

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 1:15–21

January 11, 2013

Introduction

As we consider the trials we face in life, James would have us look at our response to these events. In his letter, he has laid out several tests with which his readers are to test themselves. Those who pass these tests will have demonstrated a living faith. Likewise those who fail these tests are called to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). The first test involves a believer's response in trials. A living faith will have joy, seek wisdom, and persevere toward spiritual maturity in trials. But what is God's role in all of this? Last time we began looking at whether or not God tempts people. Is God tempting us to sin by bringing a trial? Or if we fail the test, has God *caused* us to sin!? James assures us that the answer to both of these questions is a resounding, "No!"

Test #1: A Living Faith and Trials (vv. 2–18)

The Question of Temptation (vv. 13–18)

Although God is the Author of every trial, He is not the source, nor is He responsible for the temptations that come with trials. Temptations ultimately come from within and promote sin and death.

The Process of Temptation (v. 15)

Ultimately, when we follow temptation into sin, it leads to death. The imagery in verse 15 is of the birth process. The thought here is that when temptation, sourced in our sinful disposition, provokes the exercise of our will, sin is birthed (or is the product). In other words, sin begins the moment our will is engaged in response to that temptation. Ultimately, sin grows into adulthood and brings death. Death means separation:

Physical Death: Separation of the soul from the body

Spiritual Death: Separation of a person from God

Second Death: Irrevocable separation of a person from God

This verse doesn't mean that any individual sin will cause you to die physically, although some do. Rather, it means that once sin has run its course with you, you wind up dead. Since all people are sinners (Rom 3:23), all three of these are inevitable unless God acts to bring salvation to a person.

The Source of Good Gifts (vv. 16–18)

In contrast to temptation, God brings good things to people — including trials! God provides trials to prove, refine, and strengthen us!

A Warning about Being Deceived (v. 16)

Notice that James is assuming his readers are believers (“brothers”) here. This warning applies to both what has preceded (the error of blaming God for falling into temptation) and what follows (the error of thinking that trials are bad).

God is the Source of Good Things (v. 17)

Every good and perfect gift comes from God. James describes Him as the Father of heavenly lights — the sun, moon, and stars. God made all of these and He has the power and ability to act. In this context, James is demonstrating that God has the power and ability to act in giving good gifts to people. Unlike these heavenly lights which move and make shifting shadows, God does not move. He is immutable (unchangeable). Because God doesn't change, neither does the fact that He is the source of good gifts. Consequently, He is *always* the source of good gifts, *never* temptation.

An Example of what Comes from God (v. 18)

A prime example of a good gift is salvation! James again picks up the language of the birth process to contrast what God does not bring forth (sin & death — v. 15) with what He does bring forth (the new birth).

There are four things we should note from this verse about salvation: (1) Its origin is in the will of God. Personal salvation is something that God willed. (2) He gives us the gift of salvation, causing us to be “brought forth” or born again. (3) The word of God is the means of salvation. God uses the message of the gospel to bring new life. And (4) the purpose of salvation is so that believers would be the first-fruits of God's redeemed creation (cf. Rom 8:19–23). One day all of creation will be redeemed, and we as believers are the first-fruits or first part of that process.

Just as salvation is a gift from God, so also are trials. As God refines us, we will reflect more of His glory in our lives, bear more fruit, and receive even greater reward!

Test #2: A Living Faith and Scripture (vv. 19–27)

James now gives us the second test of a living faith. Here he identifies a believer's three-fold responsibility with regard to God's word. Every believer has a responsibility to hear God's word, obey God's word, and demonstrate obedience in true religion.

The Responsibility to Hear God's Word (vv. 19–21)

We have noted that the word of God was the means of our regeneration (v. 18). What was communicated to us from Scripture was the means by which we were saved. Now we are called upon to *continue* receiving the word of God, which at the moment of salvation was implanted within us (v. 21).

Note on "The Word of God"

James was one of the first books of the New Testament to be written. As such, he must have been talking about the oral preaching of the gospel that the believers would have heard at their church meetings. They had a responsibility to hear and receive the word of God preached to them. But this doesn't mean we can exempt ourselves from applying these verses to the written word of God. If James' words applied then, how much more do they apply now that we have the Bible to read for ourselves? Think about the advancements in technology that have put the word of God right at your fingertips: the printing press, Bible computer programs, online sermons, devotionals, and commentaries! The word of God is more accessible than ever today. We just need to take hold of those opportunities.

The Command to Receive the Word (vv. 19–20)

When you read verse 19, it sounds a lot like a proverb. Proverbs are usually general truths which apply to many situations in life. But before jumping to this conclusion, consider the context. The word of God was mentioned in verse 18 and will appear again in verse 21. This is the context out of which we should interpret verses 19 and 20.

Swift to Hear

This conveys an eagerness, attentiveness, and excitement about hearing the truth of God's word. The opposite would be dull of hearing.

Slow to Speak

Someone who is slow to speak is able to restrain their mouth, and hold back a hasty judgment while the word of God has time to sink in. If we speak quickly about God's word, our own thoughts might cloud out God's thoughts. A heart that first meditates on and delights in God's word will be profited greatly (Psalm 1).

Slow to Wrath

There may be times where the preaching of God's word causes us to become angry. There may be some things we don't want to hear. But if that is the case, we need to stop and evaluate why that is. We need to ask ourselves if that is the right response to exhibit in that situation. Verse 20 explains that when anger quickly boils over, it is ungodly. This kind of anger also thwarts God's word from producing the kind of righteousness within us that God desires.

The Second Command to Receive the Word (v. 21)

Paul uses the language of putting off sin and putting on righteousness in Ephesians 4:20–24. James follows a similar line of thinking here.

Putting off Sin

Rather than responding in anger, we must put off sin. Sin in your life is not conducive to hearing the word of God. We all have moral filth and wickedness that needs to be rooted out. Even after salvation, there is still a lot of sin to remove. And it is imperative that we do it!

Receiving the Word

Contrary to a response of wrath, we must respond humbly and soberly to the word of God. A living faith will patiently receive the word, because it has already been implanted at salvation. The word is like a seed ready to sprout forth righteousness within us. Finally, notice that the *implanted* word is able to save your souls. This is not referring to regeneration (the initial moment of personal salvation). Rather, James is talking about the ongoing process by which God is making us more holy. We refer to this as *progressive sanctification*. Ultimately, this process will conclude with our final salvation (glorification). In this way, a believer can say that he *has been* saved (born again), *is being* saved (sanctification), and *will be* saved (glorification)!

~AWB