

The Friendship of Trials

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character, men of integrity with no weak spots. And if, in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem he has only to ask God – who gives generously to all men without making them feel guilty – and he may be quite sure that the necessary wisdom will be given him. But he must ask in sincere faith without secret doubts. For the man who doubts is like a wave of the sea, carried forward by the wind one moment and driven back the next. That sort of man cannot hope to receive anything from the Lord, and the life of a man of divided loyalty will reveal instability at every turn. (James 1:2-8, J.B. Phillips)

According to James, I'd better rouse the welcoming committee. I've got more friends than I imagined and they keep dropping by uninvited. In fact, my life is getting downright crowded and these friends of mine have a voracious appetite. Oh, it's not that I'm in any danger of running low on milk, bread, or any other staple. These guys subsist on a steady diet of nerves. And it seems to me that some of them have been around an awfully long time. Of course, these "friends" I'm alluding to are trials. Can you relate?

We can only assume, as followers of Christ, that these trials are custom-made for us and each has a divine commission to teach and bring about in us something of eternal importance. If we are to welcome them as friends this must be so. But I admit to it being an unnatural mind set! At first blush, they certainly look and feel more like intruders than friends. And stubborn! There's no quit in them – not until they've completed their assignment in full.

James gives us insight into the nature of this assignment of theirs and it appears twofold: to test our faith, and to produce endurance.

It is important to realize that apart from the trials our loving Father sends we have no means in and of ourselves to accurately gauge the faith we at times so confidently profess. We might believe our faith is robust, that we have taken God at His word at every turn and are growing steadily in our convictions concerning His character. That more and more, we are able to trust in His faithfulness in all

things and that our obedience to Christ is ever increasing. But how in the world would we know if all this were true unless it were tested and proven to be genuine? Apart from trials, we wouldn't know. And as Jesus Himself is true, He is pleased to lead us into all truth – including the truth about the tensile strength of our own supposed convictions.

Imagine we are avid divers who love to explore ocean reefs. We have heard about a magnificent reef off the coast of some island in the Pacific and have been invited to join a group of fellow divers for a weeklong expedition, all expenses paid. There's just one catch. The reef is inhabited by a large number of aggressive sharks. Furthermore, a company who is looking to patent a new shark repellent is picking up our expenses. If it proves as effective as the company claims, the US Navy is ready to place a massive order. The company has conducted a number of controlled tests but we are to be the first to test the product in the open sea under natural conditions. We've reviewed all the data from the previous tests and the findings look impressive. But as we near the dive zone, we can't shake the nagging apprehension. In our mind, a single question pounds away over and over again: *Can I really risk my life on this stuff?*

Trying to hide our uneasiness, we smear the repellent on our wetsuits. And with weak grins, drop over the side into the world below the waves. Glancing back up through the water at the boat reveals others on board busily ladling chum over the side to attract the sharks.

It doesn't take long before we catch sight of massive, steel-gray bodies. *Sharks!* Pulses rocket. Safety precautions have been set up in the event the repellent doesn't live up to its laboratory reputation. The thought is small comfort when compared to the presence of these awesome giants, these fearsome challenges to our convictions! These trials are in the form of razor-toothed predators.

Get the picture? Only God knows the difference between what we believe and what we *believe*, and He is pleased to reveal it to us through the agency of trials.

In our shark story, perhaps we had even played an actual role in the invention and development of the shark repellent. We may have been so impressed we invested heavily in the company's stock, so confident were we in the early laboratory findings. But until we slipped over the side and risked our very life our convictions remained passive theory. But as we clamber back into the boat after a

personal, highly successful ocean trial, we find ourselves slapping high-fives, giddy with euphoria and champing at the bit to support our previous convictions with the fiery passion born of personal experience. We now *know* what we had previously only supposed we knew. The *trial* made all the difference in the world.

This ability of trials to prove, to accurately reveal what we truly believe about God is one of the reasons we ought to look upon them as friends rather than intruders. It is no good believing things about God only to find our convictions ringing hollow when the Great Whites begin to circle round about!

Besides the proving of our faith, James also points out that trials produce endurance. He says that fully developed endurance produces mature character and integrity, eliminating “weak spots”.

From a strictly human perspective, this is scary talk! *Fully developed* endurance? This doesn’t sound easy. And in real life, it isn’t. (I can only suppose, too, that there is also an eternal need for endurance. That this characteristic has a purpose after our earthly life.)

God desires that we become more and more like Jesus who is our example in everything. The apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that God has predestined us to become conformed to the image of Christ. (Rom 8:29) This is where He is leading us. This is the great uncompromising goal of our Heavenly Father, the end result we can absolutely count on because He who cannot lie has promised.

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you *will perfect it* until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil 1:6 NASB, *emphasis added*)

Trials as friends? Yes! As difficult, painful, and distressing as they sometimes are because they prove our faith and produce mature Christ-like character in us – *if* we are willing to embrace them for the purpose God sent them to us to achieve.

James also points out that in the midst of trials we may find ourselves wondering what we should do. Inspired by the Holy Spirit he gives us a simple solution: ask God.

It makes sense. After all, God has arranged for the trial and is using it to accomplish His purposes. His ways are higher than our own, terribly so. Without

the wisdom that comes from God how are we to rightly weave our way through the trial? The Lord is both the Author of the trial and our Navigator through it. We are utterly dependent upon Him. Human wisdom will not suffice to see us through. We must ask our Father to share with us His wisdom, to provide guidance for our response to the trial. James points out that He is only too willing to do so – generously, without reservation, and with no strings attached save one: that our asking springs from sincere faith. A faith undiluted by “secret doubts”.

Let me confess here and now that I am one who struggles with doubt. I would like to say that all my convictions regarding Christianity are rock solid and I stand in the howling winds of trials without so much as a waver. The fact of the matter is that an untidy, lengthy, and often uncomfortable process has forged the things I believe in most strongly.

For the most part, it begins with a mental acceptance of information coming my way from the intake of Scripture; either from reading the Bible or listening to one of God’s servants who is using the Bible as the authority for his teaching. Believing that the Scriptures are the inspired word of Almighty God, I accept what it tells me as absolutely true. However, I find that like the laboratory results hailing the effectiveness of the shark repellent, my acceptance of this absolute truth falls short of permeating every fiber of my being. It is factually true in the realm of knowledge, but I need it (and I believe God wants it) to become true experientially, permeating to the depths of my soul. I need to be baptized into the truth itself. It is not the philosophy of religion that interests our Lord but rather the reality of the relationship between the Savior and the redeemed. Didn’t Job say as much when he cried, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee!” (Job 42:5 NASB) And again, when David declares, “O taste and see that the LORD is good...” (Psa 34:8 NASB)

There is no substitute for a first-hand witness. All else is mere hearsay. Yet if He demands a sincere faith and doubting serves as an impediment to gaining God’s wisdom, what are folks like me to do? I think the author of the letter to the Hebrews provides key insight into the answer.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Heb 11:6 NASB)

In approaching God, we are told that we must believe two things. First, we must believe that He exists. It seems almost absurd to imagine someone kneeling to pray without believing that God exists to hear his or her prayer! But a more

thoughtful examination exposes the human propensity to hedge our bets, to “sort of believe” in a “higher power” or “the man upstairs”. Or worse yet, to pray to a god of our own making and imagination instead of what Francis Schaeffer referred to as “the God who is there”. The One who knows our hearts knows if, when we pray, we do so with the conviction of His eternal, personal reality.

The second requirement is a conviction that God rewards those who seek Him. In short, that He answers prayer. Perhaps not in the impoverished way that would please us superficially but wonderfully so, in a perfect way that brings about the greatest good and glorifies His wonderful name.

On the other hand, the one who harbors secret doubts, says James, is in for the ride of his life! Like flotsam on the boiling surface of an angry sea he is driven forward one moment and backward the next. He is a man who should give up any idea of receiving “anything from the Lord”, for he is someone of divided loyalty, a man with two wavering minds, unstable, inconsistent and restless, wavering back and forth in everything he does.

Frankly, I’ve been identifying far too long with the doubter. Because God doesn’t speak to me audibly or write on my wall, I too often wonder if I’m really hearing from Him correctly. God (and others) knows what a terrible fool I am apart from Him! I secretly hedge my bets and keep a safety line tethered to the world in case God should fail me. In fact, I sincerely believe that it is because of my long-standing struggle with doubting that the Spirit has led me to this passage in James and nailed my nose to the page. I can almost hear the Lord saying to me, *Michael! Michael! You have been a double-minded man of divided loyalty long enough. Either I AM, and every word I have spoken is true and you can bet your life on it without fear, or I’m an “almost” god, comfortable to be around but incapable of living up to my claims. By grace, I’ve given you overwhelming evidence of the truth. Quit wavering between two minds!*

God grant us grace. *I do believe; help my unbelief!* May we all grow into the most sincere faith, one fragrant and pleasing to the Lord.

As Christians, when trials come our way we recognize that God has allowed them to come, and that each one fits perfectly into His plan for molding us into the image of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ. If we are lacking in wisdom as to how to handle a trial, we have only to turn to the Father and ask Him for guidance, assured that He is there to listen to our prayers and eager to help. He knows our frailty and that apart from Him we are helpless. He is a good and faithful Father!

Trials are a vital part of the Christian life and we are encouraged to welcome them as friends that they might do their work and prove our faith sincere.

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