

James 1:12

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[0 : 0 0] I'm intrigued by the way that the word blessed, which is the first word of our text this morning, how it's, I don't know, re-entered our linguistic currency. You hear it being used quite a lot in different contexts. You'll be hearing somebody on the radio being interviewed, maybe an athlete or anybody really in a given circumstance, and it's not uncommon to hear people speaking of how they're blessed. I don't think you would have heard that language being used. I certainly don't remember it being used 20 years ago or maybe even more recently. And it's been used without any religious connotation. I think it generally just means, I don't know, to be in a good place. Something good has happened to you. And so people speak about being blessed. And when I hear people using that language, my kind of inquisitive little mind is left with the nagging desire to challenge them with the question, blessed by whom? Of course, if it's on the radio, I can't do that. If it was in a face-to-face conversation, I suppose I could, but I might check it out. I don't know. But, you know, to speak of being blessed, I think implies that there is one who is blessing. And so, as I say, I'm always intrigued by who that is, if indeed folk are using it in that way, which they probably aren't.

I think the current use in Britain has something to do with transatlantic influence, you know, through the media. And so I think it's a word that maybe was used a lot or is used a lot in the States, and that's kind of come over. It's our language, of course. It started here, but then it went over there, and now it's coming back again. On the subject of being blessed, there is something that I can affirm with complete confidence, and that is that God's desire for you, God's desire for His people is blessing, that you be blessed. And verse 12 is a blessing. Within the content or within the letter, James expresses this blessing. Blessed is the man. Happy is the man. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, and it continues through to the end of the verse. What I want to do this evening, spend a little time considering this one verse as a stand-alone verse, blessing, but of course conscious that it is connected to what has gone before. It's the same theme that we looked at certainly a couple of weeks ago in the morning. And it's also connected to what will follow in verses 13 and onwards, which we'll be looking at not this coming Sunday. That's actually another thing I should have announced.

This coming Sunday is family service, so it'll be a week Sunday that we'll be hopefully looking at that next passage. But this evening we'll focus on this one verse, this blessing that we find in verse 12. And we'll just work our way through the verse, noting its meaning and drawing out some of its applications. And so we are just going to do that. We're just going to go through the verse part by part and comment on it as we make our way through it. So the verse begins with these words, blessed is the man. And we'll just, we'll pause there and just make one or two comments.

And maybe to begin with just of a more general nature, the theme or the figure of the blessed or happy man is a common one in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and in the wisdom literature, this portrayal, this description of the blessed man or woman.

We read Psalm 1, and of course the book of Psalms and the first Psalm is very much one that falls into this genre of describing the righteous man, the blessed man. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. So the very language that we find here in James. So it's very much Hebrew language, a Hebrew concept, an Old Testament theme being picked up on by James. Not necessarily the blessing itself, one that he's drawing from the Old Testament, but the idea of portraying the blessed or righteous man. The example given there in the Psalms of the very first Psalm that begins with these words, blessed is the man, is in itself an intriguing one and one worth exploring that we're not going to do it this evening. Because some argue, I think quite, I don't know if convincingly, but certainly quite persuasively, cogently, that Psalm 1 describes the righteous king. You know, in the Psalm it speaks about the man who meditates on God's law day and night, which was one of the requirements of kings of Israel. And there's one or two other connections that lead some to that conclusion, that the one being described here is the righteous king. And of course, if that is true, then that is very messianic in terms of it pointing forward to the ultimate righteous king, king Jesus, the ultimate blessed man, the ultimate righteous man. The word there in verse 12, back to

[5 : 58] James, blessed is the man, the word blessed is the Greek word makarios. Those of you of probably my age and above, I suspect, or if you're very keen on history, you might be younger, but certainly those of you my age and above may remember Archbishop Makarios, a towering figure in the history of modern day Cyprus. So, an archbishop, but also the first president of that island of that nation in the 60s and 70s, the happy bishop, Archbishop Makarios. Anyway, these blessings, we have one of them here in verse 12, but these blessings, they serve as a kind of mirror or model for the believer. We look in the mirror of the blessing to see if we can see ourselves, and hopefully it does serve as a mirror. Hopefully, we read it and say, yes, that's me, and if it does, then it's a good mirror. Of course, if it doesn't, it's not the mirror's fault, but it's the one looking in it who needs to ask questions. Or maybe more as a model, maybe that's a more helpful way of thinking of it, a model that allows us to see what is said and compare ourselves against it and say, well, is this me? Does this describe me?

Am I this blessed man? Am I this righteous man who has been spoken of in the blessing, in this case, in verse 12? So, blessed is the man. Just a kind of introduction to the very, you know, type of statement that is being made here by James, this blessing. But let's move on to the actual content of the blessing, and what does James go on to say? Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial.

Now, of course, the theme of persevering under trial is one we've already met in the letter, in verses 2 to 4. We were thinking about this a couple of weeks ago. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance and so on. So, there's an equivalence even in the vocabulary used, exactly the same words that we find in verses 2 to 4 of trials and of perseverance repeated in the blessing. So, clearly, there's a deliberate and very explicit connection between what's come before and this blessing that's pronounced by James. Just a couple of things to say about this first part of the blessing. These words, who perseveres under trial. First of all, just to make the point, it's not hugely important, but this is not a command. In verses 2 to 4, you have the language of command.

James is urging, he's commanding his readers, do this, consider it pure joy. But this is a blessing. It's a spiritual truth that is being enunciated. This is true. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. It has the sense of urging and encouraging, but in and of itself, it's simply a statement of fact, a statement of a spiritual principle. The other thing that's quite interesting, I think, and I think significant in comparing verses 2 to 4 with this blessing in verse 12 is that in verses 2 to 4, James speaks of trials of many kinds. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds. And it's clear that James is very deliberately trying to include in that, you know, any trial you could imagine, really. They're all covered. They all come under this umbrella. Any number, a multiplicity of different trials, they're dealt with in what he has to say, trials of many kinds. But here in the blessing, it is trial, singular. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Indeed, in what follows, there's still that kind of singular sense, because when he has stood the test. And so, it seems that James here is speaking not so much of any one given individual trial, but of something bigger, something broader than that. In fact, what I think James is speaking about, or what he's portraying, is life, the life of the believer, with all its many trials.

They're all included, but what he has in mind here is life itself. Life is one mega trial. And I imagine that perhaps many of us can, in some measure, relate to that. That's true. Yes, there's all these individual trials, but life itself is, in a sense, one big permanent trial. And I think that's what James is speaking about when he speaks about standing the test. And the importance of that, I think, will become clear a little bit later on as we continue to think about what the blessing says.

[10 : 48] What do we need to do in living this life that is marked by testing and trial? Well, we need to persevere, who perseveres under trial. We need to keep on going to the very end.

And this call, or this, what could we call it, this challenge to persevere, to keep on going.

I suppose it must have been in my mind as I was listening to the radio at some point during the week in the car, and I was hearing an interview with Charlotte Dujardin. I don't know if that name rings a bell to you, those of you who are interested in sport. She's, I think, a three-times gold medal winner in dressage. So I think she won a couple of golds at London and another one at Rio. I don't know the ins and outs. But a very successful Olympian with, as I say, these multiple gold medals.

The interview was one where she was simply talking about her life, and obviously the focus was on her sporting achievements. And particularly the part of the interview that caught my attention was when she was telling about how she started riding horses. And what particularly struck me was a comment that she made about what set her apart as a successful horse rider, and then of course she specialized in dressage, what set her apart from her peers who started when she did as a small girl at whatever the local riding club was. And the answer that she gave, and no doubt this isn't the full answer to that question, what set her apart, but the answer that she gave and the aspect that she focused on was this, that she just kept getting back on the horse.

You know, she said, you know, there were others there who went to the riding school, and if they fell off the horse, of course that's a very unpleasant thing to happen. It's very painful. And the question is, do I get back on again? So you've got two things there. You've got the pain that you're experiencing from the fall, but then there's also, there's the fear of getting back up on again.

[12 : 56] And so some just said, no, that's not going to happen, and walked away. They just wouldn't get back on the horse. Whereas she would carry on and get back on the horse, and she'd fall, and she'd get hurt, and it'd be painful, and she'd get back on again. And she'd be afraid as she got back on again, because she was fearful that she would fall again.

And of course she did. I guess there came a point when she started falling less. But she just kept getting back on the horse. And it was that very simple kind of description of her, I guess, first steps and trots, I don't know, in horse riding that struck me. And I think there's a parallel with this call that is directed to us as believers, as we're called, to persevere. We fall, we stumble, but we have to get back on the horse, even when it's scary, even when we would prefer to stay on terra firma, or whatever the equivalent would be in applying the illustration. I think we can apply this to so many areas of our Christian lives, this getting back on the horse. We can apply this to the matter of forgiving others.

You know, it can be difficult to forgive somebody again and again and again. We can maybe apply it to the reality of unappreciated acts of kindness, that those we are seeking to help in one way or another, there seems to be very little in the way of acknowledgement or gratitude, and we can get tired, we can get dispirited. We need to get back on the horse. We can apply it to unassuming service in the church, maybe some way in which we're serving, and most people don't even know we're doing it, and if they do, they give it little importance. How we respond to temptation and sin.

James is going to go on to talk about that particular type of trial, temptations and what follows, how we respond when we do fall, when we do stumble, when we do sin, when we do succumb to temptation.

Do we simply give up and say, well, I just can't, this temptation is too great, I can't overcome it, or do we get back on the horse? Persevering is difficult, but what we've been learning these past couple of weeks should help us. You know, last Sunday morning we were urged to focus not on what we have or don't have, but on our identity in Christ, take pride in our high position in Christ, and that that should inform the manner in which we live, the manner in which we face trials. The week before we were urged to ask for wisdom, wisdom that would help us consider our trials as pure joy, which in turn helps us to persevere. And so, yes, it is difficult, but there are spiritual resources at our disposal. So, blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Let's just carry on reading the verse. It goes on to say, James goes on to say, because when he has stood the test.

[16:10] We'll come back to the because, because it really feeds into what is said immediately after that. And let's just comment just very briefly on this language of having stood the test.

And I just have one observation to make on that statement by James within the blessing. When he has stood the test, it implies that standing is possible. It is possible to stand the test. It's possible to persevere to the end. And that's, of course, implicit in the blessing. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test. It almost suggests that it's expected that the blessed man will stand the test. And we might even go so far as to say that. That is the expectation. The blessed man faces trials, but the blessed man or woman is marked by this, that they, he, she does stand the test. The blessed man will stand.

But then if we go on to the because, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life. He will receive the crown of life. Now, this affirmation of James that he or she will receive the crown of life, this also is a statement of fact, but it serves both as, I think, strengthening encouragement for us in the face of trials. So, we're encouraged, we're strengthened by this prospect of receiving the crown of life. And it's also, and these things are very intertwined, but it also introduces this idea, motivational reality of the reward that awaits us. And we're sometimes a little bit wary of even the language of reward, you know, given our understanding of grace. But it is the case that on different occasions, the Bible does use that kind of language of a reward, in this case, a crown that's spoken of, that awaits those who persevere, in this case, those who stand the test.

There is this, it's an encouragement, it's to strengthen us, and it's to motivate us to carry on, to keep on getting back on the horse, because there's this crown of life that awaits us. And let's just think about this crown of life. What is this? You know, the language is very attractive. It sounds like it must be something good, you know, crown of life, if you're set. If somebody asks you, do you want the crown of life? Like, who's going to say no? Like, it's got to be a good thing, hasn't it? The crown of life.

But what is it? What is this crown of life? Well, if we start with the meaning of the word crown, now the Greek word here translated crown is the word Stephanos. So, for Stevens amongst us, your name means crown. So, there you go. And the word here used can refer to a jewel-encrusted crown that you would imagine an emperor or a king wearing. But it can also be used, and is also used, to speak of the laurel wreath that a fighter, a boxer, or an athlete would receive having participated in the games. And it's used in that way on other occasions in the New Testament. Paul, for example, to just give one example of that in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 25, everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. And it's the same word here, Stephanos. And of course, that wasn't a gold crown, it was this laurel wreath that was given to the winning athletes. And I think that is the crown that James has in mind, the picture that James has in mind. And of course, if that is the picture that James has in mind, that in turn informs our understanding of persevering and the usefulness of using sporting metaphors to draw out some of what's involved in persevering.

[20 : 26] So, that's the picture that James has in his mind as he writes this blessing. But we're still left with the question, but what is the crown? And I think that the best way of understanding this is as follows. The crown of life is the crown that is life. So, let me just repeat that. It sounds a bit of a... what's the word? Not limerick. Anyway, the crown of life is the crown that is life. Life itself, eternal life, resurrection life. This is what James is affirming, that the one who stands firm, the one who stands to the end will receive life itself, eternal life, resurrection life, or painted in this visual pictorial way as the crown of life. And of course, that use of the word crown is repeatedly one that we find in the New Testament to speak of different blessings of what awaits us in the new heavens and the new earth, that resurrection life, different aspects of that resurrection life. Let me just mention a couple of occasions when we find the same language.

2 Timothy 4, verse 8, Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, the crown that is righteousness, Christ's righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day.

1 Peter 5, verse 4, And when the chief shepherds appear, you will receive the crown of glory. What is that crown of glory? Well, it is to share in the glory of God that will never fade away.

In Revelation chapter 2, we have exactly the same language as in James. Do not be afraid of what you're about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for 10 days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. The crown that is life. And I think these multiple crowns point to our perfected, resurrected state, when we are matured and complete, not lacking anything, to pick up on the very language that James has used just a few verses before.

Then there's the final statement in the blessing. 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.

[22 : 57] So this granting of a crown is a promise given by God, but to whom? Now, I think what we would kind of expect to end the blessing, you know, if we weren't familiar with the verse, and if we were, you know, we're given the first part of the verse, and we were told, right, finish the blessing.

So try and imagine that. It's difficult, because we know how it ends. But imagine, try and imagine you didn't know how the verse ends. And somebody said, right, I'm going to tell you, I'm going to give you the first two-thirds of the blessing. Now, you tell me where, how you think it would end. 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, how do you think it should end?

I shouldn't really say should end. How do you think it, you might expect it to end? Well, at least the way my mind works, I would expect it to end as to those who persevere and stand the test.

You know, that's the whole point. If you persevere, if you stand the test, you get the crown, and this is the crown that's promised to those who persevere. But that's not how it ends. It says the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

So, what's the deal? Is the crown given to those who persevere or to those who love God? And they are, I think, of course, two descriptions of the same man or woman. The man or woman who loves God will persevere to the end, and the one who perseveres does so grounded in the love of God.

[24 : 22] And maybe if I can just say a couple of things as we draw things to a close and suggest two connections or two possible connections between love for God and perseverance, these two characteristics of the blessed man in this blessing. Love for God provides a motivation for perseverance.

We love God, and we want to please God by our persevering obedience, motivated by that love that we bear towards Him. And so, in that sense, you can see a connection. But I think there's another connection, and it's this, that our love for God, you know, those who love Him, our love for God is evidence of a relationship with God where, of course, love flows in both directions, and especially from God to us, though in the blessing, the focus is on our love for Him. But if there is love that we have for Him, it's only because He first loved us. And so, this language speaks of a relationship that exists.

And God's love for us is a further guarantee of our certain or ultimate perseverance. And I think this is where recognizing that James is not talking about any one given trial, but the Christian life in its totality as a trial, as a test. And James is saying we're in a relationship of love with God. We love God, and He loves us. And because He loves us, He will ensure that we persevere to the end. It's not that we're passive in this, far from it. But there is this guarantee that God will help us reach the end and stand the test. Because God loves us, He will carry us over the finishing line if, or perhaps more likely, when necessary. And let me just, to illustrate that, one final illustration, and then we'll kind of close. I don't know if you remember, it was a couple of years ago, I think about a year and a half ago, at a race of the World Triathlon Series, I think it was in Mexico, where the Brownlee brothers were running. We must know the Brownlee brothers, great heroes, Olympic heroes. And Johnny Brownlee was winning the race. So, he'd done the swim, he'd done the cycle. I think he'd done about nine of the ten kilometers of the final part of the triathlon.

And he was winning. He was winning quite comfortably. But it was a very hot day in, I don't know where, in Mexico. And as he was coming really within sight of the finishing line, I guess it was heat stroke, heat stroke struck. And you've probably remembered the images on TV, how he started meandering across the road. It was really quite disturbing. You know, this professional athlete, but the heat was such that he started meandering. And he was kind of in a haze. And you began to wonder, well, he's not even going to make it. It was so near the finishing line, and you think he's not going to make it.

And there was a South African runner who kind of thought, oh, great, I'm going to get a gold here. So, he just ran past him and won the race. And then who appears but his brother Alistair. And he sees his brother Johnny, and he's meandering around, and he's not going to finish. And so, what does he do? He comes up, and he puts his arm around him. It's his brother. He loves his brother.

[27 : 42] And he carries him over the line, and they finish together. And I think that's a beautiful picture of what's happening here, of this love that there is that God has for us. So, even when we're meandering, we're in a haze, the heat stroke of life, of these many trials, and we think, I'm not going to make it.

I'm not going to make it. And then God comes, and he puts his arm around us, and he carries us over. And so, we do persevere. We do make it across the line, because he is there to pick us up, and to carry us over, drag us over, push us over, whatever it is. But we get there. And that doesn't mean that we just wait for him to do that, but there is that assurance, that guarantee that because we love him, and because we love him, because he first loved us, he will make sure that we make it across the line. That's what God does for those he loves and is loved by. And so, we close by simply reminding ourselves of the content of this blessing. 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. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come and we testify to our love for you. It is not as deep as it ought to be. It's not as consistent as we would want it to be, but we can testify to a sincere love for you. And we readily acknowledge that any love that we bear towards you is because you first loved us. And so, we respond to that love. But we thank you for all the blessings that come with that relationship that we enjoy with you. And this one in particular that we've just given some thought to, that you're the one, because you love us, who will help us and who will ensure that we persevere and stand the test right to the end and cross the finishing line and receive the crown of life, life itself, eternal life, resurrection life, to enjoy for eternity in your presence and in the new heavens and the new earth. We pray that while we do live in this world of trials, that you would help us to look to you, to seek your wisdom, and to persevere in the midst of the many trials that are facing us, perhaps even today, even in this week that has begun. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.