4-28-24

James 1:12-18

James has written a letter to the Christian churches spread over a large area. The churches are in a difficult position because the apostolic leadership remains in Jerusalem. They don’t have immediate access to those who were intimately connected to Christ to answer their questions and protect them from those of satan who would mislead them. When we think about the great distances involved and everything against the church, it is truly a wonder the church survived.

But I think that is exactly the point: the church would not have survived if it were not divinely sanctioned. And that is why we know the true Christian church will continue; Jesus said, “*I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*” God the Father has ordained the church, Jesus will build it, and the Holy Spirit continually supplies what is needed for the church to continue.

That is why the Bible is so important; it is the word of God; its creation has been entirely guided by the Holy Spirit. And this letter of James is part of that. This letter was one of the ways the Holy Spirit kept the early church on the right track; it is one of the ways Jesus is building His church; and because it is divinely inspired, it is still relevant to us 2000 years later.

The overall focus of James’ letter is spiritual wholeness. The pathway to spiritual wholeness really doesn’t change. There are certain things we need to have and certain things we need to do and it is the same for everybody. Each of us need the things James teaches about to achieve spiritual wholeness. The reason we all need the same things is because we actually all have the same goal: to be like Jesus. This is a goal that every Christian ought to strive for throughout their life; knowing that it will be accomplished when we stand before Jesus.

Here’s some really good news: we will be successful; we will reach our goal. And the reason is because it is ultimately not up to us. God is the One who has to change us and He is the only One who can make us like Christ; and God never fails. Consider Philippians 1:6, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Now, one of the first things that our sinful human minds will come up with is, “Well, if God does it all, then I can just sit back and coast; I don’t need to do anything.” I think deep in our hearts we all know that’s wrong. If we have truly accepted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour; if we understand what He went through for us; then our desire is to please Him. Accepting Jesus as Saviour means submitting to Him; it means He become out Master. And having a Master means obedience.

Our love for Jesus is not some kind of sentimental feeling we have; our love for Him is demonstrated in our obedience to Him. Our love for Him is shown in our trying to be like Him. So, although God brings about the results, we have a lot of work to do. And what a joy our work can be when it is done in and for Christ. That is a precious thing about our God: Jesus is our Master, but when our focus is following Him He is our friend.

There is the beauty of this intensely practical letter written by Jesus’ brother. The churches needed guidance about what to do and how to live. So do we. They were separated from the apostles by a great geographical distance; we are separated by a great time difference. We need encouragement and we need to know what to do.

James began his letter by instructing the churches to rejoice in trials. His wording includes both persecution due to being Christian and those things that just happen in this life; everything from tragedies to the everyday irritations that seem to be increasing all the time. We are encouraged to know that when we face these difficulties while clinging to Jesus, they will help us reach our goal of being like our Master.

He encourages us to ask for wisdom. We are not on our own in the struggles of life; God can and will help us. And whether we are rich or poor, our glory and standing should be Christ; not our position in the eyes of the world.

Here in verse 12, James goes back to trials and expands on them. He looks here at trials, tests, and temptations. These are each their own category, but there can and will sometimes be overlap. At their very basic, trials are the difficulties we go through. A test is brought about or allowed by God for our good. A temptation is an enticement to us to do evil and its purpose is to make us fail. These definitions help us to see what is happening because they do overlap a lot and it can be hard to see what’s going on.

Let’s look at a few examples from the Bible. In the Garden of Eden, satan came and spoke to Eve. His goal was to get Eve to disobey God. He wanted her to fail. What satan did was tempt Eve. He had no intention of doing her any good; satan simply wanted to try to destroy the plan of God. We know that satan succeeded in getting Eve to fail; she succumbed to temptation. And it didn’t do her or anyone else any good. Note however that satan did not succeed in destroying God’s plan.

Incidentally we can also see that it was a trial for Eve. She had the inner turmoil of whether to trust and obey God, or follow her own desires for power and glory. So here the temptation was also a trial, which it really usually is. Any time we face a temptation it is a trial for us; sometimes it may not be much of a trial, but a trial none the less. Which also shows that if we resist the temptation the trial has done us good. We have become stronger in Christ.

As an example of a test from the Lord, consider the account of Abraham and his son Isaac. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and it was even a three-day journey to the place he was supposed to do it, so he had lots of time to think. As we know, God did not make Abraham go through with this but he did pass the test. Now the test wasn’t really for God to find out Abraham’s faith; He already knew that. But Abraham learned that his faith was solid and it was reenforced to him that he could trust God; his faith became stronger. And beyond all that, the whole account of Abraham and Isaac is a prophecy and a picture of God giving His only begotten Son to redeem the world. So millions have received good from the test.

Obviously, this test was a trial for Abraham. How difficult that journey must have been for him. What went through his mind as he bound his son and raised the knife. Still, this shows us that the greatest trials have the greatest benefits. Furthermore, you can imagine satan telling him the whole time to disobey God and save his own son. With this test, satan would have brought temptation. What God had orchestrated for good, satan would have tried to turn to evil.

So you can see the difference between trial, test, and temptation; and how they can overlap. No wonder James tells us to ask God for wisdom. It is only the wisdom of God that can get us through these things. And God gives us wisdom because He wants us to succeed in passing tests, resisting temptation, and harvesting good from the trials of life.

So James gives us a beatitude; a beatitude is a statement that begins with “Blessed is”. *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial*. Blessed can mean happy, but it is far deeper than that. It is quite possible to be very blessed while being very unhappy. Blessing is being under the good providence of God. That means that unhappy trials can and will bring about a state of being blessed.

The blessing comes about for any person who perseveres through trial. In this case, persevering refers to keeping one’s faith in Jesus and depending on Him to bring us through the trial. It also refers to resisting any temptation that may come about during the trial. Satan will use any difficulty to cause you to doubt the goodness of God or he will entice you to resolve the difficulty in a sinful manner. Also, keep in mind that perseverance may be for each trial we encounter, but it is a lifelong endeavor. As Jesus said in Matthew 24:13, “*But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved*.”

The real blessing comes after the follower of Christ has been approved; or passed the test. After passing the whole test of life and remaining faithful to Jesus, we will receive the crown of life. We often think of a crown as something royalty wears on their head. But back at this point in history, a crown made of laurel, like a wreath, was given to those who had won some sort of game or contest. It was a reward.

So James tells us that we will receive the reward of eternal life after remaining faithful to Christ throughout our lives. We will live forever in the new heavens and new earth, where we will be forever free of any more tests, temptations, or trials.

And we can count on this because it is a promise of the Lord to those of us who love Him. God never goes back on His promises; we can always count on them. And loving Him goes back to obedience. In John 14:15 Jesus tells us, “*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*.”

Make up your minds to depend on Jesus no matter what. Make up your minds to never turn your back on Him. Don’t be the double-minded man James talked about earlier, for then you will give up your crown. Life brings with it many difficulties, but nothing happens that doesn’t pass before the throne first; in other words, if something happens in your life, God has a reason for it. We are called to trust Him.

James brings out a very important point here and that is that God is all good. He is never the author of temptation because temptation is designed to make you fail. Temptation is evil. It comes from satan and the world and from ourselves. God is never evil. For now, He is able to use it for His own purposes and for ultimate good; but there will come a time when He will do away with all evil forever.

I mentioned three sources of temptation but notice that James focus on one: our own lusts. And really, if satan or the world tempts us, it will be our own unholy desires that make us susceptible to the temptation. While we tend to think of lust as referring to sex, but it covers any unholy desire we have.

The distinction of “unholy” is important. There are many desires we can have that are good: hopefully we desire God; we can desire eternal life; we can desire love in this life and fellowship; we can desire the good things God showers upon us. The problem comes in when our desires go against the things that are pleasing to God; or even good desires when they take the place of God. Anything that takes the place of God is an idol.

In verse 15, James gives a progression. Our first mistake with an unholy desire or lust is when we think about it. Evil thoughts will pass through our minds; satan whispers, the world beckons, the flesh lusts. These things will happen and part of our becoming more like Christ is to recognize these things and push them out of our minds. But, sometimes we dwell on them. That is when lust conceives. That is when we sin in our very thoughts. As Jesus said: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*”

When you catch yourself dwelling on any impure thought: lust, anger, greed, hate; that is the time to confess and repent. If you don’t the next step is the sin being accomplished; actually doing it. We know that the wages of sin is death. It is because of sin that we all die; it is because of sin that we are all spiritually dead.

But God. God chose in His grace to make a way for us to come back to life. It was His will to make a way for us through Jesus Christ. When we accept Jesus as Saviour, our spirits are born again to new life; to eternal life. We receive the crown. And this is a good thing that comes from God alone. It can come from nowhere else. It is a beautiful light that comes from the Father of lights.

In Ephesians we are told that God will sum up all things in Christ. All those who accept Jesus will glorify God in salvation. All those who do not accept Jesus will glorify God in the demonstration of His justice. All the rest of His creation will be remade in Christ, eternally free from evil. That process has begun. The souls that are reborn in Jesus are the first fruits of the new creation that is coming. We who have accepted Jesus are a type of first fruit; the very best of His creation that is offered to Him.

Prayer

Blessed Lord, we cry out to You for help in all the trials we face in this life. You know how susceptible we are to frustration with every little difficulty. You know how often we get angry over things that don’t work out right. You know our tendency toward despondency when heavy loads are placed upon us. How often we succumb to temptation and fail a test.

So we look to You, Lord, to give us wisdom and strength as we go through life. Help each of us to be less like Eve and more like Abraham. We realize that strong faith only comes through times of testing; and truthfully, we wish there was another way. But we submit to You because You desire nothing but ultimate good for us and whatever You allow in our lives is to make us more like Christ.

Lord we thank You for all good things because all good things come from You. Thank You for Your tremendous help when we face times of suffering and trial. Thank You that You bring good out of the evil we face. And we praise You Lord, because You are even able to benefit us in the times we fail. You are good and righteous God and we worship You.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen