

“Steadfast under Trials” by Pastor Steve Sommerer
First Sunday in Lent Feb. 21, 2021

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

The sermon text is from James 1:12-18, part of which reads: 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. This is our text.

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.” Seems totally backwards, doesn’t it? We’d say, “Blessed is the guy who never goes through trials in the first place.” Only in a world of dying sinners there aren’t any of those trouble-free people.

To understand James’ word, *“Blessed is the man who stands steadfast under suffering”*, you have to realize that God is smarter than you and knows better than you what He’s working out in your life, and how in the end His hidden will is done.

One of my shortcomings as a dad is I have a hard time letting my kids struggle through something. When I say it that way it makes me sound really sweet and loving, but the truth is, I’m grouchy and impatient and nothing’s ever good enough for me, so if I’m watching them tie shoes or sweep the floor, I get impatient and finally, I’ll just jump in. Let me do that! You’re doing it all wrong! But in the long run, I won’t be around to tie those shoes forever. How much am I really helping if I don’t let them struggle and work and get better?

Our lives involve struggle and sometimes anguish. *“Only through many troubles do we inherit the Kingdom of God,”* Acts 14 says. If God were loving, we think He’d spare us those trials. What must Daniel the Prophet have thought when King Darius’ soldiers slid the rock over the lion’s den and it was pitch black; just Daniel listening to growling, hungry lions? But God heard Daniel’s prayer and sent His angel to shut the lions’ mouths. What about the momma and daddy caressing their lifeless baby in a delivery room. They waited 9 months to meet her only to go home from the hospital with broken hearts and shattered dreams. The Christian life takes steadfastness. Blessed is the steadfast... that means a steely courage to trust God when the evidence of His love is hard to find. Or rather you find that evidence in Jesus’ death.

Our text makes an important theological point: God tempts no one. Evil isn’t God’s fault or God’s will. Sin, evil, and suffering come from the devil and from us sinful people doing evil things. We get hurt by our own actions; sometimes the actions of others; and sometimes for reasons we can’t know. Death is part of the Fallen world we inherited from Adam and Eve, and part of the consequence of having received people and things from God that we love and care about is each will one day slip from our hands. Only God is big enough to hold them all.

This is still God’s world. God is Almighty. In a year that 491K Americans died of Covid, God is still bigger than Satan. *“God is still our Refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.”* Because of who God is, *“We will not fear, though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.”*

God doesn’t tempt you as though He secretly roots for your failure, but the testing can be overwhelming to you, not God. When God allows suffering, sickness, natural

disaster or death, one might say, it's even worse to say God allows it. Why would God allow or cause pain in my life? How could He be so careless? When the truth is a thousand times, He's beckoned us to run into His arms, up to and including right now.

There are times when we feel like Abraham being tested by God: *"Take your son to the land I will show you and offer him there as a burnt offering."* That's unbelievable. **"How can you ask me to go on without my loved one? Is this for real? Do you really want to crush me under this terrible trial?"** I bet Abraham prayed all those things.

How did he survive? We can't survive the trials and sadness's of this world if our faith is in our ability to stay positive or our willpower or our ability to find silver linings in every dark cloud. Faith needs an anchor outside this world to steady our boat when the seas are stormy.

Grieving Abraham didn't follow God's command because he had a naturally positive outlook. His faith didn't rest on a flimsy decision at an altar call. He had God's sure word that Isaac would be the father of many nations. Hebrews says, *"Abraham reasoned that God could raise Isaac from the dead."* Abraham survived this test by trusting the Word of God, even when he didn't understand what God was up to. He closed eyes and ears to the unfairness and believed that somehow – in spite of God's command – somehow God is good *"His mercies endure forever."* He had God's promise.

When the patriarch Job reached the end of his rope, children dead, houses gone, barns burned down, crops destroyed, health shattered, Job cried out against life's unfairness – the righteous suffer – the scoundrels celebrate. But through bitter tears Job could also cry, *"I know that my Redeemer lives; and that in the end He will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"*

Isaiah wrote, *"But now this is what the Lord says; He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you O Israel; fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine. When you walk through fire, the flames will not set you ablaze; for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."*

I don't pretend to understand God's hidden heart or understand things God hasn't chosen to reveal. God is God and doesn't need me to vindicate Him. But I know God has issued His verdict, *"The soul who sins will die."* And I know when this veil of tears finally lifts, *"there remains the crown of life which God has laid up for those who love Him, those called according to His purpose."*

So even down here in *"the valley of the shadow of death"*, God is still in control. God joined Himself to our journey to empty death of its power. Hebrews 2 says, *"Since the children have flesh and blood, He Himself shared in our flesh and blood that through death Jesus might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver those who all their lives lived in slavery to the fear of death."* Jesus said, *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

The old song reminds: *"His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me."* You're more than just any old bird. In Isaiah 49, God says, *"I can no more forget you than a mom can forget the little baby sucking at her breast. But though she should forget, I will not forget you. See I have engraved you in the palms of My hands."*

So that's part of the answer to the question of why there's so much suffering and sadness... 80 or 90 years on this good earth isn't the end game. Jesus said, *"I have told you these things so that you may have peace; in this world you will have trouble, but take*

heart, I have overcome the world.” Even evil and suffering, trials and testing, must serve God’s purpose... even the pompous devil who thinks to destroy God’s Kingdom, must fail. Romans 8 says, *“God works all things for the good of those who love Him, those who are called according to His purpose.”*

Seldom do we see the sense of suffering... but God knows and God sees and His Word says, *“Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance; character, and character hope; and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love is poured into our hearts.”* It’s when the lion’s den slams shut, we learn to pray. Is it pleasant? God doesn’t say it will be, but God can use suffering to shape me and make me steadfast or even to cause me to stop running away from the God who loved me enough to die for me.

Part of the answer to “why suffering” is in our Gospel lesson: *“The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News!”* Jobs, money, friendships, stuff are foolish things to live for. Repent! Return to the Lord! For believers, suffering toughens us and disciplines us. Hebrews 13 says, *“God disciplines those whom He loves as a loving Father disciplines His children.”* Life’s crosses teach us to *“fear, love and trust in God above all things.”*

Sometimes having everything else stripped away is when, we wake up and realize only one foundation is solid enough to stand for eternity! The only thing left when everything else is gone will be the God who was there, and with just a word called the world into being. The God who formed you in your mother’s wombs and breathed into you His breath of life; Who redeemed your body in the death of His Son; who sanctified your body to be His Holy Temple by washing you in Baptisms’ word; He’s the only thing left standing in the end. But believing in Jesus, Romans 14 says, *“You will stand because God is able to make you stand.”*

When a demon-possessed Muslim militia with automatic weapons herded 21 Coptic Christians off their tour bus on the way to an Egyptian monastery, those believers died with the name of Christ on their lips bearing witness that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. The sand in the shoes of those martyr dead was worth more than the whole murderous group that attacked them, but in God’s wisdom the martyr dead pointed their murderers to Jesus, echoing St. Peter, *“There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” – “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”* Who knows but that terrible injustice may cause one Muslim to turn from Satan and be saved, because they saw a Christian die at the point of a gun!

The only life of joy... the only hope in death comes in Jesus. *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”* Jesus is the substitute Lamb God, the beloved Son sent to take the place of Abraham’s beloved son Isaac. He took the place of this whole world of sinners. Like the ram caught in the thorn thicket, our Savior Substitute had head crowned with thorns as He laid down His life on the altar of the cross. God the Father made the sacrifice He wouldn’t allow from Abraham.

When the world and when you and I cry out, “Why God? How can a loving God allow this?” Remember your God and Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. When the storm rages, set your anchor in something outside of your own ability to persevere. Saving faith is extra nos – outside of us – in the eternal God who stepped into time to rescue us timebound sinners to eternal life.

**When life's troubles rise to meet me, Though their weight May be great,
They will not defeat me. God, my loving Savior sends them; He who knows All my
woes Knows how best to end them.**

**Now in Christ, death cannot slay me, Though it might, Day and night,
Trouble and dismay me. Christ has made my death a portal From the strife Of this
life To His joy immortal!" Amen.**

And now may the peace of God which surpasses human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.