

James

A FAITH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN TOUGH TIMES

1:2-4

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2-4).

In God’s curriculum for life, He has a course entitled “Testing 201.” The class yell is “Ouch.” The class’s colors are black and blue. The class motto is, “This too will pass.”

Does testing not seem to be a common experience for all of us? In this handbook of practical Christianity, the first subject James tackles is the difficulties encountered in life. The modern idea that becoming a Christian will make life easier and solve all problems is foreign to him.

A very moving book was written by a Jewish rabbi named Harold Kushner. Kushner tells of his son, Aaron, who suffered from “Rapid-aging” disease. For eleven years, Kushner and his wife watched their son suffer. Four days after his fourteenth birthday, Aaron Kushner died as an old man. Kushner struggled with “why” this had happened and wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Theologically speaking, I cannot agree with the conclusions that Kushner reaches, but, practically speaking, I understand the motivation behind the question. Many have wrestled with the same thoughts. I know I have! In August of

1986 in a period of seven days I officiated or attended eight funerals. Besides losing a beloved elder to cancer, five of our ladies were in a tragic car accident. (Three were killed instantly, and the other two died in the ICU.) Those kinds of times make a person lie awake at night wondering, “Why?”

James begins his epistle with what could be called “Reality Therapy.” He first desires believers to *know* that they can expect the inevitable troubles of life. Second, he wants us to know that our faith in God can make a difference in those tough times.

THE REALITY OF TRIALS

Verses 2 and 3 say, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” James gives five important truths about trials in these verses.

Trials Are Inevitable

James does not say, “If you face trials, . . .” but “When you encounter various trials, . . .” (1:2). The believer who expects his Christian life to be easy is in for a shock. Life always provides some crisis for us to face, some hard decision to make, some hurt to be absorbed, or some illness or accident from which to recover. One can get the feeling that life is a series of problems.

Trials Are Multicolored

When James says “various trials,” he uses a word which might be more accurately translated “multicolored.” The concept that James announces is that trials can come in a variety of ways and forms. Each of the responsibilities we have in life has its own unique accompanying trial. For example, being a parent is glorious and exciting in prospect; yet, as every parent knows, it brings its own set of difficulties and trials.

Trials Are Unpredictable

In verse 2, the verb “encounter” is the same word that Jesus used in the parable of the Good Samaritan when he said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he *fell into* the hands of robbers. . . .” (Luke 10:30; NIV). (Emphasis mine.) It is as if James is saying that any day, at any time of day, some trial is lying in wait, ready to leap on us. In each and everyone of our lives, some devastating trial may be just around the corner.

Trials Test Faith

This is not to say that God causes the difficult, despicable, and devastating events in life to happen to us. It is saying, our faith, our trust, and our confidence in God is put to the “test” when things go bad. It is easy to believe in God and have faith in His promises when everything is going well. But what happens to your faith when you lose your job, are swindled out of your life savings, have been diagnosed as having a life-threatening disease, your spouse leaves you, or your child becomes hooked on addictive drugs? What do you do then? The trials of life put faith in the fire, and pure faith always emerges out of the furnace brighter and stronger.

Trials Create Perseverance

The question that is answered by the “testing” of faith is, “Will it persevere?” Endurance cannot be attained by reading a book, listening to a sermon, or praying a prayer. When trials come, we tend to believe that little point remains for us to continue in the good things we know we ought to do because it seems that we are not being rewarded for the good we do. James says that the only way that patience and character can be developed in our lives is through trials. We must go through the difficulties of life trusting and obeying God!

THE RESPONSE TO OUR TRIALS

Through the years, Christians have had trouble with James 1:2. We have had difficulty with the idea that God wants us to have “joy” from the troubles of life. If that idea is true, should we go out and see how many bad things we can create for ourselves? That, obviously, is not in keeping with the character of God.

Two points from the text must be considered. First, James does not say that the trials of life *are* a joy. Being with our families, fellowshiping with other saints, seeing a person become a child of God—are “pure joy.” The trials of life are not joyous, but we are to “consider” (“count,” KJV) them as such. Second, the scholars say that the word “consider” is in the aorist tense which means the “joy” comes after the trial. Perhaps you have heard the old saying, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” That humorous yet difficult-to-practice statement in a way explains the thought of James. Throughout the Bible, example after example is seen of those who turned defeat into victory and trial into triumph.

We can “consider” our trials all joy for three reasons. Study them carefully:

We can have joy *because of the belief that we know that we are not alone*. We have a loving and powerful Lord who will be with us all the way. The Psalmist expressed it so well: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; . . .” (Psalms 23:4). Not only is our Lord with us, but our spiritual family in Him will assist us through the bad times as well. I remember sitting in the living room of an elder of the church, trying to comfort him in the loss of his wife, when he said, “I don’t know how people who aren’t Christians make it.” When I was officiating at so many funerals, funerals for people I loved, I received several phone calls from other preachers letting me know that they were praying for me.

Testing by trials can be, and ought to be, a time of growth. Robert Browning Hamilton once wrote:

I walked a mile with pleasure.
She chattered all the way;
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with sorrow,
And ne’er a word said she;
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When sorrow walked with me.

The truth of that short poem has been experienced repeatedly. As one studies the Old Testament, and especially the life of David, he becomes convinced that David's relationship with the Lord, as evidenced by the Psalms that he wrote, grew during his times of distress.

James answers the cry of our heart that our faith might be more consistent and our loyalty less erratic. The trials of life are God's testing, and it is only by meeting life's tests that faith grows into a strong, constant practice.

The trials of life provide the opportunity to be more Christlike. The writer of Hebrews said,

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the *joy* set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

Having trials and difficulties in life is not an indication that God does not love us. It means we are living in a sin-cursed world. We must resolve to be more like Jesus and let our faith make a difference in those trials. James says, "And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:4).

CONCLUSION

Trials do not have to be detrimental experiences for people of faith. Christians can grow from the hardships of life. The trials of life provide real opportunities for faith to make a difference. The more faith works, the greater the Christian matures.

Gene Getz, in his book *Believing God When You Are Tempted to Doubt*, offers a personalized paraphrase of James 1:2-4:

I will look at this problem as an opportunity to become more mature and complete in Christ. I will see it as an opportunity to develop my ability to be steadfast in doing What God says rather than what I want to do. I will not allow this problem to overpower me or defeat me or keep me from developing in my Christian life. I will look at this problem as an opportunity to prove to myself and others, that I am indeed a disciple of Jesus. I will look forward to that day when I'm with Christ; joyfully entering into that experience because I have lived for him. Above all else, I will obey God because I love him more than I love myself.¹

—Bill Hooten

¹Gene Getz, *Believing God When You Are Tempted to Doubt* (N.p.: Regal Books, 1983), 27-28.

"Consider It All Joy, . . ."

"Satan tempts to bring out the bad; God tests to bring out the good."

Dr. Griffith Thomas

"Learn to hold loosely all that is not eternal."

A. Maude Royden

Real Joy

The joy James is writing about involves the ability to look beyond the problem or difficulty we're experiencing and see the opportunity to become more like Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it means seeing how God can further His work through the problem we're encountering. Thus Paul could say, as he wrote to the Philippians from a Roman prison, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I *re-joice*. Yes, and I will continue to *re-joice*" (Philippians 1:18).

Gene A. Getz,
The Measure of a Christian

Definition of "Trials"

The Greek word *peirasmois* which appears in James 1 can mean both external trials and internal temptations. In James 1:2 the Revised Standard Version of the Bible translated this Greek word as trials for it seemed to emphasize external hardships; later in the chapter various forms of this same Greek word are translated tempt and tempted, because the emphasis seems to be upon inward desire which entices (or lures) a person to sin. The King James Version uses "temptation" in James 1:2 and "tempted" or "tempt" in verses 13-15; *The New English Bible* uses "trials of various kinds" in verse 2 and in verse 13 both "trials" and "temptation." See also *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips which has "trials and temptations" in verses 2 and 12, and "tempt and temptation" in verses 13-15.

Clifford Walter Edwards,
Christian Being and Doing