

Text: James 1:1-4, 12
Target audience: All
Topic: Life's problems
Theme: The benefits of life's problems
My purpose for this message: To show that God gives us problems as part of our training to be a strong soldier for Christ.

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Problems Aren't God's Accidents

PRAY.

This morning I'm beginning a new series entitled "Does Your Faith Work?", a study of the NT book that begins with this signature, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." It's written by Jesus' half-brother. If you have struggles with one of your siblings, imagine the issues you'd have if your half-brother was God! Same mother, different Fathers! Younger brother James wasn't always a big fan of Jesus. In fact one time he and the rest of his family walked 35 miles to try and get Jesus to hang up his sandals and come home. Reading the press reports had convinced them their son and brother was over the edge.

But James eventually became a devoted disciple, a "slave of Jesus Christ." And then, the pastor of the Jerusalem church. King Herod executed him AD 62 (Acts 12:2) so the book was written earlier, probably between AD 45 and 50. It *may* even be the first NT book written.

Following the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem, a pogrom against Christians broke out and many fled Judea for places like Syria and Asia Minor. Most likely it was these former parishioners James wrote to; the "twelve tribes scattered" (Jewish Christians [2:1; 5:7-8]).

Their former pastor knew what they needed most. And he was very specific about those needs. No other NT book is so full of practical advice to Christians on how to live and not live, on what to value and what to devalue, on how we *should* view life, and how we *shouldn't*.

Today's text deals with one of those "viewpoint matters:" how do we view problems, suffering, hard times? We're all are veterans to one degree or another. Witnessed death, or serious illnesses, been in accidents. If you haven't experienced divorce either as a child or as a partner, someone you love has. If you haven't had your heart broken by someone, there's still time. A splintered partnership, been financially defrauded, had hopes shattered, goals unrealized, promises broken. We've all cried, all pitied ourselves, maybe wondered where God's at, been frightened, or frustrated, or angry, or all of the above.

What viewpoint we have on problems may depend on whom we blame for them. Are they random, the results of sheer chance? Or is someone else to blame, or am I; or are they exclusively Satan's fault? Or *God's* fault? READ Jas.1:2-4, 12. (We are going to cover 9-11 next week, but save 5-8 for our fall series on prayer.)

Joy in Trials?!

"Trials" can be translated either temptation to sin, or the testing that frustrating problems produce. James is referring to the latter, and the word translated "various" seems to mean he's talking about more than just persecution. Trials include flat tires, termites, broken romances, and cancer.

So right off the bat, its hard to like the guy writing this: count it pure *joy* whenever we face this stuff... Is he nuts? If it's a biggie like divorce or cancer, it's all we can do to keep from completely falling apart. *Joy!?*

In our agony sometimes well meaning people pop into our lives and urge us to have a positive outlook, to think positively as if grief, sorrow and disappointment are mental disorders. Yet they are normal responses to troubles that the Bible doesn't condemn. It doesn't say "don't grieve," it just says that Christians grieve differently because of their hope. It doesn't say "don't sorrow," it just says that a measure of rejoicing accompanies their sorrow.

What do Troubles Benefit?

James is not urging Christians to paste a smile on their faces and "suck it up." He says, "Look beyond the *badness* of your troubles. See that sliver of bright light, that's the *benefit* of your troubles *...the testing of your faith develops perseverance.* (3) Also, READ Rom.5:3-4. Problems aren't just accidents to irritate us, they're a means to an end.

If you've ever worked out in a weight room, raise your hand (you at the Gate too!). Why in the world would you sweat, stretch, endure pain, shortness of breath, maybe even pay a fee to do it? What was the purpose? Increase your strength. Maybe you were getting in shape for a football season, or wrestling season. To win in the competition—shucks to *survive*—you had to get stronger, get tougher.

So God sends us into the weight room of suffering. Yes, I said, "God sends us there..." Walk into a classroom to take a test and even if no one's in the room, you'll find questions and answer sheets spread out on each desk. Someone will start you then even if they are gone when you finish and leave, you *know* that you are being examined by someone. Someone will measure you; someone will grade you.

God tests your faith, tests mine. He measures us, examines us. It's clear from vv.3-4 that a divine hand is guiding events for a divine purpose. Which is what? Training. I'm His private, He's my General. Generals don't make their troops train because they dislike them, but to increase their chances of survival and victory.

Soldiers who grunt in the weight room, or who sweat along those grueling 5 mile marches, or stumble through the obstacle courses, *these* are the men who win in battle, who survive.

You see, God's deliverance is not just a ticket to the Hershey Park called heaven; it's an enlistment. *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* If salvation is just a ticket to an amusement park, then a lot of things including life's trials, life's problems, don't make sense. If salvation's just a ticket to heaven, then praying like this "God just help me to have a good day, help things to go well for me, keep me safe, Amen," makes sense. Comfort, safety and smooth sailing are job 1.

But if *that's* job 1 in *war*, it will mean either a quick death or a quick surrender. With bullets whizzing overhead, what matters more than comfort, safety, and smooth sailing, is conditioning, strength, and endurance. They may well spell the difference between victory and defeat. 2 Tim.2:3-4: *Endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer.*

So God sends into the weight room of problems with a goal. *Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.* Through troubles, God is building perseverance into our faith, and the result of that perseverance, is increasing maturity. Not maybe... *Perseverance must finish its work so that you become who Christ saved you to be.* And because that final objective is such a wonderful thing, *that* is why we should view problems with a measure of joy. I

don't enjoy finishing drywall, but I'm thrilled at the what I'm going to have when I'm done. I don't enjoy trials, but I'm thrilled at what it's going to do for me?

Automatically? No, only if we embrace His program. What I mean by embracing His program, is that we start to look at problems and trials *less* as disturbing disruptions, and *more* as divine interceptions. Remember, God's behind these things.

Last night we baptized Maceij Krasuski, AKA Matt. On a snowy night 2 ½ years ago he delivered chicken feed to Ron Bare. Ron hadn't been expecting him so he hadn't plowed the lane and Mache got stuck. Ron didn't know it because it was after 9 so he was in bed! Tina checked up on Maceij but he was sure he'd be able to get out himself. When it became clear he couldn't, Tina said Ron and his brother-in-law Joel would plow the lane and get his truck out. *And* when she got Ron awake, she *also* told him she thought he needed to talk to this man about Jesus. So Ron took his Bible and when out, not knowing that just 2 days before Maceij had come to the end of himself and cried out to God, "If you're there, reveal yourself to me." Ron shared the gospel and that night, heaven got a new resident.

Ron did not want to get up; a nuisance, he thought. But no, it was a testing of his faith, one that turned out to be a divine interception. Your child goes off the deep end, running from you, from the Lord. You're anguished and pray, and pray, and pray, but nothing happens. It's a test and God's giving you an opportunity to trust Him no matter what, or dissolve into bitterness, resentment, anger, and self pity; one more opportunity to either slide backwards toward immaturity, or advance toward maturity.

And then v. 12 says that in the end, a reward is waiting for the victorious in heaven. In some of the trials that God sends our way, we will buckle under. In others, we'll buck up. But at the end of a professing believer's life, those who know him or her can in general *characterize* the person's life as one of capitulation, or one of endurance. And the men and women, boys and girls who endure are *blessed*, and will stand with the great throng of God's people to receive their commendation.

¹²Blessed 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.

Concl:

Andrew Murray, the remarkable South African pastor, evangelist and author from a century ago, wrote nearly 250 books on devotion to God. In 1895 he was in England, miserable from an old back injury. One morning the hostess who brought breakfast to his room told him there was a troubled woman downstairs who wanted to know if this great preacher had any advice. Murray handed her a piece of paper and said, "I've been writing some advice for myself. Maybe it will help her too."

In time of trouble, say, "First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place; in that I will rest." Next, "He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as His child." Then say, "He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons He intends me to learn and working in me the grace He means to bestow." And last, say, "In His good time He can bring me out again. How and when, He knows."

Therefore say, "I am here..."

1. *By His appointment...*
2. *In His keeping...*
3. *Under His training...*
4. *For His time...*