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Suffering Will Make You or Break You (James 1:12-18)

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People have always struggled to explain the reasons for the reality of human suffering. Many books of the Bible do as well, from Job to Psalms, 1 Peter to James. Jesus himself underscored the effect persecution and suffering have on those who hear the gospel. The response to suffering literally makes us or breaks us.

In one of Jesus' parables, he speaks about a sower spreading seed, which represents the message of the gospel. Some seeds fell on the path and didn't grow. Some went in the soil and grew, but later withered or was choked by thorns. The last seeds fell in good ground and grew to bear fruit.

When the disciples asked for the meaning of the story, Jesus said this:

Matthew 13:19-23 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

The main topic at the beginning of the book of James is trials and how to respond to them. We are told to be counter-cultural when our faith is tested and be joyful. We are told to avoid the folly of being double-minded when we pray for help by doubting God's care and power. In our passage today, James adjusts the focus a little more to give us a better view of our heart as well as the nature of God and his reasons for trials.

James 1:12-18 - ¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and

he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

I. PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE (1:12)

Earlier in the chapter, James clearly said that a beneficial byproduct of trials is patience or steadfastness. If one is a true follower of Christ, one of the evidences will be a character that grows deeper in quiet-hearted faith. Here, we see that the ultimate outcome of a life lived trusting God through hardship will be eternal life, described as "the crown of life". This is guaranteed by the One who does not lie and is the only One with the power to save. Paul wrote to Titus:

Titus 1:2, 3 - ...in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

So why do Christians suffer trials and persecution? At least part of the answer is right here in these verses. The loving purpose of God is to produce patient steadfastness in this world and eternal life in the world to come.

As his children, Christians are to stand fast, as do all who truly love God, in order to receive our inheritance. Here the theme of loyalty to God and of turning from lesser and therefore potentially dangerous and false loyalties is present. The faithful are those who stand the test, for real love for God manifests itself in action.¹

II. PROGRESSION OF EVIL DESIRE (1:13-16)

Right after laying out the final purpose of a believer's suffering, James quickly swings to the opposite mindset of the one who will not trust God in the middle of trials. This person blames God for his

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problems and for his sinful attitude. Doesn't it stand to reason that if times of temptation weren't in our way, then we wouldn't sin? Isn't that God's fault then? James emphatically says "No!" The source of sin is our own hearts.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION IN SUFFERING IS TO THINK WRONG ABOUT GOD.

Proverbs 19:3 - When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD.

James presents six stages of sin in verses 14 and 15. We should know them well and take responsibility for them if we fail. We can't blame God to justify sin.

STAGE ONE – The starting point ("by his own desire"). Again, this comes from inside a man and can't be transferred to God.

STAGE TWO – The lure ("he is lured"). Just as we lure fish, sin lures us, catching our attention with something fake that looks real.

STAGE THREE – The circling ("enticed"). What happens after the lure gets our attention? We circle, think about it, justify giving in.

STAGE FOUR – The conception ("then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin"). Births are usually joyful times, but not this kind. What a vivid picture of how our desires grow into full blown disobedience to God and his standards.

STAGE FIVE – The maturation ("and sin when it is fully grown"). Just as a baby continues to grow after he is born, sin grows and matures toward its logical conclusion.

STAGE SIX – The result ("brings forth death"). Just as trusting God brings eternal life, following our natural heart's desires will lead to eternal separation from God.

With irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh... Joy in God is extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. The questions present themselves: "Is

what the flesh desires really sin in this case?" It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God.²

III. PROVIDER OF EVERY GIFT (1:17, 18)

As quickly as he switched to the progression of sin, James moves back to the positive side of trials again. According to James, trials are something to be embraced because the Designer cares enough to send them to help us grow. These gifts of suffering are good and perfect and come directly from him who knows what's best for us.

Matthew 7:9-11 - Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

James 1:17 is among the most encouraging verses we have to comfort us. None of our situations are guaranteed to be the same tomorrow (or five minutes from now, for that matter). But this verse gives us the basis, the ground, the foundation of our solid confidence that when our world is turned upside-down with suffering, that God does not change and knows our futures right now.

Few people suffered more than Joseph. Sold into slavery by his own brothers, wrongly accused of attempted rape by his employer, forgotten in prison for years, Joseph had multiple opportunities to reject God and lose faith. But he never turned his back on the Lord even in the darkest times. He eventually rose to a high level governmental position and helped prepare Egypt for famine. His brothers came to Egypt for food and Joseph forgave them, displaying his trust in God.

Genesis 50:20 - As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

¹ David Nystrom, "The NIV Application Commentary: James" (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 72.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Creation and Fall & Temptation" (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997) p.132.