

From Trouble to Triumph--Part 1

Introduction

The subject of trials is a natural starting point for the simple reason that everyone in the world encounters them. Because we are sinful beings who live in a fallen world, we experience trouble on a regular basis whether we are Christians or not.

Even when we succeed in getting our own little worlds under control, something inevitably messes them up. We do everything we can to attain peace and comfort by protecting ourselves from trouble, but trouble arises nonetheless. Marriage was designed as a source of fulfillment and happiness, yet 1 Corinthians 7:28 says those who are married "shall have trouble in the flesh." There is going to be trouble even in the best of what God gives to us because of the sin principle that is active in the world.

Jesus Himself experienced trouble and warned His disciples to expect tribulation in the world (John 16:33). John 11:33, 12:27, and 13:21 record Jesus' troubled responses to the devastating effects of sin.

Paul said he was "troubled on every side" (2 Cor. 4:8). So it is reasonable to expect trouble in our lives as well. We experience it in our families, from our friends, on our jobs, at school, and with our nation. It comes in the form of criticism, persecution, illness, death of loved ones, personality conflicts, or inflation.

Trouble is a way of life, so don't think you're alone if you're experiencing it.

A. The Reason for Trials

A jeweler gives what is called "the water test" as one of the surest tests for identifying a true diamond. An imitation stone is never as brilliant as a genuine stone. But sometimes the difference can't be determined with the unaided eye. A jeweler knows that a genuine diamond placed in water sparkles brilliantly while the sparkle of the imitation is practically extinguished. That test makes picking the real diamond relatively easy.

By way of analogy I find that the faith of many people under the water of sorrow or affliction is nothing but an imitation. However, when a true child of God is immersed in a trial, he will shine as brilliantly as ever.

Early twentieth century scholar G.K. Chesterton stated the same idea in a similar way: "I believe in getting into hot water. I think it keeps you clean." (MOODY: WE CAN'T DOCUMENT THIS) There is, to be sure, the need for testing to see if we are genuine believers. Sometimes there is no better test than the hot water of difficult circumstances. How one handles trouble is an indication of the reality of one's faith or the lack of it. That is why James, whose purpose is to give us tests of living faith, introduces the test of trials.

James says that if your Christianity is genuine, it will prove itself in times of trouble. If my faith in God is only good when I'm doing well, then it is of little value. True faith is to sustain me when everything goes wrong. James 1:2 says, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into various trials." The Greek word translated "various" (poikilos) means "many colored" or "variegated." It emphasizes not the number but the diversity of trouble that can come our way. The Greek word translated "trials" (peirasmos) refers to that which breaks the pattern of tranquility or happiness. We don't know what specific trials James had in mind as he wrote, but his instruction is applicable to any trial we might encounter.

{*}Trial or Temptation?

Peirasmos is not necessarily connected with evil. It's unfortunate that the King James Version has translated it as "temptation," because of the evil connotation that word carries. So a trial is not necessarily a solicitation to do evil, as the context here clearly shows. Rather in verse 2 "trials" refer to the difficulties God allows for the proving and strengthening of our faith.

Peirasmos is rare in secular Greek, but common in biblical Greek because the testing of faith is such an important part of spiritual life. The verb form of means "to put someone to the test," regardless of whether the results of the testing are positive or negative. Every trial that comes into your life becomes a test of your faith. You either pass or fail. To fail the test by wrongly responding to it allows it to become a temptation. If it ends up leading you to stumble, it has proven to be successful tempting you. If it ends up in victory, it has proven to be successful in strengthening you. How you respond to the trials in your life will reveal whether you really believe God and are genuinely saved, and it will also reveal how strong your faith really is.{e*}

James is not distinguishing here between internal and external trials because that's an artificial distinction. I have found in my life that every external trial soon becomes internal. No trial I've ever seen stays on the outside; otherwise it isn't much of a trial. It's when it gets in and festers in my mind that it become a trial. Any trial is external and internal.

Trials come in the form of disappointments, frustrations, misunderstandings, unfulfilled dreams, unmet expectations, great loss, loneliness, fear, criticism, persecution, and conflict. Although they may start on the outside, sooner or later they end up on the inside.

Trials come for the purpose of testing our faith and therefore apply to believers as well as unbelievers. If you consistently persevere through trials and never abandon your trust in God, then you prove to have genuine faith.

Robert Johnstone, writing in a commentary on James many years ago, said this: "[James shows that] where there is but an empty profession, or a mere dreamy sentiment, unbased on firm and intelligent convictions of truth, the fire of trouble will burn it up.... But where there is true faith, affliction naturally leads to deeper thought than under other circumstances on sin and its deserts, and thus frees the heart from the control of self-righteousness. The sense of weakness leads to earnest wrestling with God in prayer; and experience of the sustaining grace thus obtained

strengthens and exhilarates hope with regard to the time to come" (Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James [Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978 reprint], p. 74). When a false Christian goes through a test, it will inevitably reveal his true colors. When a true believer goes through a test, he will be driven to prayer, leaning on the strength of God rather than his own weakness. Trials burn up imitation faith but strengthen true faith. They may cause pain in confronting us with our weaknesses, but they have the good result of causing us to turn from ourselves to the infinite strength of God.

B. The Result of Trials

1. Happiness

James ends his discourse on trials in verse 12: "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation [trials]; for when he is tried [after his trial is over], he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him." James 5:11 reiterates the same thought: "Behold, we count them happy who endure." People who successfully endure trials are truly happy.

James is not saying happiness comes in freedom from trials, but in victory over them. There is a big difference. It's not the shallow joy of the spectator who never experienced conflict; it's the exuberance of the participant who fought and won. James here is not referring to temptation. If that were the case, he wouldn't have said happy is the man who endures it, but happy is the man who resists it.

The three key ideas in verse 12 are endurance, trials, and being tested. The same ideas appear in verses 2-3: "Count it all joy when ye fall into various trials, knowing this, that the testing of your faith worketh patience [endurance]." Therefore that is the theme of verses 2-12.

2. Endurance

Endurance in verse 12 speaks of patiently and triumphantly enduring. It connotes passive or even painful survival and focuses on the outcome of being victorious.

The person who goes through trials and comes out a winner never gives up his faith or abandons God. He is shown to be the genuine, and all genuine Christians will receive the crown of life.

Some people come to the church, profess Christ, and even get baptized. Yet when trouble comes into their lives, they're gone. And they may never come back. Maybe they encountered a broken relationship, the death of a loved one, or some other struggle, and the circumstances were so overpowering that they blamed God and walked away, convinced that Christianity doesn't work.

a) The proof of faith

Persevering through trials is proof of living faith. James identifies those who persevere as people who love God (v. 12). That's because loving God is the natural outflow of salvation.

(1) 1 John 4:19--John said, "We love him [God], because he first loved us." Christianity is a love relationship between man and God. Salvation is not a transaction whereby God grants us eternal life no matter what our attitude toward Him is. Those who are truly saved have an deep ongoing love for God.

(2) 1 John 2:15--John said, "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." People will love God or the world, but not both. Unbelievers who profess Christ demonstrate that they love the world when they depart from the truth.

It's in the trial that true love is made manifest. First John 2:19 says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for it they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest they were not all of us."

(3) 1 Peter 1:6-8--Peter said, "In this ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold trials, that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ, whom, having not seen, ye love." Our faith is being tested to prove its genuineness so we will be able to stand before the Lord with genuine faith when He comes.

A Christian is not someone who simply at one point in time believed the truth. A true believer has an ongoing love for God that holds fast even in trials. And let me clarify what love means: Jesus said several times that a person who loves Him will keep His commandments (John 14:15, 23; 15:9- 10; 1 John 2:5-6; 5:1-3).

So the genuineness of faith is built on love that obeys God.

As believers we may experience times of struggle and doubt, but our faith will never be destroyed. We cling to the Lord despite our trials because we love Him. That kind of loving perseverance results in true blessing.

One purpose of testing is to expose the quality of faith. The phrase in verse 12 "for when he is tried" can be translated "when he is approved after testing." When tests come in your life in the form of loneliness, a death, or a financial loss, God is putting you through the fire, as it were, that you might come out with the dross burned off and your true faith shining bright. Those who hold fast to their trust in God through trials show that their faith is living..

b) The perseverance of the saints

This is a perfect place to discuss the important biblical truth known as the perseverance of the saints. It is a major tenant of Reformed Protestant theology.

We believe that the saints will never abandon their faith--that they will always persevere in believing God through every trial until they are glorified. True believers won't believe for a little while and then bail out. That is evident from 1 Corinthians 10:13: "There hath no temptation [trial] taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will, with the temptation, also make the way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

For years I grew up hearing the phrases "eternal security" and "once saved, always

saved." Those are accurate phrases of what Scripture teaches. The Bible doesn't say, "Once saved, but you never know how long." However, some people wrongfully conclude that means you can do anything you want if you're saved, as if God were stuck with you. They emphasize the sovereign power of God and His unchanging promise in securing our salvation, bit to the exclusion of how a person who has been spiritually reborn is responsible to live.

(1) Divine sovereignty

The Trinity secures us forever so that no Christian who believes in the Lord will ever be lost. Scripture bases the eternal security of the believer on:

(a) The promise and power of God

Our eternal security is based on the covenantal faithfulness of God. He preserves His people from apostasy and brings them all to heaven.

i) Psalm 31:24--"Be of good courage, and he [God] shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord."

ii) Psalm 37:23, 28--"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord The Lord loveth justice, and forsaketh not his saints; they are preserved forever."

iii) Psalm 97:10--"Ye who love the Lord, hate evil. He preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked."

iv) Psalm 121:4-7--"Behold, he who keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil; he shall preserve thy soul."

v) John 6:37, 39--Jesus said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me ... of all that he hath given me I should lose nothing."

vi) John 10:28--Jesus said, "I give unto them [those who follow Christ] eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, who gave them to me, is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand."

vii) Romans 16:25--Paul said, "Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel."

viii) Philippians 1:6--"He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

ix) 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24--Paul said, "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it."

x) 2 Timothy 1:12--Paul said, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that

he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." He had committed his soul to God.

xi) 2 Timothy 4:18--Paul said, "The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom."

xii) 1 Peter 1:5--Christians "are kept by the power of God."

xiii) Jude 1--Christians are "preserved in Jesus Christ."

xiv) Jude 24--"Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy."

(b) The prayers of Christ

Christ constantly intercedes on our behalf as our Redeemer and Advocate so that any sin we commit does not alter the status of our salvation.

i) John 17:20-24--Jesus prayed for His present and future disciples to enter into the fullness of salvation.

ii) Luke 22:31-32--Jesus told Peter, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not. And when thou art converted [recommitted after Christ's resurrection] strengthen thy brethren."

iii) 1 John 2:1-2--John said, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." Christ is our intercessor.

(c) The presence of the Holy Spirit

The indwelling Holy Spirit is our guarantee of future glory. Ephesians 1:13-14 says Christians have been "sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, who is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession."

(2) Human responsibility

(a) Stated

There's another side to eternal security than just the predestinating work of God.

It's the human perspective of the perseverance of believers. You reveal you are kept by God if you don't abandon your faith in the midst of a trial. The paradox of the sovereign work of God and the responsibility of man is common in Scripture.

A believer is saved because he was chosen by God before creation (Eph. 1:4), yet he is not saved without exercising faith (Rom. 10:9-10). He is secure because of the covenant faithfulness of God, but he is still responsible to persevere. Eternal security is wrought through the power of the Spirit in energizing the true believer to endure all trials.

Theologian Louis Berkhof calls perseverance "that continuous operation of the Holy

Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion" [Systematic Theology, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941], p. 546). So our part is to endure.

(b) Supported

i) Matthew 24:13--"He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved." That appears to contradict that God is going to keep us saved, but it doesn't. We are energized to endure by the indwelling Spirit.

ii) John 8:31--"Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed."

iii) 1 Corinthians 15:1-2--Paul said, "I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and in which ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preach unto you, unless ye have believed in vain." If you don't hold on to your faith, you show it wasn't real.

iv) Colossians 1:21-23--"You, that were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in his sight, if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel." You're secure only if you endure. Endurance is the process by which the security of one's salvation is verified.

v) Hebrews 2:1--"We ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest that any time we should let them slip."

vi) Hebrews 3:14--"We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end."

vii) Hebrews 4:14--"Let us hold fast our profession."

viii) Hebrews 6:11-12--"We desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end; that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

ix) Hebrews 10:39--"We are not of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them who believe to the saving of the soul."

x) 2 Peter 1:10, "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall."

(c) Shunned

When someone doesn't endure they fail the test of genuine faith (1 John 2:19). No trial is so great that it could sever you from your Lord if your faith is genuine (1 Cor. 10:13). Eternal security is not a matter of being once saved, always saved--with no regard for what you believe or do. Hebrews 12:14 says only those who continue living holy lives will enter the Lord's presence.

The contemporary trend labeled "easy believism" holds that only a decision to accept Christ is necessary to be born again, regardless of one's sincerity. But if a person fails to love and obey the Lord through the trials of life, then there is no evidence that he possesses saving faith. How many people do you know who came to church for a while, had a little trouble in their lives, and left? Although they may have made a profession of faith in Christ, they cannot be identified as those who love Him because their lives are not characterized by an enduring obedience.

(d) Summarized

Here's what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about the perseverance of the saints: "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved.

This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but on the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof. Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves" (Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], pp. 636-37).

A Christian may get himself into trouble, but he will never ultimately jettison his faith because he will persevere. Whenever trials come into your life or mine, they prove the genuineness of our faith by giving us the opportunity to persevere. And having persevered, a believer can look back and say, "Yes, I know I belong to the Lord."

C. The Reward of Trials

The reward for the believer who does not collapse under trials is eternal life.

James says, "When he is tried [approved], he shall receive the crown of life" (1:12).

The "crown of life" is an appositional genitive in the Greek text, which means it could literally be translated, "a crown which is life." The crown is eternal life, which God has promised to those who love Him. That is the believer's ultimate reward. Although we presently experience some of the benefits of eternal life, we possess it on promise; some day we're going to receive it in its fullness. We are still waiting to enter into our future reward. At the Lord's coming, He will grant to us the fullness of eternal life.

1. 2 Timothy 4:8--The apostle Paul expressed a similar thought: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but to all them also that love his appearing." When Christ returns for the church, Christians will be granted a life of eternal righteousness.

2. 1 Peter 5:4--"When the chief shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory."

3. Revelation 2:10--Christ promised the crown of life to the Christians of Smyrna if they remained faithful until death.

We will all receive the same crown consisting of the rewards of eternal life, righteousness, and glory. Endurance does not earn eternal life. However endurance is the proof of true faith and love, and that is rewarded by eternal life. That's an important distinction.

The word Greek word translated "crown" in James 1:12 is stephanos. In the ancient Greek world, it often referred to the wreath put around the head of a victor in an athletic event. So the Lord will reward with eternal life those who demonstrate with the perseverance of an athlete that they were truly saved.

{*}How Can a Christian Endure Trials?

James 1 tell us several things are required:

1. A joyous attitude--"Count it all joy" (v. 2). That prevents you from avoiding trials the Lord intends you to face and provides the motivation to face them head on.

2. An understanding mind--"Knowing this" (v. 3). That allows you to perceive the reality and purpose of a trial.

3. A submissive will--"Let patience have her perfect work" (v. 4). That allows you to accept it from the Lord and learn what He wants you to learn.

4. A believing heart--"Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering A double minded man is unstable" (vv. 6-8). That allows you to remain firm in spite of difficult circumstances.

5. A humble spirit--"The brother of low degree is exalted . . . but the rich . . . shall pass away" (vv. 9-11). That allows you to accept God's greater wisdom, recognizing that what's valuable in life is eternal.{e*}

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why do people experience trouble on a regular basis (see p. 1)?

2. Explain how the water test a jeweler uses is analogous to the testing God puts us through (see p. 2).

3. What do trials reveal in a person (see p. 2)?

4. Are trials necessarily connected with evil? Explain their relationship to temptation (see p. 2-3).

5. Although trials may cause pain in confronting us with our weaknesses, what positive result can come about from facing them (see p. 3-4)?
6. What does James 1:12 say are two results of trials (p. 4)?
7. Is James saying that happiness comes in freedom from trials? Explain (see p. 4).
8. Whom does James identify as those who persevere (v. 12; see p. 5)?
9. What will true faith in God manifest itself in, according to John 14:15 and 1 John 5:1-3 (see p. 5)?
10. Describe the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (see p. 6).
11. What do some people wrongfully conclude about the doctrine of perseverance (see p. 6)?
12. What are three reasons for believing Christians are eternally secure? Support your answer with Scripture (see pp. 6-7).
13. Identify and explain the aspect besides divine sovereignty that relates to the believer's endurance. Support your answer with Scripture (see p. 8).
14. When a person professing to be a Christian fails to endure, what do they reveal (1 John 2:19; see p. 10)?
15. Describe the contemporary trend regarding accepting Christ and obedience (see p. 10).
16. Identify the results of true believers falling into "grievous sins," as explained in the Westminster Confession of Faith (see p. 10).
17. What is the reward of remaining faithful through trials (see p. 11)?
18. Does endurance earn eternal life? Explain (see p. 11).

Pondering the Principles

1. Have you passed the test of trials? Did they reveal a continuing love for God or a passing sense of religious duty? Can you look back and see your trust in God's faithfulness and wisdom growing stronger? Memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (NASB).
2. How are you responding to trials? Reread the quote from Robert Johnstone on p. 3. Are your trials leading you to consider what God is doing in your life? Are you coming to God in prayer and experiencing His sustaining grace? Recall the trial Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of His arrest (Luke 22:39-46). In the trials you have recently experienced, were you able to

say, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (v. 42)? Commit yourself to praying earnestly and seeking the Lord's will as you encounter your next trial.

3. Meditate on the apostle Paul's words in Romans 8:35-39: "What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord." No trial can ever sever us from the Lord. Praise the Lord for that great promise.

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