

“A Fork in the Road”

James 1:12-18

June 25, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

James is still talking about trials in this passage. He has already told us to count it all joy when we fall into trials because we have come to understand that trials are the medicine our faith needs in order to be made whole. And it is faith that leads to the most precious things available to us both in this life and in the life to come. We don't rejoice in the trials themselves, but in the use God makes of trials.

That theme continues into this next section as James contrasts the two responses we can have to trials. The basic two options are to blame God or to trust God. We can think of trials as a fork in the road. We don't usually get to decide the nature and timing of the trials in life. But we must take care in deciding which fork to take when the trials do come.

Several years ago, I rode in my first long charity bicycle ride. It was called the “Hot Hundred” because it took place in Tuscaloosa at the end of July, and it was hot. At about the 30 mile mark of the ride, there is a fork in the road where you have to decide whether you are going to ride the 72 mile route or the 100 mile route. At only 30 miles, I was still feeling strong and I thought to myself, “I feel like I can ride forever. Maybe I should take the 100 mile route.” Thankfully, the wisdom of age kicked in and I took the 72 mile fork instead. As it turned out, that was a good decision, because at about mile 60 I developed severe muscle cramps in my legs and barely made it back to the finish.

When we encounter trials, whether we know it or not, we have come to a fork in the road. A decision needs to be made about which road to take. The failure to make a decision, or the failure to recognize that a decision is before you, is to make a decision to take the wrong road. So how do you make a decision about which road to take? You do so by knowing where each option goes. James helps us with this decision by reminding us of these two options.

I. The Destination – v. 12

James begins this discussion in verse 12 by reminding us of the destination, described here as receiving the crown of life promised by God. What is this crown of life? When we hear the word “crown,” most of us picture the golden, bejeweled crown of a king. This is not that crown, but the victor's wreath. Think of the gold medal hung on the neck of an Olympic champion. It is a crown of life, by which we are to understand James to mean eternal life.

This crown consists of eternal life. Why didn't James just say, then, that we will receive eternal life? It is because the word "crown" adds something important, the idea of identity. A gold medal at the Olympics is so significant that for the rest of the athlete's life he or she will be known as an Olympic gold medalist. To receive eternal life is even more significant, not as something we achieve but as something we receive. Eternal life, as Jesus said, is to know God, and that is the source of all true flourishing in life. So our destination is the life that comes from knowing God.

James also mentions in verse 12 the two characteristics that lead to this destination: being steadfast under trial and loving God. Who will make it to this destination? Those who persevere and who love God will do so. If you will permit me another bicycle analogy, this life is like riding a bicycle in Birmingham. The hills of Birmingham result in bicycle rides that much of the time consist either of climbing hills or descending hills. When you are climbing, the most important thing is simply to keep moving forward. As long as you are moving forward, you will eventually make it to the top. Sometimes the climb is steep, as when you are in a severe trial, and it takes all the strength you have just to keep forward momentum. At other times, the climb may not be so steep, but it is seemingly interminable. Last year, my son and I rode the Blue Ridge Parkway from south to north. Day 1 featured three ten mile climbs. I had never done even one ten mile climb prior to that for the simple reason that there are no ten mile climbs in Birmingham. Life is sometimes like those ten mile climbs. You finish one long trial only to enter another. When the road of life turns upward like that, the need is for steadfastness. There is only one way to finish the climb, and that's one pedal stroke at a time. Similarly, in the trials of life, we must trust God for strength for each day, and sometimes even for each minute of the day.

When you're riding a bicycle, the climb does eventually end and the descent begins. Life works that way as well, with times of prosperity mixed in with the times of hardship. The challenge in such prosperous times is different than in hardship, but a trial nonetheless. When you are descending on a bicycle, the primary need is vigilance to watch out for dangers. You must watch for road hazards such as potholes and gravel on corners. You must also choose the line to follow on curves, shift your body weight to the outside of the curve and make decisions about your speed when entering the curve. The failure of vigilance could have catastrophic consequences. In times of ease, we need vigilance to maintain our love for God, because there is a danger that we will begin to love God's gifts more than God.

Which trial are you in right now? Are you climbing or descending? Do you need steadfastness in suffering or vigilance to keep loving God in prosperity? Both are trials, as James pointed out in verses 9-11 when he spoke of the challenges both of poverty and riches. We don't get to decide which set of trials come to us, but we are to be faithful in both suffering and prosperity.

II. The Wrong Fork – v. 13-16

The wrong path is to blame God for our suffering, essentially accusing him of wrongdoing. Instead of persevering through suffering, the person taking this path falls away from God and then blames God for it. James counters that by saying that God is not the problem in the case of evil and suffering. He is so far removed from evil that he cannot even be tempted by evil. His nature is perfectly holy.

If God is not the problem, then what is? James says that it is the sin nature within us all. He makes an assumption here that must be grasped if we are to understand his argument. His assumption is that our problem is not suffering, but the sinful response we might make to suffering. We don't get a say in most of the important circumstances in our lives. When Matt and I rode the Blue Ridge Parkway last year, there were no alternate routes we could have chosen. The road was laid out by civil engineers decades ago to follow the ridge of the mountains. We had nothing to do with it. All we could control was our forward movement on the road defined by others. Our lives are like that as well. We don't get a choice about most things in life. God lays out the road for us, and our responsibility is to travel that road as we trust in God. We get into trouble when we stop trusting God and trust ourselves instead.

James goes on to unpack what this wrong path looks like by talking about deceptive desires. I disagree with the translators of our pew Bibles and think that the paragraph break needs to come after verse 16 and not before. Verse 16 belongs with verses 14-15. James is not against human desires as such. There are good desires that are part of our nature as God's image bearers. Desires for such things as beauty, love, food, rest, and meaningful labor are all good and righteous. What James is opposed to is deceptive desire, a demand for something outside what God has chosen to give us, which we think is necessary for us.

Let me give an example of a deceptive desire. A man is married to a woman who is a little too controlling, and who seeks to exert her control through nagging her husband. His wife's nagging feels to this man like disrespect. He finds himself thinking that his life would be so much better if he had a different wife. He even has a little resentment against God for allowing him to marry this woman. His desire for a different wife is a deceptive desire. The deception lies in thinking that his life would be better with a different wife, which keeps him from loving the wife he has. That's why James says that this kind of deceptive desire will have a baby called sin. Then baby sin will grow into an adult whose name is death.

So there is much at stake in the fork in the road called trials, because the wrong road leads to death. James' description helps us know how to fight sin. We must fight it at the desire level. Is there a deceptive desire present in your life right now? If so, how do we deal with it? We need to bring it to God, and that's what James addresses next.

III. The Right Fork – v. 17-18

If the wrong path is that of deceptive desires that blame God instead of trust God, then the right path must deal with these deceptive desires. How do we do so? The path laid out by James in verses 17-18 would have us replace our deceptive desires with a desire for God. Many times people try to deal with impure desires by some form of denial. That's about as effective as a pregnant woman trying to deny her pregnancy. James knows that it is as we grow in our desire for God that these impure and deceptive desires will begin to fade. So he speaks of God in a way designed to increase our desire for him.

He begins by reminding us that God is the author of all the good things we have. From the small, good things in life to the big ones, God is the author of them all. A delicious cup of coffee in the morning is a gift from God. Both good food and the hunger that increases our pleasure in the food are gifts from God. Loving relationships are from his hand. The breath you just took was a gift from God. The beautiful mountain vista and the satisfying hobby you enjoy come from his hand. He gives generously and with a father's delight in seeing the enjoyment of his children in his gifts. And he doesn't change. His purposes are always to give good gifts, and he is incapable of giving any other kind. Even the sins of his children do not change this fact. And this is the same God who is called the "Father of lights." The "lights" refer to the heavenly lights of the sun, moon and stars. He is a mighty God who delights in giving good gifts.

His best gift is the one mentioned in verse 18. **"Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."** He is talking here about our salvation. He "brought us forth," by which he means he gave us life. And he did this "by the word of truth." That is a common New Testament way of speaking of the gospel. It is the good news of the gospel that increases our desire for God. George Herbert has a poem titled "Faith" in which he speaks of all the things that come to us by faith. One stanza includes these surprising words: "I owed thousands and much more. I did believe that I did nothing owe, And liv'd accordingly; my creditor Believes so too, and lets me go." That word of forgiveness from God through Christ is such a simple word, but it has the power to bring about life.

As a result of the life brought about by the gospel, we become **"a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."** Firstfruits is an Old Testament practice in which Israel was told to bring to God an offering of the firstfruits of their produce and

their flocks. Any gardener knows the significance of firstfruits. As the tomatoes grow on the vine, the gardener inspects them each day, eagerly awaiting the ripening of that first tomato. The first ones are the most valuable and precious to you. Later in the season, the gardener, if she has an abundance of tomatoes, will be giving them away to all her friends. But not the first tomato. God says we are just like that first tomato to him. We are his firstfruits because our changed hearts by his grace are the first result of his saving work in creation. But our changed hearts are not the last thing he will do. He will make all things new, including our bodies. Our need is to grow in our desire for this God, to love him more deeply and trust him more fully.

CONCLUSION:

What trial are you encountering now? Is it a trial requiring endurance, or is it one requiring vigilance to guard your heart in the midst of prosperity? Whatever the trial, you are at a fork in the road. Will you trust God or blame God? We are not unlike the children of Israel in their wilderness wanderings. After God delivered them from their Egyptian bondage, he led them into the wilderness where they faced numerous trials. Not three days after God had delivered them through the Red Sea by parting the waters for them and by bringing the water down on the Egyptian army, they encountered a trial of inadequate water. Did they trust God or blame God? They grumbled against God's leader, Moses. God miraculously provided water as he made the bitter water sweet. A few days later, they ran low on food. Did they trust the God who had by now miraculously delivered them on multiple occasions? Once again, they grumbled against God, even talking nostalgically and falsely about how much good food they had in Egypt. But once again God provided for them miraculously by raining bread from heaven, bread they called Manna. God told them to gather only what they needed for each day, for he would provide for them the next day what would be needed that day. But many didn't believe him and gathered more than was necessary. The same thing happened again when they wanted meat and God provided quail from the sky. And then when they encountered the challenge of fighting the giants in the land of Canaan, they refused to trust God.

Moses had a different perspective on all these trials. When his brother-in-law, Hobab, came to see him, Moses invited Hobab to join them. **"If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us"** (Num. 10:32). Moses interpreted the wilderness trials as God's preparation for giving them good things. In the words of Dan Doriani, the grumblers said, "All I see is trouble," while Moses said, "All I see is the Lord delivering us from trouble. He has never failed." Which fork in the road will you take?