

James 1. 12-18. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 11 September 2011.

The set reading for this morning comes from James chapter 1, verses 12 to 18.

Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God", for God cannot be tempted with evil, and Himself tempts no one.

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

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow caused by turning.

Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

Our opening verse, verse 12, forms a bridge – a connecting link – between the section which we considered last week and the following section, verses 13 to 18. It links *back* in that it continues the theme, struck in verses 2 to 4, of endurance under trial.

With his very first word 'Blessed', James carries us back to the 'Beatitudes' with which our Lord commenced His so-called Sermon on the Mount. There, the Lord Jesus confronted – and no doubt shocked – His hearers with His complete reversal of all human values. 'Blessed are', He taught, not 'the proud, the strong, the successful', but 'the poor in spirit, the meek, and the merciful'. And here James treads in our Lord's footsteps. Not 'Blessed is the man who passes through life without any trial or trouble', but 'Blessed is the man who endures trial'.

It is not, James insists, the absence of trials of adversity which renders a man blessed – or even, I note, that he suffers trials – but that he bears up under them and perseveres through them.

It has been said that the Greek word we translate 'endurance' here is 'the quality which keeps a man on his feet with his face to the wind'. Outside of scripture, 'It is used of the ability of a plant to live under hard and unfavourable circumstances'.¹

I was struck recently by a prayer of George Matheson. Mr Matheson gave us the hymn, 'O love that wilt not let me go'.² Born with poor vision, he became totally blind at the age of 20, as a consequence of which his fiancée broke off their engagement, and he remained unmarried to his death. A little after becoming blind, he wrote a prayer in which he pleads that he might accept God's will, and I quote, 'not with dumb resignation, but with holy joy; not only with the absence of murmur, but with a song of praise'.³ I tell you, only the grace of endurance can enable a man to pray like that ... to 'count it all joy' when falling into various trials, as verse 2 of our chapter expresses it ... to 'trace the rainbow through the rain'!

Coming forward to a Christian songwriter of our own day, I think of a line written by Laura Story, the young woman who part wrote the lyrics of the popular song 'Indescribable'.⁴ Her latest album is entitled 'Blessings', and the title song includes – and repeats – the line, 'What if trials of this life are your mercies in disguise....?' What indeed!

For trials are often the instrument which the Lord uses for the blessing of His own. And the testimony of many a believer is the same as that of Joseph when he named his second son 'Ephraim' (meaning 'Fruitful') ... 'The Lord made me fruitful in the land of my affliction (or, 'of my humiliation')'.⁵

Possibly with Joseph's testimony in mind, in part 2 of his Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan has Mr Great-heart say of 'the Valley of Humiliation', 'It is the best and most fruitful piece of ground in all those parts'. But it is this only, of course, to those who 'endure' the humbling trial.

We read in chapter 5 of 'the endurance of Job', and of the happy conclusion to the Lord's dealings with him. 'Behold', says James there, 'we call them blessed who have endured'. And not we only! For it is clear from our text that God Himself calls them 'blessed' too!⁶ Commencing with a formula He had used many times in the Old Testament,⁷ He declares, '*Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life*'.

Many years later, through the apostle John, the glorified and transcendent Lord encouraged the persecuted church at Smyrna, 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life',⁸ where again 'the crown of life' is promised to those who endure trials for His sake – there persevering even to the point of actual martyrdom.

Clearly in neither case are we to understand the 'crown of life' as being literal – any more than when we read elsewhere of other crowns being awarded for faithful service.⁹ But equally obvious, such crowns represent something. And given that the word translated 'crown' is used widely, not of a royal crown or diadem, but of the wreath or garland awarded either (i) to the victor in the Greek games, or (ii) as a token of public honour in recognition of some distinguished service,¹⁰ it is highly likely that each of these crowns represent a distinct reward to be bestowed at the Judgement Seat of Christ on those of His servants whose work and loyalty warrant it.

Since here 'the crown of life' is secured only by those who (having borne, as it were, the heat of the Refiner's fire) have won His – the Refiner's – approval (which is my attempt to capture something of the background to the word translated 'stood the test') ... since the 'crown of life' is obtained only by such, it almost certainly refers to something additional to *the gift* of eternal life which is the happy portion of every true believer in Jesus.

We learned last week from verse 2 that, when someone passes through trials, the faith which stands the test produces endurance. And now, from verse 12, we learn that someone who endures trial, and stands the test receives the crown.

And this crown, we are assured, is promised by God 'to those who love Him'. For it is only in the strength and glow of his or her genuine love for the Lord that the believer will ever bear up under trials – will ever hold on through thick and thin – so as to prove victorious right through to the end.

I said earlier that verse 12 forms a bridge between the section which we considered last week and the following section. We have seen how it links back to the previous section in that it continues the theme of endurance in the face of trial.

But verse 12 also links directly to what follows in that the word translated 'tempted' or 'tempts' five times in verses 13 and 14 is in effect identical to that translated 'trial' in verse 12.

For the word which James uses can refer either to the trials and testings of life – which, as we have seen, are meant to be endured – or to temptations and enticements to sin – which are meant – as is the devil himself¹¹ – to be resisted.

And it is important that we carefully distinguish the two. For, whereas, as we have seen, the believer's trials are to be met with fortitude and perseverance, the believer's temptations must be met with uncompromising resistance.

And in verse 13 James passes, so to speak, from our outward and holy trials to our inward and unholy temptations.

And at the outset James asserts most emphatically that God has no hand whatever in tempting us ... in enticing us to sin.¹²

'Let no one say', James insists, 'when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"' ... literally, 'from God I am being tempted'.

According to the Bible, there are things which God cannot do. For example, He cannot lie ... He cannot deny Himself. And, James insists, He 'cannot be tempted with evil'.

Because of who and what God is, sin is alien to His very nature. He is therefore not susceptible to temptation. He is, as is indicated by the word James uses, 'untemptable'. God and evil exist in two distinct realms which can never meet. He is utterly impregnable to all forms of evil or temptation.

James would have agreed wholeheartedly with sentiments expressed by a Jewish scribe, known to us as the 'son of Sirach', over 200 years before: 'Do not say, "It is through the Lord that I left the right way"; for He will not do what He hates. Do not say, He has caused me to err".¹³

But, although this Jerusalem scribe has it right, and God most certainly 'will not do what He hates', it is also true that God can – and does – permit evil, and that, in His own most wonderful way, He overrules it, bringing good out of evil. And if you doubt this, you have only to ask Joseph! Joni expressed it far better than I ever could, 'God often permits the things which He hates to accomplish the things which He loves'.

But, although God can – and does – permit and overrule evil, because He Himself is ever and always 'untemptable', under no circumstances is He ever the source and author of temptation to others.

Let us be clear. Although God may, and often does, test His people, causing them to pass through trials,¹⁴ and sometimes through 'fiery trials',¹⁵ He never, but never, tempts them.

We read 16 times in the Old Testament of Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, that 'he made Israel to sin'.¹⁶ But that never be said of the Holy One to whom the prophet Habakkuk declared, 'Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and you cannot look on wickedness with favour'.¹⁷ It will never be said of Him that He caused anyone to sin, or that He tempted anyone to do it.

Make no mistake, every temptation to evil must be laid at someone else's door. God's hands are clean!

Indeed, as James points out, the believer need look no further than within himself for the source of the problem.

As you know, this year marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. The man who acted as kind of 'general editor' for the project was Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. Some 10 years after the publication of the so-called Authorised Version, Bishop Andrewes preached a sermon on part of our passage for this morning. When speaking of temptation, and with his eye on verse 17, he declared, 'Ascribe it ... to the prince of darkness, not to the Father of lights'.¹⁸

And we know from chapter 4 that James, for his part, was well aware of the activities of the one who is spoken of in scripture as 'the tempter'.¹⁹

But here James is concerned, not with temptations which we face from without, but from those which arise from within.

And, if verse 13 assures us that there is nothing in God which responds positively to sin, verse 14 assures us that there is much in everyone of us which most certainly does.

James traces temptation to the deep and dark desires which lie within the heart of every human being from Adam and Eve down ... 'each is tempted', he says. There has only ever been one exception ... the glorious Person who could say, 'the ruler of this world is coming, and in me he has nothing',²⁰ meaning that Satan had no legal claim on Him – that there was nothing in Him which fell under Satan's power – that there was nothing to answer or respond to the devil's enticements.

And it was our Lord Himself who taught that the heart of fallen man is the foul and polluted spring from which spurts out all forms of vile thoughts, words and deeds ... that '*from within*, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things come *from within*'.²¹

James traces the whole terrible process set in train by those evil longings and cravings which lurk within my heart and which, unless checked, will ruin my spiritual life.

First, he says, someone is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his passions ... the word translated 'lured' meaning 'drawn away', as of some unsuspecting animal or fish from its place of refuge, and the word 'enticed' being a fishing term for bait, the purpose of which is, of course, to attract and then catch the prey. James, that is, pictures man's 'evil desire' first as luring him from the safety of his self-restraint, and then as persuading him by means of some inducement to yield to the temptation.

Next, leaving the metaphors of hunting and fishing, James uses the process of childbirth to illustrate the advance of evil in a person.

And in so doing he traces the genealogy of sin for three generations, as it were. First comes temptation in the form of an evil desire, an impulse to sin, which, if we yield to it, will, as though it were some human mother, conceive and give birth ... will give birth to a sinful act. And then sin, if we do nothing to check its progress in our lives, will in turn develop until it is full-grown²² and ready to produce offspring of its own. And when sin conceives, James says, in a striking paradox, it brings forth ... it gives birth ... to death.²³

And we need no better commentary on this sequence of (i) evil desires, (ii) sinful actions, and (iii) ensuing death than that provided by both Eve in the garden and Achan at Ai, who, when they saw, they coveted, they took, and they died.²⁴

And I can tell you from bitter experience that the person who plays and dallies with temptation, instead of meeting it with instant and prayerful resistance, will be sure to succumb to it. I ignore God's warning system ... His word²⁵ working through my conscience ... at my peril.

James now proceeds to point out that, far from being the source of temptation and evil, God is the author and origin of only that which is good. And I note his double 'every' in verse 17.²⁶ And we can rest assured that God will continue to bestow only that which is good and perfect because He is unchangeable.

As the great Creator, He is 'the Father of the lights' – the sun, the moon and stars.²⁷ But unlike 'the lights' which He created, which regularly move and vary in appearance, which cause changes of seasons and cast differing shadows,²⁸ God's nature and generosity never alter. He is ever only good, and He ever does only good.²⁹

I have read that the ancient Romans said of Jupiter, the king of the gods, that he had two great containers, one full of good, and the other of evil; and that he served them out into the world, both good and evil, as he saw fit. But our God is not like that. He is unchanging, both in His character and in the gifts with which He continually showers us.

And James's words in chapter 3, applied in context there to the tongue, are equally true of God Himself ... 'No fountain pours out sweet and bitter water from the same opening'.³⁰ God cannot be tempted with evil, and He bestows only that which is good.

Be way of example, James points us to one of the greatest blessings which God could possibly lavish upon us; namely, new life ... a blessing which, like all His other good gifts, but unlike all evil desires (which come from 'within') ... 'comes down' to us 'from above' – for, as Mr Dykes reminded us last week from the words of our Lord Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3 – 'except a man be born from above (the same word as used by James here), he cannot see the kingdom of God'.

And, if, according to verse 15, sin 'brings forth death', here in verse 18, God (who is as gracious in purpose as He is stainless in holiness and changeless in goodness) ... God 'brings forth' new life³¹ ... and He does it through 'the word of truth', the gospel.³² I say 'gracious in purpose' because I note that James traces the Christian's new birth, not as the apostles Peter and John, to God's mercy and love, but to His deliberate initiative ... to 'His own will'. And it is according to 'His own will' that the God who once said 'Let there be light' to every redeemed soul³³ at the same time said, 'Let there be life'.

The nation of Israel of old, on account of its special place of privilege and setting apart to God as sacred to Him, could be said to be 'the firstfruits of His harvest'.³⁴ And so too we, with our far greater privileges and our consecration to God, can be viewed as 'a kind of firstfruits of His creatures'.

But there may well be more to the expression than that. For, I think it is true to say that, ever since the death and glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus, God has been in the business of establishing a new creation. Starting with our Lord Himself as 'the second man', God is ever building out, until finally, in the language of Revelation 21, 'the former things' will 'have passed away', and He will say, 'Behold, I make *all things new*'. The present heaven and earth will then be no more,³⁵ and there will be 'new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness will dwell'.³⁶

And here and now, every true believer forms part of that new creation. In the words of the apostle Paul, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come'.³⁷ And just as in Bible days the firstfruits of Israel's harvest were the guarantee and pledge of the whole harvest to follow in due course, so we, as God's people today, are the pledge that God will, in His own time, 'make all things new'.

What an immensely privileged people we are!

Footnotes

¹ William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, pages 143, 145.

² Note especially verse 3 of the hymn:

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

Mr Matheson later wrote, 'My hymn was composed in the manse of Innelan [Argyleshire, Scotland] on the evening of the 6th of June, 1882, when I was 40 years of age. I was alone in the manse at that time. It was the night of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which

was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression of having it dictated to me by some inward voice rather than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhythm. All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a day-spring from on high’.

³ Quoted by William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, page 145.

⁴ This song received worldwide recognition after it was recorded by Chris Tomlin during Louie Giglio’s ‘*Indescribable Tour*’ in 2007.

⁵ Gen. 41. 52.

⁶ The word ‘blessed’ occurs some 50 times in the New Testament. See TDNT, vol. 4, pp. 367–70, and NIDNTT, vol. 1, pp. 216–17.

⁷ Psa. 1. 1; 32. 2; 34. 8; 40. 4; 65. 4; 84. 5 (with minor variation); 94. 12; 112. 1; Prov. 8. 34; Isa. 56. 2; Jer. 17. 7.

⁸ Rev. 2. 10.

⁹ An incorruptible crown, 1 Cor. 9. 25; a crown of rejoicing, 1 Thess. 2. 19; a crown of righteousness, 2 Tim. 4. 8; a crown of life, James 1. 12; Rev. 2. 10, and a crown of glory, 1 Pet. 5. 4.

¹⁰ J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*, page 45. Also W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, article *Crown A. Noun. 1*.

¹¹ James 4. 7.

¹² Yes, scripture makes it clear that God does test the faith of His servants, as He did Abraham (Gen. 22. 1), but it is not incitement or inducement to sin. When God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac it was a test of Abraham’s obedience, not a provocation to sin.

¹³ Ecclesiasticus 15. 11-12.

See ... <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Def.show/RTD/isbe/ID/8206/Sirach-Book-Of.htm>.

For the text itself, see ... http://www.biblicalproportions.com/modules/ol_bible/King_James_Bible/Ecclesiasticus/15/

¹⁴ Gen. 22. 1.

¹⁵ 1 Pet. 1. 7; 4. 12.

¹⁶ 1 Kings 14.16; 15. 26, 30, 34; 16. 26; 22. 52; 2 Kings 3. 3; 10. 29, 31; 13. 2; 14. 24; 15. 9, 18, 24, 28; 23. 15.

¹⁷ Hab. 1. 13.

¹⁸ *Sermons*, volume 3, page 372. – preached before King James I on 20 May 1621. Bishop Andrewes is commemorated by the Church of England on 25 September – this being the date of his death in 1626.

<http://anglicanhistory.org/lact/andrewes/v3/whitsunday1621.html>.

¹⁹ James 4. 7; Matt. 4. 3.

²⁰ John 14. 30.

²¹ Mark 7. 21-23.

²² In verse 4 there is one sort of maturity: ‘that you may be perfect’; in verse 15 there is another: ‘full-grown sin’ – a very similar word to that used in verse 4.

²³ In verse 15, James uses two verbs with similar meaning - ‘to produce (children)’, and ‘to bring forth (young)’.

²⁴ Gen. 3. 6 (with Gen. 2. 17); Josh. 7. 21, 25.

²⁵ Psa. 119. 11.

²⁶ Which could well be translated ‘every good act of giving and every perfect gift’.

²⁷ On the fourth day, God ‘made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night’ (Gn. 1:3, 16). ‘Give thanks ... to Him who made the great lights ... the sun to rule over the day ... the moon and stars to rule over the night’, Psa. 136. 7-9.

²⁸ Compare, ‘how else at the growth and the wane of the moon, and at the approach and recession of the sun, are so great an alteration [the same word used by James] and change ... seen in earthly things?’ (a reference to the changes of the seasons), Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 14, Section 4. Epictetus was a Stoic philosopher who lived AD 55-135.

²⁹ Psa. 119. 68.

³⁰ James 3. 11.

³¹ These are the only two places in the Greek Bible where the compound word ‘brought forth’ (from the word ‘to be pregnant’) is found.

³² See ‘the word of truth’ equated with ‘the gospel’ in Col. 1. 5 and 1 Pet. 1. 23-25 (‘this is the word’).

³³ 2 Cor. 4. 6.

³⁴ Jer. 2. 3. Also see Philo, *The Special Laws*, Volume 4, Paragraphs 179-180. There Philo (20 BC to 50 AD) says of the people of Israel, ‘One may almost say that the whole nation of the Jews may be looked upon in the light of orphans, if they are compared with all other nations in other lands ... Moses says that the great Ruler of the universe, whose inheritance they are, does always feel compassion and pity for the orphan and desolate of this His people, because they have been dedicated to Him, the Creator and Father of all, as “a kind of first-fruits” of the whole human race’. ‘A kind of firstfruits’ in Philo is the same Greek as in James 1; see ...

<http://khazarzar.skeptik.net/books/philo/specialg.pdf>.

³⁵ Rev. 20. 11.

³⁶ 2 Pet. 3. 13.

³⁷ 2 Cor. 5. 17.