

Suffering Successfully

Part II

James 1:9-27

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We began our study in the book of James last week. As you recall, James indicates in the opening verses of chapter 1 that suffering is both inevitable and purposeful. God's plan is to make us perfect and complete men and women. That purpose is accomplished in our life by suffering. The trying of our faith produces patience, or endurance, and if we let endurance have its perfect result we will be complete and perfect, lacking in nothing.

And then James begins to enumerate some of the things that impede the utilization of suffering in our lives. The first is giving way to the bewilderment that often accompanies suffering. Although we may know the principle that suffering produces perfection we may be confused and unable to apply that principle. And so James says, "If you lack wisdom ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproaching." God never says, "What Are you back here again? He is always ready to make his resources available to us upon request. "But," James says, "ask in faith, without any doubting.". The word translated "doubting" signifies not unbelief but rather an unwillingness to abandon ourselves totally to God's will for us. James says, "Let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.¹ The only way we can expect any benefit whatever from suffering is to yield to God's will for us.

The Lord himself in the garden experienced this sort of bewilderment. He saw the cross before him but he didn't want to suffer and so he prayed that if possible he might not have to experience the cross. "Nevertheless," he said, "not my will but yours be done." That is the proper response to suffering. "Lord, if possible, I'd like to avoid this difficult situation. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done. And if it is your will that I should have to endure difficult times, then I'm willing. Because I want suffering to work out in my life the purpose that you have for it." The Scriptures say that because Jesus was willing to obey the Father "he was heard for his godly fear." He had to endure the cross, but he was given the strength to endure the experience.

There is a second hindrance to rejoicing, found in verses 9 through 12. James writes,

But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

You remember the description last week of the recipients of this letter. These were people who were suffering. Many of them had lost everything. At least they thought they had lost everything. Yet James writes these surprising words: "When you think you've lost everything, rejoice. Boast in the fact that you've been humiliated. If you've had your possessions taken from you, rejoice in that." Because these people, you see, had been sold the world's philosophy that happiness consists in an abundance of things. If you have the right kind of house, or the right kind of clothes, or the right kind of profession, or if you have a car that you can believe in, then you're happy. But we know that is nonsense. There may be a momentary sense of happiness that comes from possession of things, but it does not last. "The wealthy man," James says, "fades away." And how true we know that to be. Things do not make us happy. God makes us happy. Happiness is always a by-product of faith. True satisfaction comes from God. They could have lost everything, and they could still rejoice, because they had the Lord. He would never abandon them. He was always available to them to supply

whatever they needed.

Carolyn and I were watching a television program some weeks ago on which they were interviewing some of the victims of the earthquake in southern California. There was a lady standing in front of the pile of rubble that had been her home. As the interviewer questioned her about the quake she began to weep. She said, "Everything my husband and I have lived for, for 27 years was in that house." We can't help but feel compassion for her but both Carolyn and I agreed that there is not one item in our house worth 30 seconds worth of tears. If God takes it all away we can still rejoice. It's going to burn up some day, anyway. And that is what James is saying. If God takes away your things, rejoice!

In verse 12 James sets in contrast the man who perseveres under trial and the rich man who fades away:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who Love Him.

"The man who perseveres," he says, "will be approved of God." I think I've commented before on this word, "approved". It is the Greek word "dokimos" and it occurs on the bottom of thousands of pieces of pottery that archeologists have unearthed in the Near East. It is the counter part of our Good Housekeeping seal of approval, or the Underwriters' Laboratory seal. It was placed on pottery that passed through the furnace intact. But if the pot cracked in the firing they would inscribe on the bottom "adokirnos", "disapproved", and it would go on the budget shelf. This is what James is saying. If we endure through suffering then suffering strengthens us and we are approved by it. We gain God's Good Housekeeping seal of approval.

The result, as James says, is that we are blessed (happy), and we receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. We receive it when we have been approved, and the approving is going on now. The crown of life is analogous to Paul's statement, "We shall reign in life." You see, it is God's intent to equip us to live in the midst of a world with pressure and problems and stress, and yet be victors rather than victims. There should never be any circumstance that overwhelms us, because we have an infinite Lord who is ready for anything. And when we have laid hold of that Lord, we discover that we are adequate for anything and then we are entitled to wear the crown of life. That is a picture of our new authority in Christ. We have learned to suffer and endure. We can reign as a king over our environment.

There is a third hindrance to rejoicing in suffering given in verse 13:

Let no one say when he is tempted say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.

We are prone to blame God for our failure to endure, when suffering comes and we sin because of it we are inclined to attribute the fault to God. But James says we cannot blame God for failure in our life. God is never the author of sin. God may test people with a view to approval; he never tempts people to sin. He is not that kind of Lord. Now, we need to distinguish between a test and a temptation, because the Scripture makes that distinction. A test is an experience that God brings into our life in order to build us. A temptation comes from Satan. It is designed to cause us to sin. But the amazing thing is that any circumstance can be either a test or a temptation, depending upon our response to it.

Let me illustrate this from the book of Job. As you know, the opening chapters of Job are a dialogue between Satan and the Lord. Satan points to the Lord's servant Job and suggests that Job's faithfulness is really based on his prosperity. "But," he says, "you let me touch his body, or his family, or his possessions, and he will curse you." And so God granted to Satan permission to touch Job's possessions and family. And as you know Job lost almost everything. He lost his wealth, his flocks and herds, his home, and his sons and daughters. Then Satan returned to God, and the Lord said to him, "Satan, you moved *me* against my servant Job."

Do you understand what he's saying? God himself accepts the responsibility for what happened to Job. Although Satan is the one who carried it out, God accepts the responsibility. The very circumstances that Satan intended to be destructive in Job's life were the circumstances that God used redemptively in Job's life. And as you know, as a result of his adversity Job developed a higher view of God and a greater faith, and he became a

more upright man.

Now you see, some difficult things may come into your life -- perhaps you've been laid off from your job, or perhaps there is some sickness in your family, or perhaps there is just some minor inconvenience. In any case you need to recognize where these circumstances come from. Ultimately they come from God. He is the source of everything. He is a Sovereign Lord. And he allows those things to come into your life in order to equip you to be his men and women. But Satan intends those very same circumstances to be destructive of faith. Whether they are a test to build or a temptation to destroy depends upon your response.

James tells us that a circumstance becomes a temptation 'lwhen we are carried away and enticed by our own desire.

But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived [i.e., when the will unites with the desire], it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

This is a very vivid analogy drawn from human conception and birth. Here is the way it works. An adverse circumstance comes into your life. If you submit to the Lord and turn to him then that circumstance has become a test to strengthen you. But if you rebel against your circumstance, if you give full reign to your own desires, then sin is conceived and born. And sin then produces death, a sense of weakness, discouragement and defeat. But if we see that this circumstance, no matter how adverse it may be, comes from God, and if we accept it and yield to it and lay hold of him and his life for deliverance, then the result is life. Notice verses 17 and 18:

Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights . . .

That is, there is no darkness in God, no hidden, evil intentions. He wants the very best for us.

. . . with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be as it were the first fruits among His creatures,

The proof that God is good is our own redemptive history. What has God done? Why, he brought us forth by the word of truth. We have a new life in Jesus Christ. We are the first fruits (the very best) of his creatures. Can he now have turned against us? Has he brought this circumstance into our life to destroy us? Of course not! He intends it for our good.

A fourth hindrance to joy is found in verse 19:

This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

Quick to hear what? The word of truth. The fourth hindrance is our tendency to rebel against God's word in times of stress. But James says, "Don't resist God. You know that God is using his Word in your life to produce the good thing that he is after, so be quick to hear the Word, be slow to speak, slow to defend yourself, slow to justify yourself. And be slow to anger against the people or the circumstances that are the cause of your suffering. Because "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." We know this well.

Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility [setting aside our own rights] receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves [or who excuse themselves].

James says hear the *Word* . When circumstances come into your life to try you, your first response ought to be

to submit to God's Word. Listen to it. And then receive it. Perhaps James was thinking of the parable that Jesus told of the seed and the sower. The ground that was responsive to the Word produced fruit, the measure of fruitfulness in each case being the measure of receptivity. "So, he says, "receive the implanted word which is able to save your souls."

But don't just receive it; do it Obey it. Respond to it. It is easy for us to avoid obedience by excusing our behavior. We can blame our wife or husband or boss or circumstances. And we can go on and on deluding ourselves and excusing ourselves and refusing to obey. The illustration James gives is very helpful:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall he blessed in what he does.

When I read this I think of our children and the way they use a mirror. Whenever we ask them to wash their hands and faces they comply with a great deal of splashing about in the wash basin. But often they appear for inspection and there is still dirt all over their faces, and they look as if they've been out rooting with the pigs. And we say, "Boys, did you use the mirror when you washed your face?" And they say, "Sure!" But we know they didn't really observe themselves carefully as they washed.

That is what James is saying. The man who casually glances at the Word and looks away is like the man who looks in the mirror and sees that his face is dirty but goes away and does nothing about it. In contrast to that we are to look intently into the word. The verb "look intently" is used in John 20 to describe the people who came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. They "stooped over and looked into the tomb," John says, and it is exactly the same word. It means to stoop over and look intently, look carefully into the perfect law, the rule of life that is suited to our nature, the law of liberty, the law that sets us free and abide by it. When we obey it, having become not a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, we are blessed in what we do.

James now gives us a final word:

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The word translated "religious" is the word which means "to be worshipful". Worship is a response to revelation. The word has been revealed and we are to respond by obedience. That is true worship and the marks of that worship are threefold. The first is a controlled tongue. The true worshiper has his tongue under control. He doesn't verbally lash out at people, or at God, or at his circumstances. James says in chapter 3 of this book that we all stumble in many ways and "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a mature man, able to bridle the whole body as well." The tongue is an index of our level of spirituality. If you want to see where a man is spiritually, watch him under stress, and observe what he says. James says that if we are truly a doer of the word, our tongue will be under control.

The second mark of true worship is found in verse 27. We will visit widows and orphans in their distress. Why orphans and widows? Well, because this is the kind of quiet activity that no one applauds. No one sees or knows. But it is a mark of someone who is not so preoccupied by his own distress that he cannot see the distress of others. If you have truly laid your cares upon Jesus Christ then you will not be concerned about your own problems. You'll be thinking in terms of the needs of others and it will demonstrate itself in quiet, hidden acts of mercy.

And then a final mark of true worship is purity. In times of stress there is the tendency to give way and to seek release in drugs or in sex or alcohol and to let all the barriers down. But James says that the mark of a man who is trusting in God is that he is unstained by the world. He doesn't look to the world to satisfy his needs.

This then is James word about suffering successfully. suffering comes from God to perfect us and it will do its work unless we allow one of these hindrances to impede the process. God grant that we may allow the process to go on unimpeded so that we may be God's men and women, perfect and completer lacking nothing.

Our loving Father, again we thank you that you've entered our life. We cannot honestly say that life has become simpler or easier because of it. There have been many things in our life that have been difficult, and yet we've discovered that you're the One who exactly suits our needs. You're the One who supplies what we need to face any circumstance in our life. We ask that we might appropriate the strength and the wisdom and the patience that we have in you, to live lives of victory and confidence and authority in the world. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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