

James 1:12 Blessing and Suffering

The Book of James is full of one verse proverbs, verses that are connected to themes that stand out. For example 1:27, on pure religion: **“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”** On the topic of mercy, 2:13 says, **“For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”** On peace, 3:18: **“And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”** In 4:17: **“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”** (See also 3:11-12.) Today, we come to one of these verses. And the topic of this verse is endurance under trial. I believe it is connected with vv. 2-3 which says, **“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.”** The immediate context for James readers is the lack of wealth or the imminent loss of it (vv.9-11; 5:1-12). Probably, these people are suffering because of religious persecution that has caused them to flee from their homes and lose their possessions. And in the midst of these trials, James is saying to those who endure, **“you are blessed.”** You are blessed RIGHT NOW. And one day soon, you this blessing will find completion in a future blessing **“the crown of life.”** With this in mind, I want to emphasize this blessing from two perspectives: 1) Already Blessed; and 2) Not Yet. This is the tension we live in as Christians in this world. Then, as we prepare to take the Lord’s Supper, I want us to look unto Christ as source of all blessings.

1. The One Who Endures Trials is Blessed Now. This word “blessed” should not be taken to mean “happiness.” Happiness may be an outcome of being blessed, but they aren’t the same. Blessed runs so much deeper. Happiness refers mostly to a present emotional state. Whereas blessedness is related to a relationship with God. I can be happy about my tax returns. I can be happy because my kids get good grades in school. But to be blessed is to know that life is more than my emotional states. Trials can come my way and I can still be called blessed. Why? Because I know God! Because I am united to Him through Christ by the Spirit. My happiness is not ultimately tied to the things of this world, but in knowing God. And this blessing is now, during our trials.

V. 12 is very similar to Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matt. 5:3-6 we read: **“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. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”** And then in vv. 10-11 notice how close they to James. **“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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 . . .”**

Who are these people to whom Jesus speaks? They are poor in spirit. They are meek. They are mourning. They are persecuted because of a hunger and thirst for righteousness. They desire justice. Yet they are blessed . . . NOW. The world does not see such people as blessed. But, they

are blessed because they are united to the living God in Christ. 1 Pet. 4:14 puts it this way: **“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”** Brothers and sisters, no matter what you are going through, you are blessed NOW! And those of you are Christians know what I mean. Your sins are forgiven. A holy God is on your side. By the Spirit, you cry out “Abba Father” (Gal. 4:6). I think of Job who was afflicted greatly as he lost his family, his possessions, his health, his dignity in the community, and even his friends turned on him. Yet, he was blessed! He says, **“Though he slay me, I will hope in him”** (Job 13:15). Brothers and sisters, blessing NOW comes from knowing the living God, and knowing that your sins are forgiven, knowing that HE is in control of all things and cares for you. Happiness will come and go, but being blessed is always there for the Christian. I think of the words of Is. 43:1-2: **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you . . .”**

There is so much more I could say here. But, I want to get to the heart of this passage. In this verse (which is evident in the rest of his letter), James ties the blessing of God NOW to the blessing of God in the future.

2. The One Who Endures Trials Awaits a Future Blessing. Already, we are blessed, but the greatest blessing is yet to come. Endurance now, which leads to blessing NOW is tied to a future blessing. Look at the second part of the verse: **“for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”** Here we see the promise of God of a future blessing. The result of successfully enduring persecution, trials, sufferings, is a “crown of life.” This phrase is used one other time in the NT. Rev. 2:10 Jesus is speaking to the persecuted church of Smyrna where some are about to be thrown into prison and some are going to die for their faith. He says, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”** I believe, here that the “crown” IS “life.” He was saying, “though you will die in persecution, you will be raised; you will be with me; eternal life.”

In 1 Cor. 9:25 Paul says, **“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever”** (NIV). In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s day, the winner of the race received a physical crown. But, Christians who endure suffering and trials run a different race and await a different crown. The crowns of this world will perish. But, the one Christ gives will not. It is eternal life. This is our prize! This truth sums up what we saw last week as James exhorts us to rejoice in our trials. Our race, the testing, the suffering, the endurance, the wisdom, and the faith are designed to lead to the crown that is life. Look at 2:5: **“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?”** This is not a difficult truth for the Christian. Our blessing now is tied to a future blessing. In this life we have hope as we trust the promise of God.

Now, let’s think about this truth a bit further. Let me give you a big word. One author calls this truth an “eschatological reversal” or the “eschatological victory wreath.” In other words, what is happening now in the lives of suffering Christians will be reversed one day. This is a major

theme in James. Think back to the Sermon on the Mount. As the children of God in this world, we are poor in spirit, we mourn, we are meek, we hunger and thirst for justice, we are persecuted and made fun of, all kinds of evil are planned against us. But Jesus says EXACTLY what James says . . . : **“Rejoice and be glad (now), for your reward is great in heaven (future) . . .”** (Matt. 5:12). In another place James says, **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble . . .”** (4:6). Also, v. 10 **“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”** And look back at 1:9-11: **“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because, like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.”**

What is lowly in this world will be exalted. What is proud and high and lofty in this world will come to nothing. For James readers there was no crown per se. The crown is yet to come. Brothers and sisters, this world is looking for an earthly crown. They want the best positions. They desire the best seats at the table. They want to be on the news in front of the world. Why? Their reward is now. But, not the Christian. Heb. 11 speaks of the persecuted Christian who waits for his reward: **“Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us . . .” (Heb. 11:36-40).**

Application: Speak to our elder conversation on trials. There is a difference between “trials” of life because of sin in this world and “trials” caused by being a Christian.

Following these verses in Heb. 12 we get more application. Turn there with me to 12:1-2: **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us . . .”** Now, stop there for a moment. What a beautiful command. Do not sin! Run the race with endurance.” This is exactly what James is saying. But, the most important part of this application comes next. **“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”** This brings us to truth #3.

3. The Source of All Blessing is Christ. Here, I want to give two ways (there are many) Jesus blesses us as we endure trials and suffering in this life.

i. Jesus is our example. In v. 12 James says we are blessed (NOW) when we remain steadfast under trial. Why, because one day we will receive a reward, the “crown of life,” which God has promised to those who love him. One day, there will be a great reversal. Has anyone read the short story called *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain? It is a story about Edward, the son of King Henry VIII, an insignificant pauper (poor person, humble kid on the street). The young street kid always wondered what it would be like to be a prince. So, one day he tried to enter the palace to see Prince Edward and talk with him. Immediately he was arrested. But Edward heard what was happening and invited the boy to come into his room and talk. They decided to change

clothes to see what each would look like. Suddenly there was an interruption and Prince Edward was misjudged as a pauper and thrown out of the palace. As Edward wandered the streets of England, he told people that he was the Prince of England, but everyone made fun of him and for some time he lived the life of a poor street boy. The day came when Henry VII died and Edward proclaimed to everyone that he was the king, but everyone laughed at him. But we know, that although he appeared as a pauper, he was really the king. Finally, he was recognized as king, but only after he suffered as a pauper.

In this way, Jesus is our example. He was humiliated. He took on flesh and lived among us. He died on the cross. Then, he rose again and was taken up to heaven. Look with me to Phil. 2:5-11: **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”** In the Lord’s Supper today, we remember this humiliation, knowing that **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin”** (Heb. 4:15).

ii. He is the author and the perfecter of our faith. Another way Jesus is the source of all our blessings in this life and the life to come is because He is the one who begins and ends our faith. And all power to endure in between comes from him. The entire Bible points to this truth. For all the wisdom of God (James 1:5) is found in Him. With this in mind, I would like to read Heb. 2:5-18 and make some comments as we prepare to take the Lord’s Supper. **“For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.”** Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. **But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again, “Behold, I and the children God has given me.” Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”**

Application: Future blessing will come for those who endure.

Application: Future blessing will come for those who love God.

Application: looking to the future sustains us NOW. A pilgrim is always travelling and passing from one land to the next.

Application: We Must go through this humiliation NOW. We cannot escape it! But, it will result in our glorification. In the meantime, we look to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.