

# Endure Temptation

We learn from living and the words of those who love us. I grew up in a military family and did not actually know



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my dad until he came home after WW II. But I was nurtured by a devoted mother and loving grandparents and great aunts and uncles. Those formative years were set on a farm, the large city of Chicago, the tiny village of Penfield, the northern and southern U.S., and the Philippines. We moved an average of every two years, which meant constant change and challenges. Although I didn't "know" God, he was very much at work in my circumstances, drawing me closer as I faced the unpredictable nature of life. At seventeen I discovered that "every generous act of giving, and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (v. 17). My moment of "conversion" was very quiet but internally radical as I realized God loves me and life has a deeper meaning. James aptly describes the meaning of the "Christ life": "In fulfillment of his own purpose (God) gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (v. 18).

James the brother of Jesus, sometimes called "James the Just," was one of the first leaders in the Jerusalem church, who urged the inclusion of non-Jews in that congregation. His letter is written in a practical voice, calling for consistent Christian living in a world that entices us with easy answers and goals of personal success. Being the people of God requires focusing on living each day with an eye on the future God has prepared.

The letter opens with the clear directive: "whenever you face trials (circumstances or temptations) of any kind, consider it nothing but joy" (v. 2). Here is the "first step" approach to living as a Christian: determine your attitude from the beginning. My transitory childhood taught me that places and circumstances would always change, but I was the same person each day. The recipients of this letter were probably non-Jews living in Asia Minor. They were in the minority as followers of Christ, facing rejection and

even threats from society in general and probably from their own families. Faith is more than accepting religious ideas – faith is God as a way of life.

James reminds us that faith in Christ produces endurance, so "let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, and lacking in nothing" (v. 4). How does one become adept in athletics, skilled as an artist, capable as a teacher or proficient in any endeavor? You study and practice. Every challenge in life becomes an opportunity to learn and grow as a Christian – if you endure or keep on. The early church believed Jesus would return at any moment, which encouraged them to keep on. Are we anticipating that Christ will come and do we live accordingly?

As we look forward to our Lord's return we need to ask God for wisdom as James encourages: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you" (v. 5). There is only one condition on our asking: "ask in faith, never doubting" (v. 6). We are all influenced by the immediate, so we must remind ourselves often to trust God in our circumstances, because God has proven how much he loves us through the experience of the cross and resurrection. We live in an imperfect world and we are not perfect, but we can remind ourselves that God knows us and is willing to help us in our doubts and fears. God's grace is a work in progress. When Jesus' disciples were terrified by the storm on the Sea of Galilee Jesus calmed that storm. God can calm our waves of doubt if we ask him. "The double minded person" (v. 7) James describes knows what it means to live as a Christian, but chooses instead to live by the world's values and goals. We cannot serve God and mammon. We cannot have two masters. There is only one God.

We wonder if James' comments about "the rich being brought low" and "the believer who is lowly" hints at tensions between these two groups within the church. The text reminds us that all of us, advantaged or not by the world's standards, face the same challenges of "scorching heat" that "withers away" (vv. 10-11). What really matters is "the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (v. 12). God is

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not the author of temptation, "but one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it" (v. 4) ... "when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (v. 15). James uses a clever connection between the ideas of birth and death to emphasize the very critical challenges we face in life.

The immediate contrast to death is God's generous giving of life, the perfect gift ... from "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (v. 17). What God has done in Christ is unchanging and we can rest in the fact that "he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we could become a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (v. 18). Our spiritual birth is by faith in Christ and is contrasted with physical life and death in this material world.

James consistently contrasts life in this world with the new life in Christ. He counsels us to look beyond the limited values and methods of this world to the reality of God's grace. God has become one with us in Christ, showing us the reality of God's love beyond the transient promises of this earth. Jesus became one with us in this world, but opened before us so much more by his words, example and the cross.

The choice is yours to believe, and to how you will live every day. You will face challenges and tragedy. Will you choose to live in the promises of God's love and grace or in the confusion of the world's ideas of worth and meaning?

Back to my childhood lessons: Mother told me early on that we would be moving every couple of years because of dad's military assignments. She offered a simple word of wisdom: "Michael, you may not be happy where we are living, but remember we won't be there long and you can get through it and learn some valuable lessons until the next assignment." There was only one place where I was unhappy, but it was overshadowed by the experiences and excitement of the other places we lived. Along the way God was at work in the challenges and people I met, leading me to discover a new life in his Son. Life, the enduring of temptations and challenges, can deepen your faith and bless you in unexpected ways.

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