

RULE # 3 FOR TRIALS: SAY “BETTER!”

James 1:9–18

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The letter of James. We’re continuing a series of verses that deal with trials. After today, James is going to switch back and get into some other subjects. But today, we’re still on the issue of rules for facing trials.

“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away, even while he goes about his business. 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. When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:9–18, NIV).

These first eighteen verses in James deal with trial, and we’ve attempted to give several rules for facing trials as a summary of each message. The first rule for trials is: Say “Welcome.” Count it all joy when you face trials of many colors. Rule number two: Say “Help!” If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God who gives liberally and doesn’t chew you out. Rule number three: Say

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“Better.” I’m going to emerge from this, because of God’s help, better and stronger. I will be a richer person, healthier person, a more vibrant person after I have gone through the trial than when I entered it. Say, “Better.”

When I visit a person in the hospital, invariably I say, as a greeting, “How are you today?” It’s obvious that they have every right to come back to me and say, “Pastor, if we were doing fine, we wouldn’t be in the hospital—stupid!” But I’m saying, “How are you?” hoping to hear them say back to me, which they inevitably do, “Better!” Even if they’re worse. “Better”—it’s a word we like to hear.

James is reminding us that when it’s all said and done, it will be better if our faith is in Him. That is the bottom line of life. Better.

There are some reasons in this passage we have read today that James advances to motivate us to say, “Better.” Three things he tells us to encourage us to say, “Better” in life.

I. The first thing he does for us is remind us, in verses 9–12, to look at how we are going to end up as Christians.

How is it all going to end? He says, “If you will look at the end and see what’s out there, down the road, ahead of you, you’ll be able to say of life, ‘Better.’”

He begins this section by making the contrast between the poor brother in humble circumstances and the person who is rich. We do this verse injustice if we think this verse is talking about money, about the money-poor and the money-rich. Since James is the younger earthly brother of Jesus, he is familiar of course with what Jesus taught in His teaching. In Luke 6, the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus himself makes the clear distinction of what He means by richness and poorness when He says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, but woe to those who are rich. Blessed are those who mourn...woe to those who laugh” (Luke 6:20–21). He talking about persons who are

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spiritually poor—those who place themselves in a position of complete dependence upon God and say, “I have absolutely nothing with which to become a child of God or have eternal life. I take my stand before God as a pauper.” In contrast with those who say, “I’ve got it all together now, and I have everything I need and I don’t need God’s help.” James is saying, “The trial may bring us to a position of poverty.”

And it may be more than financial poverty. Maybe the trial is such that we’re looking at ourselves as have-nots and other people as haves. Maybe it is a financial trial. We have not and we look at the person who has. Or maybe it’s a health trial, we don’t have health and we’re sick and the other person has health, whether they’re a Christian or a non-Christian. Or maybe you’re single and want to be married. You look at a happily married couple and say, “They’re the haves and I’m the have-not.” Or maybe you’re married and not happy and you look at a single who appears to be happy. And you’re the have-not and they’re the have. Maybe you’re a couple and you don’t have a child and you want a child. You’re the have-not.

All these situations speak of going through difficult circumstances. It so often appears, when we’re going through trials and we’re the poor person in the trial, that other people are sleek and fat and untroubled. We can become envious. But in these adversities of life, what is to be our attitude? Again, we’re to look at the end. James says, “The brother in humble circumstance should take pride in his high position” (James 1:9). That is to say, in going through trials, instead of simply focusing on all the things that are going wrong, we’re to look at the things we have. We’re to look at our high position, and the high position is that we have been made a son or a daughter of God. We’ve been made an heir of Christ Jesus. We’ve been given a name. And we’ve been declared God’s own. And we have everlasting life prepared for us. And we have life in the present.

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All that is very real. Sometimes, we let our religious faith be guided too much by our feelings. God is present, not because we ask Him to help us to feel His presence. God is present because He said in His Word, “Wherever two or three of you are gathered together in My name I am in the midst” (Matthew 18:20). So it isn’t my feelings that create His presence. It’s the reality of His Word that creates His presence.

That’s essentially what James is saying, “When we’re in trial, if you’re down-and-out and run down on your luck, instead of just concentrating on all the things that are going wrong, take pride in your high position. You’re born again. You’re called to be a son or daughter of God. He’s blessed you with many blessings in life.” And on the other hand, if you’ve got it all together and you’re saying, “Everything is hunky-dory in my life and I don’t need a thing,” then you’re not to concentrate on your high position, but instead rejoice in your low position. What is your low position? To remember that which Jesus Christ has saved you from and brought you up out of.

Let him who is down rejoice and boast and let him who is up think of how God has brought him or her from the depths.

Someone has said that we are to remember that when we die and are without Christ, we will leave our riches. But if we are in Christ, when we die, we’re going to our riches. Consider the end, James says, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life” (James 1:12).

When he has stood the test. “Blessed.” James is saying, “If you’re going through trial, just remember the end of the road—stand, stand in Christ—ahead of you is the crown of life.”

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Isn't it interesting that there may be some trials in life that never have a this-world resolution? We may never, in the physical bodies that we have, get out of the trial, or we may never know why it was or what was going on in it. But we may have to wait until we've got the crown of life. "When he has stood the test, he receives the crown of life." The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk had a marvelous experience. God told him that he would not live long enough to see God straighten up the mess that his country was in. And that, for a period of time, even in his lifetime, it would look like God was doing the wrong thing and wasn't acting to correct the injustice. But he said to Habakkuk, "Don't worry about that. I will, in My time, straighten it all up. But you may die before that happens. In the meantime, the righteous live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). That is to say, you must have faith in God's central goodness. "As you go through times of perplexity, know that I will, in My time, have it all straight."

This is what James is telling us. When we've stood the trial—the crown of life! The crown meant a laurel wreath. It's not a tiara, like the Queen of England wears. This is just the laurel wreath that the bride wore on her wedding day, or a runner in the Olympic Games, or other games when he won the race, they gave him the laurel wreath. A crown. Or, a person was being honored at a banquet and he was given the crown to show honor and dignity. Or maybe even when visiting royalty came, he might have that placed upon his head to show royalty.

The Lord is telling us, in His Word, that in that day, we're all going to have that aspect to our personality which brings out and illustrates all the festive joy, all the victory, all the honor and dignity and all the royalty that is really flowing through us. The crown of life. It's going to be better—as you look down the road at how it's all going to end.

II. The second motivation that James gives us for saying the word “better” is that we're to look at where a flight from responsibility will lead us.

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If we become irresponsible as we face our trials, things will not be better. So he is saying to us, “Now in your trials don’t begin thinking and acting irresponsibly and wrongfully and sinfully.”

James recognizes that the trial can become a temptation. In fact, it’s interesting that the word “temptation” that is used in verse 13 is the same word in the Greek that is used and translated as “trial” in verse 2. In English, we have the two different words, “trial” and “temptation.”

“Temptation” has a more sinister sound to it. “Trial” is more morally neutral.

There are some who look at James 1:13, “No one should say ‘God is tempting me,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil nor does he tempt anyone,” and ask, “Does the Scripture here have an inherent contradiction?” Back in Genesis 22:1, it says, “And the Lord God did tempt [or test] Abraham.” So how can James say God doesn’t tempt people when He tested Abraham?

The difference has to do with what this word “test” involved. Whenever the verb for testing is used of God, it always has the connotation to it as the test, in which one will emerge successfully. As you look at any passage in the Bible where it says that God tested somebody, the conclusion that is reached is that the person stood the test. The metal, their true metal of faith was proven—like Abraham. But there is also an evil force, both external (the devil), and internal (our evil desires), that pull us down in that test. God is never using the test to pull us down. He’s not sending the test. He’s not the author of the test that will pull us down into evil. He is instead seeking to give us His help to overcome the test and to be strong.

Therefore, we are not to blame God in our trial. Also, I might add, that it would probably be a good idea at times not to blame the devil. Flip Wilson immortalized the phrase “The devil made me do it.” Geraldine, one of his characters, would say it. But James doesn’t even blame the devil here. He says the blame lies within our own evil desires, not our environment, not our family, not the devil, not society—our own evil desires. Our thought life in trial can become warped and

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twisted, and if it becomes warped and twisted and irresponsible, it will produce actions that give birth to death. Sin, when it is conceived, brings forth death.

When a child is conceived and is brought forth, it is living. Here is an analogy that really reverses that and says that when you are at a gestation time of the conception of sin, when it is delivered—that is, when the thought, the attitude is carried through to its conclusion—it’s an action. When the thought is born and acted out, it results in death.

So here is the only biblical example I know of that makes a case for abortion. If you have ideas that are unlike God and have attitudes that are wrong, while they are attempting to gestate and conceive in you, abort them—so that they are not given birth in the form of wrong actions. If they come forth into life, those sinful actions will wind up destroying us, proving to be deadly.

I have observed sometimes in the body of Christ that our temptations are not always sexual, many times they’re on a spiritual level, and they have to do with attitudes towards others in the body of Christ. During my course of years in the ministry, I have seen the productivity of servants of the Lord sometimes destroyed because the persons sometimes let wrong ideas be birthed in their life, which produce bad actions.

For example, what happens if you’re faithfully serving the church or serving in the body of Christ and maybe you don’t feel like people have been thanking you? Or noticing you? Or appreciating you? Or stroking you? That becomes a trial to you. You say, “Why should I do what I’m doing? Nobody ever seems to appreciate it. Nobody notices it. I think I’ll drop out for a few weeks and see if anybody calls me.” Then, if nobody calls, that’s all the more hurtful. We allow those attitudes to germinate in our lives till finally it moves us away completely, not only from the people of God, but it moves us away from God himself. Instead of aborting those attitudes,

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which are going to result in our destruction, we let them grow; when we need to kill them with a different kind of action, which says, “Return good for evil” (Romans 12:21).

If you’re not being noticed and you’re not being said “Thank you” to, do you know how to really correct that? Look at three to five people that have blessed and touched your life and go tell them thanks for how they’ve helped you. If no one is calling you and saying, “I notice you. I love you,” the way to correct that attitude that tends to produce negativity in our heart, is to reach out and get a hold of three to five people that you maybe haven’t noticed, and call them. Say those things when they are going to produce death in your life and make you unproductive to God. That’s really what James is saying. “Don’t take flight from responsibility, for when desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin and sin, when it’s full-grown, gives birth to death.” That’s the end for us when evil is allowed to germinate in our life.

III. The third thing that James is saying to us about the word “better” is, look at what God is sending you in the trial.

Not only look at the end. Not only look at what irresponsibility is going to cost you. But look at what God is sending you in the trial. “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:16–17). What James is really saying is that, in the midst of your trial, God is sending you good and perfect gifts. How is that?

James is not saying, “Call everything that happens in your life ‘good’ and ‘perfect.’ Just use a different name for it.” I am not going to be a person who, when the hammer hits my thumb, is going to look up and say, “O, thank You, Lord, for helping me miss the nail today and for the wonderful sensation that my thumb now feels. Every blow is a perfect gift from God.” No. James

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is not saying to play that kind of idiot mental game. He is saying, however, that when these bombs are dropping on your life, God’s also parachuting down some good and perfect gifts. They’re landing in the same field. Our problem, when we’re going through the adversities, is that sometimes all we see are the bombs, and we don’t immediately spot the gifts that are coming down. But they are coming down.

As we persevere through the trial, we will see what special and wonderful things God is allowing inside of us, sometimes externally good things as well. Not just internal, but external—things that are happening to us. We are finding, as we go through the trial, that what God gives us as His good and perfect gifts begins to dominate and make it possible to get through the trial. God is causing His goodness and His perception in us—we’re then becoming the cream of the crop, the firstfruits. God is making us the cream of the crop and is showing us to everybody. He’s saying, “Look at what My Word is birthing in them.” He’s setting us as a display of His goodness and of His gifts to those who know Him not.

That’s a hard thing to swallow. It’s hard for me to swallow at times. When I’m going through pain, all I want to do is hurt. Sometimes the last thing I want is the Word of the Lord to come at me at a level that says, “Look at the other side.”

There are times in life when each of us may feel absolutely pressed to the wall. Yet God is summoning us up to take another step and get on with life and not get stuck and not become bitter. O God, give me strength one more time!

James says, “He chose to give us birth by the word of truth that we might be a kind of cream of the crop of all he’s created” (James 1:18). We’re always touching lives. Whatever our response to trial is, we’re always touching people. We’re touching our children. They’re seeing how we’re responding. They’re seeing if we’re faking out or not. They see if we’re being morally true or

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morally untrue. Whether we're being spiritually true or not. Our family and friends see it. We're influencing people. God says in your trial, "I've got you as the cream of the crop. The best and first of the harvest. I'm demonstrating My power in your life. So look around. I'm putting some good and perfect gifts there. I know there's a lot on the landscape of your life that isn't good and perfect, but I'm putting some things that are good and perfect. Maybe they're only in seed form. But they're there. They're going to grow up and they're going to produce life in you."

Rule number three for trials: say "Better." We are on display as God's samples in the world, we are not running from pain and trial. We know that in everything it will be better. We are going to stand the test and receive the crown of life.

Closing Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we're very conscious of the fact that there may be friends here today who are going through a particularly painful moment in their life. Your Word has come now.

Sometimes, Lord, our own internal life is like a dried-out, baked-up piece of ground that's sat under the hot sun for too long. If a heavy rain comes down, it's going to pour right on past us. But it doesn't get through to us. We're too dry. It doesn't soak. It doesn't permeate. But Lord, I just sense, in this context that we're in today, that we're just slowly opening Your Word, and Your Word comes—by the ministry of the Holy Spirit—as a gentle rain in our life. Giving us time to take it in, to let it perch down to the deeper inner levels of our life, where the pain is the greatest. You're dropping this little word, three little words, into our hearts about our trial—"welcome," "help," better." You're ministering Your healing to us. Thank You, Lord, that You've not left us alone in trial. But that You're with us. In this moment in our life, You are birthing the Word of truth in us and we're being set aside as the cream of the crop. Thank You for Your help. Thank You for the good gifts. It's so easy to chafe at all the restraints and the

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places that are rubbing us raw and proving difficult for us to cope with in a trial. Thank You for this moment of peace in You, in which we can thank You for the good You’re doing, for the wonderful gifts that give us the strength to stand, persevere, and one day, in Your presence, receive the crown of life. Thank You, Lord. Thank You for comforting each of us. For the ministry of Your Holy Spirit who is so faithful to us. In Your name. Amen.