
Even in Trial and Temptation, Our Heavenly Father is Still With Us.

Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Lent, 2018

James 1:12-18

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, James 1:12-18: **¹² Blessed is the man who patiently endures when he is tested, because, when he has passed the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him! ¹³ No one should say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”! For God cannot be tempted to do evil, and He does not tempt anyone. ¹⁴ Each person is tempted when he is dragged away and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Next, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and, when sin has run its course, it gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my dear fellow-Christians! ¹⁷ Every act of giving that is good and every gift that is perfect comes down from above, from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shifting shadow. ¹⁸ As He planned, He gave birth to us by the Word of truth, so that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Life can be summed up in three words: “Trials and temptations.”

These words are what we as Christians at times use to describe life as we know and experience it. The words are really a cliché for our views on life. Trials can take on many forms. It could be in the form of health issues, relationship problems, financial problems, and on and on. James does not identify the trials faced by the early Christians he was writing to, but in the context of his words, it seems that the lure of wealth was an issue.¹ As for temptation, no one is immune, and nobody wants to discuss the temptations, lest their ugly selves be exposed. Everyone has their own temptation, something that preys on them more than others, and again, temptation can take many forms. Ultimately though, temptation is the constant attempts of our spiritual enemies to lure us away from God and into the captivity of sin.

¹ Cf James 4:13-5:6

Is this how James comes at the subject of trials and temptations? Hardly! He comes at them not as a negative, not as something to drag you down, but just the opposite. He talks about the only answer to the trials and temptations we seem to love to dwell on. He talks about God and *what He does* in the midst of our trials and temptations. James reminds us that the Giver of every good and perfect gift is on our side, even in trial and temptation, and that makes all the difference.

It sounds hard to believe, but James begins his letter by saying, “*Consider it nothing but joy, my fellow-Christians, when you become involved in various trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces patient endurance!*” (1:2-3). During His public ministry, Jesus often seized people’s attention with provocative, seemingly contradictory statements: “*The last will be first,*” He said.² “*Blessed are you who are weeping.*”³ James begins in the same way by inviting believers to think of the painful trials and testing in their lives as a joy. Really? How is such an outrageous thought even possible? Think of some of your own trials, and I am almost certain you would think of it as anything but joy. Again, think of all the daily assaults from Satan, and how you grow weary of them. Satan will use his human and demonic allies to try to distract us, trade our spiritual treasures for trash, sell our future for immediate gratification, grow tired of the Word, chase illusions, or despair of any living communication or relationship with God. None of this sounds anything like joy.

Yet James says to think of all this as joy. That is what verse 12 is saying too: **Blessed is the man who patiently endures when he is tested, because, when he has passed the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him!**

You see, God uses trials to strengthen our faith. Experiencing suffering and trials matures us. Our faith grows when we have to sweat, be frustrated, wait, and persevere, just as our muscles need regular workouts to grow strong. Unused muscles stay weak and soon waste away. Everyone knows the saying “No pain, no gain.” Our faith gets tougher when it feels resistance and overcomes. Again, trouble can be good when it drives us to our knees to ask God for help. Our faith grows when we learn that God “*gives generously to all,*” (James 1:5). It is arrogant to think that we are completely self-sufficient. As Paul said: “[*God’s*] power is made perfect in weakness.... For when I am weak, then I am strong,” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

² Matthew 20:16

³ Luke 6:21

The tough times move us to flee to and cling to God. We see His hand and we experience God keeping His promises to us as He sustains us during our trials. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and that includes His ability to take the trials we suffer in this world and use them for our good to strengthen our faith in Him and in His dear Son.

Speaking of Jesus, He definitely knows all about trials! From having nowhere to lay His head, to His arrest, trial, beatings, nailings, a crown of thorns, and a spear in the side. He knows. He suffered trials beyond what we can imagine. Our Gospel for today from Mark says that after Jesus was baptised, ¹² *At once the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness,* ¹³ *and He was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan,* (Mark 1:12-13). Take a moment to think about that experience. Jesus had to face this battle all alone. He was fighting this battle as the *Substitute* for all humans. The battle was arduous and long. It lasted 40 days with no breathing spells - totally unlike the 40 days Moses had spent on the mountain with God (see Exodus 24:18), and totally different from the 40 days Elijah spent on the way to Horeb sustained by the food God had provided (see 1 Kings 19:8). For Jesus they were 40 days of continuous testing. Yet, He always had His eyes on His heavenly Father to sustain Him during the very trials God ordained Him to suffer in order to save us. In perfect obedience to His Father, He suffered all, and all the while He had perfect faith in His Father and His plan for Him.

So it is, that in our time of trial, He is there with us, knowing exactly what we're going through and sympathising with us. He does more than sympathise with us. He's the One who gives us a strengthened faith through it all. He's the One who'll bring us through the trials of this life and give us life everlasting. The crown of life is ours because our dear Saviour suffered the trials of Calvary for you and me. So, the next time a trial comes, remember the Saviour. When you wonder where God is when you're suffering, then go to the cross. He's there to give you His comfort, His understanding, His power, and His victory. Go to His Word. He will speak to you. Go to His table and receive His body and blood. You will be strengthened.

So much for trials, but what about temptations? How is that positive?

Well, the temptations we all face are not God's fault. Certainly, James says, ¹³ **No one should say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"! For God cannot be tempted to do evil, and He does not tempt anyone.** Our falling into temptation is not God's fault, although, we do like to blame God for all this. After all, isn't He the One who created us with desire in the first place? We all have desires, and lots of these desires are not bad in themselves, and yes, God did create desires, but He

didn't create us to abuse those desires He gave us. Think of hunger. We all have the desire to eat but look at gluttony. The Apostle Paul says that a little wine is good for the stomach,⁴ but look at how so many abuse alcohol by drinking too much. Sex is reserved for the marriage partner alone, but look at how that is abused today, and on it goes. Whether we like it or not, we can't blame God for temptation or for our falling into temptation. James makes it clear that we look no further than ourselves for the problem of temptation.¹⁴ **Each person is tempted when he is dragged away and enticed by his own desire.** ¹⁵ **Next, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and, when sin has run its course, it gives birth to death.** Temptation is always around for all of us. As God told Cain, it's always "*crouching at the door,*" (Gen. 4:7). Our temptation problem is not from God but really comes from within - cooking away in each person's heart is a sinful self that will never be converted. It restlessly seeks to dominate our thinking and values. It will never submit to God. We struggle with it. We feel guilty when we fall into it. We make up our minds to defeat it. We can't. We won't. We fail when we trust in ourselves to overcome.

All thanks to God then, because He comes to the rescue! He brings us good and perfect gifts. He brings us the message, the Word of truth, the Gospel. That Gospel tells us that God has given us the best, good, and perfect gift, the gift of His Son. He knows what trial is, and He knows what temptation is. Not only was He tempted by Satan as we read in the Gospel; He was tempted even more than that. His greatest temptation was to avoid the cross, not to go to that cross to save you and me, not to suffer the trials that He faced. He was tempted not to suffer and die for you and me. He overcame that temptation. He went to that cross for you and me to pay for all the times we fall into temptation. He is the only One who can defeat temptation for us.

We are His children, His "**firstfruits**." That is, we are the best of the harvest, offered to God in sacrifice.⁵ **He gave birth to us by the Word of truth**, that is, we have been reborn by our Baptism. We belong to God. We are His special possessions. He loves us. He has sent His Son to die for us. We have forgiveness for all the times we've fallen into temptation. We receive the crown of life in Jesus Christ. We receive heaven itself. We receive the power we need to go through this world of trials and temptations. What is He doing about it?

He's feeding you with His Word, which sustains and reminds you. He strengthens you in His promises of His constant presence, sympathy, and understanding of what you're going through, because He's been there. His victory is yours, and, even if you

⁴ 1 Timothy 5:23

⁵ Exodus 22:29; 23:19).

fail, He will pick you up. He picks you up, forgives you, and prepares you by the power of His Word to strengthen your faith for the next time temptation comes. He does the same thing through His Supper. He is feeding you with Himself, His body and blood, that suffered and was shed for you. He strengthens your faith, forgives your sins, and gives you the crown of life.

We need to remember that while we still grace this earth, that our evil self will not just automatically wither away and disappear. We need to recognise, honestly and humbly, the enemy within our own hearts, an enemy that can and will conceive and give birth to evil thoughts, evil words, and evil deeds. We humbly accept James' words of warning and daily repent of our sins, so that an unrepentant attitude won't cause our spiritual death. We gladly submit to God's Law, which convicts and condemns our sinful hearts and crushes our sinful pride, and we cling to Christ's Gospel, which alone can give us worth and hope before God. For it is only God's verdict of "not guilty" that will spare us from the divine wrath that will fall upon Satan and all evil on the Last Day.

So whatever hinders us from faith in Christ must go; the things that bind us to Christ - to His Word and Sacraments - must be the centre of our lives. As James says a little later in verse 21, "*lay aside all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and, with a gentle spirit, welcome the Word planted in you, which is able to save your souls!*" Getting comfortable with a sinful lifestyle and getting apathetic about God's hatred for sin leads to spiritual death. Listen to God; "*welcome the Word planted in you.*" Our lives really are better when we worship God, get rid of idols, honour our parents, respect marriage, flee adultery, tell the truth about people, and respect other people's property, to name a few.

God doesn't want to hurt His children. ¹⁷ **Every act of giving that is good and every gift that is perfect comes down from above, from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shifting shadow.** He doesn't change, loving us one minute and then turning on us. He is the Lord, the God of steadfast covenant-love, who does not change like shifting shadows. He has given us our physical lives, and has given us rebirth through His mighty Word into spiritual life so that we might be a kind of firstfruits, that is, the prime, prize part of all creation, the part that He is proudest of. This, not temptation into sin, is God's gracious will for us.

God knows all about trials and temptations. His only Son whom He sent suffered trials and temptations. He knows exactly our struggle, but He has come into this world to give you all you need so that you can come through the trials and temptations of this

world and receive the crown of life that He has earned for you at the cross and empty tomb. Knowing this will help us trust our heavenly Father in everything. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Almighty God, heavenly Father, since every good gift comes from You, we approach You in prayer in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ our Saviour. Though we are ashamed because we are unworthy, we come with faith and confidence in Your fatherly love and mercy.

We thank You that You have given us Jesus Christ as our high priest. He knows our weaknesses, for He bore them. He knows our temptations, for He endured them, and learnt obedience by what He suffered. Grant that we may show our loyalty to You by absolute loyalty to all Your words, even when they seem baffling.

Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world, cleanse us from our sins, and teach us obedience. Take away from us all desire to follow any will but Yours. Fill us with faith and love, that we may gladly believe and follow Your Word. Give us such trust in our heavenly Father's protection that we always rejoice as we walk in His ways.

Holy Spirit of God, when we are led into the wilderness of testing, deliver us by Your power, and save us from the evil on every hand. Give us Your strength, and by the example of Jesus show us the victorious power of God's Word.

Strengthen and bless Your Church. We praise You for the privilege of being co-workers with You to save people. Help us not to waste the grace of God that we ourselves have already received. Open the door of opportunity for us. Fill us with a faith that claims Your grace each day and then moves us to proclaim it to others. Because Your Gospel can make many people rich, give us joy in our witnessing, no matter what sacrifices we suffer.

Uphold our homes by the Gospel. Empower all parents to be true followers of Jesus, the light of the world, so that their example of faith and obedience may help their children also to know and follow Jesus.

Pour out Your Spirit on our country, O Lord, so that in their life and work all citizens may seek to show forth Your praise, power, and glory.

Be with all those who suffer, and let them know Your concern and compassion. Be with those who grieve, and comfort them with Your promises. Be with those whose earthly pilgrimage is coming to an end, and fill them with the sure hope of eternal life in Christ.

O Father, watch over all Your people, and bring us safely through this world to the kingdom that You have prepared for all who love You. We pray all these things in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Genesis 22:1-18

¹ After these things, God tested Abraham. God said to him, “Abraham!”

He replied, “Here I am.”

² God said: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah! Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall point out to you!”

³ So Abraham got up early the next morning and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He cut the wood for the burnt offering. Then he got up and started out for the place about which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ Then Abraham told his servants: “Stay here with the donkey and let the lad and me go over there, so that we may worship! Then we shall come back to you.”

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the burning coals and the knife. So the two of them went on together. ⁷ Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!”

Abraham said, “Here I am, my son.”

Then Isaac said, “Look! We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God will provide Himself with a lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

So the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place about which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ However, the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said: “Abraham! Abraham!”

He replied, “Here I am.”

¹² He said: “Do not lay your hand on the boy! Do not do anything to him! For now I know that you fear God. You have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

¹³ When Abraham looked up, he saw behind him a ram caught by his horns in the thicket. So Abraham went, took the ram, and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham named that place “The-LORD-Will-Provide.” It is still said today, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

¹⁵ The Angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time.

¹⁶ He said: “‘I have sworn an oath by Myself,’ declares the LORD, ‘that, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,

¹⁷ I shall certainly bless you. I shall certainly also make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess the city-gates of their enemies. ¹⁸ In your Descendant all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have listened to what I have said.’”

James 1:12-18

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birth to us by the Word of truth, so that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

Mark 1:9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw heaven being torn apart and the Spirit coming down on Him like a dove. ¹¹ Then a voice came from heaven: “You are My Son, whom I love. With You I am well pleased.”

¹² At once the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and He was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels served Him.

¹⁴ After John had been arrested, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News of God: ¹⁵ “The time has come and the kingdom of God is near. Repent, and believe in the Good News!”