

Sometimes the Bible says things that seem to contradict each other. And we have an example of that in our reading for today from James. James says very clearly that God tempts no one. But then we read a passage like Genesis chapter 22, which says that: "After these things, God tested Abraham." Or in case we need to have it even more clear than that, in the old King James version it says: "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham." So we have James saying that God tempts no one. And we have Genesis saying that God tempted Abraham. So what are we supposed to do with that? How do we make those two things work together? Do we just say the Bible's mistaken, that it made a mistake, that it's simply wrong here, like so many in the world do today? Of course not. Both of these things are correct. It's just that they are each emphasizing something a little bit different. Each one is saying something a little bit different than the other. So if we're going to understand them, then, we have to look at James carefully to understand what he's trying to say. And in the process, we will learn something about trials and temptations.

So James begins, verse 12: "Blessed is the man who remain 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." So James begins, then, by talking about trials, talking about those hard times in our lives. And Christians, how many of them do we have! I'm sure you can all think of examples in your own lives, but just to give a few. Maybe we're dealing with bad weather. We all remember last year the drought and how difficult that was, or even the snow storms just this last month. Or maybe we're dealing with financial loss. I'm sure that many of you lost calves this past snowstorm. Or maybe we're even just talking about something as simple as the death of a loved one. These are all trials and things that we have to deal with. And these kinds of trials call for us to endure. They call for us to remain strong, to stay steadfast, to not give up in the face of them. But how often are we tempted to lose heart? How often in the midst of these trials are we tempted to say or to think something evil, even about God? So what James is showing us here, then, is that there's really two things at work: the trial itself and our reaction to it. And it is the reaction, our reaction to trials, that James is focusing on today. That's what he wants us to pay attention to in this passage.

Because the trial itself, Christians, comes from God. The trial itself is something that God sends into our lives. In Genesis, for example, God tested Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his own son. And throughout the Old Testament, God tested his people time and time again to see if they would walk in his ways or not. But God also sends these trials into our lives too, such as the trials that we've been talking about so far. God is the one who commands the weather, Christians. God is the one who sends the rain. God is also the one who withholds it too. As Amos chapter 4 tells us, God says, "I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest. I would send rain on one city and send no rain on another city." So God sends us good weather, yes, but God also sends the drought for his purposes. God is also the one who gives us our possessions, Christians. God is the one who takes them away. As Job says in Job chapter 1, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." So if we are dealing with prosperity, that's something that God gave to us. But if we are struggling with poverty, that's something that the Lord has also given. Because all that we have is in his mighty hands. And God is also the Lord of life and death, Christians. Job says again, chapter 14: "Man's days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass." So the Lord is the one who knows the day that we are born. The Lord

is the one who also knows the day of our death. Life and death are in his hands. And so yes, such things do come from God's hand. God sends to us the good times, the easy times, but God also sends the hard times, the trials that come into our lives.

But those trials are never easy for us, even as Christians. Because there's always that temptation to turn that trial into something negative, to see it as something evil within our lives. Because whenever the trial comes, Christians, we are still struggling with the reality of sin. There are two men within us: the old man and the new man. The new man believes in God. The new man trusts in him. He even delights in such trials, because he knows and delights in the things of God. But the old man, our sinful nature, that sin which is still clinging to us, hates such things. It wants nothing to do with them. And so as a result, it sees them as something purely evil. And this weakness in our nature is what entices us towards sin. It's what tempts us to see these things as something bad, which tempts us to even speak against God in the midst of these trials. This is why James says in verse 13: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." This temptation, of course, is the temptation towards stumbling into sin, the temptation to speak against God. Maybe the bad weather that has come upon us tempts us to say that God doesn't care about us, that God is somehow ignoring us, that he doesn't want to give us any good things anymore. Maybe dealing with financial troubles tempts us to say that God is indifferent towards us, that he doesn't care about us, that he doesn't want to give us the things which we need. Maybe the death of a loved one, Christians, tempts us to say that God is simply being cruel towards us, that he hates us, that he's just punishing us for something that we have done. And so in that process, then, we are tempted to think that God is leading us to evil, to crush us, to destroy us, trying to make us sin. And we are tempted to say that what God is doing is simply wrong.

But that's not the case, Christians. God does not lead us into evil. And that temptation, those wicked thoughts which we have in the midst of trials, come from within, not from God. This is why James says: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. And desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death." And that desire here is our weakness, our sinful nature which still clings to us. When we give into that desire, when we listen to it, that leads us into more sin. And that sin gives birth to death. Sin can only destroy. It can only lead to our destruction. And so when we give into those desires, we are listening to the old man, and that's what causes us to stumble and to fall.

But Christians, we should not think that God is doing something evil by sending us trials. Such trials are meant for our good, even if we can't fully understand how in that moment. God, for example, led Israel through the wilderness, giving them trial after trial as they passed through, so that he could finally say in Deuteronomy chapter 8 that he did all of this so that "he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end." This is what James means when he goes on to say: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Everything that comes down from God, Christians, is good, even the hard things. Because God is the Father of lights. There is no such thing as darkness in him. And just as a bright light shining into our face is sometimes painful to us, so also the things of God will sometimes seem painful too. But God intends them for good and not for evil. God is building us up, even if he has to tear us down for a time.

And to really drive home this point, James points us up towards the skies. God is the Father of lights, after all, so he points to those lights which are above: to the sun, to the moon, to the stars, those things which have "variation and shadows due to change." The sun gives us light and heat and life. The moon causes the tides to rise and to fall and influences the world for good. And the stars which move through the sky also lead us and guide us on our way, and show us times and seasons. All of these things which are above, Christians, are meant for our good. God gave them for our good, because he is the Father of lights. But those lights which are above change. They have variation and shadows. The stars move through the night sky. They are not constant. The moon is constantly changing. We just had a full moon, and now it's going towards a new moon. And the sun also rises and falls, and it causes shadows to move as it passes through the sky. If we were looking to them as a way of finding something to rely on, we would be sorely disappointed, because they are not steady lights. They are constantly changing.

But God is their Father. God is our Father too. And he does not change. He is a light which does not waver, a light which does not have shadow, a light which does not move, a steady light bringing us only good into the world. And the sun will fail. The moon will disappear. The stars will fall when God destroys the world. But God will go on forever, Christians. And he will not change. He is faithful towards his promises and faithful towards you, and he means all things for good.

And in case we still doubted that, in case we were still wondering if that was true, James says, 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." God brought us forth, he gave birth to us, he made us Christians through his holy Word. And if God loved you so much, Christians, to make you who you are today, do you think that he's just going to forget about you afterwards and just let you go to ruin, because he doesn't care? Paul says it beautifully in Romans chapter 8: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" God gave you his Son, Christians God gave you Jesus. And if the Father was so willing to save you that he gave up Jesus for your sake, what makes you think he's just going to suddenly stop? God loves you. And everything that he does for you is meant for your good. Even the hard things will bring forth good fruit. And through such trials, through such hard times, Christians, God is bringing you ever closer to himself and ever closer to heaven.

So let us not be impatient with God. Let us not speak evil against him. Let us stand firm in the midst of every trial, knowing that God means such things for our good. God tests us, yes, but through that testing he does not lead us into sin. God brings these things into our lives so that we will be all the stronger because of it. And through his Son, he will give us the crown which will never fade away. God does not waver or change, Christians. He is faithful. He is true. And all of the things that he does in your life, whether good or bad, are meant for your good, because he loves you in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to yourself through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to trust in him, knowing that you care for us and even the hard things in our life are meant for our good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.