

James 1:12
The Crown of Life

Main idea: Jesus stood the test and earned for us what we could never earn for ourselves. Therefore, remain steadfast in Him.

Do we have any golfers here this morning? Let me know if you've heard of this rule.

In professional golf, if a golfer unintentionally touches the ball with the putter and the ball moves even the tiniest bit, the golfer is required to take a one stroke penalty, which can make a huge difference, like a field goal at the end of a football game, or in basketball, a three-pointer at the buzzer that wins the game. So taking even a one stroke penalty can lose a tournament in golf. Professional Golfer Ray Floyd found himself in that situation in 1986.¹

He was in a tournament that had a top prize of \$108,000. As he approached the ball and lined up for a 9-inch putt, which is a piece of cake for a professional golfer, Ray Floyd noticed that his ball moved just ever so slightly, but he was sure that he was the only person who noticed it move.

So what would he do? What would you do?

Well, Ray Floyd did the right thing. He told on himself, accepted the one-stroke penalty, and ended the round one stroke behind everyone else.

This is called integrity. It's doing the right thing, even when no one is looking. As Christians, we're called to be people of integrity. God calls us to serve Him and obey Him with our whole lives, even when no one is looking.

Does the way that you live your life show that you love God? When things in life get hard, do you still cling to Jesus? And is that evident in your life? What I mean is, do you look to Jesus not just as your Savior, but as your Lord? Do you love Him through your lifestyle? Do you seek to obey Him? Does your life look like you love God?

As we consider those kinds of questions, we're going to look at just one verse of Scripture this morning.

James 1:12.

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)

Father, thank You for giving us life through faith in Jesus. Help us to live by faith so that we might stand the test when the test comes, which I think is all the time. Help us to show by our lives that we love You. In Jesus's name, Amen.

So we're looking at just one verse this morning, but we're going to ask three questions about it.

As with all of the book of James, our verse this morning is such a simple encouragement. James encourages us to be steadfast. Don't waiver. Stay the course. Have Christian integrity even when it's hard. Because if you do, James says you'll receive the crown of life.

¹ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-07-09-8602180630-story.html>

But this leads us to some questions. **Number one**, when did God promise us this crown of life? It says that God HAS promised it to those who love us, so when did God promise that? **Number two**, if this crown of life has anything to do with eternal life, does this mean that salvation is in any way earned through our works, because we have to do something to receive it? And **number 3**, who is the man who remains steadfast under trial? Because I feel like I fail more tests than I pass!

At least two of these, numbers two and three, are pretty big questions. How we answer them will make a huge difference in how we live. In fact, I think in general, the questions we ask and how we answer them will make a huge impact on our faith and lives.

Someone once asked Isidor Isaac Rabi, a Nobel prize winner in science, how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but she always wanted to know from him, "Did you ask a good question today?"

Maybe you have even more questions, maybe even bigger questions, this morning. Maybe your questions have to do with your future, or your past, and you wonder if God has a plan for you. We're going to be talking about some of those kinds of things this morning, too, but no matter what your questions are, I encourage you to take them to God. God has all wisdom, and He loves you, so it's perfectly safe and good to always run to God and His word with your questions.

So that's what we're going to do. Even though we have questions about God's word, from God's word, we're going to take these questions back to the Bible to see what God says about them.

So, question number one, **when did God promise us this crown of life?**

If you search for the phrase "crown of life" in Scripture, it's actually only mentioned one other time in all of the Bible, and that's in the book of Revelation. But when James wrote the book of James, Revelation hadn't been written yet, so James couldn't have been referring to that. So what is this crown of life, and when did God promise it to those who love Him?

Some commentaries state that this is a literal crown that God will give to some or all believers. I certainly won't say that this is impossible, but to me, it seems more likely that the word "crown" in this context is being used as a metaphor to refer to a prize of great value. When the Greeks competed in the Olympic games, their prize was a crown. And James, writing not to Greeks, but to Jews, used the phrase "crown of life" to show that the prize that we receive is far greater than a temporary piece of metal. All of our struggles, tests, and trials in this life are not meaningless, but prepare us for eternal life as we endure them.

James wrote, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast."

Have you ever watched trees during a storm? Strong storms can really make trees bend and thrash with the wind, and some trees can even be uprooted. But if their roots are deep and strong, those trees will continue to stand firm even during the trials.

And if we stand firm during these trials, the Bible says that we're rewarded with the crown of life.

In the Old Testament, the Jews were told about blessings for obedience, and curses for disobedience. It was read earlier in the service. The Jews were promised that they would be blessed if they obeyed God, but cursed if they disobeyed God. And it seems that James is echoing much the same idea in our verse this morning.

After a life of obeying God and standing firm when tested, God promises to reward us with the crown of eternal life.

But I hope some red flags are going up in your minds right now. I preach all the time, and I hope you know, that salvation isn't by works, but by grace alone. That's what Paul wrote many times in the New Testament. Galatians 2:16 says:

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

Romans 11:6.

if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.
(Romans 11:6)

And, of course, Ephesians 2:8-9.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So does James really mean to say that we in any way need to earn eternal life? And is that even possible? That's our second question this morning. Do we have to do something in order to receive salvation?

We talked last week about how it's the lowly brother who's exalted. It's the humble one, the one who knows that they didn't earn anything from God, this is the one that God exalts.

Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee, who everyone thought was righteous, and a tax collector, who everyone thought was a rotten sinner.² In today's terms, it would be like comparing the best person you know with the worst person you know. The story goes that the Pharisee prayed to God while boasting in all the good things he's done. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

But the tax collector knew his place before God, and wouldn't even look up to heaven to pray. With his head bowed low, he prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

And Jesus said that it was this tax collector, this rotten sinner, rather than the Pharisee, who went home justified before God. Because salvation doesn't rest on what we've done, but on God's mercy.

So, no, we don't have to do something in order to receive salvation. Salvation is a gift. It's completely free. In fact, if we had to do anything to earn eternal life, then none of us would receive eternal life.

If you remember all the way back to Genesis 2, there was a tree in the garden of Eden called the Tree of Life. If Adam and Eve would have simply eaten the fruit from the Tree of Life, they would have lived forever. But instead of eating the fruit from that tree, they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the one tree that God commanded them not to eat from! They sinned.

And, of course, it's not just them. The Bible is clear that it's all of us. Romans 3:23.

² Luke 18:9-14

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

Romans 5:12.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

And even in the Old Testament, it says in Ecclesiastes 7:20:

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

So the point of the Old Testament isn't to give us a bunch of commands so that we can do them and hopefully earn our way to heaven, but to show that we can't possibly earn heaven, because we can't be good enough. We can't just stop sinning.

We can try, and we should try. And we can even have a great deal of success in turning from sin in order to glorify God. That's what repentance is. But we can never be perfect at it, because in this life, we will always be sinners.

John said it this way in 1 John 1:8:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

So when James writes, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial," I think, "Who can possibly do that?"

That brings us to our third question. Who is the man who remains steadfast under trial?

Have you ever missed the obvious answer when it was right in front of your face?

I read a story about a man talking to his pastor after church. The man asked his pastor, "If you were going to be stranded on a deserted island and you could only have one book with you, what book would you take?" The pastor didn't hesitate, and said "Obviously, I would take the Bible! What book would you take?" And the man responded with a smile, "I would take a book about how to build a boat."

The pastor may have given the correct biblical answer, but he missed the obvious.

One criticism that many Christians throughout the history of the church have had about the book of James is that it isn't focused on Jesus enough. But I see Jesus all throughout the book of James. It's so obvious!

Already in the book of James, we saw that Jesus is the One who counts it all joy when He meets trials of various kinds, because He's the One who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.³ Jesus is the wisdom of God, given to anyone who asks God for wisdom.⁴ And, we saw last week, Jesus is the lowly brother who boasts in His exaltation, because when Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee

³ James 1:2, Hebrews 12:2

⁴ James 1:5, 1 Corinthians 1:24

should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.⁵ I see Jesus literally throughout the book of James!

So when we get to our verse this morning, and we read “blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial,” and we wonder, “who is the man who remains steadfast under trial,” I hope that you know by now that both the biblical and obvious answer is Jesus. Jesus is the man who remains steadfast under trial. He stood the test and received the crown of life that God promised to those who love Him.

Jesus stood the test and earned for us what we could never earn for ourselves. And when we rest in Him, we receive the crown of life with Him.

Now, this doesn’t mean that this verse doesn’t also apply to us. I think it does. Certainly, as we seek to be faithful to God, even through trials, we’ll experience life to a greater degree. When we’re steadfast in our faith, we have greater joy, peace, and contentment no matter what happens.

It’s just like anything in life. Giving up when faced with the smallest bump in the road never leads to as much joy as sticking it out.

You’ve probably never heard the name Jan Koum. Jan Koum was born in the Ukraine, to a poor family. They had no hot water, and they rarely spoke on the phone because they were afraid the government could be listening. Eventually, he and his mom moved to the United States, but his dad had to stay in the Ukraine because they couldn’t afford for him to come too. In high school, Jan Koum was always in trouble in high school, because he never quite fit in, but he did start to enjoy computer programming. Eventually, as an adult, he applied to work at Facebook, but they turned him down. At this point, or really at any point up until now, he could have given up. But instead, he stood steadfast during the trials, and created a little app called WhatsApp, which Facebook eventually bought from him for 19 billion dollars.

I share this story not to make us lust for money, but just to point out that giving up when faced with adversity never leads to as much joy as sticking it out. When we’re steadfast in our faith, we have greater joy, peace, and contentment no matter what happens.

And, not only that, but Jesus even told His disciples when he sent them out to be His witnesses that if they would endure to the end, they’d be saved.⁶ And I think that means that genuine believers will continue to believe and strive to live for Jesus. This is called the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. When you trust in Christ, all of your sins are washed away, and you’re a saint in God’s eyes. And all of God’s saints will endure to the end.

I’ve known many people who say they believe in Christ, but later in life completely turn away from Jesus. But the Bible teaches that the presence of God’s grace in our lives will be demonstrated when we cling to Him even in our trials.

Therefore, as James wrote back in verse 2, count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds. Trials give you the opportunity to remain steadfast and receive a crown of life.

But even when we receive these things because we stood the test, we should never think that we earned them for ourselves, but remember that God gives good gifts to those who love Him.⁷

⁵ James 1:9-10, Philippians 2:9-11

⁶ Matthew 10:16-22

⁷ James 1:17

You see, God wants you to receive a crown of life. Therefore, he wants you to go through some trials. If we had no trials, we would have no crown. But since God promised you a crown, He gives you trials so that you would receive the crown. And knowing that Jesus already earned the crown for you ought to give you great strength to remain steadfast in Him.

What I'm saying is this: you're not alone. God doesn't just command you to serve Him and then leave you to try to do it on your own. No, Jesus came and served us so that we could see what it looks like. And then He died for us because we're unable to do as He did. And then He rose from the grave so that we might rise with Him and live a new life in Him. And then He sent us His Holy Spirit to live with us and in us as we strive to stand the test and remain steadfast in our faith. So it's God Himself working for us, with us, and through us so that we would receive the crown of life.

So, to answer **our questions this morning**, number one, when did God promise us this crown of life, God promised us the crown of life when He placed the Tree of Life in the Garden, and when Jesus wore a crown of thorns on His head. And to answer our second question, is salvation in any way earned through our works, no, salvation is by grace alone, but that saving grace will transform us so that we begin to stand firm during trials. And to answer the third question, who is the man who remains steadfast under trial, it's Jesus, who not only stood firm under trial, but died in our place, so that we would receive eternal life in Him, which God promised to those who love Him.

And Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."⁸

So, the question that all other questions leads us to is this: do you love Him? Does the way that you live your life show that you love God? I'm not asking if you're perfect, or if you ever fail the test. No one is perfect, and we all fail the test. But Jesus loves you so much that He gave His life for you, and through His death and resurrection, He gives you eternal life as a gift.

If you've never received salvation and eternal life in Jesus, I invite you this morning to receive Him as God's gift to you.

⁸ John 14:15