BLESSED IS THE MAN WHO PERSEVERES

November 11, 2012

James 1:1-27

Key Verse 1:12 “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

James was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ. James was not always a man of faith. John the apostle says of Jesus’ brothers, “for even his own brothers did not believe in him.” (Jn. 7:5). Later, however, James repented and became the central figure in the Jerusalem church. He is legendary for his faithfulness in prayer, which made his knees became as “hard as a camel’s.” James wrote this letter to those Christians who were scattered because of persecutions. James encouraged them that they should not fall into doubt and so be led astray by their evil desires. Instead, regardless of their circumstances, they must persevere to receive the crown of life which God promised.

I. Overcoming trials by faith (1-18)

Look at verse 2. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” Life had never been easy for the first Christians. From the onset of the first converts, Christians were looked on by the people of the world as impractical people with a touch of delusion. They suffered under financial poverty. They were persecuted and were driven away from their homes. Their trials and hardship were life threatening and spiritually taxing. Believers today are no different. We face many trials daily. What can be our trials today? They could be our financial situation, finding a job, the demands of school, demands of work, health problems and so on. These trials are never easy to endure.

There are several responses to the trials. Some people adopt a spirit of defiance, boasting that they will battle through to victory by their own power and positive thinking. Some people lose heart and give up under pressure, and complain and grumble about their troubles. They blame God for their troubles. Some people indulge in self-pity, saying, “I am the most miserable person because of my hardship.” However, the best response should be to accept the trials as God’s discipline. We should say, “God has allowed this trial to come to me. He has a good purpose in it for me. I don’t know what that purpose is, but I want that purpose to be worked out in my life. God will turn this trial into a fruitful victory.”

Look at verses 3. “…because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” One of God’s purpose in giving us trials is develop perseverance. Perseverance is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a “continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition.” Perseverance is steadfastness. When we persevere, we are standing firm in our belief, determined, and immovable no matter what the cost is, no matter what the conditions are, and no matter how difficult it is. That’s why we need to consider it pure or complete joy because our hardships and suffering are developing this spiritual steadfastness and immovable faith. So, there is value in every hardship and trial because it tests our faith. Here the word “test” is similar to the word to describe the process of purifying gold. Gold is refined by using high temperatures to melt the impurities. After this process, we have pure gold. Similarly, we also grow through a refining process. Our trials and hardships are like the melting pot, and we are the impure gold. That’s why God tests our faith, so he can give us the necessary training to develop perseverance.

Look at verse 4, “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” Just as our tests and true faith work together to produce perseverance, so perseverance must be allowed to continue or ‘to perfect’ or ‘finish’ its work to produce spiritual maturity and completeness. Notice that the outcomes of perseverance are maturity and completeness. Here the word “mature” can be translated into ‘perfect’ or ‘finished.’ Therefore, perseverance refines us to grow in purity and spiritual maturity. Through perseverance we become like the purified gold. How amazing is that? Many times when problems come, we become desperate and use any available means to cut short the trial. We want a magic solution to shorten the trial. But it is possible that we may have to undergo a longer trial to complete our training. So be patient. When our training is complete, God will end all the trials.

Trials reveal our weaknesses. Weaknesses make us ashamed and fearful. But faith convinces us that in the time of weakness, we must turn to God for his help. Look at verse 5. “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him.” God does not judge us for our weaknesses. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to pay the price for all our sins. God does not hold our weaknesses against us. He has instead opened the door for us to come to him in our weakness, so that what we lack might be generously supplied. Praise God! We can face trials with confidence, and we can face up to our weaknesses, because God will supply what we lack, and in so doing, we cross over from incomplete to complete, one step at a time. God does not find fault in those who come to him.

When we face trials, we often become fearful and lose sense of what is important and what is not important. We cannot distinguish what we can change and what we cannot change. So many times, we spend a tremendous amount of time to change what we cannot change. Can I change the fact that I was born in a poor family? Can I change the fact that my parents divorced? Can I change the fact that I am not as smart as Einstein? We need wisdom to distinguish the difference between what we cannot change and what we can change so that we can accept things we cannot change as God’s sovereignty and make the most of them for God’s glory.

The well-known prayer of serenity is as follows: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him Forever in the next.

Wisdom is the generous gift of God. But James warns that wisdom will not be given to those who harbor doubt in their hearts. Thus we need faith. Look at verse 6. “But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” We need faith to overcome our trials and hardships. We need faith that God will complete the work He has begun in us. Philippians 1:6 says, “…being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” We must have faith that our hardships and trials will lead us into greater spiritual maturity and completeness that only God can give. We must believe that God will complete His work in us, so that we lack nothing. James says that if we don’t believe, we are like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind and is unstable in all we do. The reason James gives for this doubt is because of our double-mindedness. An unstable mind cannot trust God. He has no peace or comfort in his heart but only anxieties and worries. This kind of person seeks God but at the same time seeks human solution based on his own idea. Basically, he is serving two masters: God and the world. This is why he is unstable. Thus, when we pray, we must have faith in God. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see…anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Look at verse 12. “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” Here we can see two rewards for those who endure hardships and trials in faith. One reward for our perseverance in faith is a blessed life. The word, “blessed” is the same as one in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. It means blissful. It means “fully satisfied”. This full satisfaction does not come from our favorable circumstances, but from God himself. We will be truly blessed when we persevere through our trials because we have stood the test. Another reward for persevering under trial is we will receive the crown of life. The final reward for all our trials is the crown of life. Knowing that our reward is in heaven, we can certainly persevere joyfully under the severest and harshest trials or hardships. We can have true happiness knowing that our reward is waiting for us while going through our sufferings. This is the great promise of God. How can we persevere under trial? Verse 12 says, “…he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” We can and should persevere under trial when we love God and our Lord Jesus. The love of God is essential to persevere. When we do not love God, we are not interested in the promises given to us. Also, when we do not love God, how can we truly stand the test of our hardships? We cannot, we will just end up quitting. Therefore, our trials and hardships are a good time for self-reflection of our love for God, our faith, joy, and hope. May the Spirit guide us to persevere under trial so we can be truly happy and have the crown of life.

II. Listening and Doing (19-27)

Look at verse 21. “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” The word of God is the word of truth. It is the word of God that provides us with the wisdom and guidance we need as we navigate the trials and hardships of life. It is by the word of God that God has given his life to us.

Therefore, we must listen to the word of God very carefully. When the word of God is spoken, we must quiet our soul and prepare our hearts to receive God’s word. Speaking our minds and babbling on about worldly things, or reacting emotionally and angrily to our circumstances keeps our hearts from hearing God’s word and letting it bear fruit in us. As the Psalmist says in 131:1-2, “My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.” Likewise, we must make every effort to listen to what God’s word is saying.

Look at verse 22. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Listening is a lost art in this generation. Students don’t know how to listen to their teachers. They want to be entertained, but they don’t want to think along with them. Wives and husbands don’t listen to one another, nor do they listen to their children. There is so much information. But people have no time to listen to what anyone else is actually saying. James reminds us that listening is not just a matter of hearing something. In his day, too, people would listen to something and become puffed up with pride over what they heard. This is not listening. Listening means that we do what we hear.

James gives a funny example of a man who looks at a mirror and then, when he looks away, forgets what he looks like. Perhaps, when he looked in the mirror, he saw that he wasn’t shaved and that his teeth were filthy and his hair was messy. But when he looked away, he forgot and thought that everything was fine. What a foolish man! But how foolish are we, if, after studying the Bible and discovering who we are and who God really is, we continue to act as if we are fine and we deserve God’s mercy and love, or that we can be trusted to do what is right or good on our own! Instead, we must look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continue to do so, not forgetting what we heard but doing it. Then, we will be blessed in all that we do.

May God bless us to listen carefully to God’s word, do what it says, and persevere in our life of faith until the crown of life is ours in Christ Jesus!