

Part One: Stretched Into Maturity

Written by Bob Stone

Remember when you were little, how you used to get hurt? How many of you have permanent scars on your body from childhood injuries? I got in a lot of scrapes, and have the scars to prove it; I wasn't very careful and was a little too adventuresome for my own good.

One time I climbed up a telephone pole because I thought it would be fun to grasp ahold of the guy wires that steadied the poles and slide down them. Well, just above the ground at the foot of the wire were a lot of exposed wires that cut open my ankle and left the need for some 30 stitches.

Another time I was running late to high school, so I parked my car and decided to take a short cut across the school parking lot. To do that, I had to hurdle a 4-to-5 foot fence. I thought it would be no problem, because I was a hurdler in track. I woke up in the hospital. I had caught my shoe on the top of the fence, flipped over and landed on the back of my head on the sidewalk. I made it over, but the landing and the concussion were quite painful. I don't remember the event; all I know was that I really shook up my brother—he thought I was dead.

I could share many more childhood mishaps, but I think you get the idea that I'm fortunate to be here.

We would all like to think we would get over being hurt as we grow older, but even as adults we make mistakes or are caught in unfortunate circumstances and need stitches and care for our hurts. We may get the wind knocked out of us by an unfaithful marriage partner, a crippling accident, or the sudden death of someone very close to us. We may have traded climbing telephone poles for climbing corporate ladders, but it still hurts when we fall—when we slide into hurtful circumstances. We don't cut our fingers much anymore, but we do hurt from cutting remarks that leave us bleeding on the inside.

Nowadays, it's our hearts, not our arms and legs, that are injured and bruised by troubles. Today's cuts, burns and spills leave behind painful emotional scars and hurts. Even in the places we often feel safest, our homes, we face a variety of troubles. Sometimes we have heart-wrenching experiences that leave us breathless and injured. Sometimes our stretching moments are just the routine of taking care of the family—that

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can bring a unique set of repetitive experiences that add up to a lot of discomfort.

Thankfully, not all we experience in the home is painful, though at the time the events might seem a little more than we want to handle. It is helpful, in fact, to look back on some of those stretching experiences and see the humor in them.

An example of a disaster that eventually turned humorous is the description of a day in the life of Bill Butterworth, a pastor who volunteered to take care of his four kids and give his wife a few nights to attend some special seminar. The kids were 5,4,2, and 1 month. This is Bill's account in his journal:

"My 4-year-old wants to know why it is that when Mommy goes out, the kids have to go to bed when it is still light. I tried to feed them dinner, a real disaster; tomorrow night I will feed them in the backyard; they'll eat off paper plates; and they'll be dressed only in underwear and shower caps. The kids always want me to read the alphabet book because they know with that book I can't skip pages. Never close your eyes when you pray with four kids. I always wanted to ask my four-year-old what it is like to sleep on the top bunk with his big wheel. 60 Minutes wouldn't even do a story on our house; they're safer in the Middle East. The kids are all mad at me now because cupcakes don't float in the tub. My two-year-old has special powers: he can look at a glass of juice and it will spill. I just made a big mistake; I lifted the lid off the diaper pail. That one act clears sinuses, kills roaches, fleas and ticks, and effectively discourages would-be burglars. I got angry. I said some things I shouldn't have."

Whatever our circumstances, we must recognize that life is not always as we dream it should be. Most of us waste vast amounts of energy, hopelessly trying to make our lives conform to some mental myth of what life ought to be. In reality, life is full of joy *and* difficulty, pain *and* success, frustration *and* contentment. This is true now and was true in the first century.

The book of James was written to a group of Jewish Christians experiencing tremendous suffering because they believed Jesus to be the Messiah. They were being harassed and

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persecuted, driven from their homes and homeland, and constantly being treated with hostility by Gentiles—who hated them because they were Jewish—and by fellow Jews, who hated them for being Christians. Their shops were boycotted, and their wages withheld. They understood the meaning of suffering.

In our [overview](#) of the book of James, we saw that it is focused on these Jews and in a very practical way, seeks to help them respond to the pressures of their lives. The book has a distinctively Jewish flavor since it was probably the first New Testament book written. This is important to keep in mind as we try to understand and interpret it.

We noticed this flavor last week, when we saw how James referred to these Jewish Christians as those "who are dispersed abroad." This term almost always referred to Jews who were scattered throughout the ancient world as a result of repeated persecutions. James used the term symbolically to help his readers see that they were in a dispersion similar to Israel's. As Jews, they were being driven from their homeland and as Christians, driven from their Jewish communities—they were a people without a country.

These believers knew the misery of troubles that wouldn't go away. James, therefore, in his letter, immediately went to work binding bruised spirits with the truth about troubles. Let's take the stance that this letter is from someone who really desires to bring healing to those who are suffering. Doctor James has some help for the scattered and hurting Jews and also for any today who are being stretched by life's troubles. Straight from the great Physician Himself, James passes on to us some very wise advice.

The Diagnosis: What do we need to know about trials and troubles?—vv. 2-6.

Troubles are inevitable.

James 1:2—*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds..."*

Notice that James didn't say, "Consider it pure joy my brothers if you face trials of many kinds." He said, "whenever." We needn't wonder if trials will come or when they'll leave. They're here to stay. They are not elective courses. First Peter 4:12 emphasizes this—

"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."

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Today there are numerous ideas being tossed around regarding trials. Some people believe they're a form of punishment from God. Others dangle the promise before us that if we can just reach a certain level of maturity, trials will disappear and we'll live happily ever after—life will be one big spiritual Disneyland. Still others are trying to convince us that there's really no such thing as adversity—trials such as death, pain, and sickness are a figment of our imagination; like the boogeyman, they don't exist.

James, however, has something quite different to say about trials—they are inevitable. M. Scott Peck opens his best-seller *The Road Less Travelled* with this statement: "Life is difficult." He continues:

"This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it has been accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

"Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties, as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be, and that somehow has been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race, or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share."

Troubles come in a large variety of ways.

The Greek word he uses for "many kinds" is the one from which we get the term *polka dot*. The word also means "many-colored." By this James means we can expect our lives to be spattered with trials of all sizes, shapes and colors.

If we took a survey here today, we would see how diverse our suffering is. Some are feeling the pain of a lingering illness. Some are experiencing the constant ache of a marriage dysfunction or an unfulfilling relationship. Others are faced with a rebellious child or an alcoholic parent—maybe an abusive one. Some are struggling with overwhelming problems in school, or business; a depression that will not go away, or a habit that doesn't

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seem to be controllable. Some of you are so used to your pain you have to be reminded that it is even there. Whatever our problems, James' point is that there will be a variety of them.

Troubles and pain have purpose.

vv. 3-4—"*...because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4] Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*"

We often feel hopeless and helpless in trials—we think God has abandoned us, but James tells us trials/suffering are the sign that God is at work in us. James is sharing a profound truth for the believer. Troubles and pain do have a specific purpose. Our pain is productive—it is working in us to develop something and finish something.

What is God after? In every trial, God's purpose is to develop endurance and help us grow in maturity until we are complete, not lacking anything. That's quite an order for some of us! This is what He is after: **perseverance** and **maturity** in us.

What does **perseverance** mean? This word is vibrant and dynamic and comes from a combination of two Greek words that, when put together, literally mean "to abide under" or "to remain under." It's one of my favorite words in the Greek:

hypomonen

. The word suggests the capacity to remain under pressure without collapsing—to have staying power under pressure. It's a "don't quit" word. We all admire this quality and desire to be strong, stable persons. We all want to be people who keep on going even when most, if not all, the indications are that we are licked—defeated.

The only way that will happen in our lives is if we develop perseverance. How is perseverance developed in us? The answer again is in verse 3: "*...because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*"

" The only way perseverance is developed is through the testing of your faith

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The description of the testing process makes it clear how testing develops perseverance: "Testing" comes from the Greek term *dokimos*, which means "approval." It's a word found on the undersides of many ancient pieces of pottery unearthed by archeologists in the Near East. This mark meant that the piece had gone through the furnace without cracking; it had been approved.

The application of testing to us is obvious: the only way we can develop perseverance—i.e., abide under the tests God sends us through—is by abiding under the tests He sends us through. In other words, the process that *reveals* perseverance, is the very process that *develops* it. How does testing both develop and reveal perseverance at the same time?

The answer is seen in the way gold is purified through fire. The goldsmith melts the gold in order to bring the impurities to the top to be ladled off. The process continues until the goldsmith can see his face reflected in the gold. Suffering and trials are like that, too; it is heat which melts and purifies faith. It pulls out our supports and leaves us vulnerable and needy. As we continue to stay in the fire, the impurities come to the surface so they can be dealt with—ladled off.

The end result is that each time we go through the fire, Jesus is seen a little clearer and we develop perseverance. Listen to Peter 1:6-7 again:

6] "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7] These 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."

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What will perseverance do for us? This question brings us to the second thing that God is after—maturity. Perseverance has a work to do—v. 4.

"Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Perseverance is sometimes hindered from exercising its influence and achieving triumphs in our lives. This happens when we grow weary from our trials, stop short of the goal and fight back. Getting bitter or resentful we shout, "Why me"? Or, "It isn't fair!" By stopping short, however, we miss the beauty of God's plan for us—to make us perfect and complete, mature, adequate, fully equipped to handle the demands of life.

When we are steadfast, and exercise a staying power that confronts difficulties and continues on in faith, that process will develop maturity. This obviously is a process, not a state at which we will arrive totally in this life. Scripture does not indicate that believers reach perfection in this life. The statement "perseverance must finish its work" indicates progress and development, the result of which we could call maturity.

I can remember times in my Christian life when I would say to the Lord, "If only this circumstance wasn't in my life, I could serve you much more effectively." It took me many years to discover that the very circumstances from which I longed to be freed, were making me what I longed to be.

Have you discovered that? *The circumstances in your life from which you long to be free are the very circumstances that are making you what you long to be.* Wouldn't it be easier for all of us if we just quit fighting God and allowed Him the freedom to perfect our faith?

Based upon this diagnosis, James now gives us a prescription. A doctor who can only

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diagnose and not prescribe would not be very helpful, so we ask, "What are we supposed to do?"

The Prescription: what do we need to do?

James gives us four commands that form the basis of what we are to do. I have phrased them into four things we are called to do, actions we must take when we face a trial if we are to grow into maturity.

Look at verses 2-4 again:

vv. 2-4—*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3] because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4] Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

First, Exercise an Attitude of Joy—v. 2

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers. . ."

The word "consider" (v. 2) in Hebrew literally means "to lead the way;" it's the idea of going ahead of something else. Here it is linked together with the attitude of joy; the Christian is to consider it pure joy when he is going into a trial.

What does that mean? Is James a masochist exhorting us to enjoy or ignore the awful reality of pain and suffering? The context of these words reveals that there is real joy in believing that all of our hurts, struggles and difficult circumstances are in God's plan for our lives and are being used to help us grow. This is real joy when we are in a test, being genuinely thankful for what these trials and suffering are accomplishing in our lives.

It's not saying that all is joy. Problems are not happiness; they're not pure joy! When God tells us to count it all joy, He is telling us to look at our situation from the positive side: that these wretched problems could be turned into profit for us. "Counting it all joy" is the deep

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contentment that comes from knowing God is in control of every area of our lives and using the worst circumstances—even the ones we hate and are hurt by—to do something for us.

I think joy is far more important than any of us have imagined, and far more available than any of us have dreamed. We all know that life is difficult and suffering is inevitable, but don't forget misery is optional. We need not spend our time practicing joylessness. We need not wait until circumstances change so we can be joyful, because we know (v. 3) that tests are designed by God for good, not evil... that they have a purpose and we aren't simply "playthings of circumstance."

We can be joyful, because we know the heat of the furnace is designed not to make us crack, but to solidify and strengthen His character in us.

Second, expect to receive wisdom from God

v. 5—"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."

What do we discover about the nature of God from this verse? If we lack wisdom in how to handle a trial or suffering in our lives, God will give to us generously the wisdom we need to make up our lack. If we ask, He will give us the wisdom we need without finding fault in us. (i.e. He doesn't say, "You should know already what to do, Bob" or, "Why should I help you again? You have been in this situation before, haven't you?")

How do you know if a trial you are going through will have maximum benefit for you and your faith? My experience has been that in times when I have not known what to do and have lacked wisdom, I then have had the greatest potential for growth. My experience has also taught me that these times of great lack are designed to create a special time of communication between God and me, one I might have not experienced otherwise.

It is in the midst of our greatest struggle that we can experience the love of God in a new way. Sadly, it is only in trials that some of us get serious about talking to our Lord. It is my experience that the wisdom God shares in those times of great lack, has the greatest

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potential to help others in the years to come. The wisdom mentioned here in v. 5 is directly related to trials; it's not just wisdom in general. James is referring to the ability to view a test from God's perspective. Without this kind of wisdom, the ability to endure becomes elusive, and the goal of maturity may never be reached.

Third, We must Exhibit Faith and not Doubt—

vv. 6-8—*"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. 7] That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; 8] he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."*

The only reason we will lack the wisdom we need in a trial is because we lack faith. In vv. 6-8 James is not referring to saving faith, nor to a general kind of trust. He's advocating a sustaining faith that involves complete abandonment of our will to God and His purposes in our trials. Verse 8 gives us a name for someone to whom wisdom just doesn't get through—that person is one who doubts and is called "double-minded."

"Doubting" means to be divided in one's mind. The opposite is to be single-minded or undistracted. A double-minded person is someone who wants his/her own will and God's at the same time... someone who, down inside, still has reservations about being completely yielded to God.

God only gives to those who want what He gives. You cannot enjoy Him until you abandon yourself to Him. We will be unstable in all our ways until we are single-minded, undistracted and abandoned to God.

Fourth, we must evaluate our circumstances, our trials, from an eternal perspective—v. 9-11.

9] *"The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. 10] But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. 11] For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business."*

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Both the brother who has nothing and the rich man with everything are enjoined to do the same thing—evaluate their circumstances/trials with an eternal perspective. Humble circumstances have their own glory in God—especially if the poor person devotes his/her life to Him in the midst of poverty. The rich don't usually recognize the trial they are in, unless they look at their resources from an eternal perspective:

- Money takes management
- Material goods are temporary

Whatever our economic state, we still have a need for God's wisdom and perspective on our condition.

The Prognosis: what can we look forward to

v. 12—*"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."*

The first promise is of happiness...

as we learn from the term "blessed," which means "genuinely happy." In the Old Testament, the word blessing is always used in the plural, signifying being happy many times over. This kind of happiness is impossible if dependent on circumstances, but available in abundance if we depend on the Lord in all our circumstances.

The second promise is of "the crown of life."

James isn't referring just to a future crown to be received once we're in heaven; he's referring to the crown of a rich and full life to be enjoyed here and now. Historian and theologian William Barclay draws out several of the implications hidden in James' reference to this crown of life. In the ancient world the crown (*stephanos*) had at least four great associations.

1. The crown of flowers was worn at times of joy...(it) was the sign of happy, festive joy.
2. The crown was the mark of royalty. It was worn by kings and by those in

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authority.

3. The crown of laurel leaves was the victor's crown in the games, the prize which the athlete coveted above all.

4. The crown was the mark of honour and of dignity...

...The Christian has a joy that no other man can ever have...The Christian has a royalty that other men have never realized, for, however humble his earthly circumstances, he is nothing less than the child of God. The Christian has a victory which others cannot win, for he meets life and all its demands in the conquering power of the presence and the company of Jesus Christ...The Christian has a new dignity, for he is ever conscious that God thought him worth the life and death of Jesus Christ. No man can ever be worthless, if Christ die for him.—William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, Westminster Press, 1960, pp. 57-58.