

Enduring Temptation

James 1:12-15

Introduction

James writes to Christians who are scattered abroad because of the unbelieving Jews who ravaged the early church. Many would have been tempted to leave Christ due to the hardships, mockeries, and threats of following Christ. James reminds them that these trials are and can be endured by resting in God's promises. If they, and we, would see as the goal, not earthly happiness, but rather "to be crowned in the kingdom of God, it follows, that the contests with which the Lord tries us, are aids and helps to our happiness" (Calvin).

Overview of the Text

In v. 12, James reiterates the themes of the opening verses of the letter. He notes the blessedness of the one who remains steadfast in temptation (same word as "trials" in v. 2). James earlier said that the testing of our faith through trials produced patience, and now he says that when the believer has been fully tested ("approved"), he will receive the crown of life. This is the final reward promised by the Lord to those who love Him. James then warns about the inclination to blame God when we are tempted (v. 13). Instead, we must remember that our sinful tendencies come from the lusts of our own sinful hearts (v. 14). James then describes the general pattern our sinful hearts follow (v. 15).

Trial and Temptation

In English, "trial" and "temptation" have different connotations. In general, a trial is an external hardship whereas a temptation refers at least to an appeal to the remaining sin in us. This distinction is good and helpful for the most part, but in the Greek, there is just one word used for both. When James says, "Blessed is he who endures temptation" (v. 12), he is not starting a new topic, but rather returning to the topic introduced in v. 2. In the broad sense, a trial or temptation or test is "any difficulty in life that may threaten our faithfulness to Christ" (Moo). James emphasizes to the Christians he is writing to (many being persecuted and tempted to fall away from following Jesus) that it is to their good to remain steadfast in the face of these tests. In v. 13, James speaks of a slightly more specific kind of test, that is, the temptation to commit evil or sin. At the heart of every trial is the question of whether we will trust God through it, or whether we will doubt or curse Him because of the hardship. James makes it clear that when we face that temptation in a trial, we cannot accuse God of tempting us to sin. There are two reasons for this. The first is because it would be contrary to God's nature to do so. He does test us, but He is not the author of the sinful responses to the tests. And yet the temptation to accuse God is one that has been with us from the beginning ("the woman You gave to be with me," Gen. 3:12).

No Excuses

This leads to the second reason, which is that the source of sin is man's own heart (v. 14). We cannot blame God for our sin because, although He sovereignly ordains "whatsoever comes to pass" (WSC 7), He has given us responsibility for our own desires. God tempts us in the sense that He sets us in situations to test and prove our faith (e.g., Gen. 22:1). God tests us so that we might learn to overcome the internal temptations of our sinful hearts. But any fall to the temptation is entirely our own—there is no excuse. You might think that

this warning from James does not apply specifically to you, that you are not really tempted to blame God for your failings or for tempting you. Consider for a moment what you are tempted to blame—your circumstances, your background or history, the other people who provoke you, etc. Where do all of those things come from? Who brought you into those circumstances? Who governed that history? Who put those people around you? It was God who sovereignly ordained it all. So when we shift the blame to someone else or to our circumstances or our personality or upbringing, we fundamentally blame God. Again, this is just like our father Adam. You cannot blame the lack of sleep, a sibling, a spouse, your children, the stress of work, the busy schedule, your depression, the weather, the traffic, or anything else. The hard reality is that there is no excuse for your sin.

The Method of Sin

James also gives us an outline for the way our sinful hearts operate (vs. 14-15). We are tempted when we are drawn away by our desires and enticed. While desires are not always bad, given the context here, it is safe to conclude that James is referring to the corrupt desires that “war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11, Gal. 5:17). These draw us away, presumably, from the way, from the truth, from the light, from the straight path. And this is itself the first sin. It is not wrong to be faced with a temptation—remember that James calls the one who endures it “blessed.” But we can also fall into the ditch of thinking that simply not acting on a sinful desire, I have not committed sin. No, sin begins in the heart (e.g., Matt. 5:21-30), in giving any countenance to the corrupt desires that spring up from within. “Stop the beginnings of sin therefore, or else all the evils it produces must be wholly charged upon us” (Henry). Having been drawn away, we are then enticed—beguiled and allured into deception. We excuse and indulge our sinful inclination, beguiling ourselves or believing the lies of the devil. Then, the desire, having conceived, “gives birth to sin,” which in turn “brings forth death.” The sin which is “full grown” is contrasted with the patience from v. 4 which matures us. Sin maturing brings forth death, but the steadfast trust in the Lord brings forth a fullness such that we lack nothing. Our corrupt hearts seek to grasp after things which God has withheld from us, sometimes for reasons beyond our knowing. We think we have a great lack, and so we covet and transgress God’s holy law. But he who endures the temptation is blessed. When he has completed his testing, “he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him” (v. 12).

Conclusion

The only one who has done this perfectly is Jesus. He was tempted but endured the temptation, resisting any inclination that arose from His human nature to doubt God’s goodness and promises (Matt. 3:17-4:10, Heb. 2:18). Unlike the first Adam, the Second Adam endured perfectly. So how do we endure? We endure by keeping our eye on the prize. This is no crass selfishness for the Christian because it is rooted in our love for God and our trust in His promises. God tests you in order that you might be made perfect and complete, lacking nothing. When you fail, His promises are not lost because our perfect Savior has finished the tests. But God seeks to grow each of us up in Christ, which means that there are more tests. So, we endure by asking for His promised wisdom in faith (v. 5-6), resting in the hope that we will receive the promised crown of life (v. 12), refusing to blame or make excuses (v. 13), looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.