

Do Trials Make You Bitter or Better?

How to Handle Your Problems

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Text

James 1:2-7 – *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.*

Introduction

On a regular basis I hear people say, “*I’ve got problems.*” And I say, “*What else is new, join the club.*” “*Yes,*” they tell me, “*but you don’t have problems like I do?*” And then they pour out their particular difficulties about their marriage, in-laws, children, job, lack of love, inferiorities, unfaithfulness, frustrations, failures, addictions and worries in general.

My problem is I’ve got too many problems. I’ve got problems I haven’t even used yet. Many echo the complaint of David in the Bible when he said, “*My problems go from bad to worse.*” Neither I nor anyone else can supply you with an easy 1-2-3 formula that effortlessly solves all your problems. But let’s see if we can view our problems from a more biblical perspective.

Explanation

First of all, problems are universal. Someone once said, “*God only has one Son without sin, but He hasn’t any without sorrow.*” The same is true of problems. Since the dawn of time, everyone has had problems with himself, his family, his environment, his circumstances and his God. Not a single person has been exempt or excused. Problems are life-long companions. That’s life!

You might think that a perfectly innocent man in an ideal environment might have no problems, but you would be wrong. Adam had problems with himself, his wife and his God. His selfish rebellious will posed a serious problem. His problem with the devil compounded his other problems. He struggled with the problem of his lack of responsibility in blaming others. All this led to problems of personal rejection, loss, loneliness, working in a thorn-infested ground and seeing his wife suffer in childbirth. Yes, even Adam, the first man, had problems.

We are forced to agree with Job who said, “*Man was born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.*” Problems will be with us from the day we’re born until the day we die. In this, we are all the same. Where we differ is in how we handle them.

One term the Bible uses for a problem is a trial. A trial is not without purpose. It involves the subjection of a person to a test to determine something such as: one’s virtue, faith or patience, etc.

There are many types of trials that we face. For example:

- 1) Physical Health – illness and chronic conditions.
- 2) Material Provision – loss of possessions and finances.
- 3) Frustrating Circumstances that are beyond our control.
- 4) Disagreeable Tasks – doing things we would rather not do.
- 5) Relational Health – relational conflict or broken relationships.
- 6) Grief – loss of a loved one or loss of something we highly valued.

How do most people naturally react to trials? They resent them, grieve over them, avoid them or at best stoically endure them. A person shows his true character only when he is exposed to trials. Circumstances do not cause character, circumstances reveal character. The reason they reveal character is the trials reveal our true values which make up our character.

How do you react to trials or frustrating circumstances? Do you react like most people or do you react the way God wants you to react? We can respond to trials the way God wants us to respond by following the principles set forth in James 1:2-7.

I. Face Trials with Joy (Have a Good Attitude) – James 1:2

James 1:2 says, “Consider it pure **joy**, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” The word “*trial*” is not a court trial or an allurements to sin but a test of our faith (Matt. 4:1-11; Heb. 5:7-10). Notice that James says, “*When*”, not “*if*.” Jesus taught His followers to expect various tests and trials. In John 16:33, Jesus said, “*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*”

In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul also taught us to expect persecution and suffering. He said, “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” More than not being surprised, we should come to expect trials, tests and trouble as an essential part of the Christian life. James refers to many kinds of trials; they are diverse and manifold.

Not only should we expect trials, but James counsels us to count them all joy when we are engulfed by them. How can we face trials with joy? This seems to be so unnatural and against our nature. At first glance, it seems to be a contradiction in terms. Who is joyful in trials?

The world may encourage us to be calm and composed in the midst of trials, but only Christianity prescribes a joyful response to what may be viewed as a negative situation. We are not only to be joyful in trials but Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 that we are to: “*give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*” James is exhorting us to do what God desires. What does God desire? God desires us to do His will. Why? It is in our best interests! There is never a conflict between what pleases God and what is in our best interests.

How did the apostles react in Acts 5:41 when they suffered for Christ before the Sanhedrin? They rejoiced “*because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*” When we suffer, we need to make sure it’s for the Savior and not for our own sin or stupidity.

James 1:2 teaches the importance of having the proper attitude with regards to our trials. In large measure, our attitude determines our reaction, and we are exhorted by Paul to develop the attitude of Christ (Phil. 2:5). If we have the wrong attitude toward trials, we may forfeit learning all the valuable life lessons that God wants to teach us and that He intends for our good.

II. Face Trials with Patience (Be Willing to Suffer) – James 1:3-4

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

James 1:3-4 explains, in part, God's purpose in permitting trials to come into our lives. The best commentary on these verses is Romans 8:28-29a: "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son....*"

God will use any and every circumstance to conform more to the image of Christ if we respond the way God wants us to respond. All things work for good only to those who love God. Jesus said that the test for loving God was obedience to His commandments. In John 14:21, 23, Jesus said: "*Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.... If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*"

As God's children, we are like diamonds in the rough (some rougher than others). And God uses His tools of frustrating trials and irritating circumstances to work in us the quality of patient endurance or perseverance. This is a key quality that enables us "*to keep on keeping on*" (Gal. 6:10). A synonym of patience is long-suffering, which is "*the ability to suffer long.*" It involves the ability to cope with different sources of frustration so that we surrender our will for God's will.

In James 5:11 we are given Job as an example of what the apostle is teaching us in James 1:3-4. "*As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*" Job was patient and trusted God in his sorrow and eventually ended up more blessed than ever. God knows what's best and wants what's best for us, but are we willing to wait and receive His best?

William P. Loveless said, "*Christians are like tea, it takes a lot of hot water to bring out the true strength and flavor.*" Just as gold is put into a crucible and passed through a fire, so our faith is tested by trials. First Peter 1:7 says, "*These [trials] have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*"

One day a tourist was watching a farmer build a sturdy stone wall before the coming blustery Maine winter. After a few moments of quiet observation the visitor commented on the sturdy dimensions: four feet high and five feet wide. When asked the reason for this, the farmer replied, "*I constructed it in this fashion so that if it ever blows over, it will be taller than it was before.*"

No doubt the industrious farmer builder had his tongue in his cheek when he spoke of his monstrous wall being disturbed by the wind; yet there is a good lesson to be drawn from his comment. God is looking for Christians who, when they are blown over by adversity, become taller than they were before. Are you such a person? Can you take a licking and keep on ticking?

God works patience in us in many ways. He can use our health, other people, lack of finances, adverse circumstances, even unanswered prayer to help develop patience in our lives. All our trials borne with patience will, in the end, turn into triumph.

James 5:7-8 contains another example of patience: “*Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You, too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.*”

Try this little experiment the next time you experience a trial or testing: expect it, thank God for it, identify the source of the trial, be teachable and ask what quality does God wish to work in my character, and how can this trial conform me more to the character and conduct of Jesus Christ.

III. Face Trials with Faith and Prayer (Confidence and Commitment) – James 1:6-7

If we want wisdom we need to ask God in prayer. Asking in faith is essential for answered prayer. How would you feel if your children did not believe or trust in you? Just as we want our children to trust us, God wants us to trust in Him and faith involves confidence in the truth and reliability of God’s Word. If we have faith, we seek to act in a way consistent with what God’s Word teaches.

“*Without faith it’s impossible to please God*” (Heb. 11:6a). The most important part of knowing God’s will is our willingness, in advance, to do it (John 7:17). Prayer isn’t real or effective unless it is a genuine expression of faith. When we ask God in faith for wisdom, we expect an answer.

IV. Face Trials with God’s Wisdom (Make Good Decisions) – James 1:5

How can we rejoice in our trials and thank God in all our circumstances? Clearly, we need God’s wisdom. We need to see our trials from God’s point of view. James 1:5 teaches that it is important to face trials with godly wisdom. Without wisdom we cannot respond the way God wants us to respond. At the very heart of Christian experience is wisdom which involves understanding and acting according to God’s will. A wise person does: 1) God’s will, 2) God’s way, for 3) God’s glory.

Understanding involves seeing life from God’s point of view. Wisdom is skill in living. It involves knowing and responding to life’s situations from God’s perspective. Wisdom is the ability to make good decisions. Matthew Henry said, “*We should not pray so much for the removal of an affliction as for wisdom from God to make right use of it.*”

Five Observations Regarding Our Trials or Problems

- 1. Expect Problems:** Problems should never surprise you, for they are certain, constant and continuing. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that everything will be rosy and being shocked when it isn’t. That’s simply being unrealistic. Become a tough-minded optimist saying, “*Sure we’re going to have problems, But with God’s help we’re going to overcome and benefit from them.*” Difficulties are inevitable and inescapable, but they are also necessary, desirable and important.
- 2. Value Problems:** Problems are more valuable to our personal spiritual development than we can imagine. “*The trial of our faith is more precious than gold that perishes.*” Christ was sinless and He certainly had His share of problems, didn’t He? It’s not what the problem does to you, but what you do with the problem that counts. No one has achieved in any field without facing and overcoming problems. Problems are valuable because they help us to become more like Christ.
- 3. Understand Problems:** If you can’t handle your problems with God’s help you wouldn’t have them, because God promised not to give you more than you could bear. You can never say,

“This is too much for me to handle.” God promises that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our strength (1 Cor. 10:13). God knows our capacity. His grace will be sufficient for the task. God has given you a mind to think and a will to choose what your attitude and action will be. God’s says in effect, *“Here’s an opportunity for you. I know you can handle it if you allow me to help you.”*

4. Responsibility for Problems: We are responsible for the way we respond to our problems. Paul says in Galatians 6:5: *“for each one should carry his own load,”* and in Romans 14:12: *“each of us will give an account of himself to God.”* God will not do for you what He expects you to do for yourself.

We must avoid spiritual escapism and retreat-ism; this only leads to spiritual irresponsibility and self-deception. Mental wards are filled with people divorced from or trying to escape from reality. In a storm, a person leans into the wind. You can never remain upright unless you do so. The same is true with problems. If you lean away from them they will knock you down.

If God doesn’t provide a way out of your problems, He will provide a way through your problems. A crooked life is a life that follows the path of least resistance.

5. Conquer Problems: What practical strategy can you use to conquer a problem?

a) **Thank God:** Ephesians 5:20 says, *“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Thankfulness is an expression of God’s wisdom and love.

b) **Be Honest:** Lay your problem before God in absolute honesty. He can’t help you otherwise. Ask God to give you the wisdom you need, but first be willing to do what God desires (Jn. 7:17).

c) **Ask Questions:** Honest questions can help you to better understand the nature of the problem. A problem clearly understood may be half solved and will give you insights into some answers. Try and identify all the basic biblical principles which relate to the problem and the solution.

d) **Take Action:** It’s never enough to have the right attitude or a clear understanding; we need to be willing to take action. If our faith does not result in action, it is a fraud and a hoax (Heb. 11). Genuine faith, a Christ-like attitude and wise understanding need to lead to obedient actions (Jas. 2).

e) **Be Accountable:** Whatever our problems we need to bring God’s wisdom to bear but we also need to be voluntarily accountable to a godly individual that we love and trust. Proverbs says, *“Just as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”*

Christians should react to trials in the way that God would have us react. We should look at them from a godly mindset and a Christ-like attitude. Here’s how J.B. Philips paraphrases James 1:2-4: *“When all kinds of temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character with the right sort of independence.”*

My challenge to each of you is to honestly and realistically face your trials with:

1) Joy, 2) Patience, 3) Faith, 4) Prayer and 5) Wisdom.

1) Expect, 2) Value, 3) Understand, 4) Be Responsible For and 5) Conquer Your Problems.

1) Thank God, 2) Be Honest, 3) Ask Questions, 4) Take Action and 5) Be Accountable.