

HOW GOD HELPS WHEN WE'RE IN TROUBLE

Eighth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *The Body of Christ*, from James 1:2-12

"Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." James 1:12

Richard Winter is head of the counseling department at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He tells how some years ago all kinds of trouble came crashing down upon him. He says, *"I wish it could be said of me by family and friends, 'That was Richard's finest hour!' but I fear the judgment may be closer to, 'That was his weakest and most foolish hour.'"* What happened? First, his sister died in childbirth. Then his father-in-law died suddenly of heart disease. His wife was diagnosed with cancer. His brother-in-law took his own life on the anniversary of his sister's death. Beyond that, Richard and his wife had a person living with them who had suffered ritual satanic abuse. There were difficulties among the leadership of their church and in relationships at work. And he had major life decisions to make. He was run down, burned out, and exhausted. God seemed very far away, oblivious to prayers, appearing merely to add on pressures. (Covenant Theological Seminary Magazine, *Medicine for Madness*, Winter 2007, 4)

For several weeks we've been talking about *The Body of Christ*. Today we're going to look at the times when trouble comes upon us and how God helps the members of Christ's body to heal when we go through trials. Please turn to James chapter 1. James was the brother of Jesus. After Christ's resurrection he became a follower of Christ and a leader in the early church. In verses 2-12 he tells us four things to do when we find ourselves in trouble. **1. Alter your attitude, 2. Ask for help, Adjust your perspective, and 4. Achieve God's approval.**

1. Alter your attitude. In verse 2 James tells us what our attitude ought to be when we find ourselves in trouble. *"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials."* You find yourself in trouble. James says you should react with joy. Now, that sounds stupid, doesn't it? Isn't that what you expect people to say who are overly religious and out of touch with the real world we live in? I recall a few Christians who were members of our church years ago who kept saying, "Praise the Lord!" whenever anything went wrong. They irritated to me. They were obnoxious. It seemed as if they didn't take seriously the pain and suffering others of us faced. Is that what James is saying? You get hit with serious sickness, or are grieving the death of a loved one, or face the wreckage caused by another person's moral failure, and James wants you to get back up with a smile, wipe the blood off your face, and say, "God, that felt so good! Please hit me again!" Is that what he's saying? No, of course not.

The word *trials* in verse 2 can also be translated, *temptations*. When normal people are in trouble we are tempted to despair or be discouraged, to grumble and complain. James says we mustn't respond to trouble in that manner. In verses 3-4 he says that under God's hand we can actually benefit from trouble. He says concentrate on the benefit, not the trouble. What is this benefit that can bring us joy? James says, "*The testing of your faith produces endurance,*" and if you endure—that is, if you keep your faith in spite of your troubles—your endurance will enable you to become "*perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*" Oh, great! When I'm in trouble, I don't think about self improvement, I just want to stop hurting. Isn't that how you feel?

Let's shift and look at this differently. What does "perfect and complete" mean? It means you win a championship! Let's talk about the Gamecocks for a moment—or should I say, the "Shamecocks"? When Steve Spurrier came to Carolina as head football coach, his assignment was to create a winning tradition at USC. At the beginning of this season Coach Spurrier said the goal this year was to win the SEC championship. Just four weeks ago the Gamecocks were ranked number six in the nation. That's when the *State* newspaper printed "Steve Spurrier paper doll cut-outs" on the front page and reignited the old "Chicken curse." How else do you explain four straight losses? What does a championship coach do to rally the fans? He says, "OK, we haven't played as well as we should have. It'll take longer than we expected. But we'll keep trying, and eventually we will win the SEC and maybe a national championship." We'll see.

James is calling us, however, to think like champions-to-be while we endure the troubles of life. Paul wrote to Timothy from a prison cell in Rome. His life was almost over. It was ending in suffering, pain, and apparent defeat. But he said, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved [Christ's] appearing.*" (II Timothy 4:7-8) Most of us don't think that way. It's not until we're in trouble, not until all seems to be lost, that we really begin to desire the perfection of heaven. So, alter your attitude.

2. Ask for help. In verse 5 James says, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God.*" And he assures us that God gives help generously. God doesn't get tired of us asking him for help. He gives "*without reproach.*" And then James says, when we ask God to help us, "*It will be given.*" So here's the assurance of answered prayer. When we're in trouble, prayers for help come rolling off our lips. And what do we pray for? Usually it's some variation of the prayer, "God, get me out of this!" "God, please heal me! God, please supply my need! God, help my child or change my spouse" or, "God, change the conditions at work!"

There's nothing wrong with prayers for deliverance. In fact, God encourages us numerous times in his word to pray for these very things. But the problem is that often God does not answer in the way we've asked him to, and then we're not sure how to handle it. God isn't much help if he doesn't help us!

Look more closely at what James says. *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God."* So, James wants us to ask God for wisdom. That's not exactly what we want, is it? We want deliverance. God offers wisdom. Are we to be content merely learning the lessons trouble helps us to learn? Consider this for a moment. The Psalmist says, *"The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord."* (Psalm 111:10) He's telling us that you and I need to yield to the plan of God. If we can somehow understand God's plan it helps us to trust him during those times when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we've asked them. We actually do this more often than we think. How many times do we ask, "Why did this happen to me? Why did God allow that beautiful little child to be ill? Why did he permit a young mother to die? Why does he allow the wicked get away with the evil they do, when I've tried to serve him faithfully and all it's ever gotten me is more trouble? James says, ask God for wisdom so you can see something of God's purpose, plan, and method. Your faith will be stronger, and stronger faith will help you to persevere.

When Barb and I moved from Pittsburgh to Baltimore we put our house on the market during the time when interest rates were hovering between fifteen and twenty percent. Our house didn't sell. We prayed, "Lord, it only takes one buyer. Please sell our house so we can afford to buy a house in Baltimore." But it took nine months and for six of those it stood empty, and I couldn't understand it. But God provided for us in another way. A man in the church gave us a private mortgage at an interest rate we could afford. When our house didn't sell, he said he would rework the loan for ten years when our house finally did sell. For years I wondered why God had worked it out that way. It would have been so simple for him to provide a buyer when we needed it. When we moved from Baltimore to Columbia, the reason became clear. If we had started the ten year private mortgage when we wanted it, I would have had to refinance our house in Baltimore for just a few extra weeks until we could work things out here. As it was, because of the delay back in Pittsburgh ten years earlier, the house loan in Baltimore still had a few weeks to run and the timing worked out perfectly for us to sell our house there and buy a house here. I've learned from that experience that God is in control of every detail of our lives, even when we're in trouble. The result is, I don't worry as much now about how things are going to work out, as I used to. I know our heavenly father will provide what we need when we need it. James says in verse 6-8, ask God for help. Let him show you what he's doing. Yield to it. And he will help you through.

3. Adjust your perspective. James says in verses 9-10, *“Let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation.”* At first glance this statement doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense either. The brother in humble circumstances is a Christian who suffers because he doesn’t have much in this world. He’s poor, he’s deprived. What high position can he claim that will make him glad? Well, he’s greatly privileged because God loves him and has a plan for his life and is willing to help him. So James says the poor man should lift his eyes and keep them on the God who knows him personally and comes to his aid.

David Livingstone was the great pioneer missionary to Africa. He missed his wife greatly, and when he could, he sent for her and brought her to Africa to join him. She died three months after arriving. He led only one person to Christ in all the years he served in Africa. Livingstone’s supporters back in Britain abandoned him because he had not won more converts. But he said, *“We’re the first missionaries. We’re preparing the way. Someday missionaries will come who will see hundreds turn to Christ each time they preach.”* In his explorations he encountered a tribal king who would not let him pass until he yielded to an old African custom. Livingstone must allow the king to take any one of Livingstone’s possessions he desired, and the chief would give him something valuable in return. Livingstone emptied his pockets. He had a watch, some books, the clothes on his back, and a goat which provided him with milk because his digestive system was so damaged from Africa that he could not drink the water. The chief, to Livingstone’s dismay, took the goat. In return he gave Livingstone a carved stick. Livingstone’s heart sank. He was tempted to despair. But then a member of the tribe told him what that stick was—not a walking stick. It was the king’s scepter. With that in his hands, every village in the land was opened to him. Livingstone rejoiced.

What about the rich man? He holds a lofty position in this world. What is the humiliation he should rejoice in? On this one we don’t have to guess, for James tells us. *“Like flowering grass he will pass away.”* In other words, he’s human. He’s not going to live forever and if he’s a Christian, that means he must depend on God completely in this life and the next. You can understand what a privilege that perspective is by looking at someone who doesn’t see it. For example, Sumner Redstone is eighty-four years old. By relentless struggle and infighting he has gained control of 80 percent of Viacom and 78 percent of CBS. He controls those companies. His daughter is presently at war with him, trying to take over his empire. But Redstone says, *“I’m in control today, and I’ll be in control after I die.”* I doubt it. James says in verse 11, *“The rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.”* Adjust your perspective. God will help you.

4. Achieve God's approval. In verse 12 James says, *"Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."* Being "approved" means literally "passing the test" that trouble brings. If a Christian passes the test, he receives the crown of life. Benedict Schwartz was returning from a disappointing land-hunting expedition in northern Zambia. He and his party were hoping to establish an agricultural training program and an orphanage to aid Christians in that country and open the door to evangelism. But now it didn't look like that could happen. They happened to stop at a farm owned by three elderly Christian women. "Auntie Harriet", the oldest of the three, told Schwartz that she and her sisters were third generation Christians, the grandchildren of a Malawi evangelist who was one of only a handful of converts led to Christ in the nineteenth century through the ministry of pioneer missionary, John Smith Moffat. Moffat was the brother-in-law of David Livingstone.

The sisters had prayed that the Christian ministry of their family might continue. They had wanted their land to be used for an agricultural training program or an orphanage. Coincidence? They had worried that they would die and their hopes would never be fulfilled. So Schwartz' visit that day was a Godsend. Auntie Harriet said, *"God's people came and we were very happy....Now our people can become independent, can look ahead, can discover the gifts they have."* The land was fertile. Deep wells would provide water. So the land was given and received. It lies along the Great North Road. As Christian workers came to begin building housing for the orphans who would live there, they discovered that two decades earlier the builders of the road had used the site as a supply depot. Hidden in the weeds and brush were thousands of tons of crushed stones the road builders had stockpiled there. The crushed stones now provided the material for construction of the houses. (*World*, November 10 2007, 44)

Think about it: Crushed stones. Stones broken to pieces by vast pressures and the blows of hammers. You and I are the crushed stones of God. The trouble we face in life may break and crush us. But by God's plan, we find that we've been placed right where God wants us to be--ready, waiting, available to be used in the construction of temples raised for his glory. We can't earn God's crown of life by perseverance, by passing the test and being approved. Salvation is always God's gift. We put our faith in Christ, and he gives eternal life. Perseverance is only the proof of where our faith rests.

When trouble comes into your life and crushes you and breaks what you treasure into tiny pieces, remember that God is fully able to stockpile our broken stones and in his time turn them into concrete for his great building projects in this world. At the moment you may think all is lost, that your life is being

wasted. But never forget that God can transport the pieces of your life to the very location he wants, so when a worried old lady fears that her Christian heritage will fade away uncompleted, when a disappointed Christian visionary is about to call it quits because there is no way forward, when a tired evangelist is at the end of his life and must hand his cherished work for Christ to his children or the next generation of Christian workers, when a missionary struggles in a wasted land and sees almost no fruit for all his suffering, and no one notices; there you and I will be. Broken, discouraged, overwhelmed. And yet, with God's help enduring by faith. And God will take our trembling perseverance and make something out of it. Does that help you when you face trouble? God says it does.

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