

Trials: God's Means of Spiritual Maturity

JOYFULLY EMBRACING TRIALS

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” James 1:2-4

Trials are something we want to joyfully embrace as God's people because we recognize they are necessary for us to become like Christ in this world, maturing in our expression as the people of God who are the light of the world, manifesting his righteousness, compassion and humility, with the confident hope of the final redemption of all things.

- I. You need your faith tested in trials, so that you can develop perseverance. You need to develop perseverance because ***perseverance is the only thing*** that brings maturity in the kind of character God wants to produce in us.

Romans 5:1-5 -- *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

The trials God allows, and even at times leads us into, are directly related to the quality of character he wants to produce in us: humility, compassion, justice [Cf Hebrews 2:10-11]

- A. Why persevering is so necessary to maturity

Real growth takes place when we actively believe our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father for all He is and all He promises; and out of that context of faith, new obedience comes forth and our character is changed. Trials are the means God uses to work that growth in us.

- B. Persevering in the midst of trial is the means of growth for God's people from Genesis to Revelation

Abraham - the birth of Isaac

Isaac - the births/raising of Esau and Jacob

Jacob - the births of the 12 tribes, the history of sojourning

Joseph - exaltation for God's purposes through betrayal

Israel - 430 years in Egypt; the Exodus

Deut 8:1-5 -- *Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.*

Judges 2:20-23 -- *Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did." The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.*

David's 20 year journey to the throne [Cf 1 Samuel 24:11ff, 26:22ff]

- C. Persevering through trial is how Jesus Christ himself matured and learned obedience

Matthew 4:1ff, cf Hebrews 5:7-8 -- *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*

- II. Why we have the freedom to embrace trials

- A. Our faith is strong enough - that is, the "faith" God has deposited in us

1 Peter 1:3-7 -- *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

When we persevere and see God deliver and discover that our faith will not fail, that in turn gives us a great hope, that will not be disappointed, because we know God's love is faithful and real [*Romans 5:1-5*]

- B. The freedom to endure the trial comes from the "rest" God provides us right in the midst of the trial [*Hebrews 4:1-13*]

This "rest" is the Sabbath blessings and comes to its greatest expression in the Old Testament in the Year of Jubilee [*Lev 25:8ff*]. God provides forgiveness of sins; freedom from oppression; restoration of all things; and overall "shalom."

- C. Recognizing that trial is the way to maturity, and not a road block, means we don't worry about looking for a quick fix.

That means you must take the approach of being willing to stay in the trial until you see God accomplish His purpose [Cf Joseph, Moses, David]

It also means the presence of pain is not the signal it's time for you to quit.

III. What makes up these trials?

James says it: all kinds of things. The stupid, sinful, rebellious things people do (and we ourselves can do), as well as the incredibly evil, destructive things people do (and we ourselves can do), as well as all the "natural" problems of living in a fallen world – sickness, disease, and death, as well as the great spiritual oppression Satan brings against us as we stand in the darkness and be light.

The almost unbelievable news is that there are this many opportunities for us to mature in our faith.

**WISDOM AND FAITH:
OUR CHARACTER AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF GOD'S JUSTICE**

*"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."
James 1:5-8*

Recognizing that trials are the way to maturing the people of God, not a roadblock, we believe that God will give us the wisdom we need not only to make it through the trial to maturity, but also the wisdom to see his justice/righteousness accomplished.

- I. Understanding what "wisdom" is
 - A. God granting you wisdom does not mean. . .
 1. ... He is going to give you what you immediately want: an answer to how to end the trial
 2. ... He is going to show you how to change other people
 3. ... He is going to give you all the details of how a given situation will end, so you can answer all your unresolved questions.
 - B. The heart of God's wisdom for you is this: helping you understand how he wants to change you as you endure the trial, both to thoroughly equip you for doing his will, and then giving wisdom on how to apply/work out his justice and righteousness in your given situation.
 1. God is after shaping your character. He is after teaching you to believe in Him; fellowship with Him and know His love, holiness and power in greater measure; and teaching you to obey Him by making His love known in new and deeper ways [*Phil 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:9,10; Hebrews 12:11; 1 Peter 1:7*]
 2. The wisdom of God is rooted in a leading, directing and guiding of the Holy Spirit that enables you to understand the outworking of righteousness (the Covenant Law of Gen - Deut, given full expression in the Sermon on the Mount) in life today.

Isaiah 11:1-5 (cf Psalm 72); 1 Cor 1:30,31 (cf Jeremiah 9:23,24)

II. “Wisdom” is ours as a free gift

When you go to God to ask for wisdom, He does not measure it out according to your sinlessness; He doesn’t hold your sin against you. You are His son/daughter, who is loved and completely righteous in His sight and He is glad you have come and will generously give you what you need [*cf Luke 11:11*]

III. In order to gain and benefit from God’s wisdom, you must have a humble heart of faith.

A. Genuine faith does not require the total absence of any shadow of doubt. It does mean that you will submit your doubts to the Lord. *If you give yourself over to doubt, you won’t get the wisdom you need, because you won’t be listening to God, you will be listening to your circumstances and the self-justifying character of your sin nature.*

B. Believing God to give you wisdom does mean ...

1. ... you humble your heart to listen

2. ... you acknowledge God’s Word as true, knowing the affirmation of its trustworthiness is Jesus Christ Himself who loved you, died for you, and lives for you

TAKING PRIDE IN YOUR HUMBLE POSITION

“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wildflower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. 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.” James 1:9-12

Recognizing that trial is the way to maturity, not a roadblock, we gladly accept that it is in the midst of poverty and humble circumstances that the greatest opportunity for God’s glory arises.

- I. Poverty - broadly defined - is a place of high esteem in God’s sight
 - A. What that does not mean:
 1. That God wants people to go without food, shelter and clothing
 2. That God is opposed to good financial management
 3. That wealth is a curse
 4. That the place of poverty is equal to righteousness
 - B. What it does mean: poverty helps keep things in perspective
 1. Your resources can become, in a limited way, our focus for determining how much we will believe God to accomplish
 2. The resources themselves can become our rationale for the changes that take shape, and your future hope for good things to continue
 3. God wants you and everybody else to know that trusting God alone is the source of life

Lacking the resources you (and everybody else) think you need, is precisely the place where God is able to work a deliverance that will cause men to acknowledge it is the hand of God alone that has and will work salvation.

- II. We are committed to boasting in our poverty
 - A. Not with a spirit of self-righteous judgementalism
 - B. Not with a spirit of carelessness and irresponsibility
 - C. But with a spirit of glad dependence on God
 - 1. It is a “naturally” hard place to be
 - 2. But the end rewards far outweigh the present costs

SIN IS OUR PROBLEM: GRACE IS GOD'S SOLUTION

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 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. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.” James 1:13-18

I. The Problem of Sin in the Middle of Trials

A. Trials have an effect of exposing deep patterns of sin within us -

If we live by grace, we know this is a good thing, so sin can be repented of and renewal and change take place

B. In a self-defensive reaction we want to blame God

C. Characteristics of a blame-shifting spirit

Cf Saul - I Samuel 15:13ff

II. The Answer of God's Grace: God gives only good gifts; he has in fact given us birth

A. Having given us His own Son, how will he not also along with Him graciously give us all things [Romans 8]

B. Humbly accept the word planted in you, which is able to save you

C. Commit to obedience