

## **Introduction**

When I was in grade school, the President's Council on Physical Fitness sponsored competition annually for the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. At the end of the school year on Awards Day, several students were recognized who passed all the tests. I was never one of them. I absolutely dreaded the days when Coach Jackson our PE teacher decided it was time to test. First, there were the pull-ups. I think you had to do like five and I always struggled to do even one. Never have been very muscular. Then there was the test of sit-ups. The criteria was something like 45 sit-ups in 60 seconds. The standing broad jump was also on the agenda as well as the 50-yard dash and the 600 yard run. Students who met the minimum score in each of the categories were approved. These students are the ones who were recognized on Awards Day. They received a special patch that could be sewn onto their jacket. I always thought I would have liked to be one of those athletic types who won the award but never enough to train for it.

James likens the endurance of the Christian amid trials to the test for which there is an award. It is not a president's award but an award nonetheless, and one that comes directly from heaven itself, from the God who sits enthroned over the creation he has made. He has promised a crown to those who love him and has pronounced them blessed. Here is great incentive for enduring training and training for the Christian means enduring trials. Let's hear what James has to say that provides incentive for endurance.

[Read Text and Pray]

In our previous text we learned that trials come in one of two general categories. We are tested by absence and abundance. We are tested by hard times and good times, times of pain and times of pleasure. Either way it is a test that results in a visible display of whether the faith we profess is genuine or not. Enduring the testing sets before us a sometimes grueling prospect. We might look upon the time of testing the way I used to look upon the test for the presidential fitness award. But here we are not talking about mere bodily fitness and we are not talking about a patch to put on your jacket. We are talking about pleasing God, and we are talking about heaven's grand awards day. It plays an important role when it comes to enduring trials. Here is incentive to continue fighting the fight and running the race even when the fight is long and hard we have fallen to the mat and even when the race is a marathon through the desert. And what James wants us to know is that God blesses those whose faith is proven through trials. He awards them with a trophy of unequalled worth. Keeping this trophy before us is needed to be able to "count it all joy" when we meet trials of various kinds. The message of this text centers in on the word that commences the verse, "blessed." Here are four aspects of blessing.

### **I. The Pronouncement.**

We start off with a pronouncement of blessing. "Blessed is the man." It is a declaration of the deepest and richest happiness within, that is connected to the favor of God.

The pronouncement, "Blessed is the man" or, in essence, "blessed is the one" occurs throughout the scripture. Psalm 1:1 begins, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord." He meditates on God's word continually and becomes like a well-nourished tree and bears fruit. The blessing is not his outward circumstances but his inner strength, stability, and fruitfulness. In the

psalms (34:8, 84:12) the one who trusts in the Lord is said to be blessed, as is the one who makes the Lord his refuge. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount makes a number of pronouncements of blessing. Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst; blessed are those who are persecuted.

There is an ongoing theme then in the Bible that the person who is blessed is not necessarily experiencing good fortune in the eyes of the world. The world may look upon this one as being in an unenviable position. He or she is experiencing adversity, resistance, enmity, inward hunger and yearning, even sorrow. However, such persons who trust in the Lord, are counted blessed.

Clearly, this idea of being blessed runs counter to what people generally think of when they think of being blessed. I am sure at one time or another you have been told to "have a blessed day." What do you think the person has in mind when that is what they wish for you? Do you not think that our society generally equates blessing with material success and circumstantial comfort? That is, material prosperity and happy circumstances. Of course they do. And we would not mind it either, would we? But the Bible is clear that the blessing of God is not to be equated with these things. It is not to say that those things should not be considered blessings when they are present; they should. However, blessing itself is not to be equated with those things.

Let's consider the term, blessed. Blessed is the man. What does it mean? Well the word itself means "happy." But it is not a mere flighty emotion that we may feel one moment and lose the next as our circumstances go from pleasant to painful. It is an indication of convictional happiness—happiness by conviction. Clearly, this happiness is a deeply rooted disposition within the soul that withstands hardship, challenge, inconvenience, and opposition.

Peter says it this way in 1 Peter 1. He speaks of the inheritance that is kept in heaven for those who have been born again. It is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading and ready to be revealed in the last time. And he states, "in this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials." You are rejoicing, he says, even though you are also grieved. It is parallel to the teaching of James. Count it all joy, even when it hurts. Blessed are you, even when it stings.

Now, there is a reason this blessedness withstands adversity and even sorrow. The reason has to do with another aspect of the idea of blessing. Not only does it speak of deeply rooted joyful happiness. It also speaks of the favor of God. The state of blessing is not a state humans can reach on their own. The idea of blessing presumes a giver of the blessing. The idea of be blessed runs completely counter to the idea of being lucky. I was visiting with my neighbor the other day. He is 101 years old. And he said several times to me, "I consider myself to be extremely lucky." But you know the idea of luck means that good fortune has come to you purely on the basis of random and inexplicable causes. There is no rhyme or reason to it; it is just the luck of the draw. It is just throwing the ball up in the air and it happens to go through the hoop.

James does not use the word "luck" here because, the good fortune about which he speaks has an author and a designer and a sovereign ruler who manages and directs the world with purpose and a plan. There is intentionality to do good, to show divine favor, to specific individuals according to his counsel and pre-determination. In Ephesians chapter 1, the Apostle Paul blesses God because of the way in which he has determined to bless his chosen people. He writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be

holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

The blessing of God is not willy-nilly. It is not random. It is not of chance. It is favor meticulously and graciously poured out for the purpose of doing good, true good, ultimate good, eternal good, to those who are targeted by him for blessing. So “Blessed is the man” means he is enriched, favored, and determined to receive transcendent happiness by the purpose, plan, and action of God.

I will insert at this point that this blessing fundamentally has to do with what Christ has achieved through his life, death, and resurrection. Those who are in Christ through faith have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of trespasses. Those who are blessed in any additional sense are first blessed through their identity with Jesus. They have been convicted of their sins against God and they have sought and found reconciliation with God on the basis of Christ’s work. They have turned away from a life of sin and invested their total hope for right standing with God in Jesus Christ. If you desire true blessing, you will only find it when first you turn from your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have not already turned to him, I am praying that today might be your day.

But for those who have come to the Lord—and I trust that means most of you—we have to make a number of adjustments in our understanding as we come to Christ. And one of those adjustments is thinking that blessing means a trouble-free and inconvenience-free life. It does not. It has to do with eternal reality and substance not the veneer of circumstance.

We turn next from the pronouncement of blessing to the person who is blessed.

## **II. The Person.**

Two descriptions identify the person who is pronounced as blessed.

A. First, he is one who remains steadfast under trial. Merely being subjected to testing does not result in blessing. Rather it is the man who remains steadfast under trial who is blessed. Trials themselves do not result in blessing. It is the purpose of testing to reveal whether a professed faith is genuine or not. Many collapse under testing and become hardened toward the Lord. The man or woman who is blessed is the one who remains steadfast under trial. They are tried by circumstances and even tried by their own failures, but these do not turn away. Their faith does not fail. Ultimately though they do fail the Lord now and then, they do not leave the Lord.

I think of Peter. He confidently and proudly boasted that he would never fall away from the Lord. Jesus warned Peter that Satan had demanded to sift him like wheat, but Peter insisted he was ready to go to prison and even to death. And you know what happened. Three times he was accused of following Jesus, and three times he denied the Lord. In one sense he failed the Lord, but that was part of the test. In the end his faith did not fail. He did not abandon Jesus.

That will happen to us as well. We will be sifted. We will be tested. We will all be tried. Sometimes we will sin against the Lord. We may even deny him in certain situations. That is when the test has only begun. The testing here is for proving the genuineness of faith. True faith will remain steadfast. It will endure. Ultimately, it will not turn away from the Lord.

B. There is a second description which further identifies the man who is blessed. He loves God. The one who passes the test receives the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. So at issue in facing tests is the question, "do you love God?" Job made it clear that he loved God even when he lost everything. He still blessed the name of the Lord. Peter again comes to mind. In denying the Lord, he caved under fear, but he did not stop loving Jesus. And Jesus knew how important it was for Peter to declare his love as many times as he had denied him. So after his resurrection, the Lord got Peter off to the side. Three times he asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter asserted and reasserted his love. He passed the test.

Remember whenever you are in the fire of trial, it is an opportunity to declare your love for God. When the trial comes, hear the voice of Jesus saying, "Do you love me?" Ultimately, the ones who are blessed are those who love God. They love God more than comfort. They love God more than wealth. They love God more than any other person. Their love for God surpasses their love for what God gives. They love God more than life itself.

So do you say you love God? Do you profess to love him with your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do you assert that you follow Jesus, that you have denied yourself and taken up your cross to go after him? It is all about love. Do you love him? Trials cumulatively are the opportunity to leave no doubt. Don't you want to let there be no doubt that you love God? God does not merely say that he loves us; he has demonstrated his love in an unmistakable way by sending his own Son as a substitute sacrifice. Your love and my love needs to be demonstrated as well.

It is easy to say you love, but true love will be acted out. It is acted out to others through patience and kindness, through humility and politeness and through refusing to seek its own way, and so on. One of the clearest demonstrations we love God is through obeying his commands. And that demonstration of love is taken up another notch when we endure trials for the sake of being faithful to him. Standing the test through our lives says, "God, I love you!" It says so more powerfully than words and more earnestly than a song. It is a love letter to God written with our very life. John MacArthur is spot on. He writes, "A genuine Christian is not someone who at one point in time made a profession of faith in Christ, but he is a person who demonstrates true faith by an ongoing love for God that cannot be damaged, much less destroyed, by troubles and afflictions, no matter how severe or long-lasting. Like obedience to God's will, love of Him is certain evidence of true faith" (42-43).

### **III. The Prize.**

The person who is blessed, the person who remains steadfast under trial and who demonstrates his love for God will receive from God a prize. James calls it the crown of life. It is the consummation of the blessing God gives to him. It is a testimony from God that he has been tested and found to be genuine in his faith and in his love for the Lord. "When he has stood the test" indicates that the test is over and he passed. The word for the test here was used of the test carried out on metals and on coins to see if they were genuine and thus approved. The prize is given to those who have been proven to be genuine by their steadfastness under trial. They have finished the race and finished the course, they will receive the crown of life.

When you think of a crown you might automatically go in your thoughts to a royal crown, a diadem. But the word used here would have been associated by its original audience with the athletic crown. It would have been a laurel wreath placed atop the head of the victor in an athletic event. It signified the triumph and the completion of the event. James is telling us that trials are here and we will be tested, but those trials will come to an end and those who have persevered in faith and love

will be crowned as victors. The Lord will recognize the genuineness of their faith and award them eternally.

This is not an award for special Christians but the award to be bestowed to all who have run the race and kept the faith. The crown is life—true and eternal life—to know God, to be in his presence, to be made righteous, to be glorified. All those things of which the trials consisted will be passed away. The crown is life in the new heaven and new earth. It is when according to Revelation 21 “the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.”

So you see, the trials we all face are evidence of real blessing from the Lord. They give us the opportunity to prove our love for and faith in Christ. And those of steadfast faith will be crowned as victors at the end of the race with an eternity of joy unspeakable and full of glory.

#### **IV. The Promise.**

There is a certainty here of blessing and of the crown. Under no uncertain terms, God would have his people be sure of his intent to award them so richly on that day. He has PROMISED the crown of life to those who love him. The same God who is single-minded and unwavering in his determination to give wisdom to those who ask of him is just as unwavering in his determination to give the crown of life. He has promised. The God who is a giving God is also a promising God.

I am touched by the demonstration God gave Abraham. The Lord had promised him a great reward and that his very son would be his heir and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. And he believed God. Then the Lord promised him the land; and yet he asked the Lord for some assurance. The Lord had Abram to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. He cut all but the birds in half. And at night the Lord appeared in the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch and passed between the pieces and made a covenant with Abraham. In effect he was saying to Abraham, “May I be as these if I fail to keep my word.” He was making an oath by his own self. But he did so to give to Abraham absolute assurance that he would do what he had promised. The Lord wants his people to know. He cannot lie. He does not make empty promises. The promise of life to those who endure and demonstrate a genuine faith is certain. He would rather not be God than to not keep his word.

#### **Conclusion**

The test of life is about much more than fulfilling a set of physical fitness standards. It is not about recognition by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness. And the reward infinitely exceeds that of a patch to be worn on a jacket. But the tests are tougher too. The test is life itself. Its ups and its downs and its encounters with Satan himself. The tests involve fearful and sometimes dreadful, certainly unwanted, circumstances. But steadfast faithful endurance proves the genuineness of faith and the authenticity of love. And the reward, promised by God is life in its fullness. Welcome the trials for the opportunity they provide to demonstrate to the Lord that you do love him more than anything else. And be kept in confidence in those darkest hours by the assurance of His promise.