

Steadfast Under Trial

- James 1:12
- You've heard the expression, "the straw that breaks the camel's back." I recently read RC Sproul's account of why he went to Weight Watchers for the first time. Everyone in the meeting was given several things when they arrived, including a food guide, a chart for recording every day what they consumed, an exercise book, and a drinking straw. Near the end of the meeting, the instructor asked for volunteers to share why they had decided to join. Every person who volunteered an answer had a different one: couldn't stand the sight of themselves in a recent photograph, had to get a whole new wardrobe, had been told by their doctor to lose weight. The instructor then held up a drinking straw. "This is your last straw," she said. "This straw represents the reason why you decided to join this program. Take it home and put it in a prominent position. Tape it to your refrigerator. When you falter in your desire to lose weight, look at it. Let it serve to remind you of why you are here." Sproul went on to say that the expression, the straw that broke the camel's back had its origin in the Middle East, where camels are still used as beasts of burden. The camel is expected to carry straw that is harvested, and there is a limit to how much it can carry. Every camel's back has a breaking point. The difference between a tolerable burden and one that crushes may be a single piece of straw. We don't know, as Americans, how much a camel can carry. Neither do we know how much WE can carry. But we all have a tendency to suppose that we can carry far less than we actually can. We sometimes say to the Lord, "God, I cannot handle one more thing!" But God never promised to not give us more of a burden than we *want* to carry. He did promise that He would always be with us. And we have already seen in James' letter that God gives us burdens, trials, not because He is mad at us and wants us to suffer, but because He delights in us and He wants us to mature and grow stronger. We have seen, to use JB Phillips' paraphrase, that we are to welcome trials as friends, not resent them as intruders. Because as we go through them we build spiritual muscles, primarily the muscle of steadfastness, and that happens only when we have to carry burdens. We have learned also that we develop godly character in proportion to how we use that steadfast muscle and how we count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds.
- Today's text takes us one step further in understanding God's purpose for trials, why He sends them and how we are to respond to them. And in the style of his older brothers' Beatitudes, and in the style of Psalm 1, James starts off with "Blessed is the man (or woman)." You can translate that word blessed as 'happy' if you desire, but the deeper truth is that a man or woman who is blessed is "the recipient of God's favor," whether or not he or she finds herself to be emotionally happy. Let's look at the text and answer several questions about it.
- **What is a trial?**
- We have already seen that James says we will meet "trials of various kinds," but he never spells out what kinds of trials he is talking about. That's a good thing; otherwise, we would have well-developed theology on the 'hierarchy of trials.' And we would score our trials according to the sliding scale, and of course, my trials would always be worse than yours. Or even sicker, some Christians would try to make sure they WENT through the #1 or #2 trials on the list. But the truth is, nearly everything can be a trial. Douglas Moo defines trial as "any difficulty in life that may threaten our faithfulness to Christ." That can include physical challenges, financial shortfalls, family issues, job issues... Being an only child can be a trial. Having brothers and sisters can be a trial. Being single can be a trial. So can being married. Being poor, as we saw last week, is a trial, but so is prosperity. Our job is not to compare or complain, but to count it all joy when we meet trials, no matter what they are. I remember the story of Corrie and Betsie ten Boom who were imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II for hiding Jews in their home in Holland. At first they were horrified that they were being kept in a part of the prison camp that was infested with fleas. "How will we live in this place?" Corrie asked. They opened their Bible to 1 Thess 5 and read,

“give thanks in all circumstances.” Betsie said, that’s it! We can give thanks for this place because we are together. Yes. And because we have the Bible. Yes. And that we have fleas here, lots of them! Corrie said, “Betsie there is no way even God can make me grateful for a flea.” Betsie said, “It says, give thanks in all circumstances. It doesn’t say just in pleasant circumstances. And fleas are a part of this place where God has put us.” So they stood between the tiers of bunks and gave thanks for the fleas. But Corrie knew that this time, Betsie was wrong. It wasn’t but a few days later that they realized why they had so much freedom in the particular barrack where they lived. Much more than any of the other barracks. The prison guards would not step foot into the place. Because of the fleas.

- Notice the orientation of the man or woman who is blessed in the trial. They are “under” it. It doesn’t require Christian character and steadfastness to run away from a trial. That usually shows a lack of character. You have to go through it. Today’s helicopter parents hover over their children to make sure they don’t ever have to suffer anything. They do everything in their power to take their children out of the trial, but in doing so, they stunt their children’s emotional and spiritual growth. And they prepare the way for that child to experience great anger and resentment when they face trials as adults and have no reference point for how they are supposed to deal with it. No, we are not to go around the trial, but through it, by God’s grace!
- **What does it mean to ‘remain steadfast’?**
- We have already seen that the word means to successfully carry a heavy load for a long time. Again, God sends trials of various kinds, and your trials will be different than mine. The word for various in verse 2 means ‘varied, or even multi-colored.’ It is the same word Peter uses in 1 Peter 4:10 in describing the grace of God that is on display as He gives various spiritual gifts to His children. So God send various trials, and we meet them precisely when He has chosen for us to meet them, and our job is to remain steadfast. To carry the burden God has placed on us, knowing that God has chosen it for us. Andrew Murray wrote something that is excellent and helpful for all of us. After going through a period of testing and trials, he wrote this:
 - First, he brought me here, it is His will that I am in this strait [hard] place: in that fact I will rest. Next, he will keep me here in His love and will give me grace to behave as His child. Then, He will then make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends for me to learn and working in me the grace He means to bestow. Last, in his good time He can bring me out again -- how and when He knows.
 - Then he summarized what he learned as he remain steadfast under trial:
 - Let me say I am here, 1. By God’s appointment 2. In His keeping 3. Under His training 4. For His time.
 - It is when we view our suffering as meaningless and without purpose that we are tempted to despair. But that takes us back to our core belief and our rock solid theology that God does not do anything, nothing, that is meaningless and without purpose. As Abraham Kuyper said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”
- **What does it mean that we have “stood the test”?**
- It means that we have not taken shortcuts. We cannot cheat God. Madison Surratt used to teach math at Vanderbilt University, and when he handed out his exams, he would say: “Young people, you are taking two tests today. One is on math. The other is on integrity. If you have to fail one, fail math.”
- We cannot cheat and say that we have “stood the test.” Or quit. Going through a hard time at work? Find yourself in a very hard class in college? Dealing with a disagreement with a friend or a parent or with God? Don’t quit. Remind yourself that you are there by God’s appointment, in His keeping, under His training, for His time.

- **What does it mean to receive “the crown of life”?**
- Jesus said it to the church in Smyrna: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” There are lots of images that come to mind when we think of a crown. A royal diadem, studded with diamonds and precious jewels, may be the image you have. People in the Greco-Roman world would have thought of a laurel wreath, just twisted vegetation shaped into a crown that was put on the head of an athlete who had run the fastest. Paul used the same imagery in 1 Corinthians 9 when he said, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.” Amazing good news, that there will not be only ONE who receives a crown and the rest of us losers will just get a participation medal! All who remain steadfast and who have stood the test will receive the crown of life. There is a future truth being expressed here, no doubt. Because all of life is a test, and the test will not be over until life is over. When we see Him face to face, and we have moved from trial to triumph, that’s when there will be no more final exams, mid-terms, or most hated of all, pop quizzes! And we will know by sight what we believe now by faith, which Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” It’s coming, just as sure as the sun will rise in the morning. We will rise and we will be with the One who does wear the crown. Maybe that’s what Mark Hall was talking about in his song, “Just Be Held” when he writes as though Jesus were saying to His child who is struggling in a trial, “Your world’s not falling apart, it’s falling into place.”
- I believe that there is a right-now application to this promise as well. That we receive the crown of life in this life in this way, that as we remain steadfast under trial, we grow in God’s grace to receive life and embrace life and rejoice in everything and be thankful in all things.
- **Do we love Him?**
- God has promised to give the crown of life to those who love Him. That’s what takes us through the trials, isn’t it? We who are married made a covenant before God that we would be faithful to our spouse in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, in times of plenty and in times when the cupboards are bare. And what sustains us through those times, good and bad, is that we love each other. By God’s grace. Do you love God? I know you do, and it is because He first loved us.