

James 1:2-4

"The Fruit of Tested Faith"

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You've heard the expressions: "Grin and bear it." "Keep your chin up." "This too will pass." "That which does not kill you makes you stronger." "Pain is weakness leaving the body." and many others like these. Such expressions are in fact proverbs, short, pithy statements meant to convey a helpful life-principle or a nugget of wisdom that one ought to meditate upon and live by.

Each of the expressions that I just cited are common enough in our own age and culture, and each relate to the human experience of suffering, trials, hardships, or pain. The wisdom being conveyed by such statements is intended to help people better face, endure, and benefit by hardships.

When we find ourselves in difficult times or situations, rather than falling to pieces or giving in to depression, we are to grin in the face of trials and bear them with dignity, honor, and an overall proper, respectable disposition. If indeed we have to face such trials, nobility is found not in seeking to skirt them or evade them, nor in enduring them as a whining brat, but with a knowing, accepting grin, for by so doing we prove how much better we are than those who don't and set an example for the weak to emulate.

Same with "keep your chin up." Giving in to depression or complaining or other such base attitudes demonstrate weakness, and one ought to take greater pride in himself or herself and in one's background, nationality, culture, race, etc., than to tolerate such weakness.

"That which does not kill you makes you stronger" and "pain is weakness leaving the body" both convey the idea that you will

become a better, stronger, person because you have endured the trial. Momentary pain, such as is experienced in exercising, might be uncomfortable and unpleasant, but the gain makes enduring it worthwhile. We can even grin and bear it knowing that we will be better, stronger people because of it.

"This too will pass" expresses the idea that we ought to take a broader perspective on the trials of life. While we might indeed be suffering greatly in the present, history and experience proves that the suffering has only a limited duration. It does not last forever. Like the trials we have faced before, whatever it is that is causing us pain now will pass. We will look back upon it later and likely conclude that we have become better and stronger because of it.

As I said, all of these expressions are cultural proverbs that most of us are familiar with, nuggets of wisdom that have been passed down from parent to child for generations and have now

found themselves plastered on bumper stickers, t-shirts, and social media memes. And they all contain a degree of wisdom. But the type of wisdom that they contain are what the Scriptures speak of as "the wisdom of this world."

That is to say, they are a wisdom that originate from here, from below, in this world. These are expressions of wisdom that arise from the experience of men in this world, and sinful men at that. If you think about all of these expressions more deeply, you will see that in the end they reduce to nothing, to vanity, futility, empty puffs of air.

The wisdom they offer, and thus the comfort they offer to the suffering, only goes so far. That which does not kill us makes us stronger and this too will pass offer little solace to a mother watching her child dying of cancer. Pain is weakness leaving the body, grin and bear it, and keep your chin up does little to comfort the dying child.

Encouragements to enduring suffering grounded in the pride of one's heritage or culture prove quite shallow when the suffering is indeed unto death. This too will pass turns into foolishness when faced with the prospect of death. In other words, when one is faced with real trials, genuine hardships, heart-breaking, body-twisting pain, and death, such wisdom is revealed as little more than a collection of cheap platitudes.

Something else then has to ground the exhortation we are hearing here in James 1:2-4. When James says, "Count it all joy, brothers, when you endure trials" he is most definitely not standing upon the shifting sands of the wisdom of this world. At its best, the world can encourage you to grin and bear it, but to have joy in the midst of hardships, trials, suffering, and persecution, to look upon the prospect of having to go through such with "all joy" or "great joy" has either its ground in madness or in something that is not of this world.

The wisdom found here in James is a wisdom that is not of this world, a wisdom that comes from above, a wisdom that has been revealed by God Himself in Jesus Christ. It is this kind of wisdom that gives true comfort, peace, hope, strength, and even joy in the midst of trials. James is offering you true wisdom, even the wisdom of the Spirit of God.

James is writing, remember, to Christians who have been scattered throughout the Roman Empire, many of whom were Jewish Christians who had been accustomed to having their own nation, Israel, their own capital city, Jerusalem, and an identity bound up with certain cultural and ethnic heritages. All such things have been stripped away from them.

They are now strangers in strange lands, without a city of their own in this world, coming to grips with the reality that circumcision and uncircumcision means nothing, only a new creation in Christ Jesus. They are no longer accepted by the

Jews, for the Jews rejected any who named the name of Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ, and they are not welcomed by the Greeks or Gentiles, who count their hope in Christ as backward, uncivilized, unsophisticated foolishness.

Indeed, these early Christians had to look forward not only to rejection by both, but to overt persecution as well.

Segregation itself is a form of persecution, but it never ends with mere segregation as our own country well knows. And yet James is here exhorting these exiled Christians to count it all joy to be tried and tested as they were and would be tested because of their faith.

Why? Why would Christians actually rejoice in suffering when the rest of the world, at best, just grins and bears it? Is it because Christians console themselves with the idea that the suffering, the rejections and persecutions would only last for a little while as in "this too shall pass"? No, such a notion might

offer a degree of consolation, but surely not lead to "all joy"? As a matter of fact, it wasn't and isn't going to stop anytime soon. Christians are still being killed for their faith, and even in greater numbers, in our own day.

So what is it? Why the joy? Because it has been revealed to us that those who endure sufferings in and for the name of Jesus Christ will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. James ties our joy to our faith being tested. The trials, he says, test our faith. They test it in the sense of proving it, as in the proving of gold in a furnace. James, in other words, is drawing our attention to what has been revealed by God.

"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD."

Malachi 3:3

"Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction." Isaiah 48:10

"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the LORD tests hearts." Proverbs

For the Christian, according to Scripture, trials prove our faith, like taking gold and putting it in a furnace so that the fires burn away all that is not pure, all of the dross, leaving only the treasure, only that which is precious. For the Christian, trials, hardships, sufferings, the oft-times difficult providences that the Lord brings into our lives, have the effect of purifying our faith, making it stronger, more pure, and more precious in the sight of God.

Specifically, the testing of our faith produces, says James, steadfastness or endurance or patience. Steadfastness is a good translation. The idea is that the trials take a faith that is immature and weak and cause it to become a faith that endures,

a strong faith, a steadfast faith, purged of any sinful dross, any pride, any worldly elements.

Indeed, just as exercising proves the body, making it harder, stronger, more limber, more resilient, etc., so trials, testings, hardships, etc., make our faith better, a faith that endures, a faith that is not wavering, tossed here and there by the waves of this world, but steadfast, on course, fixed, anchored more and more firmly upon the Rock that is Christ.

And this is where it gets really joyous. You see, Scripture teaches that it is by faith in Christ alone that we are and will be saved. It is by faith in Christ alone that we have and will hear God's verdict of "not guilty" in His sight. It is by faith in Christ alone that we have peace with God and look forward to being received into His heavenly Kingdom as sons and heirs.

And what James is telling us here is that God is pleased to ensure that our faith endures. By grace He will see to it that our

faith is not the kind of faith that fizzles or fades, not the kind of faith that withers, but the kind of faith that is able to remain, a steadfast faith, an enduring faith that holds on to Christ not only in the beginning but throughout the whole course of our race in this world. And that kind of faith, the faith that endures to the end and receives the crown of life, is the faith that testings produce.

James encourages us therefore to let steadfastness have its full effect, that is, the effect of causing those who believe to be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. Again, this is James' way of saying that trials prove faith, cleansing it as by fire from all impurities. As Christians, we live by faith. We are saved by faith. It is by faith that we lay hold of Christ and all that He has done and won for us.

Faith is crucial! Faith is all-important! But faith that can be weak, faith can be immature, faith can be clouded by sin and the

things of this world, but rejoice, because God is not content to leave you in this world struggling to get along with such a weak, immature, sinfully diluted faith. He is going to make your faith strong, and He's going to do so by the same means that you saw in your Savior. Suffering, testings, Cross-bearing in and for the name of Christ.

It is by means of this way of the Cross that God is pleased to bring you into perfection, to sanctify you and your faith so that when you appear before Him you will be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing, prepared by the Master as a glorious vessel fit to be showcased in His heavenly temple, fit to everlastingly reflect His own glory and purity.

As the author to the Hebrews wrote of Christ, "For the joy set before Him he endured the Cross, despising the shame" and "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he

suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."

This is why you count it all joy when you suffer various trials that test your faith. You count it all joy because you know what God is effecting in you. He is making your faith strong, steadfast, a faith that holds on to Christ despite the shame, and faith has its reward: eternal life, perfection in the presence of Him in whom you have believed.

Again, all of this is a wisdom that the world cannot understand or receive. But you, by God's mercy, are not content with empty platitudes. You know that the judgment of God, even death, renders all such wisdom hollow and vain. But this wisdom, this is the wisdom of God, which if a man hears it and receives it, will live as he should before God in this world and receive as his reward at the end, resurrection life from the dead. After all, this is the hope of faith, this is the fruit of tested faith.

As Jesus Himself said,

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when
others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil
against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your
reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets
who were before you."

Amen