

Introduction

The world often asks the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book by the title, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." He believes that if there is a God, he is simply powerless to protect good people from bad things.

There is more than one problem here. It starts with the fact that there are no truly good people except, of course, for Jesus. In addition, the idea is preposterous that God is powerless. But sometimes even Christians wonder why our lives are so hard. Many seem to think that we deserve better or that faithful Christians should expect a relatively trouble-free life. Clearly, it is not so. Suffering and heartache are everywhere. Inconveniences, injustices, and injuries abound. What are we to do with all these trials?

Well, the immediate audience to which James was writing was literally on the move in the wake of a great persecution that arose in Jerusalem. They had left homes, jobs, and family. They were mostly poor and were being mistreated and taken advantage of. Times were truly tough. And the first matter of concern to which James directed his attention was what to do with the trials.

[Read Text and Pray]

In relatively little space James provides some of the most fundamental and helpful instruction every Christian needs for living life for the glory of God. He also packs a whole lot into a little space. It all has to do with trials. And what James says about them can be divided into two categories. He tells us what we need to know about trials and what we need to do about them—what we need to know and what we need to do. And this is how we will proceed this morning.

I. What to Know About Trials.

There are a number of facts about trials that we need to know. Knowing these facts helps encourage us with what we need to do about them. And it is really impressive how many things James tells us about trials in these few words. Here are no less than seven facts we need to know about trials.

A. Trials are unavoidable. They are inevitable and inescapable. You cannot live your life without encountering trials. You cannot live a day without experiencing adversity of some kind. And James indicates it is so. He writes, "Consider it all joy, my brothers, **WHEN** you meet trials." He did not say "IF you meet trials" but "**WHEN** you meet trials." Trials are inevitable for everyone. It does not matter where you were born or where you live. It does not matter what is your social or economic status. You **WILL** experience trials. Christians should not think that being one insures an exemption or a reduction when it comes to them. Some people seem to think that trials are an indication of something being wrong in your life—a sin, a lack of faith. We have this expectation that if we are living right, the days ought to be easy and according to our schedule. We start getting jumpy and agitated when the unexpected and unwanted takes place.

But even the godliest of believers will face significant trials in their lives. Such was the testimony of the Apostle Paul. He was always running into resistance. He had a thorn in the flesh. He was shipwrecked, hunted down, and harassed. He made the Corinthians aware of one trial in particular. He called it an affliction, saying, "we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we

experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death." Not all trials are that intense, but even the Apostle faced them. In fact, Jesus himself lived a life of trial. Every aspect of his earthly life was a test. He had no place to lay his head. He became hungry. He was challenged, hated, inconvenienced, falsely condemned, and executed on a cross.

The point is that we should not act surprised when trials come. Peter reproves his readers saying, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you . . . as though some strange thing were happening to you." Prepare everyday for trials. Don't be surprised by trials because they are inevitable. Trials are unavoidable.

B. Trials are unplanned by us. Trials are by their very nature unexpected matters of life. James says that "you MEET trials." The word here literally means "to fall into." It is the same as what Jesus used when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The man that he came to help is said to have "fallen" thieves. He did not plan to encounter thieves. But he fell among them. From the outward view it was a happenstance. Even so, though God has a good purpose in his providence for the trials we encounter, and though he ordains all the trials we encounter, they are not what we would have wanted or designed.

This is part of the nature of a trial. Trials may well tempt us to wonder what God is thinking or doing or to wonder if he really is there. But even though we do not plan them, we can gratefully acknowledge that God does. Psalm 139:5 says, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." The Lord has his hands of watch-care all around us, and nothing can penetrate his shield without his permission. So, although trials are basically interferences into our plans, they actually are part of God's plan.

C. Trials are tests of faith. By their very nature, trials call our faith into question, and the way we respond either lends evidence to support or deny the genuineness of our confession of faith. What would you say is the most well known test of faith in the scripture? Would you say Job? Would you say Abraham? Job lost everything he held dear except his wife, and then she tempted him saying, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die." Every trial is not the same as Job's but every trial tests our faith. It was the same with Abraham when God instructed him to go and offer Isaac. His belief in and commitment to the Lord was put to the test.

We need to embrace the fact that it is the same for us in every one of our trials. It matters not how big or how small, the question is, "Do we truly trust God?" Because it is the nature of trials to call our trust in him into question. As long as we are untested, we have not demonstrated the genuineness of our faith. But when circumstances seem to mock what we believe, when the chaos tempts us to wonder about God's ordering hand, that is when we are tested. When things are undesirable, hard, unwanted, and unpleasant, that is when testing comes. It happens every day multiple times. Every test is an opportunity to demonstrate the genuineness of our trust. Will you acknowledge this fact and seek to glorify the Lord in every trial?

D. Trials are various. "Count it all joy my brothers, when you meet trials of VARIOUS KINDS." The word here speaks of variegation like with variegated plants. These are more than one color. James is telling us that trials come in various sizes and shapes and levels of intensity. They are different. Not all trials involve taking your son to a mountain to sacrifice him. Not all trials involve the removal of everything precious to you. Some trials are major and some are pretty minor. They vary. Today you may be tested by a tragic event. Tomorrow you may be tested by the temptation to think a

bitter thought. The next day you may be tested by an offense against you. But these testings do include temptations to sin. They are not only temptations but they include temptations. So do not overlook the significance of what seems small. Let how you handle the small things strengthen you for how you handle the bigger things.

E. Trials produce steadfastness. James says, "the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." Steadfastness may also be called endurance or strong consistency. Here you could say trials are to spiritual strength what lifting weights is to strong muscle. Trials are to life as a believer what distance is to a runner. Developing increased stamina requires increased resistance either by the time you run, the distance you run, or by the harder terrain you encounter. Here is where it really becomes clear that trials are undesirable but essential. By their very nature trials are hard and they come against us, but without them our spiritual stamina remains weak. We don't grow.

Couples stand at their weddings and make vows to love one another until death parts them. There they stand at the threshold of a long life together, but their love, as strong as they think it is, is not the strength of love it will become as the years actually wear on. And what makes their love strong? If they hold fast to that love, it grows, especially through the tough times. They will make adjustments to accommodate one another. They will weather storms from outside. They will endure offenses committed against one another. They will forgive one another and be transformed. And the love they professed, when the years have come and gone, comes to be stronger far, if indeed they weathered well the trials.

And so it is with life as a Christ follower. Trials not only provide evidence of genuine faith, they strengthen the faith that is there if it is genuine. So value trials for the role they play in strengthening faith.

F. Trials are known by experience. What I mean is that this important aspect of producing strength is something that you come to see in actuality. It is not merely an abstract theory; it is an observable truth. It is something you can learn by experience. This is the implication of James when he says, "For YOU KNOW that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." According to James this knowledge is something you possess by observation. He is not teaching them this thing; they already know it because they have experienced it to be true.

This principle of learning by experience helps us with what may seem to be a strange saying in the scripture. In Hebrews, it says that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Hb 5:8). It is not that Jesus did not know what obedience was. It is that he came to know it or to learn it by experiencing what he suffered. Even so we come to know not only by principle but also by experience that trials produce endurance; they increase strength.

G. Here is one more important fact about trials. Trials can lead to maturity. When properly embraced, trials will bring the Christ-follower to be what James calls, "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." This phrase does not speak of spiritual perfection as sinlessness in this life. In chapter 3 verse 2, James says that "we all stumble in many ways." What James is talking about is either maturity in our sanctification or it is perfection in our glorification. Perhaps it is both; one is on the way to the other. So this phrase expresses the pursuit of being a mature follower in Christ who is persevering in their faith in Jesus, who in all areas of his/her life is strong and enduring, becoming more and more like Jesus. And this is part of why we were saved. We know that all things work together for good because God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

That is what he is using all things in our lives to work together for. Ultimately in the kingdom, we will be completely perfect when we are glorified.

What you know is important. What you know about trials is critical. What you know about trials will greatly impact your perspective about them. By their very nature trials are unwelcome and unwanted, but they are indispensable to fulfill the purpose for which we were saved and indeed the very purpose we should be wanting to pursue—Christlike maturity. But it is not just what you know about trials that matters. It is also what you do with them. James addresses that as well.

II. What to Do About Trials.

When it comes to what to do about trials, how to handle them, James extends two exhortations.

A. First, he says, "Count it all joy when you encounter trials." Because of what you know about trials, they should actually occasion your joy as opposed to your anger or frustration or disbelief or bewilderment or complaint. But that is not to say that there will not be other emotions as well. Some trials come as events which are sad and heart-breaking. In those cases James is not saying don't be sad. He is not disallowing grief or disappointment. The wording here really is important.

Take the word count. Other translations use the word consider. It is getting at how you look at something. Of what account do you render it? It is what you think of something when you hold it in a particular perspective. And that can change depending on how you look at it. The writer of Hebrews says, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, BUT it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." Put into perspective, discipline should therefore be welcomed rather than resisted. Paul used the same concept but turned the other way. He listed for the Philippians all the things that were gain to him: his lineage, his personal righteousness and zeal for the law. And then he said, "But whatever gain I had, I COUNTED as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I COUNT everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." It did not seem like loss. To the world it did not look like loss. But Paul counted it as loss. It is Paul's view of Christ that led him to consider everything that was gain to him as loss. From the perspective of the surpassing value of knowing Christ, all that was gain to Paul was in fact loss.

So James is saying here in effect:

I know trials are hard. They are unpleasant. They hurt; they sting; they inconvenience; and they tempt. I know that they are seemingly interruptions in the plans you have for your lives every day. I know how horrific is the persecution you are going through. But because of what we know about these trials, we must consider them something other than what they seem to be on the surface. Actually they are an occasion for the settled conviction to rejoice. And so, count it all joy my brothers.

B. The first exhortation is followed by a second in verse 4. James says, "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In other words, allow God to complete the purpose he has for you in the accumulation of these trials. In counting these trials as joy, you are welcoming the work of God in your life through them. Do not get in the way by questioning what is going on or complaining or suffering as though for no purpose. Do not reject the trials but count it all joy when you encounter them and then the intent of the trials will come to pass. It is the only way. Jesus said that the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life. And James is in full agreement. Submit yourselves to God and to the trials he has ordained in your life to complete the process of making you like Christ.

C. James' exhortations are ones we need every bit as much as his original readers. How do you deal with the fact that due to unforeseen circumstances you are running late for an appointment or for work? What is your response when it feels like the whole world has gathered up on your shoulders and the stress is seemingly unbearable? Or what about that deep and searing loss? And that moment of intense temptation when the flesh is crying out for satisfaction and you wish you just would not experience it any more? Or that person that just excites your bitterness? How do you respond when it seems like the unrighteous get all the breaks? If you know and understand the facts about trials, then you can count it all joy when you encounter them. And that is exactly what you should do.

Training and exercise are unpleasant in and of themselves. I mean who likes to get down and do pushups or repetitiously lift weights? Who likes to run sprints? Who likes to train in and of itself? But if you can grasp the final end and purpose of it all, it becomes not so bad. You can count it joy. And so for trials. They are undesirable in themselves. No one should go out looking for trials. But when they come, every single one is a divine appointment for increasing the strength and stamina of the Christian's faith.

It has so much to do with how we think. So much of the Christian's life is putting off the world's way of thinking and putting on heaven's way. Much of our trouble arises out of trying to reason our way in the kingdom with the reason of the world. James is meeting that tendency head-on.

Conclusion

I mentioned earlier that Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered. The writer to the Hebrews points out that, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." Hebrews 12 tells us how Jesus endured a trial like no other: "for the JOY that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame." The joy that was set before him was the joy of obeying the Father and the joy of redeeming lost sinners.

All we like sheep have turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was despised and forsaken, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. And he did it to become the payment for sins. And he calls sinners to turn from sin and trust in him so that they may be forgiven and redeemed, escape the penalty of hell, and possess the hope of eternity in God's kingdom, made like Christ. If you have not trusted in him and taken up your cross to follow him, I invite you to do so today.

He is the model for how you handle trials. He reveals that the question is not, "why do bad things happen to good people?" Rather the real question is, "why would a holy God send his Son to save wicked people?" This text in James reveals also that this holy God actually uses the bad things his people deserve to test their faith and produce steadfastness in them that leads to maturity—to make them more like the Son who died to save them. What a gracious and glorious God!