

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Turns from Temptation*** James 1:13-18

Some of you know that every Friday – my day off – my wife and I go to our favorite coffee shop, *The Third Place*. (By the way, in my humble opinion it's the best coffee shop in town!). Having lived in France for some years, we love good coffee. Not the .....type with all the hype; just the straight stuff. And each week, I order my normal 12oz latte with a croissant. I must say, I relish that time. I love being with my wife and I love my coffee and croissant.

Well, a couple of weeks ago Mary Alice and I were enjoying our weekly date together at *The Third Place*. I bit into that delicious, delectable butter filled croissant and...to my surprise, found myself biting into this (a piece of paper carefully wrapped in cellophane). I was initially confused, intrigued, and curious ... and then somewhat angry. How dare anyone place a foreign substance in my croissant! My curiosity got the best of me and I carefully extracted the paper from my croissant. At that point I realized that whatever this was, it has been placed there intentionally in *my croissant*! Was this a word from the Lord? Or was someone pulling my leg?

As I opened up the carefully folded piece of paper, I began to read: "...but each one is tempted when by his own evil desire for croissant he is dragged away and enticed!" James 1:14. Come to find out that my daughter, Mary Lynne, who worked at *The Third Place* during the summer months, had devised this sneaky scheme!

Well, I do love croissants, but I really don't think I have a serious problem of lust in this area. But I can think of other areas in my life where I need that verse written out on a piece of paper as a constant reminder of the evil power of temptation. And what about you? Can you fill in the blank: "I am tempted when by my own evil desire for \_\_\_\_\_ I am dragged away and enticed."

### **How do I turn from temptation?**

In James 1:13-18 we find some wise words of advice for all of us as we face the daily temptations inherent in the Christian life. So just what is temptation and how do we turn from it? In keeping with his practical bent, James is very specific.

### **Be realistic!**

First, *be realistic*. Notice how James begins verse 13: "*When* tempted..." Just as we saw last week in verse 2, he doesn't say "if" you are tested or tempted, but "when" you are tempted.

The first step in dealing with temptation in our lives is *to recognize just how vulnerable we are*. I'm not exempt. You're not exempt. The person next to you is not exempt. We are all vulnerable. Even Jesus was tempted (Matthew 4:1-11).

Paul puts it this way as he talks about the importance of learning from Old Testament examples:

“...don't repeat their mistakes...we are just as capable of messing it up as they were. Don't be so naïve and self-confident. *You're not exempt*. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else.” 1 Corinthians 10:12 THE MESSAGE

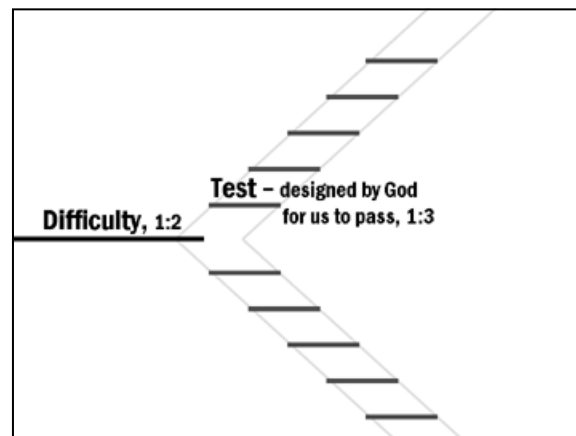
We don't grow *out of* temptation any more than we grow *out of* difficulty. But God does want us to move *through* temptation and to learn to *turn from* temptation. In fact, as we grow in Christ, we may experience an even stronger assault on our faith through temptation.

You might say, “But pastor, I know all too well my areas of weakness and vulnerability to temptation.” And that is good. We need to know our areas of weakness. But the flip side is that the areas in which we consider ourselves to be strong, that very sense of strength can paradoxically be a source of weakness. For we subtly begin to depend upon ourselves and our ability to withstand temptation rather than rest upon God's strength. That's why Paul goes on to say to the Corinthians, “Forget about self-confidence; it's useless. Cultivate God-confidence” (verse 13, THE MESSAGE).

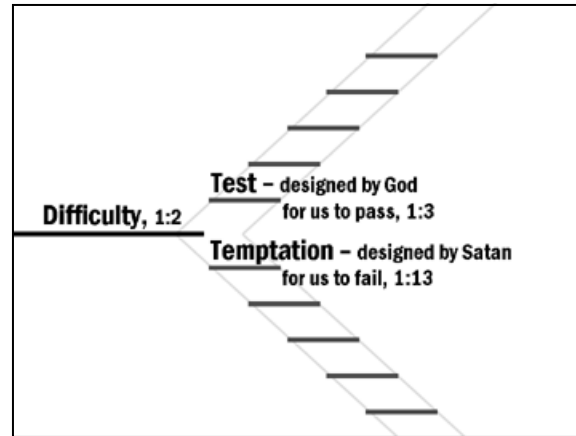
But there's a second observation that James seems to highlight about being realistic in the face of temptation. It's this: *sin is particularly appealing when we are going through difficulty*.

Haven't you found this true in your life? I have. I am the most vulnerable to anger, a quick temper, a lustful look, or a general spiritual apathy when I am physically, emotionally or spiritually spent. And I am most often physically, emotionally or spiritually spent when I am in a situation of stress or difficulty. This fact about temptation is also seen in verse 13. James says, “When *tempted*...” Here, the word translated “tempted” is the same word translated “trials” in verse 2. Only the context can determine the meaning of the word.<sup>i</sup>

What is the difference? I believe we can view it this way. A testing or difficulty in our life is designed by God. His intent is that we pass the test, leading to endurance, greater maturity, and finally blessing and the crown of life.<sup>ii</sup>



But have you noticed this? It is not uncommon that the difficulties we experience can be subtly transformed into temptation. What's the difference? Testings are designed by God for us to pass and – when endured by faith – result in greater maturity and life. Temptations are designed by Satan for us to fail and – when given into – result in sin and ultimately death.<sup>iii</sup>



External circumstances may bring about mental, physical, emotional pain in our lives (as was the case with those to whom James is writing). And it is frequently in the context of pain that you and I seek relief. Pleasure, we reason, is the perfect antidote to pain. And it is here that temptation finds its cutting edge. Jesus provides an illustration of this. It was after fasting in the desert for 40 days and nights that the Devil comes to him and says, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” In pain, there is the temptation to wrongful pleasure.

So *be realistic* when it comes to temptation. None of us are exempt! Never think you can stand against it in your own strength. And pay careful attention to the moments of stress in your life when you are looking for relief from the pain of difficulty.

### **Be responsible!**

Second, *be responsible*. That's what James says next in verse 13:

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil<sup>iv</sup>, nor does he tempt anyone. James 1:13

Will Rogers once said that you could summarize American history into two great movements: the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck! We read in the news that a thief robs a home, severely injures himself in the process, and then has the audacity to sue the owner of the house for damages...and wins the case! We live in a society that plays the “blame game” all the time. We blame our sin on our parents, on heredity, on our personality, or on our environment.

Even as Christians, we can find all kinds of excuses for our sin, even claiming *God* made us with a particular personality, or a particular sexual bent or propensity, or has placed us in such difficult circumstances that we have no choice. We might reason: “If God has allowed these *trials* in my life, then he is also responsible for the *temptations* in my life.” It is amazing how easily we as Christians can subtly blame God for our sin. I've had people say things like: “But God told me to leave my spouse and marry this person!” But if the Bible says one thing and you say another, guess who's wrong?

Of course, there is nothing new under the sun. Adam and Eve did exactly the same thing Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. But actually, Adam does just what James says not to do. Adam ultimately blames God. He says, “The women *you* put here with me.” In other words, “God, you’re responsible for this mess!”<sup>v</sup>

In a similar way, the Proverbs say, “People ruin their lives by their *own* foolishness and then are angry at the LORD.” (Proverbs 19:3 NLT). You see, the real problem for Adam and Eve was not the fruit in the tree, but the *pair* on the ground!<sup>vi</sup>

How do I turn from temptation? Be *realistic*. But also, be *responsible*. Don’t blame God, other people or your difficult circumstances for giving into temptation. Why? Trials come from without, but temptation comes from within. And that’s what we see beginning in verse 14 as James gives us his third word of advice: Be *ready*!

### Be ready!

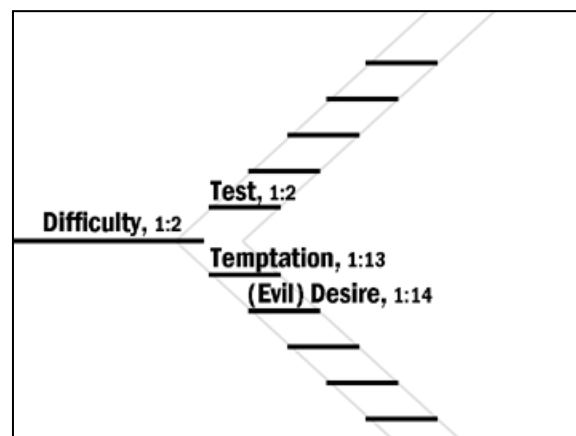
...but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. James 1:14-16

Readiness in the face of temptation is a constant theme of the Bible. Jesus says, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Matthew 26:41). Paul tells us, “Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes you will be able to stand your ground” (Ephesians 6:13).

How can you and I be ready in the face of temptation? In verse 16, James gives us the answer. It’s quite simple and summed up in three words: “Don’t be deceived.”<sup>vii</sup> And James sandwiches that command to you and me right in the middle of four verses that tell us three things about which we are not to be deceived.

#### (1) We must not be deceived about the *strategy of sin* (14-15).

Where does temptation begin? Apart from the influence of Satan, it begins with our own desires.

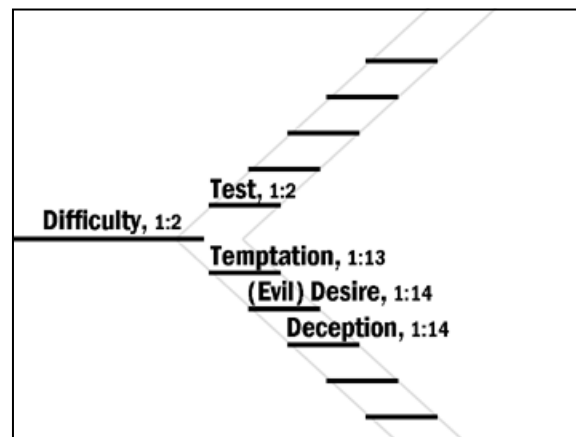


The desires James speaks of are not necessarily bad. The translators supply the word “evil” in this verse, but in the original text there is only the word “desire.” In fact, Paul uses this very

same word when he says, “I *desire* to depart and to be with Christ.” (Philippians 1:23) And the Psalmist says, “I *desire* you more than anything on earth.” (Psalm 73:25).<sup>viii</sup>

What is temptation? *Temptation is the enticement to fulfill what I consider to be a basic need in my own way or in my own timing.* That’s why James uses the word “desire.” God has given us desires and these desires can move us closer to Him. Our real problem with temptation is not that our desires are too strong, but that they are not strong enough. We are too quick to settle for the counterfeit offered by sin, rather than allow our deepest desires to find their true satisfaction in God alone and in what he provides for us.<sup>ix</sup> The psalmist David says: “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the *desires* of your heart.” (Psalm 37:4). And Nehemiah says, “The joy of the Lord is my strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). How is that? As you and I find our deepest desires met in God, that bring us joy. And that very joy in the Lord is our strength against temptation.

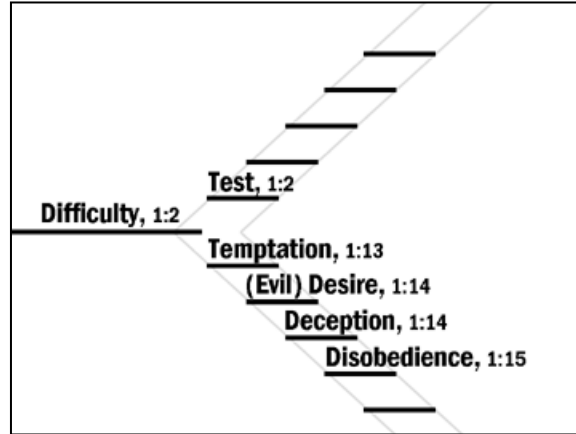
The next step in temptation, however, moves us from desire to *deception*. You see, sin *appears* to be what you want and need. But in *appearing* to be what we want and need, sin deceives. Sin doesn’t just happen. It is birthed in the connection between desire and deceit. When desire and deception are combined, it makes for sin. Notice again what James says in verse 14:



This graphic description of the pathway to destruction comes from the fishing industry.<sup>x</sup> Picture in your minds a fish underwater. The fish, appearing somewhat timid and fearful, stays close to a rock on the sea floor. But suddenly the fisherman’s bait is cast into the water. Eyeing it, the fish is enticed from its position of relative safety, swimming around it as if to evaluate what appears to be too good to be true. Suddenly, the fish bites, only to discover the dreadful hook hidden within, and is dragged away into the fisherman’s possession.<sup>xi</sup>

The secret of great fishing is in the type of bait you use. After all, when was the last time you caught a fish with a bare hook? So also, the deceitfulness of sin is found, not so much in the hook, but in the bait. And Satan knows exactly what bait is best for you. He knows where your points of vulnerability lie. That is why you and I need to make decisions ahead of time. I decided some time ago in my life that there are certain things I don’t do, certain places I don’t go and certain things I don’t allow through my eye gate. Why? Because I want to steer clear of that enticing bait with the hook in it. By the way, it is not a sin to be tempted. Jesus was tempted by Satan. Temptation is the invitation to do wrong; sin is the act of doing wrong. It is not sin to see a baited hook.

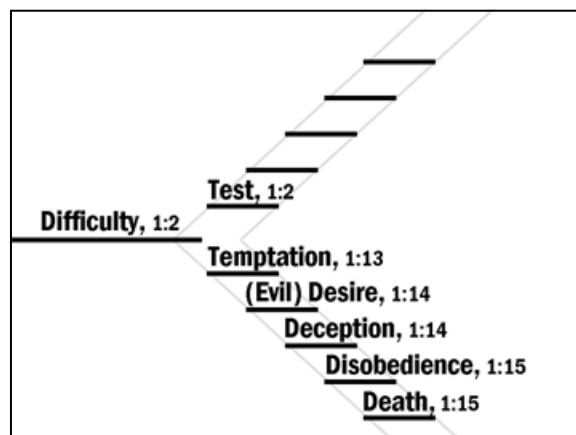
The next step in the downward slide of temptation is *disobedience*. Evil desire coupled with deception leads to disobedience. Satan first gets our *attention* through our desires. Then he manipulates our *attitude* by means of deception, and then leads us to a sinful *act* which is disobedience. In verse 15 James takes us from the fishing industry to the maternity ward, where he depicts the relationship between desire and deception as “giving birth” to sin.



As followers of Jesus Christ, you and I must not compromise in this area. Paul says: “...we take captive every thought to make it *obedient* to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of *disobedience*...” (2 Corinthians 10:5-6).

Is this your attitude towards sin in your life? Far too many of us take sin are far too lightly. As for James, he calls sin, sin. James does not redefine sin, downplay sin or dismiss sin. He speaks unabashedly of “impurity,” “moral filth,” “adultery,” “slander,” and “pride.” And he calls you and me to repent. Do you call sin for what it is in your life? There is no room for compromise.

Desire...deception...disobedience...and ultimately death: “And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (verse 15).



Sin is depicted as a woman giving who conceives and gives birth. The paradox, however, is that the birth only results in a still birth, death. Isn't that rather paradoxical: “sin *gives birth* to death?” Since when did birth result in death? It *always* does with sin. You never find in sin what you enter sin to find. James highlights here the contrast with the end result of enduring testing. Such testing, when responded to in faith, brings about maturity in our lives. But sin, on the other

hand, when “full-grown,” brings only death. “Sin, when it is *full-grown...*” is the dark “mirror image” of the maturity that characterizes the one who endures testing in verse 4.<sup>xii</sup>

We are all free to make choices in life. But we are not free to choose the consequences of those choices.<sup>xiii</sup> As for sin, it’s a dead end street. Sin is lethal. It kills. It causes our inner person to crumple up and die. It breaks up marriages and families. It snuffs out our prayers. It freezes up our passion for good and for God.<sup>xiv</sup>

## **(2) We must not be deceived about the character of God (17).**

In helping you and me be ready for temptation, James tells us: “Don’t be deceived.” First, don’t be deceived about the strategy of sin. Second, don’t be deceived about the true character of God.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift<sup>xv</sup> is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.  
James 1:17

I wear on my finger my wedding ring. I’ve probably taken it off no more than 10 times in the last 29 years. Engraved on the inside is this verse, James 1:17. When Mary Alice and I first chose this verse, we were thinking of the “good gift” that God had given to us in each other (though I’m convinced I got the better deal!). While that is true, God’s good gifts are more than the tangible blessings He brings into our lives, such as the people we love and daily provision. These “good gifts” are also the character he develops in our lives by testing, the wisdom He gives in testing, and the blessing and reward promised to those who walk through testing and temptation (verse 12).<sup>xvi</sup>

While sin and Satan give bad gifts, ultimately leading to death, God gives good gifts which reflect his character of light and goodness. While the stars and planets change and are in constant movement, God never changes. The heavenly bodies indicate variation in length of days, the change of the seasons, and in the variation of light. Change is a common feature of all created things. But God is not like that. God is not capricious. He does not change. He is dependable.<sup>xvii</sup>

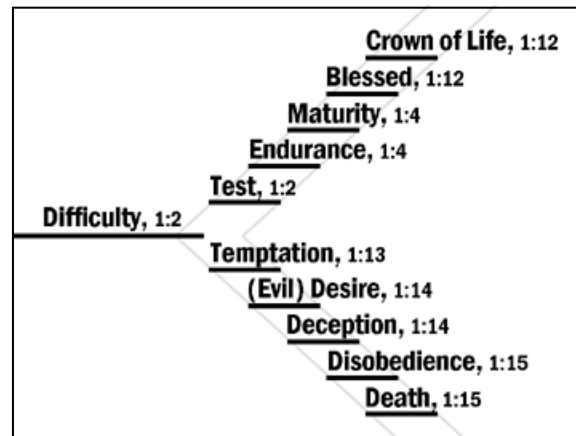
When tempted to sin, remember the character of God. God wants the very best for you. Satan wants the very worst. Don’t settle for Satan’s ploy. But also, remember your identity and destiny in Christ. That’s what James says in verse 18.

## **(3) We must not be deceived about our identity and destiny in Christ (18).**

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. James 1:18

James only hints at here what Paul develops more fully in passages like Romans 6. Our identity in Christ, which includes our destiny in Christ, is one of the most powerful deterrents to sin in our lives. Consistently the Bible calls you and me as Christians to overcome temptation by reminding ourselves of who we really are *in Christ*. Sin gives birth to death. God’s work in our lives gives birth to life. Sin works by deceit. God works by truth.

James outlines for us here the choice that confronts us in every temptation. Will you choose the path that leads to life, or the path that leads to death?



A faith that works turns from temptation. But how? Be realistic... we all face temptation. Be responsible...don't blame your bad choices on others, on your circumstances or on God. Be ready...remember the strategy of sin, the character of God and your new identity and destiny as a believer in Jesus Christ.

I'm sure that each of us can think of at least one area of life where you are struggling to turn from temptation. James tells us to "pray for one another." I want to do that this morning. If you are struggling with a specific testing or temptation in your life and are desirous of bringing that to God in prayer this morning, I'm going to ask that you come here – to the center of the auditorium. I'm going to be the first, for I know well my areas of need. Will you join me here for prayer?

<sup>i</sup> Testing in verses 1-12 is largely external. Beginning in verse 13, James shows how it can also be internal, springing from within. It is not unusual for a word to have different meanings depending on the context. Our English word "sanction," for example, can carry both the idea of "approval" and "disapproval."

<sup>ii</sup> I am indebted to my good friend Dick Pearson for the schematic depiction of James argument here. I have taken the liberty to modify it however.

<sup>iii</sup> God allows us to be tested. He brings testing into our lives to *correct* us and to *perfect* us. But it is Satan working through our own evil desires who attempts to use such tests as a means of tempting us to evil. This was the case in Job's experience. The original readers of this letter could well identify with this very human tendency to give into temptation at a moment of personal weakness. After all, most of them were poor and suffering persecution for their faith. We also gather from certain verses in this letter (cf. 2:6ff) that some were oppressed by the wealthy. In their pain they were tempted to speak evil of God and of others in the church.

<sup>iv</sup> When James says that "God cannot be tempted by evil," he is saying that, though the temptation might exist in the form of deception, God does not concede to the temptation. We know that Jesus, as the God-man, was "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). And John reminds us "... in him is no sin" (1 John 3:5-6) and the prophet Habakkuk says: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (1:13).

<sup>v</sup> After Adam's disobedience, eating the prohibited fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he first blames his wife: "The woman ... here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." (Genesis 3:12). Then the God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman follows suit in the blame game saying, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:13).

<sup>vi</sup> Centuries later, Homer in his well-known *Odyssey* depicts Zeus as complaining: "It is incredible how easily human beings blame the gods and believe us to be the source of their troubles, when it is their own wickedness and

stupidity that brings upon them sorrows more severe than any which Destiny would assign.” Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.32-34 as cited by David P. Nystrom, *James in The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 73.

<sup>vii</sup> The word “to deceive” means literally to lead someone to roam from safety. In biblical days it was used of a ship that gets off course.

<sup>viii</sup> See also Philippians 1:23-24 “I am torn between the two: I *desire* to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” and Luke 22:15 where Jesus says “I have eagerly *desired* to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”

<sup>ix</sup> C.S. Lewis, in a message entitled “The Weight of Glory,” puts it like this: “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” C.S. Lewis

<sup>x</sup> See Ecclesiastes 9:12 — Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

<sup>xi</sup> It was really not different with the first woman, Eve. First destabilized by the words of the tempter (‘enticed’ Gen 3:1-5), she was then attracted by the fruit itself (‘dragged away’ Gen 3:6).

<sup>xii</sup> Nystrom, 74.

<sup>xiii</sup> The Proverbs often speak of the two ways and the consequence of choosing one over the other as depicted by the wise man or woman and the foolish man or woman. Jesus also spoke of the two ways, the broad way and the narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14).

<sup>xiv</sup> Certainly everyone must die in the physical sense. The Bible says: “For it is appointed to everyman once to die, after which comes the judgment.” But this cancer called sin that runs in the veins of all of us results not only in physical death, but in spiritual and eternal death. That means separation from God and, if not remedied, separation from God throughout eternity. The believer who continues in willful sin can be taken from this life (1 John 5:16; 1 Corinthians 11:30; Acts 5:10). Or James could have in mind that idea that sin is simply a “dead end street.” It has nothing of value to contribute to our lives and leaves us barren and dry. The dead end street called “death” stands in stark contrast to the “crown of life” promised in verse 12.

<sup>xv</sup> James uses two different words for “gift”. The first word emphasizes the act of giving, literally “all good giving.” And the second word focuses on the gift itself.

<sup>xvi</sup> Even God’s discipline in our lives is one of His good gifts (Hebrews 12:7-11).

<sup>xvii</sup> The popular deity at this time among the Romans was *Tyche* (Latin, *Fortuna*). She was the goddess of Fortune or Chance (also mentioned in Isaiah 65:11). In fact, the Romans believed that it was Fortune who had entrusted to them the task of governing the world. Popular culture looked to the heavenly, astral signs as determining their personal fate. In contrast, James tells us that it is God who created the very astral signs that some look to for determining their destiny. God as Father has authority over these luminaries (Genesis 1:14-18; Psalm 136:7; Jeremiah 31:35). Nystrom, 76. For that reason, in the midst of difficulty our attitude should be like that of Job: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.” (Job 13:15).