

# SUFFERING SUCCESSFULLY

**SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN**



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James 1:2-11  
2nd Message  
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In a recent Stanford Daily article, a student from Texas reported that her parents flew out to visit her every weekend during the first quarter of her freshman year.

These are the opening sentences of an article on over-parenting in the most recent Time Magazine:

*The insanity crept up on us slowly; we just wanted what was best for our kids. We bought macrobiotic cupcakes and hypoallergenic socks, hired tutors to correct a 5-year-old's "pencil-holding deficiency," hooked up broadband connections in the tree house but took down the swing set after the second skinned knee. We hovered over every school, playground and practice field—"helicopter parents," teachers christened us, a phenomenon that spread to parents of all ages, races and regions.*

What makes otherwise capable people into "helicopter parents," fearing that all hardship is harmful, that every unknown is dangerous? This condition is the flip side of pride that says, 'I take credit for all my accomplishments.' Arrogance and vulnerability are two sides of the same coin.

This double foolishness is contradicted in the Bible from beginning to end. We are not the rulers of the universe. And we are cared for by One who intends that we have life "in abundance." Life's hardships come our way to produce good, not damage, as we grow in faith.

Consider some of the images drawn by the writers of the New Testament: a gardener prunes a vine so that it will be fruitful (Jn. 15:1-2); a wise parent disciplines children (Heb. 12:7-9); a fiery crucible purifies gold (1Pet. 1:6-7). Faith grows when it is tested.

James' instruction on this theme begins with typical bluntness:

James 1:2-4:

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

Faced with a hard situation, most of us begin with the hope that God will alter our circumstances—that he will intervene with more money, an altered style, new friends, changed politics, a better job, or different lingo. And yet, in order to bless us, what is required is that we be changed. If God were merely to deal with our circumstances and do nothing to help us grow, he would be a helicopter parent not a loving Father.

His goal is mature faith—faith that has been stretched, weighed down, surrounded by unknowns, and forced to limp instead of skip ahead. Mature faith is overwhelmingly worth the pain that is required to gain it. Therefore, "Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds."

## **Trials**

The big idea is clear enough, but what instruction does James add to help us respond rightly?

The Greek word *pierasmos*, translated 'trial,' means to stress-test something. We are put beyond our competence when we encounter a trial. As a result, we can't resort to familiar approaches that used to work, we can't call up latent reserves of strength, we can't talk our way out of a jam.

How does such stress bring positive change? James walks us through this process and I want to make four

observations about what we read in verses 2-4.

### **1. Having faith and being tough is not the same thing.**

Developing toughness does not require the presence of God. Consider common wisdom: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going;” “What ever doesn’t kill me, makes me strong.” Armies, orchestras, and soccer teams all improve with hard task-masters who demand maximum effort.

That very ordinary human process is not what James is talking about here. The issue for James is faith. God is not testing our courage; he is testing our faith in these trials.

When Jesus’ disciples were in the midst of a frightening storm they woke him from sleep with the question, “don’t you care if we perish?” (Matthew 8:25). Faith is tested when we wonder if God truly loves us, when we wonder if he keeps his promises. Perhaps on a personal level we question whether we have exhausted the grace of God which embraces all other sinners.

Random hardship can be met with personal courage, but a believer has to face the question of whether faith in a God who could intervene and chooses not to, is ultimately foolish. Can we trust God when we lose sight of all evidence that he cares?

Of course, the greatest account of faith being tested is the story of Job. He lost his livelihood, his health, his family, his place in the world. He was wracked with physical pain and subjected to loneliness. His “friends,” said, “Job, all this is your fault. If you are suffering you must have done something to deserve it.”

Job’s wife said, “You are not the problem. God is the problem. Curse God and die”(Job 2:9). Job refused both of those analyses. He cried aloud, he wrestled, he stumbled, but he refused to relinquish his faith. He refused to let go of God in his wrestling, and in the end, having gone to the depths, he soared to the highest place, to a grand vision of the nature of God and what it means to know him. Job’s faith was tested and the result was new certainty

that God is good.

**2. Trials of many kinds.** Sometimes trials make sense to us. Disciples may be persecuted for righteousness—Paul notes in Galatians 6:17, “I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.” Ridicule, rejection and closed doors of all kinds may occur because we are faithful to Christ and even though the hurt may be great such suffering makes sense. Also, consequences that flow from sinful choices are not unreasonable. A compulsive gambler may resent his poverty, but his condition doesn’t lead to questions about life’s unfairness.

However, random blows and scatter-shot trials raise questions. Why me? Why now? And so on. Natural disasters (earthquakes, tidal waves, etc.) are not “caused by” human choices and are not evenly distributed across the globe. On a smaller scale, a child’s lasting illness, a terrible coincidence (the traffic jam that kept you from a critical job interview), or Dad’s dementia can all make us question God. We want answers before being willing to trust him.

However, God knows what he is doing, and does not need to explain himself to us. “Various trials”—those that make sense and those that don’t are occasions for faith to be tested and grow strong.

Let me also note the phrase “my brothers” in verse 2. James does not teach from a high pulpit. He stands next to us, having learned faith’s lessons the hard way, as we must.

**3. Don’t fake happiness.** James says “Consider it joy when you encounter trials.” Joy and happiness, of course, are not the same thing. We should recognize testing, and joyfully receive it because we know that God is at work. It is ultimately going to be for our good. But, we don’t have to paste on a fake smile. We don’t have to pretend that it doesn’t hurt. We don’t have to act like we are not confused, when we are truly confused by the chaos around us.

Widowhood is one of life’s hardest burdens. And it may be accompanied by a feeling that one should “appear

victorious” in church. Many have noted that one of the hardest parts of losing a spouse is coming to church alone, not knowing how to answer well meaning questions, not knowing when a painful memory will occur, or how friends will react to an emotional roller coaster. We need to be sure in this case and all others that genuine faith is compatible with pain and unanswered questions. Being real in God’s presence is evidence of faith.

**4. Mature, complete, not lacking anything.** Trials lead to perseverance. Facing stress we develop needed strength and emotional discipline; fitness in the inner man. But perseverance is not the final destination. God intends more than a thick skin and a steady hand on the wheel. The goal is maturity (completeness). We are intended to gain Christ-like character.

The mature believer has learned that “When I am weak, I am strong.” He or she has discovered the abiding power of the Holy Spirit, not a harder gritting of one’s teeth. Such a person will say with John the Baptist that Jesus must grow greater and I less and less—I will not shy away from admitting weakness. Finally, the disciple who is complete, lacking nothing, chooses ministry to others, delighting to give away what he or she has received.

## Wisdom

James 1:5-8:

**<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup>he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.**

Often our experience when being tested is not resistance to trusting God, but confusion. Thrust into unfamiliar surroundings we don’t know what steps to take next. James tells us to pray: ask God for wisdom in trials because he gives it generously.

But there is a caveat. We cannot ask God for help in order to evaluate its usefulness. God’s wisdom cannot be one opinion among many—seek God, ask my friends, do a Google search and then choose the course that suits me best. Such doublemindedness will prevent us from receiving anything from a generous God. Only when we have already decided to obey will we be granted the generous provision of the wisdom of God.

To be clear—we may struggle to understand what God says, what he intends for us. This struggle is not doubt. James is warning against an aloofness that suggests we can treat God as a benefactor who may or may not merit our approval.

## Riches and Poverty

James 1:9-11:

**<sup>9</sup>The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. <sup>10</sup>But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. <sup>11</sup>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.**

James has a good deal more to say in subsequent chapters about riches and poverty so comments here will be brief. The simple point, in the context of trials producing mature faith, is that we should expect our familiar understanding of things to be turned upside down.

The brother in poverty discovers the enormous riches of Christ as his faith grows. He defines himself not by worldly standards but by his ‘high position’ in the kingdom of God. The rich brother learns to appreciate that he is a sinner saved by grace rather than take notice of the passing status offered by this world’s wealth.

## Conclusion

Jesus has no interest in being a helicopter parent—protecting his loved ones from every difficulty, removing every obstacle, lifting every burden, driving away every risk. In fact, it is the Lord’s gift to put us in circumstances that are too much for us. We should joyfully receive them, because it is by those very encounters that the firmness of God’s promises are assured to us, that confidence in his character is reinforced, that our loving welcome with his arms around us is made plainer and plainer to us.

After a night of prayer, Jesus chose twelve apostles, men who would become both teachers and examples of faith. Immediately he called the twelve together and gave them authority to banish demons and cure disease, sending them out to preach the kingdom of God. He told them to take nothing for the journey, no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt.

A dangerous and unpredictable assignment: challenging evil, illness, and ignorance with no resources except Jesus’ power extended to his followers. They returned to him filled with joy and strengthened in their faith. Jesus continues to make such assignments for our good. “Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds.”

This first commission of twelve apostles to a dangerous assignment reminds us of the great commission that applies to everyone.

Matthew 28:18-20:

**<sup>18</sup>Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

The great promise at the center of this charge is, “I am with you always!” But we discover the truth of this promise only when we put it to the test. Therefore, we say thanks to our Lord God when the world is too hard for us to manage and we don’t know where to turn and our hearts cry out for wisdom and the outcome is uncertain . . . and God proves himself faithful.

I want to end with a benediction that contains a smile; a word from Brennan Manning:

*May all your expectations be frustrated.  
May all your plans be thwarted.  
May all your desires be withered into  
nothingness . . .*

*That you may experience the powerlessness and the poverty of a child and sing and dance in the love of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>*

Amen

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Time Magazine, *The Backlash Against Over parenting*, October 20, 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*, (Colorado Spring: Navpress, 1994), 13.