

LAWS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Part 6: God uses the struggles in our lives to help us grow

A few years ago I came up with an idea for a pamphlet that we could hand out to people who were not a part of our church. The front of the pamphlet had a picture of a moth on a tree with the words under it "going through a hard place?" On the inside there was the following story: "One narrow opening in the left part of the flask shaped cocoon of any emperor moth marks it's only way to freedom. Watching that moth, huge in comparison with the exit point, laboring in what seems to be a hopeless battle makes us wonder why God would have made it so hard. Surely there must be an easier way! Can there really be any purpose for all this?"

It is supposed that the pressure to which the moth's body is subjected in passing such a narrow opening is a provision of nature for forcing the juices into the vessels of the wings. In other words, it must struggle if it is to ever fly. One man, having watched the great struggle personally, felt that the moth would never be able to get out. So, he decided to help by making a small cut with the point of his scissors-just enough to make things easy enough to ensure success. Sure enough, immediately and with perfect ease, the moth crawled off dragging behind a huge swollen body and little shriveled wings. The would be hero eagerly watched to see the moth's wings assume the proportions it needed to fly. But alas, his false tenderness had proved to be the moth's ruin. It was never anything but a stunted abortion, crawling painfully through a brief life which should have spent flying through the air on rainbow wings. What is the moral of the story? Simply that we cannot bypass the trials without losing the blessing.

The struggle of that moth well illustrates our sixth law for spiritual growth which says, "God uses the struggles in our lives to help us grow." There is an idea in our country today that the Christian life is easy. It isn't. Jesus talked about taking up your cross daily, denying yourself, and following him. There is nothing easy about that.

The most beloved hymn of all time ("Amazing Grace") contains a verse that teaches this same truth: Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home." There are no shortcuts on the road to growth. As coaches have said for generations, "No pain, no gain." No struggle-no growth. We experience God's grace through our trials in ways that would not happen if the trials had not come.

1. EXPECT TRIALS

James 1:1, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,"

Notice that he does not say, "if" you face trials; he says "whenever" you face them because they are coming. You went through a trial coming into this world; your mother went through a trial bringing you into this world; and your father went through a trial paying for it. As long as you live, you will be faced with trials. That does not sound encouraging, but it is realistic. Trials happen, and they happen regularly.

Picture someone driving down the highway in a convertible. The top is down, the music is blaring, and the driver is having a blast. He doesn't have a problem in the world. Suddenly there is a bump, and the car comes to a sudden halt. What happened? The car hit a massive pothole, and suddenly the happy journey is over. Life is like that for all of us. No matter who we are or where we live, trouble is always a very real possibility, and there is an endless list of things that could go wrong.

Because we live in a fallen world, nothing works the way it's supposed to. Things break. Our bodies wear out. We grow old and die. Our friends disappoint us. And we disappoint our friends. Why does God allow all this stuff? God uses suffering in our lives to build our faith.

2. PRAISE THE LORD DURING YOUR TRIALS

James 1:2, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,"

The translation of J. B. Phillips puts it this way, "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!"

In verse 2 James not only mentions trials, he mentions trials of many kinds. From the Greek word for "many," we get the English word "polka-dotted." That is, life is "dotted" with trials. They are everywhere from little irritations to great tragedies.

Over the course of the last few weeks, many who watch our financial markets have gotten motion sickness from the sharp ups and downs—mostly downs. Insurance companies are having problems. Banks have folded. Stock prices have plummeted, and many people are very nervous. Add to that the high price of gasoline along with other things escalating in price, and we have some serious problems.

The strange thing, however, is the fact that James tells us that we should "consider it pure joy" when we face trials. James is not saying, "feel joyful" because that would be impossible. If you felt joyful when bad things happened to you, there would probably be something wrong with your mind. You can be joyful because you know God is in control and that he has good in mind for you.

3. EXPECT GOOD THINGS FROM YOUR TRIALS

The word "consider" means to evaluate. James is saying, "Evaluate your struggles in the light of what God is going to do through them in your life." This concept of expecting good from trials was much better understood by the ancient Hebrews than it is by us. They knew that the trials of life are opportunities for growth. So they looked at the suffering they went through as not necessarily happy but as precious. It's like going to the gym and working out. You may be on the treadmill running and feel like you can't go one step further. Your heart is pounding out of your chest, and your legs feel like they are going to buckle beneath you. There's not a lot of joy in that, but you can take satisfaction in doing it because you know that it is an opportunity to get stronger.

What will God do through the struggles of your life?

a) He is going to produce perseverance.

"Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:3).

The word "perseverance" comes from the prefix "per" which means "through," and the word "severe." It means to keep on pressing on, even through severe circumstances. Henry Dempsey was the pilot on a flight from Portland, Maine to Boston. While flying, Henry heard a noise from the back of the airplane and went to see what it was. As he reached the tail section, the plane hit an air pocket, and he was thrown against the rear door. The rear door had not been latched properly at take off, and when he was thrown against it, the door opened, and he was instantly sucked out of the jet. The co-pilot, realizing what had happened, radioed the nearest airport requesting permission to land and asked for a helicopter to search that area of the ocean. After the plane had landed, they found the pilot holding on to the outdoor ladder of the plane. Somehow he had managed to catch hold of the ladder and to hold on for 10 minutes as the plane flew 200 miles an hour at the altitude of 4000 feet. It took the airport personnel several minutes to pry his fingers from the ladder. That's really pressing on through severe circumstances. Like Henry, we must learn to persevere.

In the book of Revelation, this word for "perseverance" describes the faith of those brave saints who would not take the Mark of the Beast. It is a faith that stands up under fire from the enemy and does not run. William Barclay says that in the early church the martyrs gained the respect of unbelievers because they persevered until death. It is said of them that, "They died singing." We don't get that kind of perseverance by reading a book on the subject. It comes through the laboratory of life.

b) God will produce maturity and completeness

James 1:4, "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

The word "completeness" refers to something that is "whole in every part," something that is without flaws or defects. Before we can be "useful" to God, He has to remove the defects from our lives. He has to work in us before He can work through us. Trials are not just there; they are there for a purpose. They are there to motivate us to leave the nest of our own carnality and unbelief. Knowing that is the first step toward being able to be joyful through them.

The great danger is that we will try to short-circuit the process by running away from our problems. Eugene Peterson (The Message) translates part of this verse this way: "Don't try to get out of anything prematurely!" That's good advice, but it's not always easy to follow.

Every trial is a test that is made up of two questions.

Every time trouble comes into your life you need to remember that God is asking you two questions:

** Do you trust Me?*

It's easy to answer "yes" to that question when everything is going great. Whether or not you really trust God will be answered in the valleys of life. I heard a man give his testimony concerning a trial he went through. In one year he had heart surgery and cancer surgery. After one of the surgeries, he was taken back to the emergency room. He was bleeding, and they thought he was going to die. He said, "Lying there on that table, too weak to struggle, I said to God, "I don't understand, but I trust you." That man could have become very bitter, but because his faith was in God, he became better.

** How much do you trust Me? At what point will you bail out and walk away from the Lord?*

Until your faith is put to the test, it remains theoretical. You never know what you believe until hard times come. When the phone rings with bad news, when you lose your job, when your parents suddenly die, when life comes apart at the seams, then you discover what you really believe in the depth of your soul.

4. SEEK GOD'S WISDOM DURING TRIALS

The Bible tells us the value of wisdom many times.

Prov 16:16 How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver!

Wisdom is more important than great riches, and our world is desperately in need of it. An employee said to his friend: "The stress my boss puts me under is killing me. I have migraines, my blood pressure is going through the roof, I can't sleep at night, I just found out I have an ulcer, and as long as I stay in this job, the only question is whether I'll have a stroke or a heart attack." The friend replied: "So why don't you quit?" The employee answered: "I have a great health plan."

Wisdom is not just knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to use the knowledge found in the Bible in such a way that you become skillful at living life. Like a mechanic who knows how to use his tools in such a way that he can make the car run well, the wise person is able to use the principles of scripture in such a way that his life runs well. When there is a problem in his life, he knows where to find the appropriate tool in the Scripture and just how to apply it. We all need wisdom, and that is especially true during trials. James says we should “ask God.”

James 1:5-8, “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. 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. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

God says, "if you need wisdom, I will give it to you. I'll never scold you for asking, and I will give you as much as you need. My only requirement is that you trust Me."

APPLICATIONS

1. BE A STUDENT , NOT A VICTIM

Many people are professional victims, always talking about how bad life is to them. A victim says, "Why did this happen to me? It's not fair." A victim feels so sorry for himself that he has no time for others. A student focuses on helping others so that he has no time to feel sorry for himself. A victim begs God to remove the problems of life so that he might be happy. A student has learned through the problems of life that God alone is the source of all true joy.

Malcolm Muggeridge said, “Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message.” He also said, “Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through afflictions and not through happiness.”

2. EXPECT GOD TO DO SOMETHING IN YOUR LIFE THAT IS GREATER THAN THE PAIN OF THE TRIAL

When we read the life of Joseph in the Old Testament, we see him going through many hard places. It must've been a terrible blow to him emotionally to be sold into slavery by his own brothers. Then there is the blame that was put up on him concerning Potipher's wife. The first years of Joseph's life seemed incredibly unfair, but if you read the whole story, you find that God did something in his life that was far greater than the pain of the

trials. It must have looked like the end when Moses was banished to a hot, barren desert for 40 years, but the ministry God gave him during the last 40 years of his life was much greater than the pain of the trial.

God is not in the business of wasting pain. He uses pain to grow us. He uses pain to pry our hands off of the temporary things of this world so that we can wrap them around the things that are eternal.

1 Peter 5:10, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

God says "the trials are not just there. They are there to make you strong."

3. KEEP MOVING AHEAD DURING THE TRIAL

Perseverance means far more than just passively accepting what has happened because you can't do anything about it anyway. It means that you continue to move forward no matter what is happening. Abraham Lincoln was a man who knew great trials, but he persevered through them. He once said, "I'm a slow walker, but I never walk back." He kept on moving ahead.

Trials are tests given by God to make us strong and wise so that we can become mature, and that process is never finished. As you look at where God has brought you from and where you are now, you may have come a long way, but you still have a long way to go. God wants you to continue growing until you leave this world. So, just keep on moving ahead, no matter what you are going through.

As I think back over my childhood days, some of my most exciting times were my birthdays. Birthdays were very special around my home. That was the day that you were treated like a king. You may have been in the doghouse the day before, but you were on the throne when your birthday came. There was a huge party with many relatives coming in with presents that you couldn't wait to tear in to. The next day may put you back in the dog house, but on that day, you could do no wrong. In addition to the presents and attention, birthdays were a statement that you were now one year older, one year closer to being grown up.

Unfortunately, "not everyone who grows old, grows up." The same is true on a spiritual level. Not everyone who grows old as a Christian grows up as a Christian. Those who grow up are those who have been submissive to God and learned through the struggles of life. Like our story of the moth, the struggles of life have taught them to fly.