



CONTENTS

1. Our Trials Have a Positive Purpose	7
2. God Gives Us Wisdom to Handle Trials	17
3. God Wants to Mature Us Through Trials	25
4. We Can Trust God Through Trials	35
5. We Can Lay a Foundation That Can Withstand Any Trial	47

1

OUR TRIALS HAVE A POSITIVE PURPOSE

When I was growing up, I used to get irritated whenever my favorite television program was pre-empted by those tests of the Emergency Broadcast System, which would be used in case America was attacked or some other disaster occurred. When it was time for one of those tests, normal programming was interrupted, and a voice announced, "This is a test."

The nice thing about the television tests was that they only lasted about sixty seconds, and then normal programming resumed. Superman always caught the bad guys and rescued Lois Lane, and everything was cool.

But the Bible makes it inescapably clear that life's trials are not sixty-second interruptions, after which things

return to normal and everything is cool again. That's why we need to learn the purpose God has in our trials, the spiritual resources He has given us to be victorious in any trial—and, maybe most important of all, His faithfulness to us throughout the process of enduring our trials.

Let me begin by offering a biblical definition of trials. Trials are adverse or negative circumstances that God either brings about directly or allows in order to develop us spiritually. Trials come in all sizes and colors: physical, financial, relational, emotional, and spiritual, just to name a few. The Bible's most comprehensive statement on life's trials teaches this foundational truth. The apostle James writes: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2–4).

There are several key concepts in these verses that we need to talk about, but the one that usually throws people is the Bible's command to count our trials as "all joy." That doesn't seem to make sense. How can we be joyful in the middle of a trial when everything is going wrong? Remember, trials by definition are negative circumstances. But God steps into the middle of our trials and tells us to be not just joyful but *overjoyed* that these things have come. How can we do this? We can do it because we know something important, which is explained in James 1:3–4.

As negative as our problems seem, they are always there for a positive reason, which is to develop us spiritually. God is not telling us to be joyful about the pain but about the purpose and the outcome of the pain, which is our spiritual completeness and maturity.

JOY VS. HAPPINESS

That may sound like “preacher talk,” so let’s see how we can have overflowing joy in—or in spite of—our trials. Notice first that the Bible does not say, “Count it all happiness.” The reason is that happiness is largely driven by circumstances. It depends on what happens. If your happenings happen to be good, you’ll be happy. You get a raise on the job, and you’re happy. But get a pink slip, and you’re sad.

In other words, happiness is basically a feeling. It is located in our emotions and subject to all their fluctuations. Our emotions cause us to react, not to think. That’s why we jump in fear when the monster appears out of nowhere in a horror movie. When we do that, we are reacting to a complete fantasy that we know isn’t true. But it still has the power to scare us, because emotions don’t stop to take into account whether what we are seeing is true or make-believe. Our feelings respond to the information fed to them, whether it is true or not. This is not the joy that’s available to us when we run into a trial.

ADDING IT UP

The word for “consider” in James 1:2 is a mathematical term. It means to add things up, to take an accounting of your situation. James wants you to add up the reasons for your trials, the growth and blessing that God wants to bring from them, and come up with “all joy” as the correct answer.

James is talking about divine mathematics here, because trials seldom add up or make sense if you look at them solely from the human perspective. Our first re-

sponse is usually something along the lines of “Why is this happening to me, and why now? What did I do to deserve this?”

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You may not have done anything in particular to bring on the trial. James is not talk-

ing about those problems we create for ourselves by our sin and poor choices. (James 1:13–15 deals with these.) We know that from the word *encounter* (v. 2). That means something you run into, not something you bring down on your own head. We will encounter trials just by being alive. They are inescapable.

If your house is like mine, you get mail addressed to “Occupant.” You don't have to be anybody or do anything to get a letter like this. It just finds you because you happen to be living in your house. I'm not suggest-

ing that the trials God sends or allows are random. Just the opposite, in fact. What I'm saying is that all we have to do to be candidates for trials is to occupy space on this planet. Jesus told His disciples, "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

THIS WILL BE ON THE TEST

Trials are unavoidable—but that doesn't mean they have to be unprofitable. When God tests you, it's time to learn another lesson so you can move to the next spiritual level. Like a good teacher, God tests us to prepare us for the next grade in life.

You probably remember being tested in school to see if you were ready to advance to the next grade. The bad news was that you had to take the test, but the good news was that when you passed it you demonstrated that you were ready for the next level. Of course, once you got to the next grade you also encountered a new level of testing, but that was part of the process.

God has the same purpose of growth and advancement in mind for us when He tests us. You can count it all joy that God takes the time to test you, because it means God is calling you to move on. He wants to see you succeed so you will grow.

We often complain that our trials are too hard for us, but think about it. Aren't you glad you aren't still struggling with the same temptations and obstacles you faced

as a new believer (if that is truly the case)? I sincerely hope that, if you have been a Christian for some time, you have made enough spiritual progress that you can look back and say, "Oh yes, I used to really wrestle with that issue. But I've learned some valuable lessons that have made that problem seem to fade away."

Now don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about being perfect but about growing toward maturity. Can you imagine anything sadder than a forty-year-old man who is still fighting the temptation to steal change from his daddy's dresser or swipe a cookie from his mama's jar? But this is exactly where a lot of Christians are in their lives. They aren't passing God's tests, so they are stuck in kindergarten, spiritually speaking.

You need to know some other things about the trials God sends. Like a good teacher, God only tests you on information that is available to you in His Word. So if you are going through a trial, you can ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the truth or the lesson God wants you to know.

You also need to know that God believes in retesting until you pass. So if you don't want to be an adult sitting in a kindergartener's chair, take heed to the trial you are in and make sure you are diligently seeking God's mind on it. You can do that with confidence because James 1:3 says that God has a good purpose behind it.

OUR TRIALS ARE CUSTOM-MADE

Another important aspect of our trials and their purpose is that your trials and mine are designed with our names on them. They are custom-made. This means, for instance, that you can't say to God, "Why do I have to go through this physical suffering when Joe and all my other friends are feeling great?" Neither can Joe say to the Lord, "I don't understand why I'm struggling so hard financially and barely making it when Pete and the other guys are paying their bills easily."

Peter had this problem, as described in John 21:18–22. Jesus had risen from the dead and was restoring the disciples, and Peter in particular, to the ministry. Jesus told Peter he was going to die a martyr's death.

But Peter seemed to be more interested in the trials God had in store for John, because Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" (v. 21). Jesus answered by telling Peter that John's future was none of Peter's business. "You follow Me!" (v. 22) was all that my man Pete needed to know.

IT'S IMPORTANT NOT TO QUIT

Here's one more important principle about trials before we move on. Don't get discouraged or frustrated and quit before the test is complete. Don't answer half the questions and then leave the room. James wrote, "Let endurance have its perfect result" (1:4). In other

words, take the whole test or you will stunt the growth process God has built into your trial.

A little boy saw a cocoon wiggling on the side of a tree. He knew it was a butterfly struggling to emerge, and that when it came out it would be beautiful. The boy watched the struggle for a while because he wanted to see the butterfly come out and fly away, but he grew impatient as time passed.

So the little boy decided to help the butterfly, which he figured had to be exhausted by now. He broke the

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cocoon open, but the butterfly inside was unable to fly because its wings were not strong enough. What the boy didn't know was that the battle to shed the cocoon is necessary to develop and strengthen the butterfly's wings. The butterfly he "helped" was grounded be-

cause the boy let it out too soon.

You and I will stay grounded if we don't let patience have its perfect work. You may not like your trial, and that is very natural. Jesus certainly didn't enjoy His severe trial in Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion, when His sweat became like drops of blood. But His prayer to God the Father was "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

In fact, check out the story in Luke's gospel and you will discover that Jesus' greatest moments of agony oc-

curred *after* He had yielded His will to the Father. The Savior had to be strengthened by an angel (v. 43), and then the Bible says He sweated bloody drops (see v. 44). But He endured all the way to the cross.

My point is there's nothing wrong with feeling the pain as you endure a trial. But don't cut the trial short, or you won't get the strength that the trial is designed to deliver. Remember that God has His hand on both the clock and the thermostat in your trial, and He has promised that you will not be tempted "beyond what you are able" (1 Corinthians 10:13).