

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

The Blessing of Being Steadfast

James 1:12

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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 1:12).

Over the years, I've enjoyed competing in various 5k or triathlon events. Due to two knee surgeries last year, I'm still trying to figure out how to get back into a training routine. Despite putting them on my calendar, I've missed every event this year.

One of the many reasons that I love those races is because of the challenge and exhilaration of the events. Every time I compete, I find myself—at some point in the race—thinking, “Why am I doing this?” Usually, it's when a person sprints past me on the run or whips around me on the bike. There's a voice in my head saying, “You're so slow. You should have trained more. You're a sluggard.” It's crazy how that voice is always there.

Then, there are other moments while running, when I check my pace. I'm tempted to run harder, but I know I can't sustain a faster pace—it will backfire on me. It's happened too often. So, I tell myself, “Just keep this pace—not any slower, not any faster.”

My favorite moment, however, is when the finish line can't be seen but it can be heard. At about a quarter-mile away, I begin to hear the music and the announcing of people's names as they cross the finish line. And hearing that sound creates an image in my mind that I think about more than how hard I'm breathing or how tired I am. That scene of the words “FINISH” emblazoned on a blow-up arch serves to motivate me to keep going. And the hope that the race is just about over, serves to motivate me to keep running.

When I read James 1:12, that scene comes to my mind. Now, you may not relate to a road race or a triathlon. Maybe for you, it was your graduation, the completion of a massive project, the wedding of your son or daughter, celebrating 365 days of sobriety, or maybe the funeral you just attended.

Life is full of “finish-line” moments. It probably wouldn't surprise you to know that the Bible is full of them as well:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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 (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

Verses like these are helpful not only at the end of our lives, but also for seasons when we are being called to remain steadfast. It's good to keep the end in mind as we struggle to stay in the race.

This is especially important when a change in circumstances or immediate relief feels like it is a long way away. Those are the kind of moments when you ask yourself important questions like: "What am I living for?" or "Where do I find some hope?"

James 1:12 helps us understand where Christians look for hope when hardship doesn't seem to be ending or when the hardship seems to be outside of our control.

What are the blessings of being steadfast in trial? What should you focus on when life is really hard?

1) Divine Approval

The first blessing of remaining steadfast under trial is looking for the kind of approval that can only come from the Lord. It involves focusing on the affirmation that comes from what God thinks of us, what he knows to be true, and his evaluation of our lives.

There are three keywords or phrases for us to understand: (1) "Blessed", (2) "remains steadfast", and (3) "stood the test."

"Remains steadfast" – If you've been tracking with our series in James, the word "steadfast" should sound familiar. We first heard the word in James 1:3-4. To remind you, the word means to endure, withstand, or to bear up under something. It carries the idea of waiting expectantly. Other translations render it as "persevere" (NIV) or "endures" (CSB).

In verses 3-4, we learned that steadfastness was something forged through testing (v. 3) and something that we should allow to happen (v. 4) because of its connection to spiritual maturity.

Verse 12 serves as a bookend (an inclusion) of the concepts. James sees "steadfastness" both as a command (vv. 3-4) and as something to commend (v. 12). In other words, remaining faithful under trial should be seen as a goal – something hard but really good.

One of the challenges when facing a time of trial and testing is the simple fact that you are not able to fix it, stop it, or get beyond it. There are seasons of difficulty that do not resolve quickly. There are hardships that are so complex, widespread, or layered that you would easily be discouraged if your joy were conditional on the situation changing. Sometimes our singular goal must be the faith commitment to not give up, to not despair, and to stay in the battle—to remain steadfast.

Sometimes, faithfulness doesn't look like solving the problem as much as it looks like not giving up. Steadfastness looks like fixing our eyes on the goal of remaining faithful to Christ even when things are really hard.

"Stood the test" – The other phrase related to divine approval is found in the phrase "when he has stood the test". It's the Greek word dokimos which means something that was proven, tested, examined, and affirmed. As with the word "steadfast," James uses it in verse 3. But here in verse 12, the

word is used for the totality of what we believe. Trials and testing validate our commitment to follow Jesus faithfully. Let me give you a few examples in other texts:

- Paul told Timothy to be a faithful minister of the gospel – *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved...rightly handling the word of truth* (2 Tim. 2:15).
- Peter affirmed the connection with how trials prove the genuineness of our faith in 1 Peter 1:6-7.
- Paul exhorted the controversy-laden church in Corinth that factions are revealing:

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized (1 Cor. 11:18–19).

Jon Bloom, commenting on this text and 1 Corinthians 13, says something inciteful:

The church in Corinth was so divided that you might say it was diced. There were divisions over which apostle was superior, sexual morality, lawsuits, marriage, eating meat, head-coverings for women, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of believers, and I'm probably missing some... Factions reveal hearts. So, in our disagreements and divisions, Paul wants us to measure our motives, words, and actions by the gauge of chapter 13. The less they look or sound like biblically defined love, the more concerned he wants us to be about our genuineness.

Hard circumstances press us to live for divine approval. Controversy tests the depth of our spiritual maturity. I'm sure you know that 1 Corinthians 13 says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." But when is that passage especially important? Valentine's Day or when you're upset with a friend? Is that passage vital when you are in love or when you're mad?

COVID-19 and various controversies are tests. Do you know what I'm finding? I don't like the test, but I also don't like what the test is showing me about myself. I don't like what I see. I'm deeply burdened by what I see happening in evangelicalism, and even what we've seen here in our church. Sometimes I don't even know who's right or who's wrong. And I find myself falling at the feet of Jesus, realizing that my only hope to survive this test is keeping my eyes fixed on him.

And yet, one of the things I'm realizing and trying to embrace is that desperation and brokenness are part of the good fruits of divine testing. In other words, rather than just analyzing the brokenness or strategizing how to fix the brokenness, I'm trying to embrace it as it pushes me to Christ.

I'm learning that part of the test is to embrace the mess as it leads me to Christ.

Remaining faithful through the test is the essence of the test.

"Blessed" – Despite being the first word in verse 12, I'm covering it last on purpose. I wanted us to feel the full weight of what James is saying here so that we can understand the importance and significance of this word.

To be “blessed” means to be in a right relationship with God. It is the word that directly connects us to divine approval. You could think of it as a word that captures the affirmation of God and his heart. Or, you could think of it as what pleases God.

The word has Old Testament roots. For example, the Psalms begin with these words: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers...” (Ps 1:1). And in Psalm 144: “Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord” (v. 15).

Jesus used the word over and over the first recorded sermon in Matthew’s gospel; what we often call The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-11). Paul uses the word to describe those whom God favors with the forgiveness of sins: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin” (Rom. 4:7–8).

To be blessed is to receive and live upon the grace of God. It is the affirmation of God upon a person’s life because of God’s mercy.

James points to this divine affirmation as a primary means of motivation. As it relates to trials and difficulties, divine approval becomes one of the ways that you make it. Instead of “FINISHED” at the end of the race, think of the words “APPROVED” or “LOVED” emblazoned on the arch.

Steadfastness grows and is sustained in the soil of divine approval. The calling for the Christian is to live in light of what God thinks of us, to live for his approval, and to pursue what glorifies him. Let me ask you to think back on the last week and the last four months of your life. A few questions to consider:

- Do we want the favor of God or the favor of man?
- To what extent have we been motivated by the fear of God or the fear of man?
- How might living for divine approval change how you talk, what you think about, and how you sleep?

Enduring through trials by being steadfast involves embracing the priority of divine approval.

2) Eternal Rest

The second motivation that James identifies relates to the future. The text would have the followers of Jesus look to the reward that is promised them in eternity.

Do you know that the Bible often seeks to encourage obedience through the offering of reward? For example, Jesus talks about the value of private generosity because of God’s reward (Matt. 6:4). The sixth chapter of Luke affirms rejoicing in future reward because of persecution now (Luke 6:23). The writer of Hebrews cites the example of Moses who willingly embraced reproach by identifying with the Israelites because “he was looking to the reward” (Heb. 11:26).

The Bible acknowledges that we constantly live with the thought, “Is this worth it?” Every decision we make weighs the value of one thing against another. That’s why James talks about a reward. He’s reminding us what is really valuable. The blessing of steadfastness is a coming day of eternal rest.

James talks about the “crown of life” that is promised. The word “crown” might create an image of royalty and wealth. But it probably refers to the kind of honor an athlete receives after winning a race. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 9:25: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”

Revelation uses the same language and in the context of suffering:

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 (Rev. 2:10).

Notice how Revelation seeks to motivate faithfulness when facing trials. It is by reminding the followers of Jesus about the life to come. James and John seek to take the focus off the immediate, short-term, and painful circumstances by reminding them of their future eternal life.

One of my strategies for survival during this hard season is to schedule a call with a friend about every other week. In a call this past week, I was brought to tears when a friend reminded me about the good news about the gospel and said, “It won’t be long, brother.” In that short call, he helped me recall what is underneath my life and where all of this is headed. It helped me—at least for a day.

Can I do the same for you? Let me remind you, dear church, that despite all that’s wrong in the world and even with all that’s wrong with us—that God is for us! I want to remind you that God isn’t waiting for you “blow it” and mess up again. He sees you through the sacrifice of Jesus. He bought you. He rescued you. He’s got you. And can I just remind you that he’s working all this out in accordance with his perfect plan. We’ll see the result someday, and we’ll be so thankful for what he was doing in this season.

Listen to me, church: it won’t be long. There will be a day when this season of pain and controversy seems so far away. There will be a day when Jesus will make everything clear and right. For now, our simple aim is to keep loving him.

That’s what the text says – “...that which God has promised to those who love him.” Our aim is to so elevate our affections for Jesus that they become greater than our frustration or pain that we’re walking through. The solution is not to minimize the pain or deny how challenging life can be at times. Rather, the invitation is for us to look beyond the momentary challenges and consider Jesus.

This is the very argument that Peter uses:

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:8–9).

There is coming a day when our faith shall be sight. Until that day we are called to keep loving our Savior.

So, read the Bible so that you'll love Jesus. Spend time in prayer so that you'll love Jesus. Make worship a priority so that you'll love Jesus. Sing about him. Talk about him. Study him. Think about him. Let your words reflect him. Let your actions represent him. Let your generosity emulate him. Let everything you do be marked by the very aroma of him.

Do everything in remembrance of him, knowing that one day soon you'll be with him.

After crossing the finish line of a race, I love seeing the joyful relief as people find their friends and family, enjoy a banana, and drink Gatorade. In small pockets of people, there are exuberant conversations about the challenges of the race. There's a beautiful sense of community in the air.

The race is finished. The party's begun.

What a day it will be when the race of this life is over as we gather around the throne of Jesus. The race will have been finished. And the party will have begun.

So, let's ask God to help us remain steadfast and to keep loving Jesus all the way across the finish line.

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