

The Joy of Tought Times • James 1:2-4

Larry Stone is a lifelong friend of mine. We grew up together, went to the same high school, same college, spent the summer as collegians trekking around Europe together. Larry started a publishing company that has been exceptionally successful. Perhaps the most famous book his company ever published was #1 on the New York Times best seller list for in excess of 18 months and even today sells more than a million copies a year. You've probably seen it. It is called Life's Little Instruction Book and the cover says, "511 suggestions, observations and reminders on how to live a happy and rewarding life."

Some examples are:

#99 "Think big thoughts but relish small pleasures."

#147 "Turn off the television at dinner time."

#376 "Save an evening a week for just you and your wife."

#396 "Never give anyone a fruitcake."

#417 "Read to your children."

#439 "Tape record your parents' laughter."

Life's Little Instruction Book has no plot, but it is full of great practical advice. It is very much like the New Testament book of James which also doesn't have much of a plot but is loaded with practical advice and could well be named "God's Little Instruction Book."

The first advice is in James 1:2-4 and it would probably be page one if we were publishing "God's Little Instruction Book" today. It could also be a bumper sticker saying, "Trials happen," or as James wrote it, "you face trials of many kinds." "Trials" or tests or troubles are a normal part of life. Everyone has them. They come in many different kinds. There are physical trials including everything from birth defects to diseases. There are emotional trials that include fear, worry, depression, disappointment and grief. Spiritual trials deal with sin and guilt,

doubt and persecution. Social trials come when people make fun of you, when you're the last to be chosen on the school playground, when people laugh at what you say, when you're unpopular, when you love someone who doesn't love in return. Financial trials come in packages called unemployment, business failure, unpaid bills, bad investments or bankruptcy.

The truth of it is that life is too short to even sample all of the possible trials that are available to the human experience. Some of the trials that we have we initiate ourselves. We've all experienced times when we look back and say, "I made a choice six months or six years ago and the things that I'm dealing with today are really a result of that choice, and as reluctant as I am to admit it, I brought these things upon myself." But that's not primarily what "God's Little Instruction Book" in James 1 refers to. It refers primarily to the trials that come from the outside, those that we did not self-inflict.

Think of life as a battlefield in the middle of a war between good and evil. We are out there on the battlefield where the conflict is ferocious. There is no place to hide, there are shortages of supplies and there is no place to escape. We can never be sure

when the next attack will come or the next shell will hit. From the moment of birth to the moment of death every

person is at risk to face "trials of many kinds."

The question is, what do we do about it? How do we handle these trials of life? On page two of "God's Little Instruction Book" is a second piece of advice. The advice is that we should discover joy in these discomforts or, as James puts it, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds."

I read that and I think to myself, is he crazy? Who considers it pure joy to have a broken bone, be diagnosed with infertility, lose a valued friend,

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experience an unwanted divorce or to study hard for a test that is critical to the career path that you've chosen only to fail? It seems to me that we can rightly say from our own experience that no one enjoys these kinds of discomforts. No one is happy about the bad things, the trials and tough times of life. But what if we could be? What if somehow it were possible in the trials that we are up against to be able to reach in and pull out joy in the worst of circumstances?

You remember the mythological king Midas who turned everything he touched into gold. What if we could somehow magically touch the trials and problems we have and turn them to joy? Wouldn't that be a stunning approach to life? It would be far superior to the other alternatives.

I think I can tell you the formula, although I admit that I'm not always consistent in applying it to my own difficulties. Part one of the formula is knowing that God always uses troubles for a purpose. When we can get that straight in our minds and understand that every trial or difficulty that we face has a point to it, we feel as though we are going somewhere. It gives a reason for what is happening to us. Life's tests are never nonsense in the Christian's life. They always point to something good.

The second part of the formula is to understand that there is a difference between pure joy and surface happiness. It is actually possible to be very unhappy about something and at the same time to discover joy in it.

The most obvious example that comes to mind is a woman giving birth to a child. She is hardly happy about the severe discomfort and pain of labor contractions but she is joyful about the baby to be born. And it's not that the joy comes later. She can have pure joy even when she's experiencing the worst of pain.

A much more common example is all the joggers that we see out everyday. I am always kind of amazed at joggers. I'm impressed when I talk to them and they talk about the joy of running – the

rush of endorphins in the body, the benefits to the cardiovascular system and the satisfaction of being able to run 3 miles in 20 minutes or less. I believe them. But what I find strange is how they look when I drive by them. Honestly, have you ever seen a happy jogger? At least in my neighborhood they all look miserable! But somehow they have learned to consider it pure joy. So it's possible, I guess, to be unhappy in the process and yet at the same time to be aware of the pure joy that comes with it.

James starts to tie the pieces together as he explains on our page three of "God's Little Instruction Book" that tests of faith develop perseverance. The reason Christians can find joy in discomfort James says is "because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."

It sounds to me like one of those magnificent quotes penned in calligraphy and expensively framed. It sounds lofty, but we have no idea what it is talking about.

Perseverance refers to the ability to hang in there and live a triumphant Christian life regardless of the circumstances. There's a distinction between patience and perseverance. Patience is rather passive. It particularly relates to the lives of other people as we allow them to have their space, waiting for God to work in their lives. Perseverance by contrast is active. It's participative. It's a strong response to circumstances that effectively applies Christian principles to whatever the situation.

Recently I flew from Minneapolis to Houston on a Northwest DC-9. En route the captain came on the public address system and explained that we were going to arrive in Houston some thirty minutes early because of a 120-knot tailwind. He said, "We're actually going about 600 miles per hour in equivalent ground speed" and then added, "which is about as fast as a DC-9 is supposed to go." All kinds of thoughts ran through my mind as he said that. First of all, I thought, "How does he know that? What if he is off by one mile per hour? What if the maximum speed for a DC-9 is 599 and we'll rip apart at 600?" There could be all kinds of dire con-

sequences if he was wrong.

The obvious answer is that DC-9s have been tested to see if they will persevere at 600 miles per hour. Once upon a time somewhere a test pilot backed a DC-9 out of a hangar, took off down a runway and flew that plane at that speed. It wasn't good enough that engineers had figured it on paper, somebody had to test it at all different altitudes and in all different types of weather conditions to see if it persevered. It probably wasn't perfect the first time and changes had to be made before the DC-9 was certified to fly passengers at 600 miles per hour. Tests of flight developed perseverance.

James 1:3 explains that tests of faith also develop perseverance. It is not enough for us to say we are Christians in theory. We need to get out of the hangar and fly in the storms of life. We need to be tested in a different altitudes, different conditions — some of them severe — sometimes with light load factors and sometimes with very heavy loads. They are the tests of faith that develop perseverance until we can be assured that we are the Christians that we are designed to be.

The marvelous part of it is that God has designed us to pass every test. He has assured us in writing that we will not be tested beyond what we are capable of persevering. He has promised that he will not put us at any altitude or any speed or any place that will tear us apart. He gives us his Spirit to guide us and the more we are tested the stronger we become. Every test we pass gives a deep joy that our faith is real, that we are the Christians we claim to be and that God is in control of our lives. "We know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance."

The fourth piece of advice in this little instruction book from God explains that perseverance makes maturity. In James' words in James 1:4, "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

There is a sequence. Trials happen, for nobody

is exempt. With God we can discover joy in those trials. As our faith is tested we develop perseverance and that perseverance makes us mature.

You might compare that to the Olympic games. Athletes train for years. It is a very hard thing to do and they have to make enormous sacrifices. The more they train and the more they are tested the better athletes they become. Eventually they are ready for the Olympic Games. They are mature athletes, lacking nothing, prepared to win a gold medal for themselves and for their country.

By comparison we are Olympic Christians. For a lifetime we train early in the morning until late at night, 365 days a year. We go through all kinds of tests, all kinds of experiences. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail. It is all getting us ready for heaven — mature and complete, in perfect spiritual shape, ready to win the prize of heaven itself.

When the Olympic event is over the journalists run over and stick microphones into the face of the athlete who has just won the gold medal, the last

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strains of the national anthem echoing in the distance, and the question is asked, "All the training, all the

trials, are they worth it?" The athlete answers, "It was pure joy!"

What's currently tough in your life? Everyone has lists of trials and troubles for there are no exemptions and there is no escape. The choice is between a miserable life of defeat or a life of victory and pure joy. The question is whether we will find in our problems an excuse to be destroyed or an opportunity to be all God wants us to be, "mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Paul Brand is a world famous orthopedic surgeon, Professor Emeritus of Orthopedics at the University of Washington, a consultant to the World Health Organization and a best-selling author. Brand tells the story of his mother, Evelyn.

She was born to a wealthy London family and grew up in the suburbs of London in a home that he describes as very plush, filled with extravagant mahogany and expensive and unusual antiques amidst the trappings and privilege of wealth. She was an accomplished artist in watercolors and oils, a student at the London Conservatory of Art. She was beautiful and highly sought after as a model. She fell in love with and married a missionary and went to India.

When her son Paul was nine she chose to send him back to England to live and go to school, a wrenching separation for any parent. Then her husband died when he was only 44 and left her a widow for the rest of her life. She suffered from malaria and a broken arm and vertebrae that left her with life-long pain. At age 67, she fell and broke her hip and laid on the floor in excruciating pain until morning when she was discovered by the housekeeper who then arranged to transport her a hundred painful miles to the nearest medical facility.

Paul Brand writes, “For Mother, pain was a frequent companion, as was sacrifice. I say it kindly and in love, but in old age, Mother had little of physical beauty left in her. The rugged conditions, combined with the crippling falls and her battles with typhoid, dysentery and malaria, had made her a thin, hunched-over old woman. Years of exposure to wind and sun had toughened her facial skin into leather and furrowed it with wrinkles as deep and extensive as any I have seen on a human face. Evelyn Harris of the fancy clothes and the classic profile was a dim memory of the past. Mother knew that as well as anyone – for the last twenty years of her life she refused to keep a mirror in her house. And yet, with all the objectivity that a son can muster, I can truly say that Evelyn Harris Brand was a beautiful woman, to the very end.”

He tells of the enormous impact that she had upon the village people of India where she lived most of her life. She brought clinics and medical care, started schools and introduced them to Jesus Christ. They loved her and held her in awe. Her son

visited her village a last time before she died at the age of 95.

“No one else on earth, I realized then, commanded such devotion and love from those villagers. They were looking at a bony, wrinkled old face, but somehow her shrunken tissues had become transparent, and she was all lambent spirit. To them, and to me, she was beautiful.”

“A co-worker once remarked that Granny Brand was more alive than any person he had ever met. By giving away life, she found it. Pain she knew well. But pain need not destroy. It can be transformed — a lesson my mother taught me, and one I have never forgotten.”¹

In the words of God’s little instruction book, “Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

¹ Paul Brand with Philip Yancey, “And God Created Pain,” *Christianity Today*, 1-10-94, pp. 22-23.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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