

JAMES 1:12
THE CROWN OF LIFE

“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.”¹

It is difficult, some might even think it impossible, to expect that Christians can be steadfast in a world thoroughly schooled in expectations of instant gratification. We Canadians know what we want, and we want it *now*! We communicate instantaneously with people living on the other side of the world, eat meals prepared minutes, watch cultural events as they happen, and travel at speeds that would have been unimaginable scant years ago. If the pace of modern life were not enough to lead us to expect instant gratification, you need only remember that we live in a culture in which people expect they will never experience sorrow or hardship, and a culture in which each person is schooled to expect to enjoy full satisfaction in every facet of life.

There is no personal responsibility for the happiness anticipated. Government will rescue the negligent of society; modern medicine will deliver us from our own excesses; and our spouses are responsible to make us happy. Actually, modern couples appear to change spouses more frequently than a liberal politician changes his mind. Nevertheless, despite all evidence to the contrary, our contemporaries appear to believe that they are guaranteed life, liberty and happiness.

If you are a Christian, it is certain that you will be called to withstand trials, both physical and spiritual. Trials and trouble come to every life—none are exempt. James writes his letter in great measure to teach Christians how to stand fast in the midst of trial. The Christian life is not, however, all about trouble and trial. God takes note of our testing, and He is pledged to use the adverse winds of trial for our good and for His glory. Then, when the trials are finished, God will demonstrate His pleasure with us through giving us His reward for standing fast throughout the trial. However, James informs us that there is a blessing for having stood fast now.

BLESSING NOW — “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life.” James has been writing to Christians who paid an awful price to follow Yeshua Ha’Mashiach. We have seen that these early Christians were imprisoned because of their faith; they were dispossessed of their goods, turned out of their homes, beaten and threatened, and in some cases, even killed. There is no doubt that they were discouraged, traumatised and that they lived in fear. James wrote to encourage them to stand firm.

Already, in the few short verses we have studied, James has encouraged Christians by warning them that they will be tested because of their Faith. This has never changed, though modern Christians reject the concept of suffering because of their Faith. Nevertheless, James urged those so tested because of their Faith to rejoice in the knowledge that God will not permit them to experience more testing than they can stand.

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When in the midst of testing, James instructs the people of God to seek wisdom, looking forward to the work that God is performing even during the testing they are called to endure. The child of God, passing through testing, is being matured. God is revealing the perfection of His work in the life of the one experiencing trials.

What is important for us to see is that enduring testing assures blessing for the child of God. There is considerable misunderstanding concerning testing. Many people assume that Christians are some sort of glorified wimps, incapable of defending themselves from assault or injury. The assumption is that Christians will never respond to provocation. Review of the Word of God reveals quite a different perspective.

First of all, the child of God is taught to defend himself against unwarranted personal assault. When Jesus was preparing His disciples for His exodus, He taught them, “Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.” Responding to his instruction, the disciples said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” Jesus said, “It is enough” [LUKE 22:36-38].

Up to this point in their ministry, the disciples have not had to worry about any provision—the Master had provided all that they needed. Now, facing the cross, Jesus is preparing them to realise that they must assume responsibility for provisions and protection. Jesus was not telling the disciples to secure a battle sword [*rhomphaia*], but a smaller sword, such as men frequently carried for self-defence [*máchaira*]. The rules were changing, and the disciples, instead of being loved because of their association with the Master, would face hostility. Therefore, to protect themselves from assault simply because they existed, they must be prepared to defend themselves.

The texts that are often cited that speak of pacifism may convey something quite different from passive acceptance of brutality. Jesus did say, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He added to that benediction this promise, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” [MATTHEW 5:10-12].

The persecution in view in this saying is persecution “for righteousness’ sake.” In other words, Jesus is speaking of persecution that occurs because one is a Christian; this is not a generalised saying that the child of God must submit to every bully or refuse to protect his family because they “cannot fight.” The child of God can take comfort in the knowledge that they stand in good company when they are tormented because of their relationship to the Master.

Jesus also said, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” [MATTHEW 10:23]. Again, the setting is the child of God sent out “as sheep in the midst of wolves” [MATTHEW 10:16]. There, the child of God is to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” The persecution in view is the result of their obedience to the Master.

Perhaps one of the best known, certainly one of the most commonly quoted sayings of the Master concerning persecution, is found in MATTHEW 5:39. “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” As a general principle, this will apply in the Kingdom. However, we must remember that Paul was prepared to surrender those who did him wrong to the Lord, knowing that they would face harsh retribution [see 2 TIMOTHY 4:14].

I recall the account of a fellow who lived in Dallas many years ago. He had been a rough fellow, a hard drinker who was ready to fight at the drop of a hat. He was converted to the Faith, however, and made very effort to live a godly life. One day, walking past one of his former haunts, a former companion hailed him. In the bar, the erstwhile friend said, "I hear you got religion."

"Yes," the young believer replied, "I have become a Christian."

"I hear you don't live as you once did," said the man's interlocutor.

"Yes, that is true. I have given up my old habits," responded the new believer.

"Well," said the man who had called to him, "here is a drink for you," setting a glass of beer in front of him.

The young believer declined the offer, stating that he did not wish to return to what he had once done as it was hurtful and he would not handle such freedom well. With that, the tormentor threw the beer into the new Christian's face. "Doesn't that make you mad?" asked the heckler.

"No," replied the young Christian in measured tones.

"Well," said the man baiting him, "how does this strike you?" And he hit him in the face, knocking him backwards. The fellow got up and said he wasn't angry. His persecutor struck him again on the other cheek, staggering the man. When he had regained his composure, he doubled his fist and beat the snot out of the man who had tested him so mercilessly.

As he stood over his tormentor, who was now cowering on the ground, he said, "Jesus told me to turn the other cheek; He didn't tell me what to do then."

I respect anyone who truly holds to pacifistic views, as should each true Baptist. However, I find that often such views are held selectively. In the context of Jesus' saying in each of these instances, He is saying that disciples should not resist persecution when it comes "for righteousness' sake." In other words, when disciples are persecuted because of their Faith, they must accept that God has permitted such for His own purposes. However, disciples are not obligated to suffer simply because some cretin or troglodyte has decided that it would be fun to injure the Christian. We have no biblical obligation to let our family be injured or to suffer personal injury simply because we are Christians. Jesus spoke with what can only be deemed approval of "a strong man, fully armed" who "guards his own palace" [LUKE 11:21]. Those whom James addressed were being persecuted because of their Faith; they were not suffering simply to suffer.

Yet, it remains that when the child of God is persecuted because of his or her relationship to the Master, they may be assured of God's promise that they will be rewarded when they endure manfully and gracefully. Suffering because of the Faith, God promises that the child of God is blessed now. There is a sense of happiness because the one persecuted knows that it is for no other reason that he is suffering than his relationship to the Risen Son of God. The persecution is because of the individual's right relationship to the Son of God.

We live in a world in which we have unconsciously absorbed the error that if we are Christians, we will never experience hardship. Jesus pronounced a sobering woe to those who never experience opposition. In LUKE 6:26, the Master is recorded as saying, "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." James iterates this teaching when he asks professed Christians, "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God" [JAMES 4:4]?

Jesus, anticipating the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles, said, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” [JOHN 15:19]. Paul cautioned young Christians, “that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God” [ACTS 14:22]. Jesus was quite definite when He taught disciples, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” [JOHN 16:33].

The knowledge that the child of God is doing the will of God and that the child of God is standing firm in the face of opposition brings joy. Playing football as a teenager, I was filled with joy despite the fatigue of a strenuous game, knowing that I had stood my ground and helped the team win the game. The fatigue was real, but the knowledge that I had done what I was appointed to do was sufficient reward to make me happy. Likewise, a Marine that has seen the elephant, stood in combat and performed his duties, will rejoice in the knowledge that he has stood the test, though the cost may be great. Similarly, the child of God is blessed—filled with joy—in the knowledge that he or she has not, like seed planted on rocky ground, fallen away because of tribulation or persecution [see MATTHEW 13:19, 20].

Blessed now in the knowledge that he has stood firm, the child of God is also blessed because the Master has promised that the one standing firm will receive “the crown of life.” The same phrase occurs in REVELATION 2:10, where it appears in a similar context. As result standing firm in the face of tribulation, the persecuted child of God is promised “the crown of life.” “Life” in this phrase, is what linguists recognise as the *genitive of apposition*; that is, life is the crown that is promised. Neither love nor faith wins for us eternal life, yet God is pledged to reward those who love Him and who faithfully endure opposition because of their faith; and the reward promised is real life. This is not so much a reward deferred until some unseen future date; but it is rather a reward that is promised for all who reveal the effective work of the Spirit of God through standing firm in the tests of life.

Love for God is obedient love. Moreover, love for God leads the child of God to stand firm in trials. Scripture is replete with statements that remind us of the love God has for His people [e.g. ROMANS 8:37; EPHESIANS 2:4; 1 THESSALONIANS 1:4; 1 JOHN 4:7–10]; however, neglected among modern Christians is the teaching of the Word that those who love God obey Him. John states this as clearly, as does James, when he writes, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments” [1 JOHN 5:2].

What James presents is a joyous circle in that the child of God, loving God and seeking to honour Him through growing through the adversities faced in life, grows ever deeper in love with the Master. The more difficult the testing in which the believer stands firm, the greater the intensity of life experienced. The greater the intensity of life, the deeper the love. All this is marks an individual as mature.

I recall listening to a man who had suffered greatly because of his faith during the Cultural Revolution precipitated by the Red Guards in Communist China during the dying days of the reign of Mao Tse-Tung. What struck me as he spoke was the joy of life this man exuded, and the contentment with what God had entrusted him. He was unlike the American audience to which he spoke. I could only pray that he would not be consumed with the spirit of materialism that had infected his listeners to greater or lesser degree. For were he to do so, he would be the poorer for the exchange.

STANDING THE TEST — “When he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” Remember the context of this macarism which James pronounces. The brother of our Lord is urging his readers to permit the Master to work in their lives, making them mature and complete as they pass through the trials associated with the Christian life. In fact, James teaches that only by passing through such trials will the child of God have any hope of becoming mature.

Though the test may be physical, or perhaps fiscal, the underlying challenge is always spiritual. The child of God is being tested because he or she is a child of the Living God, and therefore, the quality of faith of believer is challenged. God has permitted the testing to reveal the perfection of His work in the life of the believer.

As the Apostle Peter introduced his First Epistle, he writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 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 PETER 1:3-9].

Notice in particular the seventh verse. The “tested genuineness of your faith” is “more precious than gold.” God permits His children to be tested in order to reveal the perfection of His work in their lives. God, speaking through His prophet writes of the strange work He performs in the life of His child

“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.
For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it.”

[ISAIAH 48:10, 11a]

The Psalmist echoes that knowledge when he writes:

“You, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.”

[PSALM 66:10]

The maturing child of God can say, as did Job:

“[God] knows the way that I take;
when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.”

[JOB 23:10]

I do not know the precise trial you are experiencing. For some of you, it is a call to remain faithful despite painful physical conditions that drain your energy and weary your soul. Well-meaning friends, and perhaps even family members, urge you, as did Job's wife, to "Curse God and die" [see **JOB 2:9**]. You understand that your painful affliction is more than a mere inconvenience; it is an opportunity to grow toward maturity in Christ, honouring God as you struggle against discouragement and disappointment.

Others struggle against sorrow that is almost unimaginable. Perhaps it is the disappointment of children that have rejected your faith, embracing attitudes that grieve you beyond anything you could ever have thought possible. It would be so easy to reject your child, were it not for the fact that you cannot deny the love that God has given you. When our son was sentenced, a well meaning, though self-serving, pastor urged me to reject him and count him as dead. How could I deny the lad who had given me such joy for so many years? God would not permit me to turn my back on my own son, any more than He would have turned His back on me because I am a sinner.

Perhaps others struggle against besetting sin that threatens to drag you down momentarily. You wonder if others would accept you were they to know the doubts and the depth of evil that bubbles to the surface of your life from time-to-time. Perhaps some individuals even know the sins you have yet to conquer, and they taunt you because you are not all that you wish you were or all that you yet hope to be.

Recently, I listened again to a sermon by the late W. A. Criswell, my pastor for a delightful period in Dallas. He told how he gave an invitation one Sunday morning at First Church in Dallas. At the invitation, many people responded, among them, a young woman who came to place her life in the church by confession of faith and baptism.

As the invitation continued, the young woman took a seat at the front, and began to weep. She wept, crying piteously. The Pastor, seeing her tears, asked the Music Minister to continue the invitation while he sat by the young woman to ask the reason for her tears. She responded immediately to his presence and said, "Oh, Pastor, I have been coming to this church for some weeks. My little girl is four-years old and in the nursery. I want her to have a life I have not had. You see this form I filled out? It says my name is Mrs. I wear a ring on my finger, telling the world that I am married; but, I am not married. I wear that ring so I will not be embarrassed in the presence of these good people. You see, I am a prostitute. But sitting in these services, I have become a Christian. I believe in Jesus and I want to serve Him. As you spoke just now, I thought, 'If these people knew who I am and know what I have done, they would not let me come here.' Pastor, I have made a mistake. I'll leave so that I don't embarrass you and so that I don't make people uncomfortable."

Dr. Criswell said to that young woman, "You know why you are crying? It is the Spirit of God! He has convicted you, and He is drawing you to a pure life in the Saviour. You come, dear woman. You come, and welcome into the Family of God."

Dear people, I am not all that I want to be. Neither am I all that I anticipate I shall yet be. But, praise God, I am not what I used to be. I struggle against sin, and I am not always successful. However, God continues to stand with me; and God continues to stand with you as you struggle against your besetting sin. Doubts may assail your soul, but you continue to look to the Saviour and trust Him regardless of the darkness of soul. Troubles threaten to overwhelm you, but you refuse to cease serving Him. You have stumbled, but you have not quit. You are standing the test.

I am encouraged whenever I read again the words the Apostle wrote to the Corinthian Christians. “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:7-12].

Whatever the test you are experiencing, you need to know that as you remain steadfast, you will grow stronger in faith and stronger in your ability to stand firm in the Faith of Christ Jesus your Lord. Know that because you are honouring the Master through standing firm, He will honour you with the life that is truly life.

THE CROWN OF LIFE — “He will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” There is a future component in the promise of the Master. Indeed, all that God has promised yet awaits those who love Him. Paul was undoubtedly correct when he said, “Things that no eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, are the things God has prepared for those who love him” [1 CORINTHIANS 2:9, NET BIBLE]. However, there is promised blessing for the one who stands firm now. That blessing is real life.

I have already alluded to the fact that “the crown of life” speaks of life as God meant us to have. Eternal life is not some commodity that is held out for the distant future; eternal life is a new quality of life possessed by each redeemed individual. However, the realisation of the importance of that eternal life is not always apparent. This is what I mean. When you first came to faith, the world seemed somehow changed. It was not so much that the grass was actually greener nor the sky bluer, but it was that your perception was transformed. You saw things as you have never seen them before.

However, as time passed and you discovered that not everyone was thrilled with your newfound life, you began to change. Perhaps it was imperceptible at first, but you slowly reverted to a kind of cynicism, or perhaps it was dullness or a sense of lethargy as you accommodated the views of the world. You saw other, older Christians who were senescent in their faith, making no progress toward maturity; you did not want to rock the boat. You learned to be careful not to upset those who were “older in the Faith.” After all, they presented themselves as “experts” in the Christian life because of their years.

I listened in dismay as a pastor told a new convert responding to an invitation in a citywide crusade that he would get over the excitement that he felt at that moment. I interjected, “Don’t listen to him! Don’t listen to him! He is dead. You should not ever get over the excitement because you have received Jesus as Lord. You should never cease rejoicing because He is alive and has given you new life.” That pastor, though unappreciative of my statement, nevertheless slunk away in silence. I can only hope that he did not speak to the young man after that encounter.

Moving forward on the path of life, encountering trials that test the quality of your faith, you will discover a growing sense of life. You begin to recapture the excitement you first had—not as an explosive flash such as you knew at first, but rather as a steadily burning glow that gives light and warmth to your life. As you stand firm in this Faith, Christ grows more real. The struggles do not necessarily diminish, but each trial becomes an opportunity to honour the Lord instead of a threat of defeat for you.

You can return to the staid, dull, drab life you first knew as a Christian, but you will not be able to speak of that type of existence as “the crown of life.” It grieves me to witness youth dismissing the Christian Faith as boring. We have trained our youth to look for something exciting, and they certainly don’t see the monotonous routine their parents call “the Faith” as exciting. Living a life that is indistinguishable from the world about us and trying to work up excitement on Sunday is not very exciting, either for the youth or for their parents. However, the youth are not sophisticated enough to act as though such hypocrisy were normal, so they are bored.

Parents, desperate to do something to entice their children to adopt their own temporary form of religious duty, clamour for the church to do something—anything. So, congregations invent endless rounds of events that parade as youth ministries, and the kids are entertained to death. However, neither these children nor their parents ever witness the excitement that impelled the first disciples to “turn the world upside down” [see **ACTS 17:6**]. Then, when the youths are old enough to ignore their parents, they stay home and have nothing more to do with church. Honestly, can we blame them?

Church should be exciting and the Christian life should be daring and challenging. Whenever you come into the church, you should be required to put on a crash helmet. The pews should have safety belts. There should be a vibrant anticipation that something momentous will take place whenever the people of God gather. That should be the mark of the Faith. This, nothing less than such excitement, reveals “the crown of life” among the people of God. That life is attained through the trials that accompany growth.

I have witnessed such churches on a couple of occasions. I recall one congregation that met week-by-week, and you never knew what might take place on a Sunday morning. We witnessed the salvation of prostitutes and drug addicts, the transformation of lives that had been ruined by sin, and Christians built up in the Faith. We also saw the struggles of those trying to resist evil and the mutual encouragement offered by others who had passed through similar trials in the past. There was power in the services—power that grew out of prayer meetings and the teaching of the Word. Those taught in the Word spoke to their neighbours, to their colleagues, to their family and friends, and each week we witnessed the salvation of souls won through the witness of the people of the congregation. That could happen here, and it should happen here.

We can do church like it has always been done in our memories, and we will have precisely what we have always witnessed. We can sing a few songs, say a few prayers, listen to a sermon of extended length, and then go home to continue living as we have always lived. However, none of us would dare speak of that as “real life.” As we endeavour to grow this church, our constant prayer should be, not for safety, but for God to work in such a way that we are made alive. We should pray that He will do something different as we meet, that He will reveal Himself in power among us as we worship.

I read the account of those first Christians, and I find myself crying out, “Lord, do it again.” I read the account of Peter and John when they were haled before the Council, and I read of the events that followed as they reported to the church all that had happened. “When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and [prayed]... And when [the Christians] had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” [**ACTS 4:23-31**].

Some of you are wondering if a new congregation is where you should be. If you want safety and comfort, this is not the place for you. Go back to where you came from. Leave here, and look for safety and comfort elsewhere. Here, you will find work hard, genuine spiritual battles and opposition from friends and family. Here, you will be called to endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. However, if you are seeking the power of God to work through you in ways you have never witnessed before, then this is the place you should be. We call upon those who are led by the Spirit of God to place their lives with us. Without apology, we call on those who have yet to place faith in the Living Son of God to do so without delay. We call on those who have never followed Him in obedience to His command to be baptised since believing to do so without delay.

The Word of God is quite clear in calling us to life when it says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That Word continues by promising that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Come, confess faith in the Risen, Living Son of God today. Come, following Him in believer’s baptism as He has commanded. Come, placing your life in the fellowship of this church, taking your place here with people seeking “crown of life.” Come, and angels attend you in the way. Amen.