

---

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen. The word of God that we consider today is from the epistle of St. James, *“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.”*

James the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem begins his letter with these words: *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.”* Trials? All joy? Total joy? Really? Your Dad’s not even 60 and he’s diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. That’s total joy? You’ve been a victim of physical abuse. Total joy? You want to live a life that honors God’s design for sexuality but your attractions to people of the same sex just never go away. All joy? History tells us that James was severely persecuted as a Christian leader. He was thrown off the temple mount, miraculously survived the fall and was promptly stoned to death. I wonder if he considered it total joy as he was pelted with those rocks. I actually think he did.

But we have to acknowledge that Christians have too often slapped nice sounding platitudes on the big, ugly problems others face. “God is testing you. He’s strengthening your faith through this.” “Don’t be sad. She’s in heaven!” Maybe we’re quick to pull out a Bible verse like Romans 8:28 *“For those who love God all things work together for good.”* We want to help. We want to be able to explain why terrible things happen but sometimes we use God’s Word as a band-aid to short-circuit sadness, lament, or grief. So what about this passage? *“The testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”* Is James giving us another platitude to try to make us feel better? As the flesh and blood half-brother of Jesus and as a Christian who faced many trials, I don’t think so. Rather, he is telling us something true about the way God works in the midst of suffering.

Martin Luther taught that there are three factors that shape and mature us in Christian faith. *Oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation on God’s Word), and *tentatio* (testing). The first two, you choose the time and place. You control when you pray and when you do your devotional reading. But *tentation* is outside of our control. James says “when you encounter various trials” – they are not things we devise for ourselves. We just sort of bump up against them. Why *do* these trials come? Sometimes they come directly from God – think of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son. Sometimes they come from the devil – think of the story of Job and how God gave Satan permission to afflict him so long as he did not kill him. And sometimes they are simply the result of living in a fallen world with fallen people who commit evil against us. And it’s often impossible to tell the sources of our particular trials. But one thing we know, God tells us that regardless of the reason for our crosses, he is always at work in them. Does that mean God wanted the arsonist to burn your house down so that he could strengthen your faith? No. We know that is contrary to what God commands. But God is going to be working for your good in and through the tragedies we encounter.

James says these trials and tests produce *steadfastness*. What is that? It's also translated endurance or perseverance. But it's not passive. It's an action word! Steadfastness is not just gritting our teeth and letting the trials happen to us. It's tenacious. It actively clings to our true hope which is found in Christ. It's like Jacob holding onto the God-man in that wrestling match.

We often find that the trials we face in life strip away our idols, the things we falsely hope in. Sickness may smash the idol of health. A persistent struggle with temptation and sin smashes the illusion that we can cure ourselves. Tragedy shows us that our own resources are not enough. And when everything else is taken away from us, we are thrust back upon the cross of Christ. What else do we really have that we can depend on? Or to use Peter's words, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*" When life pulls the rug out from under us and we wonder where God is – we know that we can always point back to the cross. That's where God is. He is not indifferent to my trials, my suffering, my pain, my sin. He's nailed up right in the middle of it all. And every trial we endure was there on the cross with him. Jesus' death redeems you and me and it also redeems all of our suffering and all of our trials. His resurrection is the pledge that he's going to make all things new and right every wrong.

Now, this whole thing is not easy to grasp. It still sounds kind of crazy to suggest that we consider it a joy to encounter trials. That is why James tells us to ask God for wisdom. If this is a hard pill to swallow; if you're having a hard time seeing that God is at work in the midst of suffering, ask God for the wisdom to see and understand. And, as James says, ask God confidently. Regardless of what we pray for, we can be sure God is listening and has promised to hear and answer us. That's why we end each prayer with an AMEN – a little word that means, "Yes yes, it shall be so!"

James illustrates his point with one example of a trial and God's work in it. He talks about the trials of wealth and poverty: "*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...the rich man will fade away in the midst of his pursuits.*" The poor person can boast that through baptism into Christ he is a royal priest with all the treasures of heaven! The rich person likewise can boast when he is humbled; he can count it total joy when he loses his entire fortune in stock market crash. Why? Can you imagine having enough money to live and retire comfortably and then suddenly having nothing? That may not be what we hope for but it is an occasion for boasting – "You may have taken my money but you can't take my Jesus!" If the rich man had come to trust in his wealth, what good would it do him when his life was ended? But if he trusts in Jesus alone, his eternity is secure! The same can be said of any number of things we rely on – success, good reputation, family, power, good looks. If those are taken away, we still have Christ and that is all that really matters in the end. As we will sing it next weekend,

*“Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child or spouse – though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom’s ours forever!”*

And as we remain steadfast; as we persevere and stubbornly cling to Christ through every trial, there is a precious promise. *“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.”* There is a “now” and a “not yet” to God’s promises. Here and now as we stand up under suffering and testing, we are blessed to know Christ. We are blessed in knowing that life is more than how much we own or what we accomplish or what other people think of us – our worth is bestowed by Jesus. But there is also a future aspect of the promise – the crown of life. Jesus will return in glory and then he will raise us to glory with him. Everything sad will come untrue; creation will be renewed, those separated by death will brought together again, and every wrong made right. O God, as we wait help us to remain steadfast and come quickly Lord Jesus! AMEN!

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.