

*THE SECRET AND THE REWARD OF  
CONSTANCY.*

“Happy is the man who endureth temptation : for, when he is approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which He promised to them that love Him.”—  
JAMES i. 12.

WHAT the function of evil is, and why it is permitted to exist, is a question which has perplexed the minds of men ever since they used discourse of reason. It is, confessedly, the most difficult of questions, and many, perhaps most, of the wise have given it up as, for the present at least, an insoluble problem. But the question, so difficult to us, seems to have presented no difficulty to the practical and uninquisitive intellect of St. James. He had solved it, at least to his own satisfaction ; and it may be doubtful whether even yet any better solution of it is to be reached. According to him, the function of evil is to *try* men, to test them, to put them to the proof, to show them what they are and what they ought to be. According to him, evil is permitted to exist, because out of evil and the miseries it breeds are woven these divers tribulations by which faith and patience are proved, and character is made entire and complete. And hence he would have us count it all joy when we fall into divers kinds of trials, adapted to the several elements and bents of our complex nature, and assures us that if we bear these trials with patience, and let patience have her perfect work in us, *we* shall at last become perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.

These trials, moreover, inasmuch as they will quicken in us a sense of our own weakness and folly, will lead us to God, the Source of all wisdom and strength ; feeling our lack of wisdom, we shall ask wisdom of Him, and it will be given unto us. But if we would ask so as to receive, we must ask in faith, nothing doubting ; and thus once more

our faith will be put to the proof and raised to a higher power.

Because trials bring us wisdom, and faith, and patience, we are not to shrink from them, but to glory in them, however *trying* they may be, and even though they seem to put that which is good in us to jeopardy. The rich man is to glory when he is tried by penury, and the poor man when he is tried by wealth, although, and because, these great reverses are such searching and decisive tests of character : for character is of infinitely greater worth than outward conditions, a man's life than the things which he possesseth.

Now, though in these counsels of perfection St. James rises high above the customs and habits of the world, he is nevertheless simply on a level with the thought and admiration of the world. For even the world can say, "The man who wants least is richer than the man who wants much." Even the world, although itself in such woeful haste to be rich, admires above all others men—such as George Washington, for example—who, unspoiled by their elevation to power and fame, have cheerfully retired into obscurity when their services were no longer required, and have put from them boundless means of wealth and self-aggrandisement. And if all the world admires such men as these, can we complain of St. James for bidding us become such men as all the world admires? Ought we not, rather, to be thankful to him for teaching us how to meet the inevitable miseries of life so as to get good out of them, how to make all that is lacking in our outward lot contribute to the formation of a character that shall lack nothing?

In ver. 12 the Apostle sums up all that he has previously said. As he has mused over his theme his heart has taken fire, and he breaks out into the exclamation, "Happy is the man that endureth temptation!" or, "Happy is the man that endureth *trial*!" (for we have the same word here as in ver. 2, though St. James here begins to put darker

shades of meaning into it.) And in this exclamation he assumes that we shall *take* his previous counsels. He has bidden us rejoice when we fall into divers trials; now he pronounces us happy because we have endured them, because we have let patience have her perfect work, because we have sought wisdom of God, because we have risen to an unwavering faith. Elsewhere he says, "Behold, we count them happy that *endure*," calling our attention as to a saying of special worth by the interjection "behold!" And, indeed, we may easily see that it is not enough for our welfare that we should simply be *exposed* to trials, or that we should *suffer* them. If we are to get the good of them, if they are to refine and complete our character, we must *endure* them: *i.e.*, as the word implies, we must meet them with a *cheerful constancy*; we must so inure ourselves to them that we can go to them as the athlete goes to the exercises which develop his strength and courage, go to them with alacrity, with resolution, with pleasure, so that what is hard to others shall be easy to us, *counting it all joy* when we are summoned to the arena.

I know how hard all this sounds, and is, to the ordinary man. But St. James is not speaking to ordinary, but to Christian men. And what is a Christian but a man who is being made perfect—a man who, through the grace of God, lives a higher life than his fellows, and touches a purer happiness? And even if, as yet, we feel that we ourselves cannot endure heavy trials with cheerful fortitude, do we not count those happy who can? do we not wish we were as strong as they? We must admit, then, that St. James is simply uttering an obvious truth when he exclaims, "Happy is the man that *endureth* trial!"

But why is he happy? what is the special good that comes to him and raises him above the common level of humanity? The Apostle hints at one reward in the words, "when he is *approved*," and distinctly states another reward

of constancy in the words, "*he shall receive the crown of life.*" For the phrase, "when he is approved," points to a figure often employed both in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Both the prophets and the apostles represent God as a refiner, who sits by the furnace, assaying and purifying gold and silver, and who, when He has purged them of their dross, stamps them as true metal of sterling worth. He has *proved* them, and He *approves* them. This is the image in the Apostle's mind when he speaks of men as proved and approved by trial. If they endure the fiery process by which they are purged from evil and defect, if they stand the tests which God applies to them, He approves of them; *i.e.* He declares them meet for the heavenly mint, and stamps His image and superscription upon them. So that even in the first phrase a twofold reward of constancy is indicated. If we bear our trials with a cheerful courage, they will purify and refine our character, purging us from those base admixtures by which we are weakened and impoverished. And, again, if we bear our trials with a cheerful courage, God will approve of us, and deign to use us for His service in His kingdom.

That a man should *like* trial for its own sake is no more to be expected than we could expect gold, were it rational and sensitive, to like the fire. But even gold, if it were *rational* as well as sensitive, might well be content to endure the furnace by which its purity and value are enhanced, by which its alloys and defects are searched out and purged away. Nor does St. James demand that we should like trial for its own sake, but for the sake of the happy effects it will produce on us if it be borne with constancy. All that he demands of us is that, since trials must and will befall us, since we cannot escape them, we should learn so to bear them as to turn them to good account, that we permit the inevitable furnace to melt our impurities out of us, that we make the fire a *refining* fire

instead of a consuming fire. And surely this is a demand which, if we are wise, we shall endeavour to meet. We shall not be any the more exempt from tribulation because we refuse to profit by it ; we shall simply put away from us the benefit it is designed to confer. We shall simply be as gold, which must bear the flame, but refuses to be purified by it. Instead of being passed and approved by the great Refiner, we shall only compel Him, if His gracious purpose is to be fulfilled in us, to heat the furnace seven times hotter than its wont. How happy, then, is the man who endures trial with a cheerful constancy—happy in that his character is at once refined and approved !

This twofold reward we might deem sufficient. But God giveth liberally, with a full hand. To the cheerful endurer He is a cheerful Giver. And hence St. James goes on to promise “the crown of life” to as many as endure. But what is this crown of life ? It is simply a life victorious and crowned ; or, in other words, it is a royal and perfected character. Had St. Paul used this image, no doubt his allusion would have been to the garland adjudged to the victorious athlete in the Greek games. But we cannot suspect James, the *Jew*, to whom the sports of the arena and the amphitheatre were an abomination, of such an allusion. He would be thinking of the diadem of royalty, the crown of a king ; and therefore on his lips the promise means that the man who is brave and constant under trial shall rise into a kingly life, into a noble and royal perfection of character ; that he shall be “lord of himself,” whatever he may lack ; that he shall be marked out and distinguished above his fellows as *he* is who wears a crown.

Now I suppose there is no one thing that a thoughtful man, who takes his life earnestly, so much desires, as the reward St. James here promises to those who endure. In every one of us there are two men, two worlds, at strife,

each of which gains the upper hand at times, neither of which ceases to struggle for its lost supremacy. It is because of this duplicity, this doubleness of nature, and the incessant strife between them, that we are so restless, divided, perturbed. If we resolve to disregard conscience, to suppress our spiritual part, in order that we may serve the flesh and the world, we *cannot* suppress it. Do what we may, it will assert itself at times—yes, and at the most critical times—and assert its right to rule. On the other hand, if we resolve to deny the flesh with its lusts, to break with the world and the world's law, in order that we may obey the voice of conscience and walk after the Spirit, our habits and lusts refuse the yoke; they rise up in mutiny; they surprise us in our unguarded moments; they depose their rightful lord, and usurp authority over us. Thus, within the kingdom of the soul, there is constant war; we never continue in one stay; we are never long at rest. Yet what so hateful to us as this inward unrest and division? What is there that we so heartily crave as the power to rule ourselves, to exert a lawful and royal supremacy over passion and desire, to subdue, pacify, and harmonize the various and conflicting energies, whose ceaseless strife carries havoc through the soul?

Do we in very deed desire it, and desire it above all else? Is it our supreme craving that our bosom's lord should sit calmly and steadfastly on the throne, coercing every mutinous power, bringing down every high thought that would exalt itself against the law of God, and calling back every errant affection that would wander beyond its pale? St. James tells us how we may attain it. Trials, he says, come for this very end, to make us perfect and complete men. If we endure them with steadfast patience, they will work in us a noble character, a royal dignity; they will put a crown on our heads, the crown of life.

And, mark, he is not dealing with mere figures of speech;

or, rather, he *is* dealing with figures of speech, but with figures that simply and accurately express facts which we may all verify for ourselves. The phrase, "when he is approved," points to the figure of the refiner's furnace. But drop the figure, and is it not true, so true as to be a truism, that trials, wisely and bravely borne, refine and elevate character? Do not those who have patiently endured many sorrows acquire a gentleness, a tenderness, a quick sympathy—in one word, a refinement—which, to mere polish and ease of manner, is as tinsel to gold? That other phrase, "the crown of life," is also a figure, a figure which indicates the royalty of character that makes a man lord of himself and equal to any fate. And if, at first, the promise sounds a little extravagant, is it not nevertheless a true and literal statement of fact? Look around you and mark who are the men of whom you are most sure, whom everybody trusts, to whom all are glad to run for counsel or succour. Are they not those who have been put to many proofs, and have stood them, who have been tested by divers kinds of trial, and have borne them with manly resolution and cheerfulness? Are they not those who are known to have long ruled themselves in the fear of God, who have governed their passions and cravings with a firm hand; men who, when need was, have planted themselves against the world, and have overcome it? Ah! happy and blessed men! They have endured temptation, and they are approved by God and man. They have risen to that royal sway over themselves which is the true crown of a true life. The life eternal is theirs, even as they pass through the fleeting and changeable hours of time.

On the other hand, men who cannot withstand temptation, who cannot surmount trial, who are not masters of themselves if certain passions and cravings are excited within them, may be very lovable and kindly; *you* even love and admire them; but you cannot *depend* on them:

their life is not a crowned life; they have yet much to learn, and much to bear, and much to mend, before they can be made "rulers of many things," before even they can rule the kingdom that is within them.

Every part of St. James' promise, then, accords with the plain facts of human life. Trials borne with constancy do refine men, do manifestly win for them the approval of God, do give them a royal self-mastery and control.

But we must not expect to "receive" this promise until we have fulfilled its condition. The reward of constancy is only for the constant. This man, this happy man, of whom St. James speaks,

"is freed from servile bands  
Of hope to rise or fear to fall;  
Lord of himself, though not of lands,  
And having nothing, yet hath all."

And we have not as yet reached that heroic height of virtue. How *may* we reach it? What is *the secret* of that constancy of which the reward is so great? The Apostle reveals this secret in the closing phrase of the verse. "The crown of life," he says, is promised "*to them that love Him*, i.e. to them that love God; or, as we cannot love the Father whom we have not seen without loving the brother whom we have seen, this crown is promised to those who love God and man. Those who *endure* are those who *love*. *Charity* is the secret of constancy; for the crown of life, which is promised to those who love, is conferred on those who endure. Obviously St. James regards the two terms as commensurable, as interchangeable. And St. Paul is of the same mind: "*Love endureth all things*." Both of them teach us that, if we would be constant under trials and temptations, love must be our ruling affection; both lead us to the familiar conclusion that, if we would be perfect, we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves.

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What trials love will cheerfully endure, what sacrifices it will gladly make, we all know in part. And surely we can all see for ourselves that nothing will make a man so steadfast under trial and temptation as a sincere and hearty love for the God who ordains the tests to which he is put, and for the men who will be benefited by his constancy in meeting those tests. What but this love for God and man was it that sustained Christ Himself when He endured the cross, despising the shame? What but this love is potent enough to make us stand fast in the evil day, in hours of weakness when inclination and opportunity conspire against us? He who is animated by the love of God, and who, nerved by that love, is ever studying how he may benefit his neighbours, is not likely to yield to passion, to evil impulses, to the lusts of the flesh, to the love of the world. His heart is preoccupied, and fortified by an affection mightier than all that can rise up against it.

If, then, we would endure, and so endure as to receive the crown of life, let us follow after charity, the bond of perfectness.

S. Cox.