

## **June 13 Sermon**

### **By Emma Thackston**

A few weeks ago, Jo Ruby yelled down the office hallway to me: “Emma! We have to go to this hiking spot. Like, tomorrow.” Jo and I have done a fair amount of hiking together this year; she’s been a great hiking guide to me. But this time there was a sense of urgency in her tone. It was only May, so I was confused as to why we had to get up there ASAP. Turns out, this was a trail called the Sound of Music trail. It’s known for an abundance of wildflowers, and there’s a very small window of time to see them in their full glory. Clearly, my flower knowledge is very limited. So, we did the hike (two days in a row). The flowers were beautiful; I learned their names. We sang “the hills are alive with the sound of music!” while skipping along the trail. It was great. Just two weeks later, I went back with a friend, and the flowers were significantly less alive-looking. They had faded even before the official start of summer.

This morning, we’re continuing in the book of James. In our passage, James uses the short lifespan of wildflowers to warn believers about the fragility of this life. He urges us to take a look at what will fade away, and what will remain. And as we read and hear the Word, we’ll find that James points to God alone as our sure and steadfast truth, the only One who will remain.

So let’s hear from James, chapter one, verses 9-18:

“Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a son has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God;’ for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In

fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

This is the Word of the Lord: thanks be to God. Let's pray.

Gracious God, as we turn to your Word, may Your Spirit be among and within us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen.

Many Bible scholars put the book of James into the category of “wisdom literature.” The Old Testament book of Proverbs is an example of wisdom literature. When you read Proverbs, it can come across as pretty random, jumping from topic to topic. James can feel a bit like that, too. But the book is full of practical wisdom and lessons that we can learn from no matter how it's organized.

As Janet mentioned last week, we believe that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this book. It's clear that James had an extensive knowledge of Old Testament writings and the teachings of Jesus. There are many echoes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount... “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “blessed are those who are persecuted,” “ask, and it will be given to you” - there are many parallels.

There's another echo of scripture in the passage I read. Let's read verses 9-11 again: “let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.”

Did you hear it? Those of you who were here for our Advent series on Isaiah 40 will remember the contrast Isaiah made between us people and the Word of God: “all people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.... The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the *word of our God endures forever* (Isaiah 40:6b, 8).”

In the same way, James brings the imagery of the flowers to remind us that when we put our trust in temporary treasures, we are bound to wither. Our beauty won't last. We'll fall, and we'll be down for good. When we base our happiness in the things we buy or the places we go or the activities we're part of, our lives will fade away in a surprisingly short time, like the flowers on Mount Jumbo.

Now, I don't think James is telling believers to throw away their money or become poor just because. I think he's pointing to the risk of giving too much worth to earthly accomplishments or possessions, putting too much trust in them. When my worth is in what I own or in my skills, I am incredibly limited. When our gaze is only on earthly things, we miss out on the riches of eternal life in heaven, which James points to next.

He writes, "blessed is anyone who endures temptation (who remains steadfast). Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him." I love the word "steadfast," because it implies an intentional, steady moving forward, despite the obstacles that are bound to show up. It's a decision you have to make, to keep running the race. And it's not a race we can run alone - we get to invite the Lord to be our guide and companion through the race.

The crown of life that James mentions contrasts with the withering away earlier. It's life versus death - eternal life versus death. It's what will last versus what won't. The Lord has promised eternal life to those who love him. Last week, Janet brought up the distinction between believing *in* God and believing God. We love God by *believing* Him, *trusting* Him, *looking* to Him, *asking* Him for help in the midst of trials.

After mentioning temptation, James is quick to point out that God is not the one who tempts us. God doesn't trick us or purposely lead us into tempting situations. Instead, because of our sinful nature, we're tempted by our own evil desires, which can ultimately lead to death. James writes, "when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death." So here's another contrast between life and death: endurance that leads to eternal life, or evil desires that can lead to death. We can choose to endure. We can choose to remain steadfast. We can choose to look at those desires and then turn to God instead. It may not be the easy way, but it's the way to life, a life that lasts.

James writes, "do not be deceived, my beloved." He's saying, don't believe the people that say God sets us up for trouble. Don't blame your problems on Him. This only creates distance between us and God. Instead, know where temptation comes from, and choose to remain steadfast.

One of my favorite verses comes next: "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Remember last week when Janet talked about how God loves to help? He also loves to give good gifts, and His gifts are perfect in a way that nothing on earth is.

The description of God as the “Father of lights” is open to interpretation, I think. If darkness is linked to evil, we can think of light as everything that isn’t that. Another way to think of these “lights” is through a celestial lens - the lights that shine continually even when we can’t see them. The sun and the stars, always burning. James describes this Father of lights as one who never varies or hides or changes.

See what I mean about how James can come across as jumping from topic to topic? We have riches being compared to withering flowers, then eternal life in God. Then death from sin, then God’s constancy. But I think James knew what he was doing. He points to things that don’t last: lives centered around worldly treasures and evil desires. And then he points to the things that will last: lives centered around God, characterized by humility and steadfastness and gratitude.

This causes me to pause, look at my life, and ask myself: What parts of my life and myself are like the wildflowers on Mount Jumbo, that fade and wither in the light of the sun? And, what parts of my life and myself will endure and remain in the light of God’s unchangingness? In what ways am I holding onto steadfastness, looking to the crown of life?

Let’s pray.

Father of lights, of everlasting life, of all things good and perfect, we come in gratitude for the ways you help us to remain steadfast in the midst of temptations. We ask for Your Spirit’s guidance within us as we seek to endure to the end, looking forward to eternal life with You. All this ask in the name of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.