

# GOD USES TRIALS TO GROW US UP

James 1:1-11

On the second day of the 2003 Tour de France, Tyler Hamilton was caught in a crash involving about 35 riders. He cracked his right collarbone in two places -- an injury he and others thought would make it impossible for him to continue the 2,000 mile race over bumpy roads and steep mountain climbs.

Some people believed that Hamilton was faking the injury because they didn't believe Hamilton could continue in such pain. Hamilton's team appeared on French television with Hamilton's X-rays which clearly showed two fractures in his collarbone.

Hamilton not only continued the race, but he won the 16<sup>th</sup> stage and went on to place 4<sup>th</sup> in the 2003 Tour de France.

This is the stuff of heroes. Such endurance is unusual; it doesn't just appear in the heat of the moment. Grit like that develops through trials. In 1992, while on the University of Colorado ski team, Hamilton broke his back while training, but came back from that injury to compete again. In 2002, Hamilton fractured a shoulder while racing in Italy but still finished second. Later, in August 2002, he fractured his right collarbone colliding with a car while training, yet he continued to train for the 2003 Tour de France. Through enduring each of these trials, Hamilton became one of the best cyclists in the world.

Hamilton had a choice to make in each of these trials – quit and give up or endure and grow.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we too will suffer trials of various kinds. If we don't understand this fact we are likely to become disillusioned with God when trials hit our lives. God never promises to shield us from trials: He does promise to use the trials we go through to grow us up.

This is the message that the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle James to write to his Jewish brothers and sisters who were suffering persecution for believing that Jesus is the Messiah. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of James, chapter 1.

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.**

**James 1:1**

The author of the book of James is most probably the brother of our Lord Jesus who became a leader in the church of Jerusalem. As we see in his greeting, James was writing to Jewish Christians many if not most of whom had been driven out of their homes and out of Jerusalem in a wave of persecution called the *Dispersion* or in other translations, the *Diaspora*. Luke mentions this persecution in Acts chapters 8 and 11.

**...there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.**

**Acts 8:1-3**

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

**Acts 11:19**

For the original readers of this letter, the issue of trials was not theoretical, but very real. They had been violated and violently driven from their homes, their neighborhoods, their careers and their beloved church. Some were forced to move out of Israel as refugees to try and make a living in a foreign country. If people every had reason to doubt God and lose faith in Jesus these people were it. As the head of the church in Jerusalem, James wrote this letter to encourage his flock to continue to trust and obey God in the midst of their trials.

The first thing James does is show his readers

### **GOD'S PURPOSE IN OUR TRIALS.**

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

**James 1:2-4**

Let's first define the word "trial". The New Testament was written in Koine Greek. James used the Greek word *peirasmos* which means *to learn the nature of something by submitting (it) to (a) thorough and extensive test.*<sup>1</sup>

When your doctor makes you take a stress test, he's not trying to kill you! He's trying to find out the condition of your heart and lungs so that he can prescribe things you can do to get healthier.

In the same way, the trials God allows us to suffer in our lives is not for the purpose of destroying us, but for the purpose of helping us grow spiritually.

Let me offer this definition of *peirasmos*:

**A trial is a life experience that puts our faith and obedience to God to the test.**

Now it's important that you hear what I'm going to say next: a trial is not the consequence of sinful disobedience to God. For example, if I embezzle from my company and lose my job, that is not what James is talking about. Losing my job is the consequence of my illegal behavior. If I'm stressed out because of all the debt on my credit card because I had to have the new clothes and the new car and the bigger house that's not what James is describing. The consequences of my choices, the trial James is talking about is something that happens to us as a result of living in this sin fallen world.

You also need to understand that a trial is not a discipline from the Lord for sin in our lives. God does discipline us through circumstances to motivate us to stop disobeying Him and start obeying Him. But the people to whom James was writing were not under God's discipline; they were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (Vol. 1, Page 331). New York: United Bible societies.

Here are some examples of trials as James is using this word:

I was with a couple when the woman gave birth to a son with a rare birth defect which left the baby's lungs undeveloped. Shortly after birth, the baby suffocated to death in his parent's arms. That's a trial that tests one's faith and obedience to God.

Those of us in this congregation who lost homes and possessions in the Cedar Creek and Witch Creek fires experienced a trial that tested our faith and obedience to God.

What the Griffins are going through right now with Mark's illness is a trial that is testing their faith and obedience to God.

**A trial is a life experience that puts our faith and obedience to God to the test.**

So what does the Lord teach us about handling trials?

**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

**James 1:2-4**

**We are going to face trials of various kinds.** Notice that James does not say "if", but "when". We are to count it all joy *when* we meet trials of various kinds. We will face trials of various kinds because we live in a sin fallen world and because we are engaged in a spiritual battle.

**God's intent is to use trials to change us.** James says that God will use the trials we experience to make us, "...perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." James is not talking about sinless perfection, he is describing maturity. God desires to use the trials in our lives to grow us up into mature men and women; to become what He created us to be. Ultimately God wants to use the trials in our lives to make us more and more Christ.

The Bible teaches us that God has predestined us to become like Christ:

**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.**

**Romans 8:28-29**

God uses trials to grow us up into the character of Jesus.

**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

**James 1:2-4**

Third observation: there are two commands in these verses.

**The first command is that we count it all joy when we meet trials** which leads to at least two thoughts: 1) we have the ability to choose our response to trials, that is, we are not victims of our feelings. 2) our joy is not in the trial itself, but in the anticipation of God using the trial to change our character to be more like Jesus.

**The second command is that we are to let steadfastness have its full effect**, that is, we need to persist in the process God is taking us through and not bail out. For instance the couple who's baby had the birth defect were encouraged to abort the baby and end the whole painful process. That's the world's thinking; do whatever you have to do to be happy. But that couple chose to trust God and give birth to their child. They were letting steadfastness have its full effect. As they endured through the trial God continued to reveal Himself to them and used this experience to mature them. Let me give another illustration of letting steadfastness have its full effect:

In my freshman year of high school cross country, our coaches required us to run a series of repeats through a 200 yard stretch of sand dune that was part of our race course. I still remember that workout because of its difficulty. If you've ever run in thick sand on the beach you know what I'm talking about. But we endured the workout. I also remember during that week's race pulling away from my opponents when we hit the sand dune. Through persevering through the trial of the workout it had its full effect in strengthening us for that part of the race.

In verses 2-4 James helps us understand that God allows us to experience trials in order to grow us up. But having said that James does not assume his readers will naturally accept this perspective so in verses 5-8 James explains how a person can develop God's perspective on trials.

### **GAINING GOD'S PERSPECTIVE ON TRIALS**

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup>But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup>For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup>he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

#### **James 1:5-8**

Many times this passage is used to encourage people to pray and ask God for insight on a perplexing situation and I agree that we can and should ask God for such insight. But what I want to suggest to you is that in the larger context of James 1:1-11, James is giving his readers God's wisdom regarding trials. Wisdom is truth applied to life.

James is not assuming that his readers are going to immediately buy into what he has just written in verses two through four just like people today may not buy into the idea that we should rejoice in the midst of trials!

What I believe James is saying is that if initially someone has trouble accepting that trials are to be counted an occasion for joy, they should pray and ask God to give them this wisdom. The promise is that God will answer such a request if it is asked in faith without doubting. God may give this wisdom through other Scriptures. God may give this wisdom through the testimony of saints who have endured and been transformed. God may give this wisdom through personal experience of change through trial. However God does it, James assures us that God will give us this wisdom concerning trials.

This has affected the way I pray for people undergoing trials. I now pray that God will allow them to see how He is using the trial to change them.

You may be struggling with this idea that we are to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds because perhaps you were told that when you become a Christian your problems would go away. Or perhaps we struggle with this perspective on trials because we don't want to suffer. Whatever the case, James encourages us that if we pray in faith, God will change our minds and perspective on trials so that we can count it all joy anticipating the changes that God will make in our lives through the trial.

As James continues to teach on trials, in verses 2-4 he has given us God's purpose for trials. In verses 5-8 he reveals how we can acquire God's perspective on trials. In the final section of this passage James teaches us about the people who suffer trials.

### PEOPLE WHO SUFFER TRIALS

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,<sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.<sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

**James 1:9-11**

For the longest time this section made no sense to me as to how it fit into the subject of trials. Now what I believe James is communicating is that people across the spectrum will suffer trials – from the poor man to the rich man.

The *lowly brother* is a fellow Christian who is financially poor. The *rich man* is a Christian brother who is financially rich.

Why does James encourage the poor believer to boast in his exaltation? The exaltation is that the poor brother is the object of God's love and attention every bit as much as the rich man. God is as committed to the transformation of the poor Christian as he is to the rich Christian. In the world, the rich are noticed and catered to whereas the poor are tolerated at best. But in God's Kingdom rich and poor alike are the objects of God's loving concern and transformation. The poor man will meet trials of various kinds through which God will cause them to grow up to be more like Christ.

But why is the rich Christian to boast in his humiliation?

What do we use riches for? To protect ourselves from trials! The humiliation of the rich brother is God breaking through the protective cocoon of wealth to touch the rich man's life with trial so that he might grow to become like Christ. In the eyes of the world a suffering rich man is a failure – he is a humiliation, but in God's economy he is a success if he counts it all joy and lets steadfastness have its full effect!

No one in the Body of Christ is exempt from meeting trials of various kinds – not the poor nor the rich. Praise be to God that He loves and exalts the poor and humiliates the rich in order to change them both to become like Christ.

## CONCLUSION

1. We can count trials as an occasion for joy knowing that God is using each trial to make us perfect and complete – more like Christ.
2. If we struggle with this perspective on trials we can ask God in faith and He will enable us to understand and accept the truth that trials are an occasion for joy.
3. All Christians from the poor to the rich will suffer trials because God is committed to our transformation.

## APPLY THE PASSAGE:

1. I will evaluate trials as a cause for joy knowing that God is using trials to change me to become more like Christ.
2. I will let steadfastness have its full effect in the midst of my trials so that I may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
3. I will ask God to give me His wisdom about trials so that I can come to the place where I count it all joy when I meet a trial.