

THE TRYING OF OUR FAITH

James wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (1:2-4).

The trying of our faith may be likened unto the variant worth of iron depending on its use; for example, I've read that...

- a blacksmith may take \$5 worth of iron, make it into horseshoes, and get \$10 for them,
- a cutler may take that same iron, make knives, and get \$200 for them,
- a machinist may take that same iron, make needles, and get \$6,800 for them, and...
- a watchmaker may take that same iron, make it into mainsprings, and get \$200,000 or into hairsprings and get \$2,000,000—sixty times the value of the same weight in gold!

What a work-over this poor iron must undergo to be worth as much as \$2,000,000, but the more it's manipulated, hammered, passed through the fire, pounded, and polished, the greater its value!

Since faith is the very foundation of all religious life, trials test the very crux of all that we believe in and hope for. Paul wrote that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). Nothing, then, is so necessary as for us to be confident about our faith.

In this text James made three very important points for us to always remember. Firstly...

Persuasion (Faith) Produces Proving (Tests): "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (James 1:2).

The word "count" here means "to consider," referring to a particular "attitude" about something. The Hebrew counterpart for this word is interesting to note here because it literally means "to lead the way"; it's the idea of going ahead of something else. James was saying that the Christian's mind-set, going into trials, is to be positive, remembering the facts that James outlined relative to them.

The word "joy" (verse 2) refers to that which we delight in or are pleased with, and James even emphasized this by saying "all joy"; this is the "attitude" that James demanded Christians have toward their trials. See, our attitude toward trials is what makes the difference in the end! When we use the statement, "I got a lemon" or "Someone gave me a lemon," we're referring, of course, to some disappointment, failure, or setback. Let's consider the lemon for a moment. In its original state it isn't very useful: few like to eat it as we do apples or pears; it wouldn't be good to fry, broil, or bake, but we can extract the juice, add some sugar and water, and make a delicious and refreshing drink out of it. There are many things like cocoa, onions, pepper, or the lemon that just aren't good alone to most people, but can be made into something very good by certain additions and processes. Likewise, when trials of life seem too great, add faith and prayer, then witness a great change; our Lord promised that "all things work together for good to those who love" Him (Romans 8:28).

Paul was one of those who, though he suffered much (Second Corinthians 11:22-33), regarded it a joy to be counted worthy to suffer for God: he could be sorrowful, yet rejoice (Second Corinthians 6:10); this ability of Paul just goes to demonstrate that our attitude has much to do with whether or not a test remains bitter or is made into something sweet.

Speaking from his experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, Viktor Frankl said, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Jesus left these encouraging words with His disciples: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Notice also (James 1:2) that James didn't say we're to consider it all joy "if" we fall into various trials, but "when" we fall into them; it isn't a question of whether we will or won't, but "when" we will. If a person lives any time at all after becoming a Christian, he will be tried. Besides that the word "when" implies the uncertainty as to the time one may encounter a trial; so they need to be expected all the time and at any time.

The word "fall" here supports this idea because people don't expect to fall when they fall. The word "fall" here is the same word used in Luke 10:30 when Jesus spoke of the man who "fell" among thieves without warning. So just as we should "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks a reason for the hope that is in us" (First Peter 3:15), we should also always be ready for any trial which may overtake us.

The word "various" (verse 2) not only means "many-shaded," but it's also derived of a term from which we get our word "polka dot" which teaches us that not only will our trials come to us at various and unknown times, but they'll also come to us in various shapes and shades. Like polka dots, our lives will be spattered with big and small trials, short and tall trials, and fat and skinny trials, all calculated to work on certain weak areas of our lives. One trial will work on one weak area of our lives, while another will work on another weak area.

The word "trials" (verse 2) refers to "trials directed toward a specific end"; in a good sense, it's an assurance of approval and strength after "passing" the test—we have been proven. Secondly...

Provings Produce Patience: "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:3).

The word "knowing" here refers to knowledge gained through experience, and James could have used it in two different ways. He could have been saying, "Consider it a blessing when you encounter trials, because you know from experience that the testing of your faith produces patience." Or he could have been saying, "Consider it a blessing when you encounter trials, because I am informing you that the testing of your faith produces patience."

The word "testing" (verse 3) means "approved." It's a word found on the bottom of many ancient pieces of pottery unearthed in the Near East; it was a mark signifying that it had come through the furnace without cracking—it had been approved! God's desire is to help us—the clay vessels created in His image—to mature in the furnace of trials without cracking.

Consider the well-rooted tree for a moment: when it's tossed by the storm, it only thrusts its roots deeper into the ground; if it survives the storm, it's stronger because of it, not weaker. It's said that once an elderly gentleman asked a young boy to accompany him to the woods to cut down some hickory trees to make ax handles. They soon came to a cluster of young timber, and the boy suggested they start chopping: "These trees will make good ax handles; won't they?" he asked excitedly. The old man said, "These trees in the lowlands have been sheltered from the storms which rage higher up. Let's go to the heights where the saplings have been rocked back and forth by fierce winds. Those trees have been hardened by the tempest and will make much stronger ax handles."

Writing about the severe cyclones that occasionally visit North Queensland, a traveler observed, "Nature is rational even in her most passionate moments. Vegetation, rank and gross as in an unweeded garden, requires vigorous lopping. These storms comb out superfluous branches, cut out dead wood, destroy decayed shoots, and cleanse trunks and branches of parasitic growths. All is done boldly, yet with such skill that in a few weeks losses are hidden under masses of clean, healthy, bright foliage. The soil has received a luxurious top-dressing. Trees and plants respond to the stimulus with magical vigor, for lazy, slumbering forces have been roused into efforts so splendid that the realism of tropical vegetation is to be appreciated only after nature has swept and sweetened her garden."

The word “produces” (verse 3) means “to work out, to accomplish, to bring about”; in other words, a specific goal or end is assured, and James said that “end” is “patience.”

The word “patience” here means “to abide under”; God’s “Good Faithkeeping Seal of Approval” is applied to those who persevere or abide under the tests that we encounter. This word is not passive, but it refers to a “hopeful, believing persistency, and endurance, bearing up under our own load (Galatians 6:5), and continuing our journey in spite of it, shouldering our burdens with thankfulness, and waiting in calmness upon God's Will in our lives.”

Throughout his letter, not only did James exalt and attempt to instill this virtue, but he once again in 5:11 connected it with the concept of an “end” or purpose for trial: “Indeed we count them blessed who ‘endure.’ You have heard of the ‘perseverance’ of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord.” [Same original word used all three times, translated by the NKJV as “endure,” “perseverance,” and “patience.”]

James spoke of what I like to call “faith-tests” (James 1:3); and there are some great blessings that Christians can acquire from these tests.

One of the great blessings of faith-tests is that they prove to us that we have faith to begin with. To illustrate, if you try to inflict pain on someone's paralyzed leg it won't bother him a bit, but do the same thing to his healthy arm, and the pain he exhibits is proof of the life in that limb. So it is with faith: just to feel the pain of trials and thereby be assured of a living faith is something that should be considered a joy.

Another great blessing of faith-tests is that they purify and strengthen our faith: when a man has come through the fire by reason of his trust in God, when he knows that without that trust he would have been broken and overwhelmed, he learns more trust and is ready for the next, and perhaps even greater, trial.

One more great blessing of faith-tests is its ability to produce patience. As we've already noted, trials test faith, proving whether it's strong and genuine, but it also does something else—it's not only that trials test faith, but this process is continual: no sooner is one trial overcome than another takes its place, which is what produces patience. The temptation in the wilderness was the trial of Christ's faith, if you will, the one great shock at the outset of His mission which proved its quality; it was by the repeated testing of Christ's faith in His earthly life by which He gained endurance. As Paul said, Jesus “learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

One trial may test our faith, but faith needs many tests to develop endurance, and they won't always be “big” trials (such as some tragedy in our family or church): all those little, tiny troubles and problems we have on a constant basis in our lives everyday (such as stubbing our toes or hitting every red light in town) are tests which will produce patience in our lives when we win over them; perhaps these little trials even have more of an effect on producing patience than those giant problems we have from time to time. The strongest men are those who've come through the most; their unshaken trust is the result of many tests bravely endured, until at length, through much tribulation (Acts 14:22), they become “mature and complete.” Lastly...

Patience Produces Perfection: “Let patience have its perfect work that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:4).

The word “let” here involves the idea of “cooperation,” a cooperation that's on-going in our lives: this passage, then, instead of telling us to “give up” when tested, demands us to “give in” to testing, thereby allowing it to do its job in our lives.

The words “perfect work” (verse 4) bring to mind again the concept of “an end” or a purpose; in fact, the word for “work” here is the same as the one in verse 3 which is translated as “produces” in the NKJV—its the ‘end product.’ So by telling us to cooperate with or “let patience have its perfect work,” this passage is teaching us that it isn't enough to go on enduring only for a while or even after suffering for a lengthy time. Rather, we must let or allow patience to have its “full” effect. God is working for and

toward an "end" in all our trials, so it's to our eternal profit to avoid inhibiting that task.

The rest of the words in verse 4 inform us as to what the full effect of provings and patience is: their purpose is to make us "perfect and complete, lacking nothing." The words "perfect" and "complete" here are synonyms: "perfect" means "complete" or "mature," while the word translated "complete" means to be "healthy and sound" and to have "all parts or pieces" (as in a whole puzzle). Trials help us to obtain all the pieces necessary to make us mature and sound in every point. The man whom Peter healed at the steps of the Temple was made "complete"—sound in every part and limb; God's aim for us is nothing less than this, that we should be full-grown in spiritual attainment and developed in all our spiritual faculties and parts.

The word for "lacking nothing" pictures a racing horse left behind in a race; so since First Corinthians 9:24-26 pictures Christians as running a race, and since Hebrews 12:1 admonishes us to run it with "patience," then James was saying that if we allow trials to have their perfect work, creating patience, then we don't have to worry about being left behind like race horse.

Earlier we alluded to the word "various" and how it pictures for us that trials will be of all sorts, shapes, and shades, and this important with reference to our becoming mature in Christ. We hear people speak of the importance of a many-sided education for our children, that no one part of it must be developed at the expense of another; likewise, God designs for us a many-sided training: He trains us so as to cultivate us all around spiritually.

Yes, our dark days are difficult tasks; but the terrible persistency and continuance of trial are really proofs of the faithfulness of God in the working out of His great purpose—that we should be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. We should look to such a hope, because this is the true end of the process into which the soul is placed, and it's possible to count even terrible trials a sheer joy if they lead us there. God is bringing us to glory: all happenings of life must be judged with this in mind, because trials, in and of themselves, may be bitter, even hateful; so, they're never to be judged by themselves, but they're part of a process by which we're being made mature children of God. And, if the last great end—Heaven—is brought nearer by trials, then it's possible even to count it a joy to be in the thick of them!

Noting the connection between James 1:4 and 5, someone once said, "Wisdom appreciates the good points of the worst things that happen." In First Peter 1:6-7, Peter wrote, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Conclusion

Are you tired of long, continued trouble? Tired of waiting for God to come to your rescue? Tired of waiting for that dark shadow to be lifted off your home or your life? Do you face your troubles manfully in the strength of faith? Or do you sink before them into feebleness and despair? There's only one way of turning them into good and making them serve you for the end which God intends: on the one hand, face them unflinchingly in the Master's strength, enduring as seeing Him who is invisible and invincible, and, on the other hand, accept them as the divine instruments of discipline to shape us to God's ideal of what we should and can be, remembering that He won't allow us to be tried beyond what we are able to bear (First Corinthians 10:13).

With infinite wisdom, love, and patience, He lays His hand on us here and there, He allows us to be tested in this way and that, in order that we may enter into life, being full-grown and complete in every part, being neither crippled nor disabled! So, as someone has said, "Trying times are not times to quit trying!"

How are we meeting hardness and troubles? What fruit have they produced in us? Have they made us stronger, purer, and more Christ-like? The winds of testing and trial in this life aren't meant to make us sin, they're designed to enable us to conquer sin. They're not intended to make us bad, but rather good. They're not for the purpose of weakening us, but that we might emerge stronger, finer, and

purser from the ordeal. Temptation isn't the penalty of being a man, it's the glory of being a man; it's the test which comes to man whom God wishes to use. The attitude we manifest toward trials makes all the difference in the world: if we view these trials as challenges rather than depressants, we can face them more militantly, and we can see the great working of God seeking to lift us to greater heights.

Remember this little proverb: "Today's mighty oak was yesterday's little nut which stood its ground!"

*Pain's furnace heat within me quivers;
God's breath upon the flame doth blow.
And all my heart in anguish shivers,
And trembles at the fiery glow.
And yet I whisper, "As God will,"
And in His hottest fire hold still.*

*He comes and lays my heart all heated
On the hard anvil, minded so.
Into His own fair shape to beat it
With His great hammer, blow on blow.
And yet I whisper, "As God will,"
And at His heaviest blows hold still.*

*He takes my softened heart and beats it,
The sparks fly off at every blow.
He turns it o'er and o'er and heats it,
And lets it cool and makes it glow.
And yet I whisper, "As God will,"
And in His mighty hand hold still.*

*Why should I murmur? For the sorrow
Thus only longer lived would be.
Its end may come and will tomorrow,
When God has done His work in me.
So I say, trusting, "As God will,"
And trusting to the end hold still.*

*He kindles for my profit purely
Affliction's glowing, fiery brand.
And all His heaviest blows are surely
Inflicted by a master hand.
So I say, "As God will,"
And hope in Him and suffer still.*

~ Julius Sturm

[Tony E. Denton, August 1993.]