

## **The Potential of Trials**

James 1:1-4

The book of James is one of the earliest books of our New Testament. It was most likely written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. James was the presiding elder at the Jerusalem Conference recorded in Acts chapter fifteen. He helped bring together the Jewish followers of Jesus and those, like Peter and Paul, who had seen the Lord open the door of faith to the non-Jews. One idea supporting the early date of this letter is that there is no mention of the Jerusalem Conference, which took place in AD forty-nine. It seems logical that such an important decision would have been included in James' writings.

Some commentators propose the phrase, "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad," dates this epistle after the destruction of the temple in AD 70 scattered the followers of Christ. But this is not conclusive evidence, because at Pentecost, "there were in Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven."

The writings of James are not like those of Paul. Paul often builds a theological foundation and progresses to the practical applications. James jumps right into the practical outworking of the Christian's faith. Most of Paul's writings are addressed to those in a specific location. James' epistle was designated by the early church leaders, "a general epistle." It was written to Jewish followers of Jesus who were scattered throughout the then known world.

It is obvious as we read the book of James that human nature has not changed throughout the millennia. The instruction James gives is very practical. I hope and pray our study in this book will bring you inspiration, challenge, conviction of sin, and spiritual growth. So, we begin our study of the book of James under the title, "Faith That Works."

Our opening text is James 1:1-4. James echoes the teaching of Jesus who taught that trials and suffering are to be expected as a normal part of our Christian experience. Our text outlines what our response should be and the benefits we can expect. If you and I want to develop a faith that works, we must understand the necessity of having our faith strengthened by testing. I've titled the message, "The Potential of Trials."

**Read James 1:1-4**

As we consider the potential of trials, we note several distinct **BENEFITS** they can bring to us.

The First BENEFIT is,

### **They Produce Joy**

James begins by urging us to exercise joy in adversity. In our way of thinking, adversity is always a negative, something to be avoided. But that attitude is not biblical. Adversity is the tool God often uses to develop our inward character and outward obedience. This principle spans the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

James' instruction was initially given to Jewish followers of Jesus. We know there was much opposition to their embrace of Messiah. The majority of the Jewish leaders wanted nothing to do with Jesus. We know how they persecuted the believers by observing the life of Saul of Tarsus. To religious Jews, these followers of the WAY were heretics; a scourge to be eliminated. Yet followers of Jesus had a confidence that was unshakeable and a joy that was unmistakable.

As I think about the potential of trials to produce joy in our lives, the patriarch Joseph comes to mind. After all the adversity he experienced he was able to say to his brothers, *"...you thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive"* (Genesis 50:20).

And, after all the adversity Job suffered he could say, *"He [God] knows the way that I take: when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold."* David, the "sweet singer" of Israel, knew the sharp pains of adversity again and again. Yet out of his pain we gain the riches of the Psalms; encouraging, and even commanding us to rejoice in God our protector.

In Acts 5, after the apostles had been beaten and commanded not to speak any more about the name of Jesus, did they go sulk in a corner? NO! They *"departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."* The suffering, the adversity, was proof of their identification with Jesus. And that brought joy to their hearts. What about you and me? Does adversity bring joy to your heart and to mine?

These examples introduce the question, how can trials produce joy? Here's what A. B. Simpson had to say in answer to that question. "You will have no test of faith that will not fit you to be a blessing if you are obedient to the Lord. I never had a trial but when I got out of the deep river I found some poor pilgrim on the bank that I was able to help by that very experience." We

cannot “weep with those who weep” if we never experience the pain of trial, nor can we rejoice with them. There is much joy in being able to use our experiences to encourage and bless others. And there is also joy in embracing the things in life that really matter.

A man who lived during the third-century was nearing death. During that time he penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians--and I am one of them."

Paul instructed the Christians in Thessalonica to give thanks in everything for this is God's will in Christ Jesus for you. You and I can rejoice in trials because God orders the steps of our lives. In His sovereign wisdom He arranges the situations of life that teach us to understand and experience true joy. You know something? I've observed those who've suffered greatly in the fires of adversity and they have a radiance and a joy about them that is unmatched by those who've lived a life of ease.

The Second BENEFIT is,

### **They Produce Patience**

What is patience? As it is most often used in the New Testament, the word speaks of perseverance. It is the willingness to remain in a certain place and bear with courage the trials and hardships of life. In I Thessalonians 1:3, Paul couples the word, patience, with hope. There is the understanding that some positive result will accrue to those who joyfully endure trials. James says that the testing of our faith produces a cheerful endurance.

What is it about trials that produce patience? And of what value is patience to the follower of Christ? Paul says in Romans 5:3-5, “...*we rejoice in our sufferings also: knowing that suffering produces endurance; and endurance produces character; and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given unto us.*”

J. I. Packer put it this way. “How does God in grace prosecute this purpose? Not by shielding us from assault by the world, the flesh, and the devil, not by protecting us from

burdensome and frustrating circumstances, not by shielding us from troubles created by our own temperament and psychology, but rather by exposing us to all these things, so as to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy, and to drive us to cling to him more closely.

This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort and another -- it is to ensure that we learn to hold him fast. When we walk along a clear road feeling fine, and someone takes our arm to help us, likely we would impatiently shake him off; but when we are caught in rough country in the dark, with a storm brewing and our strength spent, and someone takes our arm to help us, we would thankfully lean on him. And God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn to lean on him thankfully. Therefore, he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in him.”

Suffering trials will make you better, or bitter. My wife’s oldest brother struggled with physical infirmities for many years and finally passed away at age 39. For those who knew him, he was a continual challenge. Whenever we’d visit him, we’d come away encouraged by his cheerfulness, his confidence in the Lord, and his urging to be faithful to the Lord. He was convinced that God had a reason for his suffering and he departed this life with joy and a sense of expectation. He had grasped the reality of Paul’s words in II Corinthians 4:17, 18; *“For our light affliction which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”*

But what often happens when you and I face trials? Our first thought is often, “how can I escape,” rather than, “what can I learn through this?”

I end my teaching on this second benefit with words spoken about Jesus in Hebrews chapter two; *“and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* Jesus patiently endured the severest trials, and even death, because of the joy that he anticipated.

The Final BENEFIT is,

**They Produce Maturity**

James now urges us not to short-circuit God's goal but to let the patience that is produced by testing bring us to spiritual maturity. If we allow God complete control He will bring us to the place where we are complete in Him. The last part of verse four is emphatic, "that you may lack nothing at all, no, not even one thing."

I don't know about you, but so often my tendency is too so easily lose sight of the goal. C. S. Lewis evidently experienced that too because in his book, "The Problem of Pain," he wrote, "I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinary contented condition, when suddenly a stab of pain threatens serious disease, or a newspaper headline threatens us all with destruction.

At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little pleasures look like broken toys. And perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys.

Thus the terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. God has had me for but 48 hours and then only by dint of taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe the sword for a minute, and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over -- I shake myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness in the nearest flower bed. And that is why tribulation cannot cease until God sees us remade."

God's goal is to make us into the image of Jesus, to bring us to spiritual maturity. Ephesians 4:13 tells us God desires that we "*all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*" Little by little, God uses the painful experiences of life to stretch us beyond ourselves and our comfort zone. He allows situations to come into our lives that we simply cannot manage on our own and we are forced to cry out to Him for help. At that point, He can begin to show us the deeper meaning of life and the reality of the unseen. If God the Father saw the need "*to make [Jesus] the captain of [our] salvation perfect through sufferings,*" how much more do you and I need the trials and adversities of life to bring us to completeness in Him?

How is it with you my friend? As you face the adversities of life, do you have the confidence that you are not alone? Do you believe, even though your mind cannot understand

how, that all the circumstances of life are filtered through the hand of your loving, Heavenly Father? Let this poem by an unknown author encourage you as I close.

### **THE REFINER**

He sat by the fire of seven-fold heat, As He watched the precious ore.  
And closer He bent with a searching gaze As He heated it more and more.  
He knew He had ore that could stand the test And He wanted the finest gold,  
To mold as a crown for the King to wear, Set with gems of price untold.  
So He laid our gold in the burning fire, Though we fain would have said Him, "Nay."  
And He watched the dross that we had not seen, As it melted and passed away.  
And the gold grew brighter, and yet more bright And our eyes were so dim with tears,  
As we saw the fire, not the Master's hand, And questioned with anxious fear.  
Yet our gold shone out with a richer glow, As it mirrored the Form above  
That bent o'er the fire, though unseen by us With a look of infinite love.  
Can we think that it pleases His loving heart To cause a moment of pain?  
Ah, no, but He saw through the present cross The bliss of eternal gain.  
So He waited there with a watchful eye, With a love that is strong and sure,  
And His gold did not suffer a bit more heat Than was needed to make it pure!

Let's pray.