

February 18, 2024
First Sunday in Lent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

James 1:12–18 (Genesis 22:1–22; Mark 1:9–15; Gradual: Hebrews 12:2)

GOD IS THE GIVER OF EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT – EVEN IN TRIAL AND TRIBULATION.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The theme of the First Sunday in Lent is always trial and temptation. In our Old Testament reading Abraham is put under trial. In a testing of His faith, God called upon him to take his son, his only son Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering. (cf: Genesis 22:2) Ishmael, born from Sarah's handmaid Hagar, was cast out and only Isaac was left. (cf: Genesis 16:1–12) Isaac was the son of God's promise that through him and his offspring that all mankind would be blessed by the birth of a Savior. (cf: Genesis 17:18–21, 22:18) But now God was calling for the son of the promise to be sacrificed.

We can't begin to fathom the test. Scripture doesn't record Abraham protesting or stressing over God's request. He doesn't question the sacrifice of His sole blood offspring. By faith, Abraham obeyed, taking the boy to the place where God told him. He built an altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac and laid him on the wood. As he raised the knife to slaughter young Isaac, the angel of the Lord called out and stopped him, sparing his son. (cf: Genesis 22:4–12)

Abraham passed the test. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that:

“[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” (Hebrews 11:19)

God knew Abraham's faith and counted it to him as righteousness. (cf: Genesis 15:6; James 2:23) In humility, Abraham named the place **“The Lord will provide...”** (Genesis 22:14) as God provided a substitute for sacrifice, a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns, which Abraham placed on the wood and offered as a burnt offering instead of his son. The **son of the promise** was spared who's descendant would be the **Promised One** sacrificed on the wood of the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

It's one thing to be tested, but it's quite another thing to be tempted. In our Gospel text, we hear that immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness for forty days where He was tempted by the devil. (cf: Mark 1:12–13) God tempts no one – but it **was God's will** that the devil tempt Jesus in order that Jesus may show Himself the perfect and perfectly obedient Son of God. Jesus could've shown Satan His divine power. He could've shown that He could think for Himself and not follow the will of the Father. But Jesus didn't exhibit one bit of His own divine glory.

Armed with only the Word of God and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, Jesus trusted God's Word. Jesus beat the devil by showing it is **He** who lives by every Word that comes from God's mouth. (cf: Matthew 4:4) Jesus is the one who refuses to put God to the test. (cf: Matthew 4:7) Jesus is the One who will worship and serve the Lord His God alone. (cf: Matthew 4:10) And Jesus did all this for you and all mankind because we cannot overcome Satan's deceptive temptations.

So, what does Abraham's trial and Jesus temptation have to do with you? For the answer to that, we turn to our epistle reading where St James teaches us that God, who is the giver of every perfect gift, is on your side, even in trial and temptation. Trials and temptations are the words that you and I use to describe life as sinners living in a broken and sinful world. And James wants you to understand how trials and temptations fit within the Christian life and how God supplies what you need to deal with both. St. James begins his epistle saying:

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." (James 1:2–3)

It's a difficult saying... to count trials and testing as joy. Your trials vary from day to day. Perhaps your trials are health issues, relationship disfunction, financial problems, or one of many others. And when you're up to your neck in trials the last thing on your mind is to count those trials as joy. But that's what James is exhorting you to do. In our epistle he says:

"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." (James 1:12)

God uses trials to strengthen your faith. Very few Christians have gotten stronger in the faith during easy times. Many folks lament the decline of Christianity in the United States, but it is growing in Asia and Africa. What's the difference? Tough times move people to flee from their false idols and cling to God. You've witnessed it in your life and the lives of others. How did you get through your trials? It was God who kept His promise to sustain and keep you in the true faith during your trials. God the Father is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and that includes His ability to take the trials you suffer and use them for your good to strengthen your faith in him and in His dear Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus knows all about trials, from having nowhere to lay His head to His arrest, a phony trial, beatings, a crown of thorns, being nailed to the cross, and a spear in the side. He knows. He suffered trials beyond what anyone can imagine. Yet, He always had His eyes fixed on His heavenly Father to sustain Him during the very trials God sent Him into this world to suffer in order to save you and all mankind. And in perfect obedience to His Father:

"... for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame..." (Hebrews 12:2)

... suffering all, even unto death, while having perfect faith in His Father and His plan for salvation.

In your time of trial, God is with you, knowing exactly what you're going through and sympathizing with you. (cf: Hebrews 4:15) And He does more than just sympathize with you. He's the one who through His Word and the Holy Spirit strengthens your faith that you might

endure to the end. He's the One who brings you through the trials of this life and gives you life everlasting. The crown of life is yours because of your Savior and Suffering Servant endured the trials of His Passion and cross for you and all mankind. So the next time a trial comes, fix your eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of your faith. When you wonder where God is when you're suffering, look to the cross of Christ where He suffered for you, winning for you forgiveness of sins and victory over all your earthly trials and tribulations. Hear God's Word proclaimed. Remember your baptismal promises. Go to His Holy Supper and be strengthened by His body and blood, given and shed for you.

So much for trials, but what about temptations? Your temptations may be the allure of the pleasures of the flesh, the world, and the distractions of the devil; or the temptation to trust your false idols of self, health, and wealth. But again, St James teaches us that God, the giver of every perfect gift, is on your side, not only in trial, but also in temptation.

To start with, temptations are not from God. He tempts no one and they're not His fault. (cf: James 1:13) Sure, we'd like to blame God just like Adam blamed Him for his temptation in the Garden of Eden. We'd like to blame Him because we believe He created us with desire and passion. And, yes He did, but He didn't create us to abuse the gifts and desires He gave us. Our desire and passion was corrupted in the fall in the Garden.

Whether you like it or not, you can't blame God for any temptation or for your falling into temptation. James makes the source of temptation precisely clear. He says:

"... each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." (James 1:14–15)

Did you catch that? You are tempted, lured, and enticed by your own desire. Temptation is always lurking. Like God told Cain before he murdered his brother Abel, sin is crouching at the door. (cf: Genesis 4:7) Temptations are unavoidable. No one is exempt. You know the struggle and you feel guilty when you fall into it. You try your best while the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh do their worst. Left to your own reason and strength, your desire will drive you away from God and into the grave.

Brothers and sisters, what must you do? Fix your eyes on Christ Jesus, the founder and perfecter of your faith. Cling to Him and His promises made you in Baptism. Cling to God, for He brings good and perfect gifts. You cannot escape temptation, but you *can* defend yourself and relieve your temptations by praying for, and imploring the help of God. Martin Luther once told that in the writings of the Early Church Fathers there was a young man:

"... who wanted to rid of his evil thoughts. The old father said: Dear brother, you cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can certainly prevent them from building a nest in your hair." (Plass, What Luther Says, #4317, 1344)

So how does one keep the metaphorical birds from building a metaphorical nest in your hair? fix your eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of your faith. And:

“... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

As James says:

“¹⁶ Do not be deceived... ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...” (James 1:16–17)

He brings you His Word of truth in the Gospel. That Gospel tells you that the Father in heaven gave you the perfect gift, the gift of His Son. Jesus knows what trials are and He knows what it is to be tempted. Not only was He tempted by Satan in the wilderness, He was tempted even more. His greatest temptation was to skip His Passion and sacrificial death on the cross... skip the trials and tribulation of the very work of winning salvation for you and for all mankind. (cf: Mark 14:32–40) He was tempted but He prayed to His Father for strength, saying:

“... not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

And He overcame that temptation. He went to the cross for you and me to pay for all the times we fall into temptation. He is the only one who *can* defeat – and *has* defeated temptation on your behalf.

In Baptism, you were made God’s own child, the *firstfruits* of the new creation. (cf: James 1:17–18) You belong to Him and are His most special possession. He sent his Son to die for you and redeem you from the wages of your sin. In Christ, you have forgiveness for all the times you’ve fallen into temptation. In Christ, you receive the crown of life. You receive heaven itself. And by the power of the Holy Spirit given you in Baptism, you receive the power you need to go through this world of trials and temptations.

In chapter four St. James says:

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you...” (James 4:7–8)

God knows all about trials and temptations. He sent His only Son to suffer them as you do and to give you all you need so that you can come through the trials and temptations of this world and receive the crown of life that Jesus Christ has earned for you at the cross and empty tomb. He strengthens and sustains your faith in the hearing of His proclaimed Word. Christ Jesus promises to be with you in trial and temptation, while at the same time, He is interceding for you at the right hand of the Father. (cf: Romans 8:34–35)

He understands what you’re going through because He’s been there – and more. His victory is yours, and, even if you fail, He’ll pick you up. He picks you up, forgives you, and prepares you to press on by the power of His Word to strengthen your faith and resist the devil the next time temptation comes. He does the same thing through his Supper, feeding you with Himself, His very body that suffered and his precious blood that was shed for you. He strengthens your faith, forgives your sins, and gives you the crown of life. He is the giver of every perfect gift and is on your side, even in trial and temptation.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.