

## ***Blessed Are Those Who Stick With It • James 1:12***

The problems that are encountered by Olympic champions are what enable them to win the prize. If they didn't have stress, pressure and problems to deal with, they wouldn't win. A US News and World Report article stated that "For today's Olympians, as with those of the past, the ultimate proof of toughness lies not in the means but the end: standing on the highest platform when the medals are handed out."<sup>1</sup>

It's kind of surprising to realize that a current news magazine story was also written almost two thousand years ago in the New Testament. Picturing Christians as the athletes and using the ancient Olympics as a metaphor, James 1:12 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."

This is the kind of quote that ought to be written on a 3 x 5 card kept in front of us, put on the refrigerator or committed to memory. These are words that help us understand the toughest times of our lives and interpret them for good. Although admittedly it has sort of a surprising beginning: "Blessed is the person who perseveres under trial."

"Blessed" means happy. James is saying that true happiness is found by persevering under difficulty or trial. It's not saying that troubles or problems or difficulties themselves make us happy, but that those who face them and endure or persevere end up being happy as a result.

There's a good feeling that comes from being a survivor. To face difficulty of any kind is like going into a fight with an enemy who is trying to get us down. When we hang in there and survive the

fight we are the victors instead of the victims. Those that do that have a genuine happiness as a result. It can be a very good feeling! We feel good about God for helping us through. We feel good about ourselves for enduring. We feel strong and successful because we made it.

Have you seen the "after disaster" T-shirts a lot of people wear? They have sayings like "I survived hurricane Andrew," "I survived the flood of 1993," or "I survived the Los Angeles earthquake." People wear them with pride. They enjoy watching others read their shirts. They'll actually slow down to make sure you get all the words. It makes them happy — not that they suffered these trials but because they survived them. They're saying that they encountered something which was horribly difficult and they survived and they're happy as a result.

That's what James 1:12 means when it tells us to "Be happy! Blessed are you when you stick it out under trials."

But "persevere" means more than just survival. It means fighting back against evil with good. It's not just a passive thing. Think of it this way. Everybody has problems — that's obvious. We all have

people who make us miserable, we have illnesses, we have situations that get us down.

So how do we respond?

Some of us respond by running away. We quit the job, leave the relationship, move out of town or simply go and hide. That's not what the Bible has in mind.

Then there are other people who don't fight back; they simply give in. When the problems

***...we don't become Christians because we win; we win because we're Christians.***

come, they surrender to them. They let the bad guys take over their lives. That's definitely not what the Bible is talking about.

But then there are some people who fight back with good. If someone is unkind, they are kind. When someone else is unforgiving, they forgive. When they fail to get their own way, their Christian commitment grows and their Christian character shines in these worst of circumstances.

I was talking to a pastor friend about an experience he had last year. He told me about a man who was diagnosed with cancer and died a comparatively short time later. He told about his conversations with that man over the several months between diagnosis and death. Each time he saw him he said it seemed as if his body had shrunk and his soul had grown.

Now that's persevering under trial! His life was showing that no disease was going to conquer him. Even if he died he was growing in godliness and character. It may have looked as if the cancer won and he lost, but the truth was that he won because "blessed is the man who perseveres under trial."

There is something that I think about often. I'm reluctant to talk about it as often as I think about it for fear that it will appear that I'm always beating the same drum. It is the importance of finishing well.

I was first confronted with the idea through Dr. William Culbertson, the president of the college that I attended. Toward the end of his life he spoke often of his desire to finish his life well. And from every appearance that I could observe, he did. But many people don't. They start well. They begin a new job with excitement and enthusiasm and quality — but give them enough years and when they leave, people are glad to see them go. Many start well in school, marriage, friendships, church, projects or dreams. But then the problems arise

and they get stuck. The trials cause them to stumble and they finish poorly.

Anyone can talk about success or victory. Anyone can start a race. Anyone can claim to be a Christian. But it's finishing the race that really counts. It's sticking with it through the hard times; it's getting back up when you stumble and going on; it's remaining faithful; it's persevering under the inevitable trials that are part of every life's experience.

When I complete all the things that God has called me to be and to do—as a person, as a husband, as a father, as a friend, as a pastor—and when I die, I don't particularly want God or anyone else to talk mostly about when I started or how well I started. They can even skip what I've done along the way. For me, the best thing of all would be for others to say, "He finished well." I can't think of anything better to have written on a tombstone than "He finished well." If that can be said about me, then I'll be a happy man because "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial."

A big part of that happiness for Christians is the reward we will receive. James 1:12 says, "...because when we have stood the test we will receive the crown of life." The "crown" was a Greek word that came straight out of the Olympic games and is also written on the birth certificate of a number of people. It's the Greek word *stephanos* from which we get the name Stephen. The *stephanos* or "crown" was the wreath given to the winners of the Olympic events, much like the gold, silver and bronze medals given today. It was the highest honor and was worn by the victors long after the ceremony was over as an expression of great pride of having been a winner.

The Bible is explaining to Christians that we have "the crown of life" waiting for us at the end of life's race. It's better than a wreath, better than the Olympic gold. It is the crown of life, eternal life,

that we get to wear for all the rest of eternity to come. It is the symbol of faithfulness and of finishing well.

Now when it comes to things like rewards, a lot of us would like to not wait – we’d prefer the gold medal now. But that’s not the way it works.

Olympic athletes don’t get the gold for starting the race. They don’t get silver or bronze medals simply for qualifying. In the process of preparation, if an athlete is attacked and wounded in the knee, no medals are given for that. The medals are not for beginning the race nor are they given for encouragement halfway through the race. Medals are given for persevering — for finishing. As long as they know that the prize is waiting at the end, the athletes keep practicing. They persevere.

It’s the same for Christians. Do we get tired? Do we get stressed out? Do we get pressured? Do we stumble and trip and not want to get up again? Do we have those days where we say I just cannot go on? Yes, of course. We all do. And those problems are our opportunities to live Christianly, to show what it’s like for a Christian to deal with problems. It is not bad news but good news, as strange as it sounds, because “blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life.”

But the question is: Can I do this? I don’t know if I can. I’m not sure that I’m able to keep going on. I don’t think that I can hold up and remain faithful under stress. I’m not sure I can persevere under trial or live Christianly when dealing with the really big-time problems of life. But God says, “Yes you can!”

The answer is “yes” for those who love God

and believe God’s promises. “Blessed are you who persevere under trial, because when you have stood the test, you will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

Let me ask you a question. When it comes to sports or to education or business or any other part of life, do you think that people are winners because they win or do you think they win because they are winners? Big difference. Do you think that athletes keep practicing and trying until eventually they win the gold and on that day they become winners? Or do you think that some people are just born winners? They are the ones that hang in there, that get up when they trip, that persevere

through practices and don’t give up because they were born to win.

I suppose that you can argue the question either way for sports and business and much

of life. But there’s only one way to answer when it comes to Christians. You see, we don’t become Christians because we win; we win because we’re Christians.

When a person loves God and accepts Jesus Christ as Savior, that person becomes a Christian. That person is born again as a winner. Christians are born winners regardless of their past because, at that moment of rebirth, God does something in our spiritual genes that transforms every Christian into a winner. And God promises that every person who is a Christian will, in fact, persevere under trial and will receive the crown of life that God has waiting.

I heard a great true story about a woman who for over fifty years was the cook and director of food service at a Christian camp in the western United States. During all those years she followed

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a common camp practice of providing only one fork per person per meal. When the dishes were collected after the main course before the dessert, campers were always instructed to “hold on to your fork because the best is yet to come.” She said it so many thousands of times that she became known for that phrase.

Before she died she did something that I’ll admit is unusual and memorable. She specified that, when she died, she be laid in her casket and buried with a fork in her hands. Not only did the fork symbolize her life, but she wanted to communicate her conviction that “the best is yet to come.”

How did James say it? “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when you have stood the test, you will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

Are you facing trials that are really difficult and hard? Hold on — because the best is yet to come!

<sup>1</sup> US News and World Report, 2/14/94, pg. 52.

*Faith Matters* is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
612-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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