

Thank GOD FOR TRIALS?
THE BLESSING OF BURDENS?
James 1:2-4
September 15th, 2013

The question-marks in the title just have to be there, don't they? How can *trials*, be a blessing? I did briefly refer to them last week but James zeros in on them, here, because they were directly impacting on almost all of those receiving this letter from him. Surely, *trials* are just that, times of real anguish, a real stretching of our ability to cope with life's challenges, a time when feelings of helplessness, emptiness even despair can set in, aren't they?

Look with me at the two quotes which begin the notes today; in fact, let's read them out, one at a time. The first one, taken from 2 Timothy 3 verse 12 tells us that trials, for a Christian are normal:

"everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted".

Is that really true? Have you experienced that in your life? It may sound extreme to say that but Paul is not only referring to himself and other Christian leaders, he is speaking about ordinary people living "*in the last days*" that is the era of the Church. Stick with me and I'll aim to explain as we go, today.

This second quote, from Jesus own lips, assures us that all will work out well. However, look at it:

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16 v33)

Again, He isn't just speaking about the immediate future for this first generation of His followers—although that is in His mind. That word trouble means the kind of pressure which is used to squeeze the juice out of a grape.

Sounds a gloomy outlook for us, doesn't it? Well, how can James teach us to "consider it pure joy" when we encounter these "various trials/tests"?

Remember, he is not speaking, here, about the general trials which most people come up against in their lives in this world. He is specifically referring to those which we experience as followers of the Lord Jesus because we are followers of the Lord Jesus.

(1) The Tests God's People Faced Then.

Apart from the usual challenges of life, there were

[A] Charges Of Disloyalty By Fellow Jews. Fellow Jews believed that their worship of Jesus as Messiah (God's Anointed King) was blasphemous—worshipping a mere man as if he were God. They also thought that their setting aside of the strict keeping of the Mosaic law was a total betrayal of their Jewish heritage and distinctive culture.

You could imagine family difficulties where such disagreements occurred: orthodox Jews converting to Christ today are still considered dead by family members.

These believers also faced

[B] Charges Of Disloyalty From Gentile Officials. Opposition-persecution from people all around them in the Roman empire was evident because of a general dislike of Jews and a probable deliberate misunderstanding of Christian teaching.

CHRISTIAN insistence that there is only one Lord and God were labelled treacherous—not bowing to Caesar as a deity.

Other rumours spread that Christians were cannibals, eating flesh and drinking blood as part of their

worship.

So what about today?

(2) The Tests God's People Face Today.

[A] Charges Of Narrow Bigotedness Both From Inside And Outside The Church. When we speak up for
*Jesus as the unique Son of God, the only one able to guarantee our acceptance by the Father;
*God's Word as authoritative for what we should believe and how we should live;
*the truth of Special Creation as depicted in Genesis as real;
*the distinct character of marriage and the family and all that flows from this—many are not pleased.

[B] The Challenge Of False Teaching. This was a factor in James' day and it remains one in ours. Whether it is from those advocating the fusing of the Christian Faith with Islam and other religions or from those distorting elements of our Faith by adding or subtracting from the Gospel such errors bring chaos and confusion among us. However, there is also

[C] A Real Threat To Freedom From Government. There is great persecution of Christians in much of the world and signs beginning to surface in Western countries. Some see faith as bad for the mental health-development of children; I have had letters from people in SA stating that Christians are mentally ill and need care.

[D] Apathy And Lack Of Engagement. The Church is greatly affected by the spirit of the age in the West by the 'I'll get involved when it fits in with my other plans' type of thinking.

Perhaps you can think of many more examples of contemporary *tests*, which the Church faces?

So how does James encourage them to respond to these tests?

1. "Guys, keep your heads down till the trouble passes over, ease back on your testimony for Jesus—He knows your heart and doesn't expect you to risk your lives for the truth, He wants you to stay living." — the compromise and conform advice?
2. "Guys, start assembling the wax-dolls of Caesar and those who ill-treat you and stick the pins into them!" — the 'maintain the rage, prepare for vengeance' against enemies advice?
3. "Guys, these circumstances are a curse from the devil who rules this world you know. We will only enjoy blessing in glory to come." — the defensive-pious approach?

No, none of the above counsel is given by James! What he does is to say that, when the Christian experiences trials they are to:

"Consider it pure joy".

He says that such *trials/tests* actually benefit us.

(3) The Service Tests Perform.

It's been a while coming, this morning, but we now come to the meat of the message. These tests

[A] Purify the heart — the inner core of the person *"consider it pure joy" v2*. Often we feel that the trials God permits are unwarranted and we don't enjoy them—James says there's another way to look at things. It is a distinctively Christian way. *Many* people consider trials as punishment from God, a sign of his displeasure—something to be mourned over and avoided like the proverbial plague. Some are petrified that trials are a sign of Satan's lordship over them—somehow God isn't able to protect them: some even begin to doubt God and his Mercies. Christians are encouraged to see trials as "pure joy". Remember how Jesus said that some seed produces an immediate joyful

response in some hearts, but after a short time the person loses enthusiasm for the gospel when trouble or persecutions come? Worldly sources of joy are so temporary; they do bring pleasure but it doesn't last. So how can trial bring *joy*? Well, you see, when you face trials *because* you are a *Christian*, and for no other reason, then you come face-to-face with the promises of God and the purpose of God to work out all things for the good of those who are called according to His Purpose. You grow to more definitely value those things which are most precious in the world, the things concerning Christ and His gospel. It may sound completely unacceptable to say so, but the follower of Jesus will consider it a privilege—if need be—to identify with the Lord even if that includes painful suffering.

Now I wouldn't expect anyone to look forward to being villified, misunderstood, ridiculed, gossiped about and all for the reason that they belong to Jesus, but I wonder whether those sort of things have happened to you? If they have, have you thought that this is evidence of true faith in God, true life in Him which Satan is opposing?

Most ladies expecting a baby experience this joy-in-the-midst-of-pain, don't they? A usually-healthy baby is being formed within you, but for a short time you have pain till that little one is born—some have more pain than others, but when you feel the movement you rejoice that there is life there, don't you? So it is with Christians being identified with the Lord by means, if necessary, of suffering. Remember that Jesus said, "in the world you have experience trouble but be of good cheer, take heart, I have overcome the world". And the apostle Paul adds "if anyone wants to live a Godly life they *will* suffer persecution." In fact, the believer is willing to suffer because he/she can see the glorious goal ahead (philippians 3 v10).

If it's true that the Christian *is* going to experience persecution in the world, then such things are graciously permitted by the loving Lord for the purpose both of purifying the heart and also to

[B] Fortify The Character v3-4. Now if you're not careful, you could think of patience-endurance as a defensive, somewhat passive rather dig-in-your-toes type attitude; however, the thought here is to equip/resource us to face life's trials with that distinctive Christ-pleasing attitude which will lead to the experience of a growing maturity, eventually resulting in completeness of character. See how he puts it?

"the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

So how has suffering, adversity, affected you? We've all experienced it to some extent, haven't we? Has it blurred your enthusiasm for actively serving God and others, blunted the warmth and enthusiasm of your faith in God's goodness or has it refined you, softened your heart so that you are growing in your appreciation for God's promises and expectation of that great day of completion in glory?

Unlike others who have no hope, we do have a glorious goal in view don't we, that day of Christ.