

Joy in Trials

By Leo Chan

A. Parnell Bailey visited an orange grove where an irrigation pump had broken down. The season was unusually dry and some of the trees were beginning to die for lack of water. The man giving the tour then took Bailey to his own orchard where irrigation was used sparingly. "These trees could go without rain for another 2 weeks," he said. "You see, when they were young, I frequently kept water from them. This hardship caused them to send their roots deeper into the soil in search of moisture. Now mine are the deepest-rooted trees in the area. While others are being scorched by the sun, these are finding moisture at a greater depth."¹

If trees could talk, I'm sure they'd be thanking that man for causing the hardship earlier on in their lives. Have you ever had joy in the midst of trials? Have you ever thanked God for the work He was doing in your life through difficult, painful, trying circumstances? Today, we come to a challenging passage from the book of James, James 1:2-12. Let's read it together. Perhaps the most striking verses in this passage are verses 2 and 3.

James tells us to consider it pure joy when we are facing trials because we know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance. If we stop and pause to think about this for a moment, James is saying some serious things here. It seems impossible and even ridiculous to consider trials as a cause for joy, doesn't it? At the time of writing, James was addressing Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. Their faith was being threatened because of their loyalty to God.² So, how in the world could they see this as a cause for joy? Was James being insensitive to the troubles they were facing? Was he telling them to simply put on a happy face and deny what they were going through?

¹ Sermonillustrations.com. (n. d.). *Sermon illustrations*. Retrieved October 15, 2006, from <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/suffering.htm>

² Martin, R. P. (1988). *Word biblical commentary: James*. Waco: Word Books, 14-15.

There are two key words in verses two and three: joy and trials. Let's define these words before moving on. In our world today, we tend to equate the words happiness and joy together. But happiness and joy aren't the same thing. Happiness is about self-satisfaction and self-gratification.³ It's a temporary, fleeting emotion. It rises and falls very quickly depending on circumstances. One minute, we could be on top of the world, the next minute, at the bottom of it. This is not what James meant. He knew his readers couldn't be happy in their circumstances—it was impossible! James understood their situation though. He knew the hardship they were facing and the pain they felt. He knew how trying the circumstance was on them and their faith. James was encouraging his readers to lift their eyes off their circumstances and place it onto God. He was telling them that God was using this time of trial to grow in them something they did not have. It was in that understanding, that James wrote. It was in that understanding, that his readers could have this thing called joy. So, what's joy? The Bible describes joy very differently from what we understand as happiness. Joy is enduring. Joy persists. It's not temporary. It does not rise and fall depending on circumstance. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. It develops out of a relationship with God. It comes from knowing and believing in the promises of God. Joy gives us the ability to face the difficulties of life and still trust and hope in God.

Now that we've defined joy, let's define trials. The Greek word for trials is *peripito*. It refers to an unwelcome and unanticipated experience.⁴ James is referring to the circumstances in life that we don't want and don't expect. It's the unexpected death of a family member. It's suddenly losing your job that you've had for 25 years. It's finding out you have cancer. It's being dumped by your significant other after being together for seven years. Trials come in all shapes and sizes. Some trials are more intense than others: some can last for years before letting up, some may never end. No matter what

³ Nystrom, D. P. (1997). *The NIV application commentary: James*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

⁴ Nystrom, D. P. (1997). *The NIV application commentary: James*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

kind of trial it is, it is always excruciatingly difficult and painful. Trials shake the very foundation of who we are and what we believe. In trials, we lift up our hands and ask God, "Why me? Why now?" In trials, we experience a wide range of things: anger, confusion, fear, pain unspeakable, sadness, depression, desperation, bitterness, tears, questions unending. Trials test our faith in God. In times of trials, we have two ways we can respond: we either turn away from God or we run to Him.

So, in the midst of trials, how do we make sure we run to God rather than turning away from Him? Is it really possible to have joy and persevere? I'll tell you this. It's impossible if we look solely at our circumstances. Our circumstances will look too big, too hard, too difficult, too bleak, too hopeless, too depressing, too sad, too overwhelming. The only way we can persevere and have joy is by the grace of God. Trials can and will break us if we try to get through and handle them on our own. We simply aren't strong enough! We need God. We need His strength and we need His wisdom. "We need wisdom to know how to cope with trials, for wisdom provides a clear view of our situation from God's perspective."⁵ This is why James instructs us to ask God for wisdom. When God gives us wisdom, he gives us a new way of seeing. He takes our eyes off the circumstance itself and puts it onto Him. He shows us that the testing of our faith can develop perseverance. He shows us that when perseverance finishes its work, we will be mature and complete and not lack anything. What we need the most when we face trials is God's wisdom. Let me say that again. What we need the most when we face trials is God's wisdom! God's wisdom may not change our situation, but it certainly changes us.

When we ask God for wisdom, we must believe He will generously give it to us. When we pray, it is not simply a matter of asking. The act of asking does not mean we have faith. When we pray, we must also believe that God is able and will answer. James writes in verse 7 that a person who doubts is like a boat tossed back and forth in

⁵ Nystrom, D. P. (1997). *The NIV application commentary: James*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 50.

turbulent waters. Picture this for a moment. You're in a small boat. The waters around you are really turbulent. You try to move the boat through the waters, but waves keep crashing against the side of the boat, rocking you back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You're stuck and can't move. That's what doubt is. It's a state of inaction. It paralyzes the individual from acting or moving. Doubt takes our focus off God and puts on the self. In essence, it's a state of unbelief. We can't approach God in this way and then expect Him to answer us. Doubt is saying to God that we do not believe in His character, in His ability to give to us what we ask of Him. We must approach God in faith when we ask for wisdom.

However, God's wisdom may not come to us right away and it may not come in the way we'd want it. Remember, that one of the purposes of trials is to grow perseverance, as James said in verse 3. Perseverance doesn't happen overnight. It's a slow process and it takes time to develop. The Greek word for perseverance is *hupomone*. It refers to a patient enduring, steadfastness, endurance and constancy. There's also an idea of hope and expectancy.⁶ These traits do not suddenly appear in us because of trials. Trials are merely the grounds for which they can develop. It is our response that determines the outcome.

So how should we respond? After we've asked God for wisdom in faith, we need to trust in Him continually. I have to stress the importance of the word continually. Trials always last for a period of time, sometimes weeks, sometimes months, sometimes years and sometimes whole lifetimes. Like we've already discussed, trials will wear us down if we try to deal with them on our own strength. We can't outlast them. It's like trying to swim against the current of a really powerful rapid. We can try with all our might to swim up the stream and for a while, it might even work, we might actually make some progress. But as time passes, our strength will give in to the relentless force of the

⁶ Martin, R. P. (1988). *Word biblical commentary: James*. Waco: Word Books, 16.

current. Let's face it. Trials will take their toll on us. The only way we can persevere through them is by being renewed by God regularly. This means we go to God with all our cares, feelings and thoughts, lay them at His feet and allow Him to speak truth into our lives. It means we become honest, real honest with Him. If we're angry, upset, bitter, sad, frustrated, depressed, full of complaints, about our circumstances, it's okay. God's big enough to handle all of that and He already knows what we're feeling and thinking anyway. It's in the presence of God that we find truth and life. We'll need to be reminded that through the trial, He's working in our lives and growing in us something that didn't once exist. If we turn to God regularly, learn to wait on Him and trust Him, perseverance will grow.

I mentioned earlier that asking God for wisdom doesn't mean He will respond in exactly the way we want. Asking God for wisdom doesn't mean that He will tell us exactly why we are going through the trial or how long the trial will last. But when we ask God for wisdom, we can be certain that He will give us what we need to know to keep trusting in Him, to keep persevering, to keep hanging onto Him.

When I was 21, pain started developing in my hands, arms and wrists. At first, I figured it'd go away in a week or so. But it didn't. So I started praying, asking God to heal me. I'd wake up every morning hoping and expecting that the pain would be gone, but every morning I'd be disappointed. I soon learnt that God wasn't going to answer my request for healing. Time passed on and the pain spread all over my body. I could no longer do all the regular activities that I once did. My muscles became so weak that I could barely perform simple every day tasks like opening cereal boxes and water bottles. I was frustrated, desperate and I needed help. I saw doctor after doctor trying to figure out what was happening. Finally, when I was 22, I was diagnosed with a condition called Fibromyalgia.

Wanting to get better, I followed all the suggestions of my doctors. I took tons of

medication every day. I changed my lifestyle: I slept early, exercised regularly and avoided activities that could cause further harm, even though I loved doing them. Despite all these changes, life got worse. I'd wake up every day with intense pain all over my body. I'd wake up feeling completely drained of energy, despite sleeping 8 hours a day. It was like pulling an all nighter, every single day. I'd also experience random dizzy spells. I lost all hope. I tried everything I knew to get better, but nothing ever worked. On top of this, I still had to go to school, attend classes and do homework. Life was too difficult for me to handle. Every day was pain. Living was painful. I wondered what God was up to. I asked, "Why me?" I was angry, bitter, upset, confused, depressed about my condition. Why didn't God change my situation? All my life, I had been following Him, serving Him, loving Him as best I knew how. So why me? The next year and a half was a rollercoaster for me. I hit the lowest points in my life. I felt so broken and helpless. I wanted to throw in the towel and give up. I wanted to turn away from God and leave the faith. But throughout all of this, I kept praying that God would heal me. I kept going to God about my hurt, my frustration, my pain, my desperation. I went to God about everything I thought and felt. I wanted to experience joy through my trials but I didn't know how and I didn't think it was possible.

About a year and half after my diagnosis, God finally gave me new perspective. My circumstances didn't change, I still woke up every morning feeling tired and with lots of pain, but I no longer saw it the same way. I finally began to understand that God was using this trial in my life to draw me closer to Himself. He had been deepening my walk, my faith, my understanding of Him through it all. He had opened my eyes to more of Himself. He had grown in me something that I did not have, something that I had longed for.

All of us are at different places today. Some of us are going through intense trials right now. You've been struggling, wrestling with God, asking God questions, wondering if He's really still there and if He still cares and loves you. Let me tell you that He does.

God is using this trial in your life to develop in you something you didn't have. He's developing an enduring spirit, one that hopes and trusts and clings to Him, one that has faith in who He is. Keep asking Him for wisdom. Keep trusting in Him. Cling to Him for dear life and don't let go.

If you're not currently going through trials right now, praise God for that. But know that trials are the experience of every believer and they will come. It's not a matter of if, but when. So when they do come, trust God. Ask Him to give you wisdom and depend on Him. He will give you the strength to endure and persevere.

God loves us far too much to leave us the way we are now. Trials in our life test and grow our faith. Through trials, God develops in us something that we once lacked. Let us hold unswervingly onto Him, the One who gives freely to those who ask. May God grant all of us an enduring spirit, to trust in Him for all things.

To close, I'd like to end with a poem.

He never fails the soul that trusts in Him;
Tho' disappointments come and hope burns dim,
He never fails.

Tho' trials surge like stormy seas around,
Tho' testings fierce like ambushed foes abound,
Yet this my soul, with millions more has found,
He never fails; He never fails.

He never fails the soul that trusts in Him;
Tho' angry skies with thunder-clouds grow grim,
He never fails.

Tho' icy blasts life's fairest flow'rs lay low,
Tho' earthly springs of joy all cease to flow,

Yet still 'tis true, with millions more I know,
He never fails; He never fails.
He never fails the soul that trusts in Him;
Tho' sorrow's cup should overflow the brim,
He never fails.
Tho' oft the pilgrim way seems rough and long,
I yet shall stand amid yon white-robed throng,
And there I'll sing, with millions more, this song--
He never fails; He never fails.⁷

⁷ Sermonillustrations.com. (n. d.). *Sermon illustrations*. Retrieved October 15, 2006, from www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/t/trials.htm

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