

A photograph of two rock climbers on a tall, narrow rock formation. The climber on the left is wearing a yellow jacket and a white helmet, while the climber on the right is wearing an orange jacket and a yellow helmet. They are both wearing climbing gear and are holding hands, suggesting they are assisting each other. The background is a cloudy sky.

**TRIUMPHING THROUGH
YOUR TRIALS**

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Joy in Adversity

Trials, tribulations, afflictions, ordeals, burdens, problems call them what you want. They are an inevitable component of the Christian life. The question is not whether you will be able to avoid trials, but how you handle them when they occur. The Bible sets a lofty goal for believers beset with adversity.

“Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”

James 1:2-3

Now, doesn't that sound a little bizarre? How in the world can you have joy if your world is falling apart? You can't, not as long as you confuse joy with happiness. Happiness is an emotion triggered by circumstances. It describes that bubbly feeling you get inside when everything is going your way. If I were to hand you a million dollars right now, you would likely feel happy, (Nothing like a quick million to brighten your day, right?) But the happiest person alive doesn't necessarily have joy. Joy is more than an emotion; it is a life-changing mindset. Joy is a deep, abiding sense of well-being that can sustain you even if you lose a million dollars.

The Declaration of Independence asserts our right to life, liberty and the “pursuit of happiness.” Being free to pursue happiness is not a guarantee that we will find it. Finding it is not a guarantee that we will keep it. Keeping it is not a guarantee that we will appreciate it. This is because emotions are transient, unpredictable and undependable. God wants to give us more than a “reasonable facsimile” of satisfaction.



James tells us to consider it joy. Consideration is a function of the mind. How we react to our circumstances depends largely on where we focus our mind.

Remember the time Peter walked on the water (Matthew 14:22-33)? He was doing fine, the Bible tells us, until he noticed the strong winds. At that point, he became afraid and began to sink. His focus had shifted away from Jesus. “*You of little faith,*” the Lord remarked as he pulled Peter to safety, “*Why did you doubt?*”

Trials have a way of crying out for our undivided attention. Like the storm-tossed sea, our problems typically appear larger than our ability to overcome them. Holding on to joy requires seeing through this illusion and recognizing the spiritual reality. That's why Paul reminds us to center our thoughts on “*...Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy*” (Philippians 4:8.)

As I suggested earlier, you don't need to go out looking for trials; they find you. However, there are some Christians who seem bent on asking for trouble. If you rebel against the divine standard and life takes a turn for the worse, don't complain to God about the ‘trial’

He sent you. Those who sow seeds of disobedience shouldn't be surprised when sprouts appear. Trials you cultivate through rebellious behavior will not result in joy. They yield a very different and disastrous harvest. The Apostle Peter clearly distinguished between trials we encounter and those we manufacture.

"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer, thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler."

1 Peter 4:14-15

The answer to godly suffering is knowing. The solution



to suffering is to set aside what we feel in favor of what we know.

"The testing of your faith produces endurance ..."

James 1:3

Anyone who has been to school knows what it means to be tested. But few understand that, spiritually speaking, the true purpose of a test is to portray your aptitude. If you have accepted your assignment, studied the

material and prepared properly, the result of the test is a foregone conclusion: you receive a reward in the form of a good grade and advancement. If you're prepared, your trials provide you with an opportunity to show your endurance.

When circumstances turn against you and the deck seems stacked in favor of the enemy, it is just as though God is saying, "Clear your desk and grab your pencil. Here comes a pop quiz." Ask if the information that He gave you to study has been assimilated.

There's no getting around it, exams make people nervous. Trials cause pain. But there's nothing like the rush you feel when you know you've scored big. I remember when Lois was in labor with our first child. There was no joy in the pain she felt. The joy came from knowing what the pain was producing. Two cells had joined together and blossomed into a brand new person who was about to enter the world. Though it hurt no less, the pain became tolerable simply because of the knowing.

Perfect Result

"And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

James 1:4

A story is told of a young boy who discovered a cocoon in a backyard tree. He studied the cocoon carefully, seeking some sign of life. At last, several days later, the boy saw what he had been waiting for. Inside the filmy shell, a newly formed butterfly was struggling to get out. Filled with compassion for the tiny creature, the boy used his pocketknife to enlarge the hole. Exhausted, the butterfly tumbled out and lay there. What the boy didn't know was that the struggle to escape was designed to strengthen the butterfly's muscle system and

prepare it for flight. His act of “compassion” had inadvertently crippled and ultimately doomed the butterfly.

The night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed to His Father, asking Him not to take us out of the world, but to keep us safe in the world. The goal, Jesus realized, was not to steer around difficulty, but to navigate safely through it. That concept seems troublesome to some of us. Somehow, we have gotten the idea that

“In basketball, like in life, obstacles are inevitable.”

Christianity is designed to be a lifetime of smooth sailing—not true. Imagine a basketball player stumbling to the sidelines saying, “Well, coach, I would have scored. But every time I go up to make a shot, there’s some guy from the other team with his hand in front of my face.” It doesn’t take a veteran coach to arrive at an answer. “The guy from the other team is supposed to have his hand in your face. That’s the way the game is played. It is his job to do all he can to prevent your success.” In basketball, like in life, obstacles are inevitable.

Returning to the schoolroom analogy, letting patience have its perfect effect means that we must not lay down our pencils halfway through the exam. Even if you have answered each question correctly, quitting at the halfway point limits your score to 50%, an F at most schools. Working through our tests from beginning to end is much easier when we understand that God has a purpose for our problems. Like the butterfly in the cocoon, getting from point A to point B is not the entire agenda. The process of getting there is equally important.

Too many of us, once we’ve passed our first test, we want to skip from kindergarten to college. “OK, I’ve taken a test. That’s it; school’s out!” That makes as much sense

as your ten-year-old telling you that he wants to be a brain surgeon now! “I’m not interested in college, Dad. And medical school sounds like a drag, too. But deep in my heart, I know God wants me to be a doctor.” Right—that boy is a fool. He wants the benefits of the educational process without the accompanying responsibility. God understands that the process is as important as the result. That’s why He sometimes elects not to deliver us from certain situations.



I remember taking my son to the doctor when he was young. When the diagnosis was rendered, a shot was prescribed. “No, Daddy,” my son cried. “Don’t let him stick me.” You can imagine how pathetic the child looked at that moment. His eyes were filled with terror, and he saw me as his only source of deliverance. Now, I love my son. I would gladly lay down my life for him should the need arise. But at that moment, I was clearly

on the doctor's side. My son felt betrayed. Not only did I allow this man with a syringe to have his way, I held him down while he did it. What my son couldn't understand is that the pain of the needle was less of a threat than the danger of the disease. I refused to allow him to avoid the process. His healing depended on it. God, the perfect Father, will do nothing less for us. The Lord gives us a precious promise,

"No temptation [test or trial] 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 a way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it."

1 Corinthians 10:13

God made you. He knows when enough is enough. The trials you face will be fair, appropriate and within your power to endure. The Lord may not allow you to elude a test, but He's not in the business of giving college entrance exams to first-graders.

Ask for Wisdom

What should we do if the "way of escape" seems to have eluded us? James addresses that question directly...

"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously without reproach, and it will be given to him."

James 1:5

Wisdom, quite simply, is the ability to apply knowledge to life situations. A knowledgeable man has stored away a load of information; a wise man knows how to draw on that storehouse to form answers or solutions. Do you lack wisdom? Ask God! Too often, God is the last person to whom we turn for answers. God sometimes takes His place in line after the pastor, the elder, the deacon, the neighbor and Aunt Mary's second cousin once removed. We fill the calendars of \$100-per-hour psychiatrists, inflate the sales of quick-fix self-help books and tune in to the likes of Oprah and Phil in our quest for answers. All the while, God is waiting to hand out liberal supplies of wisdom to all who ask.

God hands out this wisdom "without reproach." Unlike the frustrated parent who blurts out, "If you ask me for ice cream one more time, I'll scream!" God doesn't mind our repeated requests for spiritual insight provided we ask in faith.

"But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts... is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

James 1:6-8

Trying to weasel out of a God-given growth opportunity is an expression of doubt. “I can’t pass the test, Lord. Let’s move on to something else.” When we pray in faith, we believe that God can and will give us the wisdom we need to make the grade. Don’t believe me; try it! Resist the urge to ask for an escape from the trial, ask for wisdom instead. Then watch God keep His promise. You’ll reach a new height of spiritual excitement as you discover that the Word works!

The Principle Applied

“Let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like the 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.”

James 1:9-11

What a practical illustration of our theme! James centers his attention on a trial with which most of us are familiar: the lack of money. The poor man in our passage is told to “glory in his high position.” Consider it all joy! He is not being admonished to enjoy his poverty. Instead, he is encouraged to redirect his focus from his financial condition to his spiritual condition. This proper focus will connect him with the spiritual resources he needs to cope financially and emotionally until his circumstances change.

James recommends to the rich man that he “glory in his humiliation.” Trials strike the rich and poor alike. No one has enough money to buy his or her way out of life’s tests. When the doctor delivers his diagnosis,

certain cures cannot be bought. When your marriage is running aground or your child is going astray, alternatives can’t be measured in terms of “convenient monthly

No one has enough money to buy his or her way out of life’s tests.

payments.” The problem with wealth is that it makes us seem bigger than life. We can have anything and everything we need because we can pay cash for it. Praise God, James says, not for your humiliation, but in your



humiliation. God is reminding you of your humanity. It takes more than money to pass the test. Take heart that you are a child of the King. Only a spiritual perspective can provide you with joy in the midst of trials.

Report Cards

In any test, there comes a time when the teacher says, “Put your pencil down and hand in your paper.” Before long, the test will come back marked with a grade. In the spiritual arena, God grades our tests as well.

“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.”

James 1:12

The one who endures shall be approved. God reviews your performance under pressure, and writes ‘approved’ next to your name. Many people believe the “crown of life” to be a victory wreath God presents upon our arrival in heaven. But I don’t believe God withholds His



approval that long. Remember when Abraham was instructed to sacrifice his son? He trusted God even in the midst of potentially tragic circumstances. Just as he was about to plunge the knife into the chest of his child, the angel of the Lord stopped him. “Approved!” God said.

When your test is finished and you have passed, God rewards your efforts with the crown of life. What is life?

“This is eternal life: that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

John 17:3

Life is knowing God now, not just when we go to live with Him in heaven. Life is when God looks at your situation today, breaks through your wall of trials, invades your experience and single-handedly turns your circumstances around—that’s life. You’ve been single for years, praying for a mate. Out of frustration, you’ve

There are few experiences on earth that match the excitement of seeing God turn trials into triumph.

given up on dating and are resigned to living the rest of your years alone. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there he is the man of your dreams (or, more precisely, your prayers)—that’s life. You’re unequally yoked to a non-believer. You’ve prayed for years that he would become the man God wants him to be. But God would not release you from the test until you learned to be the person He wanted you to be. Faithfully, you applied the principles of submission and love. In time, God says, “Approved.” Then, suddenly, your stubborn man confesses his sin and seeks a Savior—that’s life.

There are few experiences on earth that match the excitement of seeing God turn trials into triumph. But that transformation is a process, not an event. God establishes the curriculum in this classroom of life. There’s no longer any need to cut class when testing time comes. Face the tests with confidence and consider it joy!