

9.7.08 Finding Meaning in Trials and Overcoming Temptation James 1:1-4, 9-16

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Today I'd like to share with you a little about trials and temptations. Trials and temptations come in different sizes, shapes, and forms, from the very large and life changing to the small and inconsequential. Before I went away on vacation in August one of the last things I needed to do was to have some blood taken in advance of my annual physical which was supposed to be the Tuesday I got back. I fasted from the night before and drank lots of water so I was confident whoever was taking my blood could get it out easily. When I sat in the little chair at the office, however, the woman trying to get my blood out had a tough time. She tried at three different sites – two on one arm, one on the other and remarked a couple of times about how I would have bruises, and after three unsuccessful attempts; that was it. I'd have to come back another day. I had to reschedule my physical from the end of August to the end of this week, and this past week I went back to give blood again.

As I was walking in I thought, *"I hope that woman isn't on today,"* and when I walked in I saw another woman, but not her, I was relieved. Then after a few minutes, she followed another patient out of one of the rooms. So I figured I had a 50-50 chance of avoiding the flailing phlebotomist. I was hoping to avoid the trial of being poked and prodded a second time, but you know who called my name. I sat down and prepared for the worst and hoped for the best. She asked if I had been fasting and I said, *"Yes, and I drank lots of water, but sometimes people can have trouble getting blood out of me."* She replied, *"Thanks for letting me know."* I looked away and waited, but fortunately, this time she was successful. As she was putting the little bandage on my arm she said, *"You have three good veins, right there, there is no reason for anyone to have trouble getting blood out of you."* I looked at her, smiled, resisted giving in to temptation, and simply said, *"Thanks."*

The Letter of James is known for its straightforward description of and prescription for Christian living. James wastes little time, just one verse of greeting, before getting right into very sharp and pointed teaching about trials.

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

My brothers and sisters, **whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy**, because you know that the **testing of your faith** produces **endurance**; and let

a Gk *slave*

endurance have its full effect, **so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.**

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. No one, when tempted, should say, *“I am being tempted by God”*; **for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.** But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.”

The Letter of James begins by assuming that we are all going to face trials. Trials, like death, taxes, and change, are inevitable. The church may have tax exempt status, but no one has “trial exempt” status. The question is not whether we will face trials, we will, the question is not, “Why me?”, because trials come to all of us, the question is what will I do when I face trial – what will my response, my attitude, my approach be? If our response is one of anger, avoidance, or alibis it is likely that we will not handle the trial well and the testing will not lead us to growing in maturity and our ability to deal with adversity or hardship.

At first these verses make us wonder if we’re hearing them properly. Whenever I face a trial I’m supposed to consider it a joy? The call of James to consider the trials we encounter a “joy” flies in the face of a pleasure seeking culture that equates suffering with evil and seeks every means possible to avoid trials or to numb ourselves against them. I tried to imagine how our culture would re-write these verses of James. *“Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but some one else’s fault and a big mistake, because you know that you and your needs and self-esteem are sacred. You know that any testing is unfair and any trial is to be met with drugs that numb or a lawsuit because your comfort and ease are what life is all about. Blessed is anyone who never has any difficulty, such a one is lucky and will have a soft and easy life.”*

James not only confronts the reality of our culture, James challenges the longing of Christians for a faith that is secure from trial and test, by insisting that faith matures by what it endures. Do we really believe this? Is it possible to consider our marital trouble,

our family relationship issues, our financial hardship, our physical issues as opportunities to mature and grow and not as a reason to give up hope? Michael Molinos, a 17th century writer put it this way, *"In all your journey as a believer, you will have two categories of spiritual experiences.*

One is tender, delightful, and loving. The other can be quite obscure, dry, dark, and desolate. God gives us the one to gain us; God gives us the other to purify us."

A man was talking to a farmer about his soybean and corn crops. Rain had been abundant and the results were evident. So the farmer's comments were surprising. *"My crops are especially vulnerable. Even a short drought could have a devastating event."* "Why?" asked the man. The farmer explained that while we see frequent rains as a benefit, during that time the plants are not required to push roots deeper in search of water. The roots remain near the surface. A drought would find the plants unprepared and quickly kill them.

Some times we experience the equivalent of abundant rain – blessings, health, financial stability or growth, all is well with our family. Yet when trials come and our stress level increases, we can be tempted to abandon God, or think God is being unfaithful because the roots of our faith have not pushed deep enough below the surface. Only roots that grow deep into God help us to endure the trials of drought and doubt that come in our lives. Pastor and author Chuck Swindoll wrote about our attitude when facing trials:

"Words can never adequately convey the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it.

I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day to day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll, my successes and failures, fame or pain, what other people think or say about me, my circumstances, or my position.

Attitude keeps me going or cripples my progress.

It alone fuels my fire or assaults my hope.

When my attitudes are right, there is no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for me."

Knowing that each of us has faced, is facing, and will face many trials – some of which we bring on ourselves and others that our beyond our control – the issue for us, James

says, is what will my attitude be, because that is within my control. The right attitude keeps us going; the wrong attitude hinders our progress.

The key is seeking to persevere and endure whatever the trial is, recognizing that it will test us and our relationship with God.

Henry Nouwen wrote, *"Your life is not going to be easy, and it should not be easy. It ought to be hard. It ought to be radical; it ought to be restless; it ought to lead you places you'd rather not go."*

Millions of Americans were excited this week by something that had nothing to do with politics - and that is the return of NFL football. I remember watching a Monday Night Football game many years ago between the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants. One of the announcers observed that Walter Payton, the Bears Hall of Fame running back, had accumulated over nine miles in career rushing yardage. The other announcer remarked, *"Yeah, and that's with somebody knocking him down every 4.6 yards."* Even the late, great Walter Payton, one of the most successful running backs ever, knew that everyone, even the best, gets knocked down repeatedly. The key to finding meaning in trials and overcoming the temptation to quit is to get up and keep going with determination and faith.

When I was visiting with my parents in Maine I was walking with my dad one day and we were reminiscing and one of the things we talked about was how my dad would come to my baseball games when I was in high school and college with a camcorder – it was so much bigger than the ones folks use now. It had a big battery pack for power. The instructions for camcorders like that recommend that users allow the battery pack to completely discharge before recharging it, especially for the first few times. This actually increases the endurance of the battery. In a similar way, our trials "discharge" us, emptying us of our human strength and increasing our capacity to rely on and receive God's limitless power.

Booker T. Washington wrote, *"No man should be pitied because everyday of his life he faces a hard, stubborn problem...it is the man who has no problems to solve, no hardship to face, who is to be pitied...He has nothing in his life which will strengthen and form his character, nothing to call out his latent powers and deepen and widen his hold on life."*

When we follow James's advice to face our trials with joy, the endurance and strength we gain enables us to mature and grow up, or as a grandparent may have told you once when you were going through something tough, *"It builds character."*

Gary Richmond in *A View from the Zoo* tells about the birth of a giraffe:

The first thing to emerge are the baby giraffe's front hooves and head. A few minutes later the plucky new born calf is hurled forth, falls ten feet, and lands on its back. Within a second, he rolls to an upright position with his legs tucked under its body. From this position he considers the world for the first time and shakes off the last vestiges of the birthing fluid from his eyes and ears.

The mother giraffe lowers her head long enough to take a quick look. Then she positions herself directly over her calf. She waits for about a minute, and then she does the most unreasonable thing. She swings her long pendulous leg outward and kicks her baby, so that it is sent sprawling head over heels.

When it doesn't get up, the process is repeated over and over again. The struggle to rise is momentous. As the baby calf grows tired, the mother kicks it again to stimulate its efforts...Finally, the calf stands for the first time on its wobbly legs. Then the mother does the most remarkable thing. She kicks it off its feet again! Why? She wants it to remember how it got up. In the wild, baby giraffes must be able to get up as quickly as possible in order to stay with the herd, where there is safety. Lions, hyenas, leopards, and wild dogs all enjoy young giraffes, and they'd get it too, if the mother didn't teach her calf to get up quickly and get with it...

Richmond concludes, *"I've thought about the birth of the giraffe many times. I can see its parallel in my own life. **There have been many times when it seemed that I had just stood up after a trial, only to be knocked down again by the next. It was God helping me to remember how it was that I got up, urging me always to walk with the Lord, under God's care.**"*

If we seek to avoid trials, we will not be successful, they will come to us anyway, and we will remain immature and repeat our mistakes if we don't face them with the intention to learn from them what we can.

If we face trials with the wrong attitude, we will not gain the fruit of endurance, but instead we may see a growth in bitterness and hardness of heart.

Portia Nelson wrote a piece titled: *"Autobiography in Five Short Chapters."*

Chapter 1

I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in. I am lost...I am helpless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again.

I can't believe I am in the same place, but it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it is there.

I still fall in...it's a habit.

My eyes are open. I know where I am.

It is my fault.

I get out immediately.

Chapter 4

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

Chapter 5

I walk down another street.

We shouldn't blame God or the Adversary if we keep walking down the same street and falling into the same hole. We should look for another street.

God may test us to make us stronger and fit for greater service.

Our Adversary may tempt us to try to turn us to evil and to harmful behavior.

When you don't feel like coming to worship, Sunday School, or your group or ministry – who wants you to feel that way? Who wants you to get tired, discouraged, frustrated, complacent, or lazy and to just drift away from participating in and supporting the community of faith – God or the evil one?

On the other side, a recent major study of church attendance and mortality reveals that people who attend church weekly live an average of seven years longer than people who never attend worship services. Researchers say some of the gap may be explained by church's tendency to discourage unhealthy behaviors (assisting people in avoiding temptation, sin, and evil). And the social ties promoted by church attendance contribute to a network of people that monitor the health of members. God and the angels are pleased when we're actively sharing in the life of the church and growing in our faith and we are blessed. Every time an individual or family gets less involved – Satan and his team rejoices.

I so enjoy Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoons – a favorite of mine shows two pitchfork wielding demons overseeing hordes of lost souls condemned to slave labor in some hellish mine. As they look down upon one particular man who is cheerfully whistling as he goes about his toil, one demon says to the other, *"You know, we're just not getting through to that guy."*

Don't let the evil one get through to you, don't quit in your trials, don't give into temptation. When we seek to find meaning in our trials, when we ask for God's help in overcoming temptations, we will find that the testing of our faith produces endurance which moves us further along the path of faith toward maturity, completeness, and wholeness. The Lord promises to those of us who persevere in our trials, who stand in the tests, that we shall we receive the crown of life that Lord has promised to those who love him.

Blessing

Romans 5:1-5 "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that **suffering** produces **endurance**,⁴ and endurance produces **character**, and character produces **hope**,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."