

Series James

This Message Faith Without Perseverance is Dead - part 2

“The testing of your faith produces endurance”

Scripture James 1:13-18

Today is the second in the series of studies from the letter written by James. James was an unusual man. For a number of years, he did not accept that Jesus, his half-brother, was the promised Messiah. This must have been a cause of heartache for Joseph and Mary who, of course, knew the reality of Jesus. It would have been interesting to observe the dynamics in their family. However, after the resurrection of Jesus, James had a remarkable change of heart and became one of the most envied leaders of the Church in Jerusalem.

James was the ideal person to encourage the many Jews who had placed their faith in Jesus in the first decade after Pentecost. Virtually all of those Jews had had to flee Jerusalem because of persecution. They settled in every part of the Mediterranean region. James had a deep understanding of the testing and suffering of these Jewish converts, and he wrote his letter to encourage and instruct them.

As a high profile elder and leader of the Church, James must have realized that the Jewish religious leaders would eventually decide to silence him. That is exactly what happened about A. D. 62. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that the Jewish leaders stoned James to death. Another historian, Eusebius, in the 3rd Century, wrote that James was first thrown from the top of the temple and then killed at the hands of religious zealots.

I announced last week that there are nine topics which were emphasized by James, all linked to the theme “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by appropriate action, is dead” (*James 2:17*). James wanted his readers to be zealous about their faith; he wanted their faith to be real and recognizable by everyone. For him, genuine faith had to be demonstrated in how believers acted.

James regarded suffering as a normal Christian experience. He wrote that believers could expect to “face trials of many kinds.” The word “trials” refers to conditions that make life difficult for believers — they are negative circumstances which adversely affect their lives.

The title of the message last week was “Faith Without Perseverance is Dead.” The trials we thought about were those inflicted on the believer by “outside” forces. We will use the same title for the message today, but we will focus on a different kind of trial. The subject is “temptations,” and the negative forces are those which originate from within the believer.

Read James 1:13-18

The Greek noun (*peirasmos*), which was translated “trials” in the first 12 verses, can refer to both outward circumstances and to temptations to sin. Last week the meaning was clearly to “trials” and “testings” which originated from outside the individual. In the passage today, the verb form of the noun is used, and the obvious meaning is “temptations.” Other words in these verses confirm the need for perseverance in regard to the tensions which rise up from within the believer. Note the phrase in the middle of verse 14, “each one is tempted ... by his own evil desire” and, in verse 15, how this inner desire gives birth to sin.

In the verses we thought about last week, we learned that spiritual maturity and completeness can result from trials. Trials are a test of faith. Scripture is very clear that God tests and tries the faith of His people. He tested Abraham’s obedience by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac (*Genesis 22:1-19*). God tested Job by allowing Satan to take away all his possessions and inflict his body with pain (*Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6*).

God sometimes deliberately pushes His people into dangerous and difficult situations in order to reveal the qualities and strengths of their spiritual faith and character. God uses the pressures and stresses of trials to refine faith so that it becomes like pure gold (*1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-14*).

Last week we emphasized the need for believers to have “perseverance” when facing the pressures and difficulties of living in hostile circumstances. The point today is that there is the same need for “perseverance” when the believer is tempted to act improperly.

Maturity of character is developed when the believer faithfully perseveres through both trials and temptations. The believer who is not disciplined enough to handle both outside and inside pressures will not attain spiritual maturity, which is defined as “conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ” (*Romans 8:29*) and “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (*Ephesians 4:13*).

We all need to understand that the normal Christian life is filled with spiritual challenges. When we were born again by God's Spirit, we became citizens of God's heavenly kingdom even though we continued to live in the world. As citizens of heaven, we are called to follow the standards of God's kingdom, and this means that we must often live counter-culturally; that is, we must not follow the ways of this world while living in this world.

The Apostle Paul explained our responsibility: "Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (*Colossians 3:1-2*). Paul continued with these instructions: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature" and he included in his list "lust, evil desires, and greed." Paul specifically stated that believers were to "rid themselves of ... anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language" because "you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (*Colossians 3:5-10*). It is obvious that believers must undergo a radical change in their thinking and acting.

Some commentators have suggested that the temptations in this passage arise as a reaction to the outward afflictions. For example, when there is persecution, there can easily be resentment and hatred and the desire for revenge toward those who inflict persecution, or, when suffering from economic hardship, there is the temptation to be covetous and jealous of the resources possessed by others. The recipients of this letter were undergoing harassment and discrimination from both religious and political authorities, so the temptations James had in mind might have specifically applied to the circumstances of his readers.

I'm not sure whether James was linking trials and temptations in this way or not, but, whatever the case may be, he thought it necessary to provide instruction about the cause of temptations. The first point to recognize is that temptation never comes from God so believers must never blame Him for this form of testing.

Unfortunately, it's common practice to blame God for our own sinful behaviors. We rationalize our behavior, even citing Bible verses to back up our improper actions. For example, we might think, "God is sovereign over all things. If He predestined everything before the foundation of the world, how could I avoid doing what I did?" and, "He could have stopped me, but He didn't! What could I do? It wasn't my fault!" And my behavior can't be all bad. After all "God promises to work all things together for good."

When we look back in history, we recognize that fallen humans have been prone to shift the blame for evil behavior ever since Adam and Eve. When God confronted Adam, the reply was, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (*Genesis 3:12*), and when God confronted Eve, she replied, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (*Genesis 3:13*). Both statements were technically true, but Adam and Eve were trying to dodge personal responsibility for their disobedience. Adam's answer really blamed God because He had given the woman to Adam. James wanted his readers to understand that they would not overcome temptation by blaming God for their predicaments. Rather, they would only be impugning the holy character of God.

The Bible has numerous other examples of shifting the blame for sin. One that is somewhat humorous (if sin can be humorous) is when Aaron made the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain meeting with God. According to Exodus chapter 32, Aaron told the Hebrews to give him their jewelry. "He took what they handed him and made an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool" (*Exodus 32:2-4*). When Moses confronted him, Aaron stated that he "threw the gold into the fire, and out came the calf!" (*Exodus 32:24*). It was a very lame excuse.

To counter such thoughts, James stated categorically that enticements to sin do not come from God. Then he proceeded to give a series of reasons for his sweeping statement. The first reason why temptation does not come from God is that God "cannot be tempted by evil." His omnipotent, holy will fully resists any invitation to sin. Evil cannot coexist with Him. Therefore, we must not even imagine that God could be the author of temptation.

The source of temptation is explained in verse 14. It lies within each person. It springs from each individual's "own evil desire." The blame cannot be placed on anyone or anything else. The explanation written by James in verse 14 is interesting. The "evil desires" within a person "drag" him away and "entice" him. These two verbs are taken from the sphere of fishing and hunting. The words describe the "drawing of a fish out of its habitat" and luring it by means of bait to the temptation. James pictures the "evil desire" as, first, attracting the attention of the person and then getting the person to yield to the temptation.

James then changed the illustration from a snare to a comparison with conception and birth because he wanted to explain the sequence of consequences of yielding to sin. First, temptation comes (*verse 14*); then desire is implanted in the person like the seed implanted at conception, then, after a period of gestation, there is the "birth of sin." James uses this somewhat graphic way to depict the experience of yielding to temptation. The final stage is when sin, the offspring of evil desire, becomes "full-grown" and is itself ready to produce offspring. The second generation is "death."

The illustration might seem a little strange to us but it was undoubtedly a very convincing picture to Jewish readers. With their Old Testament orientation to the law and the sacrificial system, the Jews probably had a greater understanding of the costs of sin than most present day American evangelicals have. We can all understand the intention of James to trace the ultimate results of temptation when a person yields to it. The order is evil desire, sin, death. These are the same stages experienced by Eve when the devil serpent tempted her in the Garden in Eden. The desire to become like God was implanted by Satan through several half-truths. That's when her desires began to dominate her thinking. "And when she saw that the fruit was good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it" and consequently died (*Genesis 3:5-6*).

The expression, "don't be deceived," has a multiple purpose in the context of this letter. It is first of all a warning, because the purpose of a temptation is to cloud over the judgment of a believer. Temptations begin to work effectively on the believer when he/she ignores the instructions and the ways of God and allows human natural desires to take over. Satan's deception clouded Eve's mind and her desires began to dominate her thinking.

The expression, “don’t be deceived,” was also worded in such a way (*in Greek, with the present tense imperative*) that it implied that the readers had already given in to temptations and needed to come to their senses. The expression has the meaning, “Stop being deceived.”

The expression had a third purpose: It was used as an attention-grabbing introduction to the following significant statement. This was a common literary technique used by writers. The significant statement is in verse 17. James wanted his readers to understand that God, instead of sending temptation, sent great benefits to believers. He was the Provider of “every good and perfect gift.” James had previously pointed out the impossibility of God being a tempter. His statement in verse 17 emphasized that God is, in reality, the Source of goodness. God’s gifts are identified as “perfect.” This quality excludes any possibility of moral evil, such as tempting people to commit sin.

God is identified as “the Father of lights.” Unlike the “shifting” and “changing shadows” that are caused by the sun, moon, and stars, God “does not change.” Think about the characteristics of shadows. The shadows cast by the sun are smallest at noon, but just before sunset they can stretch out for some distance. And the shadows go in different directions morning and afternoon. God is not like that. There is no variation at all in His character and purposes. He does not change.

In verse 18 James presented his final proof that God is not the author of temptation. Rather than acting destructively, God acts positively and constructively. It was His purpose to “give birth” to His people. It was out of His goodness that “He chose” the individuals who would receive His new birth. The term “birth” here does not refer to physical birth. The statement in verse 18 is that this birth is “through the word of truth.” This means that the “birth” is spiritual rather than natural.

The choice of individuals to receive spiritual birth is God’s alone. His purpose in giving spiritual birth is that His chosen people “might be a kind of firstfruits.” This reference to “firstfruits” is drawn from several Old Testament passages. (*See, for examples Exodus 34:22 and Leviticus 23:10.*) The term “firstfruits” referred to the first portion of the wheat or barley harvest which was presented to God in thanksgiving for His provision, and in anticipation of the abundance of grain which was to come.

The Jewish readers of this letter would have understood three important facts from this passage. First, they would be reminded that they had been specifically selected from among the greater population of Jews to receive spiritual life. They needed to recognize just how privileged they were to be the children of God.

Second, they would understand that they were just the first members of the future greater spiritual harvest to come, that there would be many more believers to follow. These facts would have been a comforting reminder to the Jewish believers. Even though they had been dispersed to unfamiliar locations and were being subjected to persecution and trials, they were actually the privileged ones. They needed to “consider their circumstances as pure joy.”

The third and most important fact was the reminder that they needed to be faithful to their calling in spite of their circumstances. They needed to “persevere” through their trials and to not allow themselves to be drawn into thoughts and behaviors which would be displeasing to God. They needed to have attitudes of appreciation for all that God had done for them; to “consider it pure joy whenever they faced trials” and to stay focused on the One who provides “good and perfect gifts.” They needed to turn away from the evil desires which would dead-end their lives in sin and death. They needed to live as “firstfruit” believers, demonstrating maturity and being a testimony to those who lived around them.

Trials

Allowed by God for our spiritual benefit

Afflict us from the outside

Lead to maturity

Bring life

Temptations

Emerge from our own inner evil desires

Lead to the growth of sin

Bring death

Our Will

Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust

We sin when we exercise our own will independently of God

Exercising our own will brings forth death

God's Will

Exercised when He chose to give us birth

Exercised by His testing us so that we might become mature and complete

Exercised in making us a kind of firstfruits