

Rich Nathan  
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Growing Into Maturity  
James 1:12-18

## **The Two Greatest Threats to Your Life**

Every day, if you get the morning newspaper or watch the news, you are told about a new danger to your life and to your health. It could be that some consumer reporting agency has just discovered that your car's brakes fail at speeds over 55 mph. Or the back hatch of your mini van will fly open at terribly inopportune times like when your van is carrying groceries. Or your pajamas may spontaneously combust when worn with a robe. Or your shaving cream may explode if placed too near a lamp. Or movie popcorn will kill you; so will Mexican food and Chinese food. And if you choose to eat dietetic, low-fat food, watch out because nutri-sweet will kill you, especially if you eat it in the thousand gallon drum variety, which is the way they feed it to lab rats.

And if you're not killed by foods you eat, you will be by the environment. Your basement may be seeping radon. How many of you had your basements checked for radon when the scare was happening a few years ago? What did you plan to do once you had the information? Never go into your basement again? Wear a gas mask?

There are just some kinds of things that I just don't want to know about. Whether there are radon and gamma rays bombarding us because of ozone depletion. And Columbus' water is always getting high marks from the federal government, as is the residue from the trash burning power plant.

And then there are the natural disasters. I don't know why anyone would live on the coast of North Carolina! I know, let's build a house. OK, let's put it right on Cape Hatteras, on a spit of land going out into the ocean. I think it will be safe there. And especially if it is an election year, you can guarantee that the federal government will rebuild it.

On the east coast it is hurricanes. On the west coast it is the earthquakes. If you live in the middle of the country, it is the tornadoes.

Then of course, we have all the threats of violence. And all the crazy people who have grievances and who choose to protest by shooting up post offices and taverns, and blowing up innocent people and buildings and planes and bridges and railroad lines.

Well, all of the dangers that I have just mentioned are out there. We also face threats that are closer to home—threats of losing our jobs. Some of you may deal with the threat of illness that hangs like a sword over your head. Or perhaps threats from another person to your physical safety—an abusive husband or someone who abuses drugs in your home, a child, a spouse.

This is an anxiety-provoking world that we live in, is it not? I mean if I were to give you a blank sheet of paper and ask you to write down all of the terrible things that could happen to you, all of the threats that are out there to your safety, to your well-being, to your health, it wouldn't take you very long to fill up the page. But I will bet that there would be very few of you who would list on your page the two greatest threats to your spiritual life and to your spiritual health as listed by the Bible. I will bet in a congregation this size that there wouldn't be five people who would actually know and put down the two greatest dangers to you. Because while we are anxious about so many things, we actually fail to be anxious about the two things that ought to worry us the most.

We spend all of our time worrying about what may be done to us, fearing circumstances, fearing people, fearing others opinions, fearing illness, fearing suffering. And all the while, we miss the only two things that really can strike a mortal blow. Two things that can kill us, really the only two things that can ruin us forever.

I will not keep you in suspense anymore. The two greatest dangers to your spiritual health and spiritual life are our quitting and our sinning.

Friends, you only ever need to worry about two things. And both things are under your control. Both things are things that you might do. You might quit. And you might sin. You might give up. And you might choose against God.

In the text that we are going to read today, James concentrates our minds wonderfully. He is speaking to us about dealing with trials. And as we learned the first week in the book of James, those trials come in many different colors. It could be an illness. I get migraine headaches out of nowhere. Recently, I have had many of them. They just arrive from nowhere. They get me physically ill and I almost become entirely incapacitated.

The trials could be financial. You can't make ends meet. You are way over your head in debt.

They could be relational, as we discussed. You are single and you want to be married. You are afraid that you will never find a partner and grow old alone. You may not be able to have a child. The trial may be physical, an illness like mine that I just mentioned or much worse.

James is speaking to people who are being tried in some way or another even as they seek to follow Jesus. And the message that we are going to hear from James today is that in the midst of difficulty, whatever it is—marital, relational, financial, vocational, that you really only have two things to worry about. Don't worry about what is coming at you from

outside of you. Don't worry about suffering or pain or negative people. Fear quitting and fear sinning. I have called today's talk "The Two Greatest Threats to Your Life." Let's pray.

James 1:12-18 states,

*"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone' but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and, sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created."*

Looking at verse 12, James says, *"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."* You know, friends, when we are undergoing one of those many colored trials, you may feel physically awful. You may be incredibly discouraged because of a relationship, someone who has misunderstood you. Somebody who just keeps after you and are a thorn in your side. You hate your job. You are struggling in school.

James is suggesting to us that we often pray the wrong prayers in times of trial. I know what you pray, because you pray probably what I pray. "God, deliver me. Get me out of this. Change the circumstance. Heal me. Fix me. Fix this other person. Get rid of her. Give me more money." In other words, have this trial end.

It is not wrong to pray for deliverance or blessing or an end to the trial. But there are two other prayers that James is encouraging us to pray. I want you to write these down.

You have to pray two prayers when you are being tried. You have to go beyond, “Lord, take this trial from me. Deliver me.” Because sometimes he will and sometimes he won’t. As we found a few weeks ago, sometimes God just allows us to keep simmering on the stove because we are not soup yet. Sometimes God keeps us on the wheel because we haven’t been made into the vessel that he intends to make us into.

So what are the two prayers that we are to pray beyond “Lord, deliver me?” The first is “Lord, keep me from quitting. Keep me from giving up.” And the second is “Lord, keep me from sinning.” These are the two great dangers: quitting and sinning. Lord, give me strength to resist both.

Verse 12: Lord, keep me from quitting. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James mentions a quality here that will gain us the crown of life. It is the same quality that he mentioned in verse 3 that will gain us maturity. It is the quality of perseverance. Before, James said, *“Consider it pure joy, brothers, when you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete not lacking anything.”* The way to become spiritually mature is to persevere. To hang in there. To not quit.

And here, James says that it is not only in this life so that we might become mature, that is stable and discerning and reconciled in our relationships, becoming the person God intends you to be—it is not only in this life that perseverance has a great reward, but in verse 12 James speaks to us about the reward of perseverance in the next life. *“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”*

He is talking about trials. Let's understand James' thought process. When you are in pain in your marriage, in your health, in a relationship, one of the questions that will be posed to you is "Is it worth it?" Is it worth it to keep following Jesus when he is obviously not answering your prayers? Is it worth it to keep obeying Christ and honoring your commitments when you are not getting anything in return? Is it worth it to keep trusting Christ when your financial condition is not turning around and you keep treading water? Is it worth it to keep refusing to compromise in an area, when others seem to be happier when they compromise? "Look at that woman. She slept with her boyfriend and they ended up getting married." You keep refusing to give in and men keep leaving you. "Look at that guy. He got divorced and now he is happily remarried."

Why not just give up? Lots of people do. Why not settle for mediocrity? You had your ticket stamped when you accepted Christ. But to follow God, to radically pursue him, to live a cut above, especially when you are in pain—is it worth it?

Friends, Satan will come along and tell you that the fact that you are fighting means that there is a problem. The fact that you are struggling and wrestling with your emotions means that you have a problem.

Fighting is never a problem. Your wrestling and trials, your difficulties, is never a problem. The problem is always that you might give up fighting. That you might stop striving. That you might quit wrestling. That you might throw in the towel and say to God, "Forget it. It is not worth it." That is the greatest danger you always face: quitting. Quitting the church because someone offended you. Quitting a ministry because someone didn't compliment you or said something rude to you. Quitting school because it is just too hard.

James says, “Do you know the way to eternal life?” The crown of life is, I think, another metaphor for eternal life, the enjoyment of full life with God. He says, *“Do you know the way to eternal life? Perseverance.” “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test, he will receive a crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”*

In that James is echoing something that Jesus said. It is “He who endures to the end will be saved.” Or even more closely what Jesus said to the church in Smyrna in the book of Revelation 2:10. He said, *“Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life.”*

You say, “Rich, I am a little troubled by this because isn’t eternal life just a gift that we receive simply by trusting in Christ? Doesn’t this emphasis on perseverance turn eternal life into a reward, something that becomes almost a work?”

Eternal life is utterly, completely and exclusively a gift. Salvation is a gift. It cannot be earned, bought or traded for. We simply receive it by trusting in Christ and his death on the cross as the full payment for our sins.

Where does perseverance come in then? Perseverance is the biblical test of the genuineness of your faith commitment to Christ. How do you know if you really have trusted in Christ to save you? How do you know if God really has worked in your soul the miracle of salvation? How do you know if it is not just words that you have repeated, but that you have indeed been converted? How do you know if you really possess eternal life? Or if you are just saying you do?

Over and over the Bible says that the only way we know that we really are converted, that we are the genuine article and not some counterfeit hypocritical Christian is because we persevere. Because we stand the test. James says, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test...” And that phrase “stood the test” means when he has been declared genuine. When he has been approved and stamped by the Lord. You

are 100% mine. You are a child of God. Then you will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

You know, so many people are false professors. Let me put it this way. Why does the Bible continually speak to us and tell us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith, to test ourselves? 2 Corinthians 13:5 says that. What is the need for examination? Or why does Jesus speak to us about folks who will be shocked on the Day of Judgment when Jesus slams the door in their face? Isn't it enough to say that we believe? Isn't it enough that we checked off certain boxes and repeated certain words? Why does Jesus in the parable of the sower and the seeds tell us that there are lots of different types of conversion, but only one results in eternal life?

Friends, there really are shallow conversions that do not result in eternal life. There are people who are converted at the level of their emotions. They had a feeling in a meeting. At the moment, they got wrapped up in the mood. So at that mood, they thought they were saying, "yes" to Christ. But then they quit.

Some people are converted at the level of their minds. They agree intellectually with the statement that Jesus is the Christ. That Jesus rose from the dead. That Jesus did die on the cross for their sins. They have been convinced by the arguments that this really is truth. But you know Jesus is not giving us a true/false test. Jesus is looking for a conversion of our wills, the center part of our person.

What I am driving at, friends, is the warning passages of the Bible are there for some reason. They are there to get us to look at ourselves and say, "Are we the real thing? Are we genuine or did we just have a psychological trip?" Has God really entered your soul? How do you know?



The way that you know according to the Bible (and it says it over 3 dozen times in the New Testament) is that you persevere. You keep following Christ in times of trial. Possessors of eternal life don't quit. Professors do quit.

You see I believe that those who are genuinely converted will never lose their salvation. Never. But I also believe that there is only one way to know if someone is genuinely converted. Because they endure to the end. Have we not all met people who, at one point in their so-called Christian lives, were saying that they believed and were following Jesus. They may have even been preaching the gospel. And then they quit. They walked away. They said, "This Christian life is not worth it. God didn't come through for me when I needed him to come through. Forget it."

Have they lost their salvation? No. I don't believe that is the way to understand the Bible. I believe that our genuineness is proven by our perseverance. That many people never had it to begin with.

You say, "But folks were coming to Jesus through this person."

No, they were coming to Jesus through the word of God that was preached accurately. God can use anyone—an unbeliever or a believer in sharing the truth. See, the way the Bible says that we assure our own hearts that we are for real is when we see ourselves in little ways continuing to follow Jesus even when it is hard. When we don't feel him. And you are begging God for some indication that he is there and that he is real and you don't get anything. But you make a decision that you are going to continue to follow anyway. There is a sign to you that the miracle of conversion really has happened in your soul. When the feelings leave and the fruit on the vine dries up and there is really nothing going on that still excites you at this moment, but you still continue. You can speak to your heart and say, "I really have eternal life. I am a saved person."

Perseverance is one of those virtues that modern culture has all but given up on. We love image. As Andre Agassi used to say, “Image is everything.” We love talent. We love people who excite us, who are always doing something novel. Every once in a while, God will bring along an example of perseverance and the country will wake up again and say, “Yes. This is the virtue to be celebrated above everything.”

A year ago baseball was suffering from a major decline in attendance. Something like 30% down because of the baseball strike. People were saying that not only was this not the great American pastime, they weren’t sure that professional baseball had a future in America with all the greed and fighting between owners and players. And then a man came along on a warm September night, a man who was a very gifted athlete, but not the most gifted. He didn’t hit the most home runs. Or run the bases the fastest. Or hit the highest batting average. Or throw the hardest.

A man came along one September evening in the city of Baltimore and almost single-handedly rescued American baseball from complete collapse. The man’s name was Cal Ripkin. And Cal Ripkin did something that was perhaps the most remarkable feat ever done in baseball. He simply showed up and didn’t quit. He didn’t just show up to play one game, or five games. Cal Ripkin showed for 13 straight years. Day in and day out. In an era when ballplayers pull themselves out of games because they are tired. Because they have a rap music record to make. Because they are going to be in a movie. Cal Ripkin went to the ballpark every day and played 2131 consecutive games. His streak, by the way, is still going. He broke Lou Gehrig’s record; a record that was said would never be broken, of consecutive games played.

And the ovation that Cal Ripkin received in Baltimore was perhaps the greatest ovation I have ever witnessed. The fans cheered him, people wept and screamed, for 22

straight minutes as he made his way around the stadium. Every once in a while America gets the message that what is really worth celebrating, what is really heroic, what is really of cardinal virtue is simply perseverance—not quitting.

In Winston Churchill's last public speech, he was in his mid 80's. He was helped to the podium because he could barely walk. Several thousand people were waiting to hear Sir Winston Churchill speak. He stood there for several minutes. It was obvious that he was struggling. He was old. People wondered if he needed help. Finally, the old lion gained his voice and just as he had with wartime England, he screamed out with a booming voice, "Never give up. Never give up. Never, never give up." And then he turned around and sat down. Several thousand people instantly leaped to their feet because they knew they had witnessed the coming together of a life and a message that makes all the difference in the world. In the midst of trial, never give up. Don't quit.

Now James is concerned that people would take a different option other than persevering and following God. He describes that in vv. 13-15. *"When tempted, no one should say 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil nor does he tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when his own evil desire is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown gives birth to death."*

Here is the other great danger that James is warning us about in times of trial. The danger of sinning. The first was quitting. The second is sinning. And surely, we all understand this. That when we are pressured, there is a temptation to become bitter about how we are being treated or to take revenge against someone who has hurt us. To gossip. To seek a more fulfilling relationship than our marriage. To run off and to use our drug of choice, whether it is smoking a little dope or drinking or using pornography or escaping into

work or escaping into computer games—whatever your drug of choice may be. Perhaps it is withdrawing, going to sleep.

James here is laying out a spiritual process, a second one in this chapter, he has laid out one before. A process of trial leading to perseverance, which would lead to maturity. And we saw that spiritual process described in v.v. 2-4 in chapter 1. I described it as God's great mysterious manufacturing process. At one end we drop in trial. We add to it perseverance and faith. And at the other end at the assembly line, out comes spiritual maturity.

But James says there is another manufacturing process. At the top end we drop in trial. We add to it lust and sin. And what is produced at the other end is death. It is not at all the case that trials in the Christian life will necessarily produce maturity. They can produce death.

I think here we must face the issue of choices. Frankly, we spend too little time underlining for people these days the importance of choices. We spend too little time talking with our children about the importance of choices of honesty, choices of friends, choices of environments, choices of dress. "It really doesn't matter what you choose. Who you choose to be with. How you choose to look. What you choose to listen to." Or even, in many cases, how you choose to behave.

In the 90's we have become dulled to the importance of choices. We think that we can continue to be good followers of Jesus and grow to maturity while we make choices that are opposed to Christ. And secret choices, what no one else sees, toward sin, toward vengeful thoughts, toward greed, toward lust, toward bitterness. We think we can harbor fantasies, maintain certain illusions, walk in certain lies. We can make choices and yet, we ourselves will not be affected regarding our followership of Christ.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, once said that every time we make a choice (and he is talking about a moral choice), we are turning the central part of ourselves into something a little different than it was before. When you add up the choices that you make in life, to sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend or not, to lie at your job or not, to obey a calling into a ministry or world missions or not, when you add up your choices, Lewis says, you either become a heavenly creature in harmony with God, with other people and with yourself, or you become more and more a creature of hell that is at war with everything.

I want you to see the spiritual dynamic and process that James is describing. We are being tried. God is not helping you to resolve a relationship. He is not talking to you and giving you evidence of his presence through a feeling, a change in circumstance. He is not healing an illness that you have. He is not fixing your bills. What might you say?

You might say, “Well, God is powerful and over everything. And yet, he is not doing anything for me. Therefore, I conclude that he doesn’t care. He really isn’t that loving toward me. And so, if he doesn’t care, then I am not going to care either. If he is going to treat me this way, then why should I go ahead and continue to serve him. I will just serve my own self-interests. I will do what I want to do. I will grab a little bit of pleasure out of this miserable life. I will jump out of his hand and grab the reins back. I will push him aside. If he doesn’t care, I won’t care.”

Or especially when we have fallen sexually or, again, into some drug of choice we might say, “Well, God knew that my circumstance would be so tough that I would succumb. Why did he let this temptation come my way? Something that he knew I couldn’t handle.”

“Yes, I struggle with unforgiveness, but God put me in that horrible family. Everybody would struggle with unforgiveness in that kind of family. Everyone would be bitter. I have no choice but to sin.”

Here is what James says in v. 13, *“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me’ for God cannot be tempted by evil nor does he tempt anyone.”* Never say that it is God’s fault that I sinned. Never say that God set me up. I had no choice. I am not responsible. My parents are responsible for the way I am. My circumstance forced me to back away from God and to jump out of his hand. Anyone would end up the way I am, bitter and angry, if they suffered as I suffered.

Never say that you had no choice and that God is responsible for your sin. God cannot be tempted by evil. He is totally pure. There is nothing in his nature that would succumb to evil. And therefore God never tries to trip you up. He never tempts anyone. He, himself, is not given to sin and he doesn’t want to see you tripped up by sin either. God’s will for us springs from God’s character. He is pure and he doesn’t want anything from you that is not pure.

Well, why did God allow this trial to continue? Why didn’t God help me with my bills? Why did God keep me cooking on the stove for so long? Why did God permit this relationship to break down? He could have done something.

Yes, he could have. And yes, he didn’t remove the trial. He does allow us to live with very unpleasant people and in very unpleasant circumstances. Sometimes he allows us to live in very pleasant circumstances among pleasant people. That, too, can be a test. But the reason he permits tests to remain in our lives is not so we will fail them. Not so that we will be overwhelmed and overcome. It is because he wants us to succeed. Because he wants us to be approved. Because he wants us to know that we are genuine. He wants us, ultimately, to be mature. To say I made it with God’s help. Yes, God is working in my life. God is changing me. God is incredible. I had no idea that I could be a different person.

This test was in my way, I always in the past got depressed, but with God's help, I rose above it this time. With God's help, I was able to bat that temptation aside.

Unfortunately, we often do blame God or our external circumstances or our families, our parents for why we have become the people we have become and why we have the problems that we do. James says, "Friends, I want to give you a deeper analysis of your problems than modern psychology or therapists in the 90's will give you. I want to go right to the root of the problem and not just the symptoms." The root of the problem is verse 14: *"Each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."*

In other words, the source of our turning from God and sinning is never the devil's voice. It certainly is never God. It is never the pressure. It is never the trial. It is never even the hurting or victimization. The source of our turning from God and taking control of our own destinies is an inner voice in us. The longing comes from inside of you.

We have become a society of blamers where we blame everyone for what we become. And we refuse to look at our own responses, our own choices, or to take responsibilities for our own lives. I couldn't help it - you see, I'm a drug addict; I'm an alcoholic; I am being medicated for depression; I had a terrible childhood. Yes, the stuff did happen to you. Yes. But will you forever live controlled by your parents or your past? Do we have no responsibility for the choices we now make as adults?

James says that we are lured and enticed by our own desires. These are hunting metaphors. By lured he is talking about being dragged off like an animal drags away a prey. We are dragged off by evil desires. We are enticed. That is a picture of baiting where you throw bait out for an animal or fish and draw them in by putting bait out. It is an interesting characterization of sin because in temptation, we often think that we are the hunters. Men

talk about being on the hunt. They are on the prowl. We often think that we are the ones who are out there trying to fulfill that need.

James says, “You are so stupid. You are not the hunter. You are the prey.” What is going on when you begin to open up your heart to sin is you are becoming the hunted. You are being lured and drawn away and baited until ultimately you will be slaughtered.

And you know, James is borrowing from the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 7, which is the end of three chapters on the disaster of adultery, the writer of Proverbs speaks about the adulteress. And he says, *“With persuasive words she led him astray. She seduced him with her smooth talk. All at once, he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter. Like a deer stepping into a noose. Till an arrow pierces his liver. Like a bird darting into a snare little knowing it will cost him his life.”*

If you have an affair, do you think you are the hunter? James says that you are the prey. You don’t know that it will cost you your life. Each one is tempted when by his own evil desires he is dragged away and enticed.”

And then James switches from a hunting metaphor to, actually, a sexual metaphor. I think he is continuing the thought of adultery or seduction. But he says, “Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin...” We think oh, I will just keep this inside of me. It will be my little secret, this choice to be bitter, to seek revenge, to fantasize about a relationship. It will be my secret. No one will know. But this desire that is in us gets fertilized and something gets conceived inside the womb of our own hearts. We begin to bear a child called sin. Sin. You know, that choice to live independently from God. To find joy and happiness without reference to what God says. To leap out of God’s hand and to hold God at arm’s length. To use God as a means toward your goals and your desires rather than have God use you for his goals.



And when you choose to sin, there is an inevitable chain that is unbroken. It will lead to death. After desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin; sin, when it is full grown gives birth to death. Again, we are so deceived. We say to ourselves that this sin is OK and I will still experience full life with God. I will hide this sin in my desk drawer, my bedroom bureau, in my heart. It will be under the covers. And I will still enjoy full life.

James says that sin inevitably produces death. When you choose to sin, you are looking at the powers of death in the universe and you are saying, "Enter me." You are whistling for the powers of death and darkness and you are saying, "Come, invade my home. Fill me."

What does that mean, that sin brings forth death? It brings forth a dead conscience. The Bible speaks very often about the problem of a hard heart or callous conscience. A hard conscience. An insensitive conscience. The more you sin in an area, the less you will cease to feel bad about that area of sin to the point of where you no longer have the capacity to even feel. You can see very often that the first time you sinned in an area that you felt awful, horrible. Your conscience was still alive. It was still sensitive. But by trafficking in a sin, you have burned it over, you have calloused it and it is hard to even feel guilt anymore. The deadened conscience, the deadened feelings, I have seen people so trapped in sin that emotionally they shut down. They become dead. I believe that is why there is so much thrill seeking in the 90's. Why people must use bungee cords and have all of these extreme sports. Hang-gliding and then leaping off the hang-glider without a parachute. Skateboarding on water, while a motorboat comes at us.

I believe all that we are seeing in terms of extreme sports comes from a death of feelings. We no longer can be excited and thrilled by simple conversation. By discovering

love in a pure way. By the thrill of success, or doing well, or accomplishment. Dead feelings.

Sin of course will lead to dead marriages. You just kill your marriage. People through sin kill their relationship with their kids. Does not the writer of the book of Proverbs tell us over and over again that there is a way that seems right to a man but its end is death?

I don't know how many of you used to watch the old Alfred Hitchcock show. But in one particularly scary episode, there was a woman who was a murderer. And the opening scene you see her screaming at the judge, saying to him, "You will never be able to lock me up. I will escape. No jail can hold me. I will escape." This woman is taken off to prison where she discovers that there is one person who has the key to the prison gate. It is an old man who is a coroner. And whenever someone in the prison dies, a bell tolls for the prisoner's death, the coroner comes in and builds a coffin, puts the dead prisoner in and wheels him out through a gate that the coroner has a key for.

This murderer hatches a plan and says to the coroner. "Listen, the next time someone dies, I will climb in the coffin with them. You shut the box. Wheel me out and when we are safely outside the prison grounds, at night I will escape and climb out of the coffin."

In the closing scene, the murderer hears the bell toll. She runs downstairs and sees the coffin in the dark. She climbs in with the dead person. The box is closed. She feels herself being wheeled out, but realizes there are a lot of people around the box. They pick up the box and put it in the ground. They begin to cover it with dirt. She is in the box. It is hot. She is sweating. She wonders why the old coroner is not coming along to dig her out.

What is happening? She strikes a match in the box. And you guessed it. The person who died was the old coroner with whom she had struck the deal.

There is a way that seems right to a man or woman, but its end is death. When you are being tried, do not sin.

James says, “Let me tell you a better road. Don’t be deceived my dear brothers (and that is the nature of sin, by the way. It is a deceiver). Paul speaks about the deceitfulness of lust in Ephesians 4:22. Hebrews warns us over and over again about the deceitfulness of sin. Sin contains with its fantasies, illusions, wishful thinking, rationalizations, and diversions—a thousand ways that sin comes and dulls your mind. You can’t think clearly. You listen to people after they have been picked up for killing someone or stealing something. They are arrested for doing something that they are just personally shocked by. They say, “I don’t know, I just wasn’t thinking.” That’s true. Sin dulls your mind.

James says, *“Don’t be deceived my dear brothers, every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.”*

You say, “I don’t want death; I want life.” James loves processes. Here is his other path. The path toward life. He has shown us the path toward death. Lust leading to sin and sin leading to death. Here is the path leading to life. You say, “How do I find life for my marriage? Inside my soul? For my conscience? For my feelings? How do I come alive?” The source of life is God. Every good and perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of heavenly lights.

You think that temptation is coming from God? Oh no, no, no. Only good things come from God. Temptation comes from within you. That voice, that agreement, that longing, that desire to sin that comes from within you. Yes, Satan may outwardly entice you,

but the inner agreement is inside you. The only thing that comes from God are good and perfect gifts.

And so this new life, this fresh start, this other path that leads toward life it comes from above. Earthly life comes from us, from humanity. But a new life, a new start, a new heart, a new obedience, and a new freedom comes from above, from God.

Jesus talked with Nicodemus and said, “You must be born from above.” That is what James is saying. Every good and perfect gift is from above from the Father of lights. From the Father of heavenly lights who doesn’t change like shifting shadows.

What is James telling us about the character of God? We are so apt to accuse God and get angry with God when he is not removing a trial from us. James says that he is the Father of lights. He is perfect and holy. Light is often a picture in the Bible of holiness. God is not only the creator of the lights in the sky, but he is the creator of light. He is light. In him there is no darkness at all. He is absolutely pure. James is calling us to remember God’s character.

And as we think about God’s character, we must remember that God is absolutely consistent. James is drawing a contrast between the created lights where there is shifting and shadows and God. There is no eclipse when it comes to God. There is no rising and setting. There are no phases to God’s light. There is no obscuring by clouds.

The God that you will go to in times of trials is trustworthy, is dependable, and is consistent. You never go to God and find him different than he always is. God is always going to be a giver. God is always going to be a forgiver. God will never change his position about sin. He will always be radically opposed. You will never be able to go to God and say, “Hey, God, it is the 90’s. Everyone is living with his or her boyfriend or girlfriend. Come on.” God’s view of sin is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And God's provision for help and a way out is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is consistent. This new life springs from God's character. This new life springs from God's choice.

It says, "He chose to give us birth." I like that. If you are converted through the new birth, through the born again experience, it was because God chose to do that in you, to convert you. Your birth into the kingdom of God was not accidental. You were not brought forth into the kingdom as a result of an unplanned pregnancy, a moment of passion. God didn't say, "Oops! I can't believe what just happened." God believes in family planning for his family. Your birth into the kingdom of God was a result of a mature, thought out, planned, wise decision by your Almighty Father in heaven. He chose it.

Think about it. All births are not the result of the choice of the baby, but of the choice of the parents. So it is with supernatural births, births from above, the born again experience. You didn't bring it forth, he did.

Now, there is a moment when you need to receive his will. Friends, I believe that conversion is a gift that is not always offered with the same clarity or intensity. Sometimes, it will be absolutely apparent that what you need is God. Everything will come together. Your feelings. Your circumstances. Your mind. It will all be so crystal clear you will say, "What I need to do is turn to Jesus Christ. I need to do that. I need a new life. I have been dead inside. I have been walking in this other way. I need Jesus."

Conversion will be right there offered as a gift. You must take it when it is offered because it is not always offered. I have watched people as they have had that moment of clarity say, "I am going to wait. I am going to walk away. I am going to think about it for a few weeks or months." They think it is always going to be right out there. The way that it was. It is not.

I have viewed the gift of conversion as being like a person on a merry-go-round that goes by a spot just at one moment. They can reach out and touch someone standing on the side. But if they wait, if they don't put out their hand and grab the hand of the bystander, the longer they are on the ride, the farther away from that outstretched hand they will get. It may take years to come back to the point where they have the opportunity to touch that outstretched hand again.

You know, that is just the reality of God's working. When conversion is offered, by the choice of God, you need to grab it.

How does God offer it? By the word of truth. He brought us forth by the word of truth. That is the consistent way that the Bible refers to itself. Jesus said in his high priestly prayer, "Sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth." I love that. Your word is truth. It is so simple. It is not human counsel. We are talking about divine truth, divine counsel. God's word is honest. It has integrity. It is absolute. Your word is truth.

We have lost that in our culture, have we not? Francis Schaeffer, who was a great Christian thinker, and a very effective writer in the 70's and the early 80's, said that people no longer speak about truth and falsehood the way they did in previous generations. When they talk about what is true, they don't mean what is true universally and has been true forever. They mean what is true now, but not necessarily tomorrow or yesterday. Or what is true for you, but not necessarily true for me. In other words, for people living in the 90's, truth is relative.

Listen, you can't just live your life by the Bible. There are lots of other things that you need to think about.

Well, certainly, there are lots of other things that you can think about. But the truth, real truth, truth that will never turn sour, never grow old, is still found in this book. I know

what folks do. They take the truth and they twist it so that right isn't really totally right. It is mostly right. And wrong isn't really completely wrong, it is sort of wrong. It is a little unfortunate, somewhere between OK and I am not really sure. And no one can lay their trip on me because I need to make my own choices. I need to be free.

But we are not really free. We are all caught up because we have lost the truth. We are brought forth into new life by the word of truth. By God speaking to our hearts words and an offer of forgiveness bought through the blood of his Son which condemns our sin, calls us to radically turn around, to accept the gift of conversion, to follow him radically.

His goal is to make us into a kind of first fruits. The Bible speaks a lot about first fruits. The Old Testament used to have a holiday called first fruits. It was a time during the year when people would bring the first fruits of the harvest to God. The first tomatoes, the first grains, the first crop as it began to ripen was given to the Lord.

James is saying, "Christians, do you understand what you become as you receive new life from this good, giving, consistent being called God? You are the first fruits. The result of God's miraculous choice and work through the word of truth. The first fruits were not just the first in time. They were not just the first in promise and with more to come, although that is what they were. The first fruits were also the best. The portion that was especially set-aside for the Lord. The portion that was holy to the Lord. God's special fruit.

James is saying, "Christians, in times of trial, do not quit. And do not sin. Because you are special to the Lord. Holy to God and set apart for him. You are his first fruits."

Let's pray.