

Testing, Trials, and Temptation

By Dennis Cornish

James 1:12-15

“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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

For a Christian, life is filled with a series of tests and temptations, and in every aspect of our lives we are to pray for the wisdom to successfully navigate the trials and testing's that our sovereign God uses, or allows, to strengthen us in our faith as well as to diminish our sinful self-dependence so that we become utterly dependent on the power of God alone.

Testing reveals to us both our failures and our fidelity to Christ who is the object of our faith. Through them the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sinful nature while at the same time producing perseverance while He assesses the purity of our faith, which subsequently develops the endurance required to be unyielding in our resolve to follow through on the consecrating work that He has empowered us with. It focuses us on the glory of God and the wonder of His eternal plan of redemption that has saved us, is saving us, and will save us throughout all three of these stages of our sanctification. Through these trials we see the outworking of the three Persons of the Godhead in bringing to fruition the effectual call that is ours through having been elected for God's glory. This brings to believers the incomprehensible joy that James opens his epistle with. ¹

“Count it all joy when you meet trials...”

¹ The following discussion on the book of James comes from my journal narrative/commentary of James's epistle.

The Greek for 'count' can also be translated as either 'consider' or 'evaluate', both with the idea that the believer must make a determined effort at appraising the situation that they are currently in or will soon be facing. We can also see that James perceives trials as certain; it is the same message of inevitability that Christ taught during the Sermon on the Mount. James does not say 'if' but says 'when' you fall into various trials.

We are to count them as joy, an emotion that is far from the normal worldly response. We as Christians are not to fall into a state of disillusionment; we must not lose heart amid our trials; we are to stand strongly on the foundation of our faith, firm in our convictions that the Lord of our lives is Sovereign.

"It is not to say that our natural inclination, by the very fact that we are human beings, is to feel grief or sorrow for the afflictions that befall us; but this should not prevent us as children of God to rise above these feelings, by the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit, and to rejoice in our time of trouble²". This type of response is so vastly different from what would be deemed customary that the believer must make a prayerful and conscious effort to be able to abide in joy. This joy is only possible because we know, as followers of Christ, that we are blessed by our obedience to His word. This is a joy that has a quality of serenity, an intangible condition that is beyond all that life brings to our doorstep. This joy is linked to the peace that surpasses all understanding that we read about in Philippians 4. It is only through our faith that we can possess this joy because we know that these trials lead to steadfastness, which is one of the characteristics that a Christian is to pursue, right alongside righteousness, godliness, faith, love, and gentleness, (1 Timothy 6:11).

Some Bibles substitute steadfastness with the word patience which is translated from the Greek "hupomone". This is a word that does not describe a passive type of waiting, but an active endurance; like what we find when Paul tells us elsewhere that we need endurance to successfully run the race.

² Paraphrase for John Calvin's commentary

Another noteworthy part of this verse is that it says that our faith is tested through trials, not that our faith is produced by our trials. The Greek word for trial signifies trouble, or some other event that disrupts the peaceable pattern of our lives. Our trials reveal to us the level of faith that we already possess, making that faith evident to us and to others. For us it is a gauge to monitor ourselves, but for others in a watching world it becomes our testimony. God brings or allows such tests to both prove and to strengthen our faith, as well as to demonstrate its vitality. Romans 10 tells us that:

"faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ".

It is through God's Word that we derive our faith; the trials of life are just an evaluation of our application of His Word and how we incorporate Scripture into our lives. It is a measure of how well we are abiding in Him. Receiving trials with joy is the faithful response of Christians as opposed to the way those in the world might react to the same trials with anger and bitterness. Trials can be considered pure joy only when there is an acceptance of the knowledge that they are designed or allowed by God for His purpose. These tests of faith are given to us to develop perseverance, and in turn, perseverance produces a mature Christian character (Romans 5:3).³

Continuing with James 1:4 we read:

"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

This steadfastness, this endurance or patience is not something that comes quickly to someone; it is a developed characteristic. Going back to Paul's use of the example of an athlete running the race and finishing strong; this is not something that comes naturally, especially in the long-distance race that is life itself. Athletic events take training and perseverance and so does growing into the steadfastness that a Christian must possess to endure the slings and arrows of life. We are often told that in the process of person's conversion that someone in their life has tilled the soil and that we might be the one to plant the seed, whereas others might be those who water. We are

³ Paraphrased from the New Geneva Bible Commentaries on James

also told that it is the Holy Spirit who reaps the harvest. Even while all of that is true, those who have been called need to understand that faith and endurance come slowly, and these attributes must be allowed to flower and to reach their full bloom.

Somewhere within this process, this development of our Christian walk, we begin to gather enough strength, endurance and completeness to unify our spiritual reserves to the point that we will be lacking in nothing. That is not to say that those reserves won't ever wane or start to become depleted, but we have the certainty that this ebbing of strength in our walk is only a temporary valley. Scripture tells us in 2 Peter 2 that:

"...the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials..."

This is where the Christian relies upon the promises of God that they have stored up within their hearts and minds to gather themselves, and through His Word to persevere. Perseverance allows the work in us to be completed and our steadfastness to come into its fullness. "A Christian will learn to withstand tenaciously the pressure of a trial until God removes it at His appointed time and even cherish the benefit."⁴

To ensure that we have the right view of the use of the words 'perfect' and 'completeness' used by James in verse four, we need to look at them within the context of this specific scriptural verse. The word perfect being referenced is not sinless perfection, but a spiritual maturity that comes from the type of testing that brings a believer into a deeper relationship and trust in Jesus as Lord. This perfection and completeness are a wanting of nothing less than to grasp completeness in Christ; it is the mature consummation of human virtue and integrity founded upon the wisdom and truth of God; this is the meaning of perfection and completeness that James wrote about.

John Calvin said in his commentary, and I paraphrase: But let patience have her perfect work. As boldness and courage often appear in us and soon fail, He therefore requires perseverance. "Real patience," he says, "is that which endures to the end." For work here means the effort not only to overcome in one contest, but to persevere through all

⁴ John MacArthur's Commentaries

of life. Perfection may also be referred to the sincerity of the soul, that men ought willingly and not feignedly to submit to God; but as the word work is added, I prefer to explain it as consistency. For there are many, as we have said, who at first show a heroic greatness, and shortly after becoming weary and faint. He therefore wishes those who would be perfect and complete to be fully grown and mature with no part wanting. The first refers to the maturity of grace; and the second to its fullness. They were to be like men fully grown, and not maimed or mutilated, but having all their members complete, and to persevere to the end”.

Looking at 1 Peter 1:6-7 we see parallels to what James wrote when we read:⁵

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The point that Peter is making when he says that you have been grieved by trials that the result of our imperishable hope may be in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ, and therefore, one purpose of trials is to display the enduring quality of our faith.

Although He is not seen, He is believed on, and He is loved. Jesus said:

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed, (John 20:29).”

It is not by sight, but through our trials that we know that He is still working in us, purifying, and strengthening our faith.

The strength of our faith, and the hope we have in Jesus is the foundation of our perseverance, and the joy that we have in Christ. Peter uses the reiteration ‘*rejoice with joy*’ to emphasize that when we do see Him, the Holy Spirit will fill us with an inexpressible glory, and this will be at the final consummation of our salvation. We, as

⁵ The comments on 1 Peter 1 are from my journal narrative/commentary on 1 Peter.

Christians, already have obtained certain elements of salvation, such as peace and fellowship with God, but the fullest expression of our salvation will come with the possession of our resurrected bodies at Christ's return. This is the outcome of our faith that Peter wrote about, and we are to persevere in our faith despite our current circumstances.

“Interestingly, Peter does not spend most of his time giving explanations of why the trials are happening or advice for how to escape them. Instead, he reminds his readers of what is true in the gospel and tells them how to be holy as they follow in the footsteps of Christ. Peter does not write with the goal of releasing his readers from trials; rather, he strives to help them be ready. Peter is calling his readers to a *“sober-minded suffering,”* a readiness that starts with clear, biblical thinking and ends in holy conduct”.

6

Moving to the example of Abraham, we see the monumental trust and faith in his being tested on Mt. Moriah where we read that in faith, by God's command, he traveled for three days to offer Isaac as a burnt offering to God. Even through his obedience to God's inexplicable command, in his faith we see that he believed that God would somehow spare his son. We see this in the strength and confidence of Abraham when he instructs his servants to:

“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” (Genesis 22:5).

The magnitude of this trial is unfathomable to our finite minds. The immensity of Abraham's faith was enormous as Isaac was a miracle child, *“his only son, the son whom he loves (v. 2),”* the son that he had waited one-hundred years and Sarah ninety years to conceive their son Isaac who represented the initial outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant, the promise of God to make Abraham a great nation, changing his name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of many nations") because

⁶ Somewhat paraphrased from Tessa Thompson's article "Temptations and Tests" found in (*Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., August 2023).

God had promised Abraham descendants beyond counting, like the stars in the sky. We know from Scripture that one of Abraham's descendants would be Jesus, the one God would send to fulfill His plan of redemption for all mankind, but the specificity of this reality had not been revealed to Abraham.

In addition to the trust Abraham had in this trial of obedience beyond what he had told his servants about their return; we find that his test of faith was not over yet. As they approached the time of sacrifice, Isaac questions his father by saying:

"Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"
Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

We then read that Abraham took his knife in hand and was ready to plunge it into his son when the angel of the Lord called out to him, staying his hand and at the same time, providing a ram as a substitutionary sacrifice. It is widely believed that Calvary is the highest peak, or at least a specific spot, on Mount Moriah. While historical certainty is debated, Christian tradition links these decisive biblical events as occurring on the same "place," and thereby symbolizing a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice.

This trial had a happy ending and both Abraham and Isaac passed their tests in flying colors. I say both, because Isaac was just as obedient to the trial as his father Abraham had been.

In Hebrews 11:17-19 we read:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.'"

This account of Abraham's profound faith witnesses to the great need for us to act in faith when we are confronted with trials or tests of our own faith, even though we tend to see ours as insignificant in comparison. Although we may never be asked to sacrifice a

child, we never-the-less are tested in many ways, such as chronic health issues, family struggles that destroy relationships, the loss of former friends, the sudden loss of our livelihood, or being overlooked for a promotion because of our relationship with Christ, to say nothing of the devastating event we experience in the death of a loved one.

These are all tests of our trust in His sufficiency and to the providence of God in every aspect of our lives. “God tested Abraham to reveal, strengthen, and prove the reality of his faith when he was called to trust God’s word of promise over his own human reasoning. The Bible is clear that God tests our faith for the same reason. God at times allows His children to experience great trials and hardships because our faith is strengthened through testing”⁷.

John Calvin highlighted the plight we all feel when our faith is sorely tested through the trials of life but points out that even though this is true that through God’s grace there remains the comfort we have in the Holy Spirit that still allows us to rejoice in the Lord. Calvin said that: “the faithful are not logs of wood, nor have they so divested themselves of human feelings, but that they are affected with sorrow, fear, danger, and feel poverty as an evil, and persecutions as hard and difficult to be borne. Hence, they experience sorrow from evils, but it is so mitigated by faith, that they cease not at the same time to rejoice”.

The testing or trials that we experience are from God to strengthen our faith by revealing our devotion and allegiance to Him, and this produces perseverance. They are a means for us to put a finger on the pulse of our hearts’ desires and to tune our ears to the convictions that the Holy Spirit lovingly whispers to those who are the Lord’s children. The antithetical position of testing is temptation which is completely derived from the devil, the world, and our own flesh to entice us back into our old sin nature. The hollow feeling of emptiness that comes from Satan’s condemnation after succumbing to temptation is the heart felt sorrow of contrition sin brings to a believer.

⁷ Paraphrased from a feature article in *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., August 2023).

Our disobedience reveals the weakness that led to our wavering, with the crucial difference between tests of our faith and temptation is the source and intended outcome: God tests for approval/growth, Satan tempts us for our destruction. Both involve hardship, but tests aim for purification and approval, (*well done my faithful servant*), leading to reward, whereas temptations aim to lure us into sinful disobedience which leads to the second death.

John Owen wrote that: “steadfastness in believing doth not exclude all temptations from without. When we say a tree is firmly rooted, we do not say the wind never blows upon it”. When we feel the winds of temptation begin to blow, we are to flee from temptation, and we are to guard ourselves by every means possible. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that:

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

God's intended escape is not always found in an extraordinary rescue, but it can be realized in an ordinary means of grace, such as the timely recollection of a passage of Scripture, which the Holy Spirit powerfully uses to help us understand our need to live our lives in obedience to His revealed will. If you are tempted to isolate yourself from other believers because of your personal shame for a besetting sin, that is not the escape that Paul is talking about, it is the exact opposite. If you find yourself plagued by an ongoing sin your escape can very well be found in the fellowship of a trusted brother or sister in Christ to whom you can confidently confess your sin and rely on them to be an accountability partner as you pray together for a renewing of your mind as you walk through the process of sanctification. The paramount point is that if we rely on Christ, we will persevere. John Calvin writes that Paul exhorts us “*to look to the Lord, because a temptation, however slight it may be, will straightway overcome us, and all will be over with us, if we rely upon our own strength.*” James 5:16 states that: “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective,*” but what we should understand is that the power and effectiveness of our prayers is not inherently ours, but that the strength and effectiveness is derived solely from the power of God working in and

through us while we are praying for His enduring strength to see us through our temptations and it is the grace that He provides in the midst of our struggles that fortifies and protects us.

We must be patient in all our trials, and one of the best ways to garner that patience is through acknowledging a profound confidence in the Sovereign Providence of our loving God. The passages on Job's trials and his response that: "*The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord,*" shows that Job did not give up hope but acknowledged that both good and ill fall under the rule of God's decree. This is a man that lost all his children, all his possessions, was confronted by his friends for allegedly being a sinner, as well as a wife who told him to curse God and die.

What we can learn from Job and other steadfast believers is that: "a patient response to suffering does not deny pain's severity or the difficulty of seeing how the Lord is working for our good in some cases. Instead, patient sufferers acknowledge their troubles honestly before God. They realize that tragedy is not good in and of itself, but that God uses it for good. And they continue to believe He is praiseworthy, even when they find it hard to worship Him."⁸

Speaking of Job and his suffering we need to remember that in the book of James, we are told that God is not the author of evil and that God does not tempt anyone. What we see from Scripture is that it was Satan who tempted Job and brought him through a rapid series of monumental trials of faith. God often uses the sinful intent of others by utilizing what Theologians call the doctrine of concurrence. This is where we see that the evil intent of entities, such as the Babylonians taking Daniel and others into exile, or in Job's situation, the trials and temptations brought about by Satan, became a test of faith that God used for His glory. In Job's case, despite all his trials and tribulations, he did not "*curse God and die*" as his wife had indicated that he should. Job remained steadfast and even proclaimed, "*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him* (Job 13:15)." In the Puritan Matthew Henry's commentary, he said that: "Job adored the Lord when he

⁸ from *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., March 22, 2012).

was blessed and when he suffered. When all was gone, he fell down and worshipped . . . Weeping must not hinder sowing, nor hinder worshipping”.

Job’s experience reminds me of an old expression that spoke of the metal of a man, the deep-rooted characteristics within him that the trials and tests of life would bring out.

That term the "metal of a man" signified his inner strength and integrity, which is a direct parallel to the biblical term, the "refiner's fire," where God uses trials to burn away the impurities of sin and weakness from a person, purifying their character (metal) to reveal true worth, making them stronger and more valuable, like gold or silver, and this refining is for His purpose and His glory, (see Malachi 3:2-3). Both concepts use metallurgy as a metaphor for spiritual transformation, showing how hardship shapes and purifies character, testing and proving its true quality. During the process of sanctification, the fiery trials of life bring the dross, (the impurity of our sin), to the surface of our consciousness through the work of the Holy Spirit. This dross needs to be skimmed off, removed, and cast aside from who we are in Christ. Just as with molten metals, the contaminating dross of our sin nature persists in rising to the surface and must be continually tended to through true contrition where we confess our ongoing sins and cast them aside as we endeavor to become more Christ like. The ‘refiner’s fire’ doesn't destroy the good ‘metal of a man’ but separates the bad, God's refining process strengthens believers, removing sin to make them holier through the process of sanctification.

Testing, Trials, and Temptation are a real part of our everyday existence, but temptation is something we as Christians can work on more diligently in our efforts to overcome them. We know that temptation will always be lurking within the latent sin nature that still struggles to overcome who we are in Christ. My grandmother used to tell me that idle hands are the devil’s hands, and she used the temptation of David, who remained behind when his armies went to war, as an example of a man with too much idle time on his hands. On his balcony he saw Bathsheba bathing, but instead of fleeing from temptation, the allurements of what he saw allowed the hook of the flesh to be set and allowed him to be reeled in. He coveted another man’s wife and fell into an adulteress

situation, made his commander complicit in the sin of the murder of her husband, and he suffered with the death of their first-born child.

The Proverbs are replete with warnings about slothfulness, laziness, and being idle and in Dr. Brandon D. Crowe's⁹ article in the January 2022 issue of Table Talk Magazine, stated that:

"The Bible is clear that we ought to be engaged in constructive and diligent work. This is a mark of maturity and will ordinarily lead to blessings. The diligent should expect to receive the fruits of their labor, but the dangers of idleness are often compounded, for idleness can lead to other sins as well. Idleness is the handmaiden of temptation. Laziness often yields not only thorns but temptation—which leads to sin, yielding death (James 1:14–15). When we're focused on nothing—or on ourselves—we are more prone to temptations that arise out of our sinful hearts".

Temptation is inevitable, a part of our fallen nature, but how we deal with temptation will result in either glorifying God or continuing in our wayward disobedience to His will for our lives. If we succumb to temptation, it is because of the weakness of our own hearts, and we allow the desire for sin to overshadow our desire for God. The theological term for this is concupiscence, which comes from the Latin term with the meaning of 'with desire'. It is the desire of the self for the self, which is man's tendency to sin. Being in God's word and being in obedience to His commandments through the power of the Holy Spirit are the keys to our success in overcoming temptation as well as navigating through the tests of faith that come our way. Sin is inevitable on this side of glory, but with true repentance Christians can turn away from the bondage of sin while recognizing that they must take up their cross daily because we are imperfect and in a constant state of becoming more Christ like while remaining dependent upon God's mercy and grace to aid us in our struggle to remain on the path of righteousness.

Our greatest example of a man being obedient to God's will is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We read in Philippians 2:8 about His "*becoming obedient to the point of*

⁹ Dr. Brandon Crowe is professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia

death, even death on a cross" and in Luke 22:42 in the Garden of Gethsemane where He prayed "not my will, but yours, be done", and again in Hebrews 5:8-10 where it is written: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek."

Throughout His trials in the wilderness, and throughout His life, He remained obedient to God's will, up to, and including His crucifixion. In all things He remained faithfully obedient to the word of God the Father and His leading.

In our striving towards becoming more Christ like, let us become more obedient.