

Trial by fire...the forging of spirit...(K. Payne)

1. Study James 1:2-6. What implications are there with the word *knowing* found in verse 3 in relation to personal trials?

According to the Bible Christians can know, not just hope, that trials will produce endurance. The ultimate result of the trials process is that we become "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing". God's promise that we can know our trials will make us stronger is a reason to hope, even in the midst of a stressful trial.

Knowing our trials will make us stronger does not promise they will be painless. But our attitude in facing trials can make the difference between seeing that situation as a source of joy or a reason to be despondent. "*This is going to be stretching and tough to work through but I will make it*" is a far different mental attitude than the person who wonders "*Am I going to survive this?*" Trials can hurt; but a Christian knows, because of God's promise, that the end result will be a strengthened faith while the other person is left to simply survive.

According to 1 John 5:11-13, we can know we have eternal life. Romans 8:28 declares that we can know that God will always cause our circumstances to work for the good to those who love Him and are called accordingly to His purpose. James 1:3 makes it just as clear that we can know even during the painful process, that our trials will strengthen us so that we are able to serve God more effectively.

2. Look again at James 1:5-6. What does James mean? How is this reconciled in today's world? Disease, poverty, starvation, AIDS, gang violence, automobile accidents, abortion, divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, physical, mental, and sexual abuses are all sad realities we live with which have no simple solutions nor do they appear to have redeeming qualities. How we make sense of this?

If we always had a clear understanding of our trials we would not have to ask God for wisdom. The fact that James tells us we can confidently ask God for wisdom and not fear being rebuffed by Him indicates the likelihood of this occurring sooner or later. Have you ever thought how limited reality is for the individual who says, "I will only believe or accept the things I can reason through"? Finite human beings, even the brightest, are just not that smart. Some of the circumstances we face in life are beyond our abilities to reason, control, or change. God alone is omniscient. "Self-made" men and women do not exist. Those who claim to control their past, present, and future are naive, proud, or both.

The attitude in which we ask God "why" can affect how God answers our prayers. Verse 6 tells us that our request must be made in faith.

Luke provides two illustrations of this "faith" is:

In Luke 1:12-22, a Levitical priest, Zacharias, is told by the angel Gabriel that his barren wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. Zacharias responds by asking, "how will I know this for certain?" Gabriel responds by making Zacharias mute, "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

In Luke 1:26-45, we see a different example. Gabriel visits Mary, the virgin engaged to Joseph, and informs her that she has found favor with God and will conceive a boy named Jesus. Mary asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" In contrast to Zacharias, Mary asked her question with a different heart and attitude. Regardless of the implications in Jewish society of a visibly pregnant virgin, she responds, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And later in Luke 1:45, a Holy Spirit filled Elizabeth says to Mary, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

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We live in a world of uncertainty. It often feels like no one is in control and things are getting progressively worse. The contentment that a Christian should have in the face of trials, knowing that God is in sovereign control and using our trials to strengthen us, allows us the privilege and opportunity to live in sharp contrast to those around us who get up each morning and go to bed each night without hope. The good news is not that trials can be eliminated this side of heaven, but the fact that there are biblical principles which will help us work through our trials rather than become buried underneath them. James tells us that we have the privilege to ask and understand, if we are willing to believe that God, without a doubt, is bigger than our circumstances.

It is believed that the author of this epistle is James, the half brother of Jesus and son of Joseph and Mary. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and was martyred in 62 AD. This means that the epistle of James is one of the earliest books of the New Testament. However, authorship and date of writing is still debated among scholars.

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