

Steadfast Under Trial: James 1:12
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This morning we're going to talk about life and death. Eternal life and eternal death. Every time we gather as a church and open God's Word together, it is an extremely weighty moment. There are unbelievers who are walking down the path that leads to eternal death, and we pray that they will repent of their sins and trust in Jesus and inherit eternal life. And all of us who are believers, we desperately need to be fed week after week in these gatherings, and day to day in our private devotions. We need to be reminded that eternal life awaits those who are steadfast. And we need to be reminded that eternal death is the punishment for those who do not battle against temptation. So when we open God's Word together, we're not playing games. We're not here to be entertained. We're here to consider life and death. Eternal life and eternal death. And if you think that your job is so important, or your financial situation, or your belongings, I ask you to put those things out of your mind for a moment and consider your eternal destiny. All of us are going to exist forever, either in heaven or in hell. This Book, the Bible, is God's revelation to us. And it explains why we deserve to suffer eternal death because of our sin, and how God made a way for sinners to be forgiven and inherit eternal life. He did this through His Son Jesus Christ.

Let's look at this passage in James 1 together, which speaks of life and death (vv. 12-15). The steadfast person of verse 12 will receive the crown of life. In contrast, if one gives in to temptation and does not battle against sin, it will result in death. This is the message of verses 13-15, which we'll look at next week.

The Bible has different ways of motivating us. There are promises, and there are warnings. To put it another way, there's the carrot and the stick. The promises are held out in front of us like a carrot, to motivate us toward greater holiness and steadfastness. The warnings are like a stick, threatening punishment if we begin moving in the wrong direction. In these verses we see both the carrot and the stick. Verse 12 contains a great promise. Eternal life in heaven is the reward for those who remain steadfast. Verse 15 is the stick. Eternal death in hell is the punishment for those who do not battle against temptation.

These verses are about life and death. Eternal life and eternal death. Therefore, I hope you will be attentive and seriously consider what God wants to teach us from His Word this morning. I had intended to preach on verses 12-15, but as I prepared I decided to focus just on verse 12 today, because I want this verse

to give us hope. I want it to inspire us and motivate us and spur us on to be steadfast individuals, no matter what hardships come into our lives. Don't you want this adjective to characterize your life? Don't you want to be steadfast? This is something I want so badly for myself, and for our congregation. I want us remain steadfast under trial. I want us to press on in the fight of faith, even when it seems like the world is falling apart around us. When the most severe hardships of life are staring us in the face, I want us to be able to count it all joy, because we know that God is refining us and purifying us and using even this (especially this) to draw us closer to Himself. That's what I want for us, and hope you have that desire, too.

Verse 12 is about the steadfast person. And the purpose of the verse is to give us hope in the midst of our trials, and to motivate us to be steadfast under trial. I want to make four observations concerning the steadfast person that James speaks of in verse 12.

I. The Steadfast Person is Blessed

This is the first thing James says in verse 12, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial." This verse is closely related to the theme of the previous verses. Especially verses 2-4, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." James now calls this person "blessed." The one who remains steadfast under trial, the one who counts it all joy and remains steadfast, this person is truly blessed.

It's a very meaningful word. It's the Greek word, *makarios*. It's the same word Jesus used several times in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." And so on. It refers to deep spiritual contentment and joy, and receiving God's favor. James uses this word to describe the person who remains steadfast under trial. What James is saying in verses 2-4 and verse 12 is similar to Jesus' statement in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:11-12: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

James, also, is telling us that the steadfast person is blessed. Whether the trial is persecution, or sickness, or temptation, the one who perseveres is blessed. God smiles over that person. God's favor is upon that person. That person will enjoy deep spiritual

contentment and peace, even though the walls are crashing down around him. Don't you want that to be true of you! Don't you want to be calm in the midst of the storm! God may not calm the storm. He may let it rage on in your life. But He can calm you in the midst of the storm.

The fact is that we cannot know ahead of time the blessings that will be ours as we remain steadfast through a trial. On the front end, we see the difficulty of the situation. We may despair. We may become discouraged or angry or bitter. We may wallow in self-pity. But in order to remain steadfast we have to look with the eyes of faith to the other side of the trial. We must cling to promises like the one in this verse. We must believe that we will be greatly blessed as a result of the trial. We won't necessarily see it on the front end, but later we will see so clearly how God was working. It may be a short time later, or many years later, or not until we arrive in heaven. But sooner or later every Christian will know the truth of this verse, not just by faith but by experience. What a blessing it is to be a person who remains steadfast under trial, to be a person who clings to Jesus in the most difficult times of life, to be a person who has a deep calm in the middle of the storm. Let us all strive to be this person!

II. The Steadfast Person Will Be Approved

The second observation is that the steadfast person will be approved.

In the next part of the verse James states a particular way in which this blessing is manifest: "for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life . . ." That phrase, "when he has stood the test" is translated in the NASB, "once he has been approved." The word is *dokimos*, and it's very similar to the word James used in verse 3 where he spoke of "the testing of your faith," meaning the refinement and purification of your faith. And Peter, in 1 Peter 1:7 speaks of "the tested genuineness of your faith." The idea is that our faith will be tried and tested through trials, and as we remain steadfast through those trials we will be approved. Our steadfastness will be evidence that we are truly believers.

Remaining steadfast under trial is like the stamp of approval on our lives. We've been tried and tested and shown to be genuine.

This is a significant evidence of grace in our lives. There are many people who say they are believers. There are many who give intellectual assent to the truths of Christianity. There are many who attend church regularly. But put those individuals through a fiery trial of some kind, and you'll be able to see which ones are genuine and which are fake. That's what James is communicating here. The steadfast person will be approved by God when he has been tested by the trials of life and shown to be genuine.

It's possible that someone would look at this verse and think that we somehow *earn* the crown of life by remaining steadfast under trial. "when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life." Or the NASB, "once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life." One might think that this approval is something we earn by remaining steadfast, and then we get the reward of the crown of life. But that's not what the Bible teaches, and that's not what this verse is teaching.

The point here is not that our steadfastness earns eternal life. The point is that our steadfastness is evidence that we truly love God and trust Him and belong to Him. Only Jesus deserves the crown of life, and the only reason we can receive this gift is because we belong to Christ by faith. Therefore, we do not earn the crown of life by remaining steadfast under trial. Instead, our steadfastness under trial is evidence that we belong to Christ by faith. The trials in our lives will refine us and purify us by making us cling to Christ more and more. And when He returns or when God calls us home, the life of perseverance in the midst of hardships will be a testimony to God's saving grace in our lives. It will show the genuineness of our faith.

So don't think that you are earning anything from God by enduring hardships. We can't earn anything from God. But if you are a true believer, the trials that God allows into your life *will* sanctify you, and your faith in Him and your love for Him will grow, and you will have the sure hope of receiving this gift—the crown of life.

III. The Steadfast Person Will Receive the Crown of Life

This leads to the next observation, that the steadfast person will receive the crown of life. When a person has remained steadfast under trial and shown the genuineness of his faith, he will receive this great reward from God. James calls it the crown of life. The same description is used in Revelation 2:10, which says, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." There are similar references to crowns. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:25, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath (or crown; same word, *stephanos*) but we an imperishable." The crown that the New Testament writers refer to is the laurel wreath that was given to athletes when they won an event. Paul makes the comparison between the perishable crown of athletics, and the imperishable crown that is given to the steadfast Christian. Paul also says in 2 Timothy 4:8, "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." Peter also uses

the image of the crown. 1 Peter 5:4, “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

These are various ways of trying to capture the grandeur of what awaits us in heaven. It’s a crown. It’s a symbol of victory. It’s a symbol of finishing the race. And James calls it “crown of life.” The gift is life. It’s eternal life. Rather than suffering the eternal death which is the result of sin (v. 15), verse 12 is saying that the steadfast believer will receive eternal life in heaven. This is what the crown of life refers to. The steadfast person will receive eternal life in heaven with God. This should be a tremendous motivation to us in our daily walk of faith. We need to constantly remind ourselves of eternity.

In verses 9-11 which we studied last week, we saw that eternity is the great equalizer, and eternity puts our finances in the proper perspective. Whether rich or poor, what matters is eternity. And it’s the same with trials. In the midst of a trial, look beyond the trial, look to the One who allowed this trial in your life, who is refining you and producing steadfastness in you and who will one day give you the crown of life. This is the hope we have in the midst of trials.

Think for a moment about the power of hope in our lives. Isn’t it true to your experience that the way you perceive the future has a huge impact on how you feel in the present? This is true in big and small ways. And it’s true both positively and negatively. If there’s something you’re really looking forward to and excited about, you’re filled with happiness. And even if other things are going wrong, the hope of that future enjoyment helps you get through those difficulties. On the other hand, if there’s something in the future that you are dreading, then it makes it hard to enjoy anything in the present. How we perceive the future is so significant in the present.

The glorious promise of this verse is that the steadfast person will receive the crown of life, which is eternal life in heaven. And that is the hope we need to get us through any and every trial we will face in this life. When you’re tempted to despair, when you’re tempted to give up, when you’re tempted to become bitter and angry, remember, the steadfast person will receive the crown of life. One day, we will enjoy the infinite pleasure of being in God’s presence, and we will look back on the trials of this life, and we’ll smile. Tears of joy will fill our eyes as we think of God’s goodness to us in allowing those trials to enter our lives. Brothers and sisters, embrace this hope. Focus on this hope. Meditate on this hope when you are in the midst of a trial.

Some people might take issue with the idea of a reward that motivates obedience and perseverance. That’s what this verse is all about. It’s giving us motivation to remain steadfast under trial,

and the motivation is: you're going to receive the crown of life once you've stood the test. And someone might object to this, saying, "We should persevere because it's right and good to persevere, not because of the reward. The reward taints the virtue of the perseverance. We should simply do our duty."

This is an important objection, and it is helpful in clarifying what the reward actually is. Because if you have in your mind a man-centered idea of heaven, if you think heaven is going to be filled with earthly pleasures, then this objection carries some real weight. Indeed, it would diminish the virtue of our obedience and perseverance if our hope was merely to enjoy comfort and food and leisure and material possessions and worldly pleasures. And that's how some people envision heaven. It's just earthly delights to the max. I remember years ago in a Bible study a man said, "The two things I hope will exist in heaven are golf and sex." That statement reveals a lot about his heart. It shows where his treasure is. What he hopes for in eternity is nothing more than the fleeting pleasures of this life. And that kind of attitude dishonors God, because it shows that our delight is in His gifts rather than in Him.

The crown of life is not an amplified version of worldly pleasures. If it was, it would not be worth pursuing. The crown of life, eternal life, is about enjoying God for who He is. Jesus states this in His high priestly prayer in John 17. He says, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (v. 3). And later in the chapter He prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (v. 24). This is the reward. Not stuff. Not earthly pleasures. The reward is God, Himself. The reward is seeing the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The reward is fellowship with Him unhindered by sin. It's the indescribable enjoyment of being in the presence of our God forever and ever. And when we passionately pursue this crown of life, we greatly honor God. We show that He is our treasure, and that we're willing to endure any trial if it will mean we can be closer to Him.

IV. The Steadfast Person Loves God

The final observation is that the steadfast person loves God. The verse concludes with this statement about the crown of life, "for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, *which God has promised to those who love him.*" I think it's so beautiful how James points to the heart, both here and in 2:5, where he writes, "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" The reward is for those who love God. This is a matter of the heart.

It's something that has to do with our desires, and what we delight in. It's not a question of how much we know about God. It's not a question of how much we've done for God. The question is, "Do we love God?" This is not superficial. It goes to the very core of who we are. Those who will receive eternal life are those who have been radically changed from the inside out, who have been given a new heart that delights in God and loves Him for who He is.

If you don't love God, if you don't feel in your heart this delight in God, then cry out to Him to give it to you. Repent of all the ways you've been trying to make yourself happy, and look to Him who is the only source of true happiness. He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for us, so that He can forgive our sins. And those who come to Him in faith will be forgiven. Those who love Him will receive the crown of life. I plead with you, friends, look to Him, and love Him! He is so loving, and so worthy of our love.

In conclusion, I exhort us again to consider these matters very seriously, because it is truly a matter of life and death. Eternal life and eternal death. Those who remain steadfast under trial will receive the crown of life. But those who succumb to temptation and do not battle against sin will reap eternal death. Let verse 12 be a great inspiration to you in the midst of trials. Set your gaze on the finish line. Place your hope in God, and in God alone, and delight in the future enjoyment of spending eternity with Him. "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."