

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT TRIALS AND TEMPTATION?

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All of us experience trials and temptation. All of us have known times of challenge, difficulty, and pressure where our faith was tested. What does the Bible say about these times? Why do they happen and what is God's purpose for us in them?

There are a vast number of texts in the Bible that address these questions. For sake of brevity, the focus here will be from the book of James. James 1:2 tells us that there is reason that we can consider trials with joy. Why joy? Trials hurt, or mislead, or bring misery. What about them could be considered joy? Our trials produce something in us worthy of our consideration—they produce endurance. And why would this thought bring about joy. Ah, for that I need wisdom, for I will never see it without wisdom from above, which God promises to give to those who seek it in faith (James 1:5-7, 17-18; 3:17). I need the wisdom of God that stands firm when in the middle of difficult and painful circumstances.

This wisdom gives me perspective vastly different from that which is natural to me. My normal response to trials is to think of them as something to avoid, lash out at, or to escape from. Often our response is seen in interpersonal conflict, where we use our tongues to get our way or to tear someone apart (James 3:5-10; 4:1-3). At other times it is simply an outburst of anger (James 1:19, 20), or anxious favoritism towards those we believe can make life easier for us (James 2:1-4). Perhaps we find our comfort in our materials possessions, believing they can weather the storm for us (James 4:13-16; 5:1-5). All these are our natural responses to trials and testing—to fight, to get angry, to become anxious, or to find a way of escape.

The Bible gives rich metaphors to describe the real issue concerning the source of our responses (e.g., Jeremiah 17:5-10). Our responses to trials come out of our hearts, where our beliefs, desires, loves, motives, loyalties reside. Trials put pressure on us. They get in the way of what we want and reveal in what we put our treasure and trust. They reveal what is in our hearts as we respond in accordance to what we value and want. That is the purpose of trials—to provide an occasion for exposure of who will really are and what we are truly living for.

Trials, then, are intended to make us wise, to provide a means for seeing what is real about us and God in our situation. The wise person is he who finds joy in trials, because he has learned who God is, what His purposes are, and submitted himself to the reality of God's loving sovereignty in hard times. He sees that his greatest problem is not the trials per se, but rather what they reveal about himself—the remaining idolatry of self in his own heart. We must face the fact that we truly do want to be God . . . at least over our own lives. We want our way, we want revenge when wronged, we want to feel comfortable on our terms—we want to be lord over our lives. God knows this is our destruction and mercifully brings trials to expose us and give opportunity to humbly turn to Him for help (James 4:6-7).

An important fact to consider and remember is that our sinful responses are revealed in our trials, not caused by them. It is our natural inclination to believe that either (1) my sinful response was

“caused” by my situation, or (2) my response makes plausible sense given a right understanding of my situation (for example, lashing out in anger toward the person who is not treating me the way I expect). James is clear in indicating the location or origin of our sin. It arises out of a lustful heart (James 1:14-15). Temptation results in the midst of trials as they squeeze out of me what is already in my heart. Difficult circumstances provide occasions for the condition of my heart to be exposed, but they do not cause my responses. James continues on to say that sinful responses ultimately bring forth death. The wise person is never deceived into believing something otherwise (v. 16), but rather sees that God provides these occasions as good gifts that we might bear good fruit (vv. 17-18). God does not tempt us (v. 13), for temptation originates in our own hearts in concert with our desires, loves, and loyalties. But the Lord does gift us with challenging circumstances for the expressed purpose of testing our hearts (i.e., exposing them).

The wise person who has joy in trials is one who is “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger” (v. 19). He is not deceived by a worthless religion that does not “bridle [the] tongue” (v.26). Rather, in his wisdom he is gentle toward others (3:13, 17), always producing righteous fruit by sowing seeds of peace (3:18). Contrarily, the one lacking wisdom (the fool) is exposed in trials as full of “bitter jealousy” (3:14), “envy” (4:2), and “selfish ambition” (3:16). The fruit of his life is anything but joy, but rather is “disorder and every evil thing” (3:16). He fights with others for what he wants (4:1-2), critically judges others (4:11-12), and complains about other people (5:9). He not concerned about those in need to the point of giving toward that need (2:15-16). There is no joy in these things.

Trials are given to us by God to refine us by exposing our hearts, prompting us to humble repentance in recognition of God who is the source of hope and joy. They give us a window into what we are living for and what we are pursuing.

What are your trials? What types of things typically tempt you to respond in sinful ways? Are you tested when your image is endangered, that offer you made on the bigger house gets turned down, your secretary messes up a very important assignment, your water heater bursts and your house is flooded, your schedule is threatened by a traffic jam, your co-worker gets the bonus you believe you deserve, your kids are disrespectful to you, or your spouse doesn't display the affection you desire? Where do you get hooked? And how are you responding in these situations? What are you doing, feeling, and thinking? What does this reveal about what you value most? What does God say about all this? Who is He? What does He call you to do?

God is gracious. Turn to Him in your trials. Realize that all of life is a moral drama. See where you are carried away by your own strong desires. Be conscious that all of life is lived before God and should be lived for Him. Understand that joy only comes when life is lived in accordance with His design. Pursue wisdom the embraces these truths. Let trials have their intended outcome in your life—to expose your heart in order that you can turn away from that which rules you other than Christ. Turn to Christ in your moments of trials, trusting in His grace to make you into a sweet fruit tree of blessing to others.

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