

Bethel Fellowship Church, Minneota, MN
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December 14, 2025

Introduction¹

Many of you know someone — or know about someone — who once professed to have faith in Jesus but now says he doesn't believe in him. I once visited a website with stories written by people like that. I wanted to read their stories in their own words, because I wanted to know what had happened to each of them. Some of them said they didn't believe in God at all any more. Some of them said they hated God.

And over and over, do you know what I saw? Trials. Hardships. Some of them got sick, but God didn't cure them. Some of them had loved ones die, even after they prayed to God to let them live. Some of them lost their jobs. Trials like these were the number one reason for these people "losing their faith" in God, as they put it.

A better way to put it is that these trials tested them and showed what they truly believed. That's what trials do. They show what a person is made of. Trials reveal what you truly believe, the way those special pens reveal what a \$20 bill is truly made of.

You know what pens I'm talking about? If you've ever tried paying for something with a \$20 bill, you may have seen one of these special anti-counterfeit pens. The cashier takes out a special pen and tries to mark the bill with it. Those pens have an iodine solution in them. If it's a real \$20 bill, nothing will happen because iodine doesn't react with the fibers in real \$20 bills. But if it's a fake \$20 bill that somebody printed on their color printer, the starch in the paper will react with the iodine solution and you will see an ugly black stain where the pen was. The black mark shows it's a counterfeit. It looks like a \$20 bill, but it's fake.

The trials that came upon each of these people who wrote their stories on the Internet showed that they weren't real Christians in the first place. They were fakes. Instead of coming through the trial shining as bright as cities on a hill, an ugly black stain of unbelief showed through.

Some of you have gone through terrible trials. Some of you haven't. But all of you have been tested in some way. From the cruel persecution of Emperor Nero to the daily temptations of life, Christians have always been tested in some way. How do you respond when you are tested? Do you remain steadfast? James says:

James 1:12 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.

Back in vv. 2–4, James said we should rejoice when we "meet trials of various kinds," because they "produce steadfastness" which will make us "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." But now he's saying something a little different. Now James is saying that remaining steadfast under trial won't just make us perfect and complete, but will result in a special blessing.

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Why is James writing this? Well, he has just admonished both the poor man and the rich man to get their heads on straight and not to live for money. And in the next three verses, James is going to come back to the danger of fleshly desires. Here in v. 12, James is showing us what we should desire, what we should love — not riches, not the world, not the flesh, but God.

James is trying to convince us that we should remain steadfast under trial. We should resist temptation. If we do, we will be blessed.

So are you convinced? Are you convinced that it is worth it? Do you love God so much that you remain steadfast under trial, remain holy when tempted?

None of us do it perfectly. But once again, even though we have failed time and again, God loves us so much that he has brought us here this morning to hear James 1:12. God loves you so much that he has brought you here to remind you that you will be blessed if you remain steadfast under trial. So listen to God this morning.

But what does all this mean? What exactly is this blessing that James is talking about in this verse? And what exactly is required to receive this blessing? Those are the two questions I want to answer in this sermon as I challenge you, with James, to love God and serve God, always.

Exposition

I. The Content of the Blessing

So let's begin with the blessing. What exactly is it? James says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial." That word "blessed" shows up a lot in the Bible. For instance, in Deuteronomy 28 God told the Israelites that they would be "blessed" if they obeyed all his commandments — and he told them exactly what he meant by that. They would be blessed with health and wealth. God would give them lots of money, children, food, and victory over their enemies. Is that what James means by "blessed" here in v. 12?

No. Those blessings in Deuteronomy 28 were for the nation of Israel under the old covenant. James tells us what he means: the blessing is "the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." "The crown of life" — in other words, eternal salvation. Not health and wealth in this life. Not money or power or popularity. James is talking about the afterlife here. He is talking about going to heaven to be with Jesus. That's the blessing.

And don't miss what James is saying about this blessing. This blessing of eternal life is *promised* by God to those who love him. And God never breaks his promises!

We see that over and over in the book of Genesis. Over and over God shows that he is a promise-keeping God. He keeps his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is absolutely trustworthy. He is utterly reliable. When God makes a promise, it is as good as done.

And if you love God — the God of the Bible, who demands faith in his Son to approach his holy throne — then God has made you this promise:

Ephesians 1:13–14 13 In . . . [Jesus] . . . when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

This is the rock-solid promise that God has made. It is guaranteed for eternity.

It isn't like the riches of this world. The riches of this world are nothing like the crown of life James is talking about. Remember what James said about the rich man? In vv. 10–11 he told us that the rich man is here today and gone tomorrow:

James 1:10b–11 10 . . . like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Take a look at this \$1 bill. Who is pictured on this dollar bill? George Washington. What you may not know is that it was on this day in history, in 1799, that George Washington died. See, it doesn't matter how rich or powerful or famous you are. You and your wealth are here today and gone tomorrow.

But the crown of life will never fade away. Do you realize what that means?

It means that more money, a better job, a more successful business, or whatever it is that you might wish you had in this world, is nothing compared to the crown of life.

I'm not saying these things are worthless. The money we put in the offering plate a few minutes ago certainly isn't worthless. But the crown of life is so priceless that it makes the things of this world look cheap and tawdry. Why should the poor man covet the rich man's money when the crown of life is so much more valuable? Why should the rich man revel in his riches when they are nothing compared to the crown of life?

Yet some poor men do covet the rich man's money. Some rich men do revel in their riches. And when trials come upon them — when the poor man is cold and hungry and when the rich man fears losing his money — they don't care about the crown of life. All they care about is the here and now. Who cares about eternity? Heaven can wait! It seems so far away. I can't see it. All I can see is the world and the things of this world. Give me the things of this world, and then I will be happy.

That's what happens when we fail a trial. Every time we give in to temptation we are saying, "I don't care about the crown of life. It isn't that important to me. What I really want right now is to satisfy my flesh."

When you think about it, it really looks stupid, doesn't it? If I offered you a diamond ring in one hand and a penny in the other, which would you want? Not the penny, no way. Pennies are so worthless that the US Mint stopped making them this year. Only an ignorant child would want the penny. You're smarter than that. What good is a penny? It's almost worthless.

And so are all the worldly pleasures in this life, when you die. Worthless as a penny. Yet the one who turns away from God at the moment of temptation says, "Give me the

penny!” As C. S. Lewis said:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²

How easily pleased are you by the things of this world? How easily pleased are you by sin?

I know, sin can feel good in the moment, until the guilt and shame come. If it didn’t feel good, it wouldn’t be tempting. But the pleasure of sin only lasts for a moment. Live for the promises of God, like Moses did:

Hebrews 11:24–26 24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

And so should we.

Are you looking forward to that reward? I’m not talking about some foolish make-believe heaven. This is not about going to the great golf course in the sky. This is about going to be with Jesus. This is about an eternity worshiping Jesus. And if you love God, then that is what you want more than anything. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Loving God is the key to the whole thing, and that’s what James talks about next.

We should look to the reward that James talks about in our passage this morning — the blessing of the crown of life. The question is, how do we receive it? That is the second question I want to answer this morning.

II. The Condition of the Blessing

The first question was, what exactly is this blessing that James is talking about in this verse? The answer: the crown of life. But what exactly is required to receive this blessing? That’s the second question.

In other words, what are the conditions for receiving this blessing? After all, James doesn’t say, “Blessed is everybody.” He doesn’t say, “Blessed is everybody who goes to church.” He doesn’t say, “Blessed is everybody who says he is a Christian.”

What does he say? James says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.” That’s the condition for receiving this blessing — to remain steadfast under trial.

Do you know what remaining “steadfast” means here? Immovable. Unswerving. Rock-solid.

2 C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” Preached originally as a sermon in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on June 8, 1942: published in *THEOLOGY*, November, 1941, and by the S.P.C.K., 1942.

Let me give you an illustration. You know the game “King of the Hill,” right? We played that when we were kids. To win the game, you need to stand at the top of the hill and not be pushed off. To win, you must not allow anyone to push you off the top of that hill. What do you do when somebody tries to push you? You push back. You stand firm. It might be hard. It might take all your strength. And if there is some really big guy coming at you, you might be tempted to turn and just run down the hill! But to win, you can’t quit. You have to persevere, you have to endure, you have to *remain steadfast*.

And that’s exactly what you have to do when you come under trial. You have to push back. You have to fight. You have to fight like Joseph did when he ran away from Potiphar’s wife rather than sin against God. When she grabbed him and tried to get him to sleep with her, he left her holding his garment while he ran for his life!

Maybe you’ll never face a trial like that. But a trial here is anything that tests your faith. The Jewish Christians to whom James is writing this letter went through terrible trials. They were persecuted and oppressed, and many of them were poor and hungry. Over the centuries, other Christians would face terrible trials, too. They would be tortured, threatened with death, even executed because they refused to turn away from Jesus. That is still happening today in places in this world. Terrible trials.

What would you do if somebody threatened to torture you or kill you — or your child or your mother or father — unless you worshiped a different God? Would you pass the test? Would you say, “No! Do whatever you want to me or my family, but I will *never* turn away from my Lord!” I hope so. I hope I would say that.

But if we should remain steadfast during a trial like that, how much more should we remain steadfast during a smaller trial? Remember, trials reveal who we are. They are tests. That’s why James says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life.” What does it say about us if we can’t even pass the smallest test?

There’s a saying out there in the world: every man has his price. In other words, every man can be bribed to do something wrong — it’s just a question of how much money. And that may be true for many people. One man will accept a bribe of only \$100, while another man wouldn’t be tempted by anything less than a million dollars. What would you think of the man who has a low price? What would you think of the man who says he’s always available to do dirty deeds, done dirt cheap? He would seem like an especially bad man, right? It doesn’t take much to get him to do the wrong thing.

It’s the same way with us when a small temptation causes us to turn away from Jesus. When we fail a small test, we show how low our price is — we show how little we think the crown of life is worth.

If we treasure the crown of life like we should, we would never turn away. That saying, “Every man has his price,” would not apply to us. Nothing could ever cause us to turn away from Jesus, not riches, not toys, not hobbies, not sex, not drugs, not booze, not pornography, not gossip, not *anything*. Nothing would be worth it to us, because we would treasure the crown of life. We would always remember what James says here:

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life.”

That’s the condition for receiving this blessing — the blessing of eternal life. You must remain steadfast under trial.

But wait! What’s all this talk about what you must do to be saved? Isn’t salvation by grace alone through faith alone? That’s certainly what Paul says. Is James contradicting Paul? Is James saying that to receive the crown of life, to receive eternal salvation, we have to earn it by *doing* something?

No, James isn’t contradicting Paul. Paul said the same thing. “For if you live according to the flesh you will die,” he wrote in Romans 8:13, “but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” And four verses later Paul said that we are children of God, “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Clearly, Paul wasn’t talking about earning our salvation by anything we do. In that very same letter, Paul also wrote, “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom 4:5b). Clearly, we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone.

But that faith is a faith that is never alone. The faith that saves is a faith that bears fruit, a faith that shows itself by remaining steadfast under trial. And that’s exactly what James is going to say in chapter two of his letter.

Our works show what we believe. As John wrote, “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1Jo 3:10).

So does this mean that if you ever fail even one test, if you ever give in to even one temptation, you are lost? No. There has only been one perfect man who has lived on this earth, and his name Jesus. You and I, however, still sin sometimes. When trials come, you will fail some of those tests. But if you believe in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit will sanctify you. You will improve. You will pass tests that you used to fail, and you will pass them more and more often.

This is what gives us assurance — remaining steadfast under trial, however imperfectly, as we grow in grace.

Now, somebody listening to this sermon might say, “You shouldn’t preach like this. People are going to go back home thinking that if they don’t pass enough tests they are going to hell. You’re taking away people’s assurance of their salvation.” But I’m just preaching the Word of God — and God does not seem particularly interested in giving assurance to us if we are living in unrepentant sin. As we saw in 1 John, if you do make a practice of sinning — if that is the way you like to live your life — then you shouldn’t have any assurance of salvation. You need to turn to Jesus and live. You need to love God, not the world nor the things in this world.

And that brings us to the last part of James 1:12. The “crown of life,” James says, is something that “God has promised to those who love him.” The “blessed” man, the one “who remains steadfast under trial,” the one who “has stood the test,” is the one who loves God.

And that, my friends, is the key to understanding this part of James’ letter. The poor man and the rich man of the last three verses both need to love God, not riches. The one who is “lured and enticed by his own desire” in the next three verses needs to love God, not his lusts. Loving God is the key to everything. Unless we love God, we *will* fail our tests. Unless we love God, we will not remain steadfast under trial.

This is something we so easily get wrong. We take theology and doctrine seriously, and we should. We take seriously the things we should do and shouldn’t do, so seriously that we even have a tendency to make up rules to follow. But not only must we take seriously what we think and what we do, we must take seriously what we feel in our hearts — the loves, the affections we feel in our hearts.

Even the pagan Greek philosophers understood that the only way to conquer the flesh was to love the right things in your heart. It doesn’t matter what’s in your head if your heart is in the wrong place. When temptation comes, your head may say no — but if your heart says yes, then you will fail. You will obey your belly, just like the people of this world Paul writes about:

Philippians 3:18–19 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

So don’t set your mind on earthly things. “Set your minds [KJV: affection] on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,” Paul writes in Col 3:2.

Only when you *love* the right thing can you *do* the right thing. You cannot serve God unless you love God. As James will write later in this letter, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4b). And John writes:

1 John 2:15–17 15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. [17] And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Do you love God? Unless you love God, you will fail even when you think you succeed. Unless you love God, it doesn’t matter how many nice things you do. If you don’t love God, it doesn’t matter how calm and cool you are under pressure. If you don’t love God, it doesn’t matter how much money you give away nor how self-controlled you are. You could be the most respected, upright person in your family and in your town, but if you don’t love God, you are living your life with your fist in his face — you are doing it all while saying, “I don’t need you, God. I don’t want you.”

Loving God is everything. If you don't love God, then you're not a Christian. If you don't love God, then you don't have faith in Jesus. "If anyone has no love for the Lord," Paul wrote, "let him be accursed" (1Co 16:22a). Literally, *damned*.

And to love God is to love him for his own sake. If you say, "I am going to love God so I get what I want," then who are you really loving? Love God for who he is. Love him because he is your *God*. And love him "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deu 6:5b).

Earlier I said that if we treasure the crown of life like we should, we would never turn away from God. But the only reason the crown of life is worth anything is because it means eternal life *with God*. If you don't love God, then you won't love the crown of life. But if you do love God, you won't trade that crown of life for anything.

Conclusion

Those people I told you about at the beginning of this sermon decided they couldn't believe in God after bad things happened to them. Some are bewildered, others are angry, but all of them feel like they don't deserve hardship. They think they are entitled to have what they want from God. They are selfish. They are proud. They refuse to submit to God. They do not love God.

Do you love God? Do you serve God?

If you love God, then you will serve him as a disciple of Christ. You know the only reason you began loving God in the first place is because he first loved you, in all of your sin, worthy of nothing but his wrath — and you rejoice that he has chosen you to be his child, if you have faith in Jesus. If you love God, you trust him to do whatever he wants to do to bring himself glory.

So love God, and serve God.

And even if you face a fiery furnace like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did in Daniel 3, you will not stop loving God. When they faced the fiery furnace, they said:

Daniel 3:17b–18 17 . . . our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

Whether God delivered them or not, they were determined to remain steadfast under trial!

Love God that much — and no matter what trial you are facing, whether you face persecution, or you get cancer, or someone sins against you, or you just hit your thumb with a hammer or bang your head on a kitchen cabinet, do not sin! Remain steadfast under trial!

Love God, and serve God! Turn away from every temptation wherever you are, whether you are in a crowd or all by yourself at home — at work, at school, at home, in your car, at your computer, everywhere, all the time.

Love God, and serve God! For "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."