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James 1:9-18

Third Message

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## GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

*SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE*

I saw a cartoon strip once in which a teacher said to a little girl in her class: “If you cheat in school, isn’t it likely that you’ll cheat when you get out in the world? The little girl responded: “Only if the world pulls those surprise tests!”

Life has a way of surprising us with unexpected tests. My wife has a recurring dream in which she is at school, facing a quiz she has not prepared for. The tests that life throws at us, however, have little to do intelligence or knowledge. Difficult circumstances put our faith to the test. James, the brother of the Lord and the writer of the letter which we are studying in this series, refers to these situations as trials. These tests come from unexpected sources—a phone call, a visit to the doctor, a summons from a supervisor. Suddenly, life changes radically. The question is, how will we respond? Will we be prepared? Or will we try to cheat our way through the crisis?

As we have already seen, trials are circumstances in life which produce pressure and suffering. They may arise from persecution for our faith in Jesus, or they may come simply because God has designed them for us so that our character might be purified and perfected. Even though trials are designed for our good, however, it is probably safe to say that no one looks forward to them. When the surprise test comes, our response typically is lacking.

So trials may have the effect of discouraging us. Nevertheless, James says that when we encounter trials, we are to “consider it all joy,” because trials produce Christian maturity. God has designed everything in life for our good. Rather than trying to avoid suffering, James says we should allow it do its work, to let the pressure mold and change us. Oftentimes we become confused when we are buffeted by the storms of life, but James says we should pray, asking God for wisdom, in faith, so that we will not be tossed to and fro.

This book then is about dealing with the pressures of life, understanding trials and suffering so that we can respond in a godly way, without cheating.

In our study today we will look at two of the more common problems we encounter when we face trials. The first problem is dealt with in verses 9-12:

**But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him. (James 1:9-12 NASB)**

When we face trials, we have a problem with embarrassment. That is because trials have a way of exposing us. They make us feel naked and vulnerable. Suffering strips us physically, of possessions, and emotionally, of security. We feel alone, scared, and uncomfort-

able. We compare ourselves with others, and we worry about our image.

What makes a trial really hard to swallow is seeing others prospering. If everyone was laid low, we wouldn’t feel so bad. If we could live like those who seem to have everything, then we would be convinced that God is good to us. And we all want to be blessed, don’t we? The purveyors of what is called “prosperity religion” would seek to persuade us that prosperity is a divine right. Even if we don’t believe this, still we try to accumulate money and possessions so that we can hide our nakedness, escape our pain, and pretend that we are secure. The Jews of the Diaspora, to whom James wrote this letter, were exiles and aliens. Scattered and poor, they were treated unjustly by wealthy landlords. They thought if they had the money and the status of their rich overseers, then life would be sweet.

When my wife and I were married, back in the 1970’s, housing was very expensive in the Bay Area. Prices were escalating at a frightening rate. We found this very frustrating. We felt cheated. Every time we felt pressured by some circumstance or other, the fact that we did not own a home somehow seemed to make things worse. We felt that if we had a home of our own, at least we would have a place of comfort and security from the storms of life. (Now that I have experienced some of the problems that come with having a home, I wonder why was I so anxious about owning one.)

The sentiments of Psalm 73 articulate the feelings of many who are facing trials:

**I was envious of the arrogant,  
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.  
For there are no pains in their death;  
And their body is fat,  
They are not in trouble as other men;  
Nor are they plagued like mankind...  
Behold, these are the wicked;  
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. (Ps 73:3-5, 12)**

The wealthy always seem to live comfortably and trouble-free. James gives us two things to think about when we are tempted to believe this. First, he says, our evaluation of prosperity is wrong. Life is paradoxical. We should not judge the book by the cover. We should not evaluate blessing by the address of the house or the label on the clothing. Things are very different from what they appear to be on the surface.

James compares a poor brother and a rich man (who is not a brother). The former is undistinguished. He is of no account, lowly, humble and broken. This was how Jesus was regarded in his day. The rich man has abundance, and seems secure from the storms of life. On the surface one would think that the rich man was blessed, that he had achieved a high station and could boast of his accomplishments and acquisitions. But it is the contrary that is true. The poor

brother can glory in his high position, because he will be exalted. The rich man, in contrast, should actually boast in his low position, because he will end up being humbled.

James uses an analogy to prove his point. The rich man is like the “flowering grass,” he says. When the rain falls, the flowering grasses of the fields are beautiful to behold. But when the “sun rises with the scorching wind,” the flower falls off, its beauty destroyed. We can see this for ourselves right here in the Bay Area. Following the winter rains, the hills become alive with color. But it doesn’t last. In summer, the green grass turns brown, the wild flowers wither. James says this is the fate of the rich man. Like the flowering grass, his beauty and the glamour are temporary. The security of riches is a false security.

The Lord revealed this truth to Asaph, in Psalm 73:

**When I pondered to understand this,** [i.e. the prosperity of the rich]

**It was troublesome in my sight**

**Until I came into the sanctuary of God;**

**Then I perceived their end.**

**Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;**

**Thou dost cast them down to destruction.**

**How they are destroyed in a moment!**

**They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!**

**Like a dream when one awakes,**

**O Lord when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form. (Ps 73:16-20)**

We see this great paradox revealed in the lives of many in the Old Testament. Joseph was humbled and broken in prison, but in the end he was exalted. Nebuchadnezzar was cast down from his lofty throne. History records the stories of many who rose to the pinnacle of success only to die penniless and friendless. Later, in chapter 4, James will say that God is “opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

A second thing that will help us see behind the fallacy that the wealthy seem to live trouble-free lives is recognizing that our time-frame is too short. We want to be blessed immediately, but there is more to life than the here and now. The fact is, we will be blessed if we faithfully endure and remain under the trial. We will be approved and we will receive the “crown of life” (a symbol for eternal life, future exaltation). Revelation 2 uses this same phrase: “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)...Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

The stakes are extremely high: the trophy is the crown of life. Trials expose those who appear to have faith, who in the heat of the battle give up on God, fold under the pressure and go their own way. The exhortation here is to endure the test so that in the end we will have the blessing we so desire. Any portion of genuine faith, however small, will be demonstrated and perfected.

Consider the life of Abraham. The Old Testament patriarch was not always a man of faith. He failed to obey God on occasion, just as we fail. But Abraham believed God and grew in faith. When God asked him to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the seed which had been promised and was so long in coming, Abraham obeyed God. His faith was proven. Afterwards, God said to him, “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” And Abraham was blessed. God promised him, “Because

you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you...And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

So we should not be embarrassed when we encounter trials, when we are humbled and brought low under the pressure of suffering. Life is a paradox. Things are not as they seem. Our evaluation is faulty. We should strive to look to the end and see our high position—the glory that is in store for those who love God. This is what Jesus promised in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth.”

The second problem we encounter when we are undergoing trials is identified in verses 13-18:

**Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures. (1:13-18)**

The problem here is blaming God when we succumb to temptation and fall into sin. Trials produce pressure. At times we become discouraged, at other times we try to escape the pressure by running away. But occasionally we are tempted to sin, and we sell out. We seek to satisfy our sensual desires as a way of alleviating the anguish of the despair we feel.

There is an interesting word play here. The word “tempted” is the verb form of the word “trial.” “Trial” is the state or the condition; “tempt” is the action evoked. Trials are not the results of sin; they are circumstances that bring about temptations to sin. God uses trials to test our faith and perfect our character; but Satan uses them to tempt us into sin and disobedience.

For example, when we are wronged, instead of enduring, we are tempted toward anger and revenge. When we are slandered by the words of a friend, we are tempted to gossip about him. The pressures we face in business arouse our ambition and we respond by destroying a peer’s credibility. A difficult marriage tempts us to sexual immorality. A family member hurts us and we respond by refusing to talk to him. The difficulty of getting into college arouses the temptation to cheat and become obsessed with perfection. The desire for our children to make the team or be selected for the starring role makes us manipulate situations to exalt our children at the expense of others.

The danger we face in the midst of suffering is to not persevere, and thus lose sight of the crown of life. Frustration gives way to bitterness, and bitterness to sin. We blame God for what we deem unfair circumstances. We justify our sin, evil that is manifested in anger, blue moods, drinking and gossip. It was God made us do it, we say. Since God dealt us such a bad hand, we have no recourse but to cheat. God does not care for our needs, we feel, so we have to look out for ourselves. It’s all God’s fault.

James offers a three-part response to this mind-set. To begin with, we need to accept responsibility for our actions. James says we can-

not blame God. God does not tempt us. God is not tempted by evil. Trials and suffering cannot be put forth as justification for committing sin. No matter how much we hurt, we must take responsibility for our actions. When we sin, the problem is not with God, our boss, our parents or our friends, the problem is ours alone. For example, as parents we may go away for a weekend and entrust to our children the responsibility of running the house. We give them the opportunity to succeed or fail. But if they choose to have a party while we are away and wreck the house, they can't blame their parents for their irresponsibility.

The pressure of trials never provides us with an excuse to sin.

Second, we need to understand the process of temptation and sin so that we will recognize patterns and habits we are prone to fall into, and take steps to counteract them.

As we have seen, trials create pressure. In the process, our desires, our lusts are stimulated by these external circumstances, and we are tempted. Of course, temptation in and of itself is not wrong. Jesus was tempted, but he did not sin. So we cannot eliminate temptation. It is our response to it that is critical.

This is the process: We are carried away and enticed by our lusts. "Lust" in this instance, is general in nature. This is not referring merely to physical lust, but to all our normal desires and cravings—for love, security, acceptance, etc. When we face temptation, these desires become twisted.

James uses two insightful words to help us understand the process of temptation and how Satan gets us on the path of sin. "Carried away" is the term used in Judges 20:31 of the sons of Benjamin who rebelled against the sons of Israel. The sons of Israel dragged the Benjaminites out of their city, away from protection. Once outside the city, the sons of Benjamin were then drawn into an ambush. The word "enticed" means to lure, to bait. The word was used to describe the actions of a hunter; it was also used to describe the enticements of a harlot. When we are undergoing trials, lust is aroused. Our desires draw us away from what our response should be. Lust draws us to the bait, and we are ambushed. In the Garden of Eden, Satan got Eve fixated on the one thing she could not have. When I visit a certain store, although I may be feeling perfectly content, on occasion I will see something I didn't know I wanted. When that happens, I have fallen for the bait. Next thing I know, I'm fishing for my credit card.

After our lust has enticed us and we fix our attention on the bait, lust "conceives" and "gives birth" to sin. The words describe the process of bearing children. Once lust conceives, a seed is planted, and that seed will grow and give birth to a sinful act. Sin then gives birth to death, which is manifested in the lack of joy, peace and fellowship with God.

The chain of progression is: Lust→Sin→Death. Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a destiny.

When things are going smoothly, of course, we think we can handle anger, lust and greed. But when the pressure comes, there is a different story to tell. Most people have predictable response mechanisms for dealing with stress and suffering. If we understand how this process works, then we can begin to deal with it at the point of conception, before matters get beyond our control. The challenge is to oppose temptation early on, to nip it in the bud, even as our Lord did when Satan tempted him in the wilderness.

The third part of the solution to the temptation to blame God for our problems is understanding God's nature and character. Instead of blaming God for our suffering, and the sins that we commit as a result, we need to see him as he really is. James says we must not be deceived. Sometimes we project upon God our own attitudes and feeling towards ourselves. It was Blaise Pascal who said, "God made man in his own image, and man returned the compliment." We think God gives to us when we are good and takes away from us when we are bad. When he gives we feel blessed; when he takes away we feel rejected. We imagine God is fickle and unpredictable. We think he remembers our sin and pays us back; he builds us up to let us down. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The text says that God gives good and perfect gifts: "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above." We may think we are missing out on a blessing because of the trials that we face, but we must remember that all of life is a gift from God; everything that he gives to us is perfect and good. God is not stingy. He does not shop at thrift stores. He does not want to make us miserable. The blessings that will be ours both now and in the future will be beyond anything we can possibly think or imagine.

God is a generous Father.

And James says that God does not change. He is the "Father of lights," the source of perfect light and perfect truth, and "with Him there is no variation or shifting shadows." These terms refer to the movements of the planets and the sun. The solar system rotates: at times there is darkness, at times there is light. But it is not so with God. "God is light and in him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5). God is the source of perfect light, and we always live in this light. The fact that we suffer does not mean that we are in darkness, that God has turned away from us. His loyal love is not conditional. Not even our sin causes him to change towards us. He is constant and steady, dependable and trustworthy.

And James tells us that God gives life. It was by his desire, by his word, that he caused us to be born again so that we might be the "first fruits" among his creatures. The word refers to the best of the harvest, that which is set aside for the Lord. Notice the contrast to the process of sin and temptation. The process of sin is: lust, sin, death. James says that this does not come from God. The process is, God by his desire (i.e. by his choice), through his word of truth, gives birth to a new creation, and we have life. God is the life-giver who initiates life. He gave us the best gift of all—life in his Son Jesus. Without his life we would suffer without hope and despair without comfort.

Looking back over the years, I recognize many times when I tried to bless myself, when I scratched and clawed and manipulated to get things to work out for me. But all I experienced was a feeling of emptiness. When I look at what God has given to me, however, the special friendships, the special times of joy, none of these has anything to do with possessions or materialism. All of these things came from God; nothing derived from me.

God is a generous Father who does not change.

Christianity seems to go against the grain much of the time, doesn't it? Christians go against the grain by refusing to envy the rich and pursuing wealth. We go against the grain by glorying in our brokenness, by refusing to give into sin and blaming God. As we live this way we see God for who he really is—a generous, unchanging Father, loyal and faithful, who is the very source of life. Because of his goodness toward us, even in the midst of trials, we can say, with

Job, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee."

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