroy faith faster than almost anything else. Look at the language he uses. The sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, and so also will the rich man *fade away* in the midst of his pursuits. It gives the impression that they slowly fade, not that they suddenly disappear. In other words, you lose yourself before you even know it. Jesus warned us of this several times, in the parable of the sower and the deceitfulness of wealth, and when he said it is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The truth is that wealth comes with a warning. Do not let it own you. That doesn't mean it is wrong to be wealthy. It means you have to treat it with wisdom, discernment, and sobriety, or, to quote James, you will fade away in your pursuits. The big idea he is getting at is that for the rich who seem to have lost their status and their money, they would rather be humiliated in this life and exalted in the next than exalted in this life and humiliated in the next. They can rejoice, because what appears to be a curse is actually a blessing.

ii.

Rewards

> 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.
>
> James 1:12, ESV

This is the blessing for those who handle the trial well. Now I know what you are thinking. What is the crown of life? Quite honestly, that is a rabbit hole of theological theory. Is it a real crown or is it metaphorical? Is it connected to the other crowns mentioned in the Bible, like when Paul tells Timothy there is laid up for him a crown of righteousness, or when Peter says we will receive a crown of glory when Jesus returns, or when the elders in Revelation cast their crowns at the feet of Jesus? I am going to avoid getting into all of that, because it is largely theory. It would be a fun thing for you to go research on your own, just be careful that you don't force things into the text that aren't there.

But what I can speak to is what James is communicating. One day you will be rewarded, somehow, in some way, for your faithfulness under trial. One day it will be worth it. The Bible speaks very clearly that we will receive rewards in the next life for how we steward this one, and 1 Corinthians 3 breaks that down about as clearly as anywhere.

This is an aspect of our walk that we often forget, and honestly it was a decade into my church experience before I ever heard about it. We understand that salvation is not earned. It is not a reward. It is a free gift. We could never earn it, never deserve it, and never be worthy of it. But that does not mean there are no rewards in eternity. Scripture goes into some pretty decent clarity as to what those rewards are. Where you live and what you govern in the next age appear to be part of it. So do these crowns. Salvation gave you a hundred on the test, but now we are working for extra credit, and that is really going to matter to you when you are looking at Jesus face to face. I once heard someone say, as it relates to these crowns, "I don't know what they are, but I know in the next life I'm going to want one."

The big point here is that you and I will receive a reward for all the hard we do and endure for the sake of Jesus. When you serve your wife. Ladies, when you encourage your husband. When you lose your money and keep your faith. When you lose the job and refuse to get bitter. There are rewards for all of it. It's just not in this life.

iii.

Temptation

> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God 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. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.
>
> James 1:13–15, ESV

Remember when we talked about trial being the season we are most apt to neglect our faith and walk in compromise? James is now addressing it at a greater level. The natural tendency of a double-minded, fractured believer, when the trial has sucked the life out of you and the temptation starts to hit, is to blame God. And it looks something like this: if you hadn't put me here, I wouldn't be tempted to do this. Lord, you made it clear I was to marry this person, and now it is hard and they are sinning against me, and I am tempted to fulfill my desires with someone else, and this is your fault.

This is where James brings the correction. No. God does not tempt people with evil. He is for you, not against you. And if we are honest, when we feel tempted to sin, to lust, to lie, to cheat, to steal, we typically blame one of three things: the devil, the other person, or God. What I need you to understand is that our temptation to sin comes from us. You are your own worst enemy. This is why we have to be so diligent with our thought life.

The devil's best strategy is often to leave you alone. You will likely be your own undoing.

James then establishes a pattern that is very real, and he explains exactly how you fall into sin. First you are baited by your own desires. Then desire is conceived, and that word means to take hold of or to seize. Once that desire turns into a captor and seizes you, you sin. And once sin has reached its maturity, it brings forth death.

Friends, our sin, when it matures, results in death. I need you to get this, and I need to get this. Our sin — pride, bitterness, lust, coveting, jealousy, greed, hatred, slander, gossip, lying — one day, if left unchecked, will result in death. It results in death for you, but it also produces death in others. So what is the answer? Know your desires. Don't be baited by them. And for the love of God, don't let them seize you. Master your desires.

Before You Turn the Page

Think about the last time you were genuinely tempted, and be honest about where you sent the blame. Was it the devil, the other person, or God? James is telling you the bait was already inside you, and that naming it correctly is the first act of mastery.

Now name the desire underneath it. Not the sin, the desire. Then ask the harder question: has that desire already taken hold of me, or am I still the one holding it?

iv.

God Is Immutably Good

> Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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.
>
> James 1:16–17, ESV

This is the other side of what James just said. God is not evil, so do not be deceived into thinking He is anything other than what He is. He is good. He is the only One who is good. He has always been good, and He is the author of everything that is good. He is not the author of sin, He is not the author of temptation, and He is not the Father of Lies, which is what Jesus calls the devil in John 8. He is the Father of Lights, in whom there is no darkness at all.

And James isn't simply saying that God is good. He is saying that God is demonstrably good. He has shown it to you. Every good thing you have, whether you worked hard for it or not, ultimately came down from the Father of Lights. You have a beautiful family? That is a gift from God. A successful business? Gift from God. Good friends? Gift from God. So let me ask you the question directly: how has God demonstrated His goodness to you?

James doesn't stop at the claim that God is good. He also tells us that God is immutable. It means that in Him there is no variance, no inconsistency, and no change. To keep with the concept of this whole letter, God is not like us. God is not double-minded. He doesn't grow, He doesn't evolve, and He doesn't adapt. He is who He has always been. Which is really great news, because the same God who called you out of darkness walks with you every step of the way. He does not change, even when we do. He is stable, steady, and steadfast, and He is able to be relied upon.

v.

The New Birth

> Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.
>
> James 1:18, ESV

This ties together everything before it. He is good, He is the Father of Lights, and He gives good gifts — chief among them calling us forth by the word of truth, out of darkness into His marvelous light. It is the ultimate demonstration of love, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And notice something. There are two births in this passage. The first is evil desire giving birth to sin, which produces death. The second is the Father of Lights causing us to be born again, which results in life. Both begin with something conceived in you. Only one was your idea.

vi.

Practical Recap

Trial exposes what you believe about God, and temptation is where that exposure turns into a decision.

How Sin Is Born

Desire › Enticement › Conception › Sin › Death

If you have been brought low, that may be the mercy that kept you. Endure, and there is a reward on the other side. When temptation comes, do not blame God — the bait is your own desire, and you are the one who must master it. The Father of Lights has never been the source of your temptation, only ever the source of the gift.

He does not change, even when we do.

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