

Hearkening to James

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My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may *be* perfect and entire, wanting nothing" (James 1).

When in the council in Jerusalem James began to sum up the matter before them, he started by saying, "Men and brethren, hearken unto me" (Acts 15). I have said to myself, Yes, I would like to hearken to that which God may have said to me by that remarkable man. And I want you to hearken for a few minutes to things the apostle James would be saying to us if he were standing here tonight. He would say to us, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." It seems to me we don't listen to James as we ought. We have only one epistle written by him and that not a very long one, and also he seems to have been rather at a discount in many minds. So great an authority as Martin Luther, I am told, spoke in terms of contempt of this epistle and talked about it as an epistle of straw. Now in many things I bow down to the authority of the great reformer but I must rather stand up to him in that. The book to me seems much more like a great sledge-hammer than a bundle of straw. If any man knows how to hit heavy blows on the conscience of the average saint James is the apostle that does it. We get very straight talking if we hearken to James.

Is it not a rather extraordinary thing that he says to us in this verse? Temptation, of course, has the force not merely of certain things that tempt us, such as besetting sins. Practically all the circumstances of our lives in this world provide us with occasions of temptation, in the way of trials and testings. We grin and bear them. That may be stoical, but it is not Christianity. James says, "My brethren, count it all joy." "Why, James," we might say, "you have asked us to do a very big thing." Candidly, I am not up to it. I hope I have arrived at this point that when trying things keep happening, I can say, God knows how ultimately to make all things work together for good to them that love Him. I can see there may be eventually what is profitable. But this is rather beyond me.

"Count it all joy!" not ninety per cent joy. All joy when you fall into divers, that is, various testings. Again and again we get tested, and not always by the same circumstances. First of all we are attacked, assaulted, tested, tried, tempted on this side. Then the wind seems to veer round and blows from the other quarter and we are tempted in a totally different direction. And suppose we challenged James as being very peculiar in his teaching he would look us in the face and say, I am only saying that which is the concensus of the apostolic testimony.

We turn to the Pauline epistles. There are verses in Romans 5 which say in other words very much what James is saying here. Paul says, We not only rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, and not only do we rejoice in God Himself, but, we *rejoice in tribulation* also. We turn to Peter's epistles, so as to listen to the Petrine exhortation, and we find in his first epistle more about suffering than anywhere else in the epistles. Again and again he speaks of Christ's suffering and our suffering. We suffer for righteousness' sake, for Christ's sake, for doing good. We suffer in other ways, but we should be very, very careful, though we suffer as Christians, not to suffer as evildoers. But when you get to the end of Chapter 5 he sums up by saying, "The God of all grace who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while make you perfect, stablish, strengthen settle you." Peter speaks of *Sufferings*, Paul talks about *tribulation*. James talks about *temptations*, but mark you, they all tell us of the great virtues that reside in these things.

Now it seems to me, if I am going really to listen to James, I shall have to revise some of my Christian thinking. Instead of trying to dodge suffering when it comes I shall have to welcome it. Frankly, I don't like temptations; temptations are very terrible things. Let me avoid them, I should say, at all costs. "My brethren," says James, "count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations."

Each apostle gives the same reason. Paul says, We glory in tribulation knowing that *tribulation worketh patience* — the very thing that James speaks of here — patience works experience, experience hope, hope makes not ashamed. It clears away obstructions and makes room for the inshining of the love of God. Find a Christian whose heart is filled with the love of God and you find a very remarkable man. And Paul knew right well that, though the process was trying, the thing to be reached by the process was a thousand times worthwhile.

We turn to Peter. God has called us to eternal glory but, he says, *after ye have suffered a while*. We may connect that little phrase with the beginning of the verse, He has called us to His eternal glory after we have suffered awhile; but we must connect it with the end of the verse also. Suffering helps to make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. Why is it, think you, that we often find a sad lack of stability of settlement, of establishment amongst us as believers? I dare say it is that we have managed in this very favoured land of ours to escape so many of the sufferings others have endured. Again and again we see it, that suffering instead of knocking the truth of the gospel *out* of the young convert most effectually knocks it *in*, and if you want to find stabilised Christians, strengthened Christians, settled Christians, you will have to discover *tested* Christians.

The strong winter winds shake the sapling down to the utmost ramifications of its roots; and it is that shaking, that testing that the young tree gets, that enables it to break up the soil round the roots and get ready for the underground growth of the spring, when above the ground the fresh leaves and twigs appear. The process is going on beneath the surface and even the winter winds prepare the ground for the strengthening and establishment and settlement of that tree in the site where it has been placed.

We still listen to James and he tells us that the trying of our faith "worketh patience," and patience, as you know, has in it the thought of endurance. It is the testing of your faith that works endurance. God permits the trials to come upon us in order that we may be tested, and patience having worked her perfect work we may be perfect — that is, carried to completion — and entire, wanting nothing. The common notion is that temptations and testings and trials are merely dreadful weights. We say, if only I were not tied down by these difficulties what a good kind Christian I could be. But again I have had to revise my thoughts on that subject. I discovered after all I was not right.

A little lad flies his kite in the March winds. It goes soaring into the sky and here he is down beneath. He has hold of the cord and if you could give that kite a mouth it might reason plausibly to itself after this fashion. "Look how well I am flying and, mark you, doing all this in spite of the aggravating circumstance that that stupid little youth continually hangs on to the end of the string. I don't know what it is for. I know why I have a tail and little side wings, but that string is the trouble, and that idiotic child hanging on the string. Does he think I am going to lift him as well as myself in the wind? Seeing I fly so well under this handicap, I think I could fly up and hit yonder moon if only I got free. What could I not do if I were not tied down in this foolish way?" Then the little lad is inattentive for a moment, the string goes slack, and the kite going up again with a jerk, the string snaps. The kite goes wobbling down and down, and gets tangled in the telegraph wires or the old oak. A poor, sorry thing it looks. Supposing the kite could speak what would it say now? It would have to revise its thinking and say, "Well, well, I never! The very thing I thought was keeping me *down* was keeping me up."

My little parable is not an original one. I have heard it used before and I have used it myself before, but it is a good one. It is the trials, the testings, the awkward circumstances you and I have to face that are God's education for us. We are learning what God can do for us in the midst of those temptations. We have an opportunity of gaining an experience we are never going to get in all the golden days of heaven.

There is no doubt about it, God knows how to deal with each one of us, and so James opens his epistle with this word. He has many things to say to us but he clears these great distractions out of the way to begin with. The temptations are distractions and stumbling-blocks to us unless we hearken to James. Look at these things in the home, in the business, in the meeting. It often seems to me that people are pig-headed and obstreperous and foolish. They may be all that, and I am not proof against being all that myself, but it is here in the midst of these testing circumstances, these temptations, I am going to learn myself by my failure, and I shall learn what the grace of God can do for me. I am thinking not so much of opposition from the world as things amongst the people of God — in this land of ours the trouble comes less from without than from within.

Supposing God saw fit in His wisdom to allow this country to pass into circumstances that have prevailed in other countries so much of late.

Supposing we got a measure of tyranny. Supposing things don't get better but worse, and the idea prevails of a totalitarian state — the State claiming to control the life of the individual in totality, not even religion excluded from its grasp — and you have to bow down or suffer. We have not got that yet, but if we did we should be a good deal more together, the line of demarcation between the world and the church would be much more definitely drawn. But the present tendency is to utter disintegration within. We fall apart and fight, the world meanwhile sitting by with a very broad sneer on its face, while we are in easy surroundings.

But either way temptations abound. They are going to work endurance, and teach us patience, and prove our spiritual mettle. And there is the day of the kingdom coming. What a wonderful thing it would be if the Lord could look upon such as ourselves and say, There are people approximating to a state of being "perfect and entire, wanting nothing." We may prove the grace and sufficiency of God, by the Holy Spirit, in these difficult circumstances. We may discover the infinite resources in Christ in the midst of these circumstances. We may learn to know Him with an intimacy and knowledge of such a character as we will never get in heaven if we don't get it on earth.

So, let us be encouraged. Let us remember what God has in view in these testing things. And let us hearken to James when he tells us to count it all joy — not sorrow, nor something to be avoided at all costs. If God confronts you with testings again and again, say to yourself, "Look! a fresh opportunity of my experiencing something more of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ; a fresh opportunity of proving the fulness that is in Him, of learning lessons that, once learned, will stand in good stead throughout the golden days of eternity."

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."