

ENDURANCE

Standing Firm
In a Throw-Away World

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Endurance: Standing Firm in a Throw-Away World

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F O R E W O R D

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works. These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee (Titus 2:11–15, KJV).

What does it mean to be a “peculiar people?” Today we often associate this word with such terms as *strange*, *weird* or *odd*. This incorrect connotation makes it hard to understand just what type of people Christians are supposed to be.

The meaning of the word *peculiar* has changed significantly since the days of King James. Originally it meant to be set apart—to be reserved for something special. This passage teaches that, as “peculiar” people, we are being called apart by Christ to live a different life.

In this booklet I have sought to explore some of the peculiar characteristics of the Christian life. Characteristics which mark believers with an indelible stamp identifying them as God’s possession. It is my prayer that this study will guide you into a deeper understanding of your position as His special treasure.

Endurance

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“But if you would just believe in Jesus, I know He would heal you. He does not want anybody to be sick! If you will become a Christian, Jesus will give you whatever you want. You just ‘name it and claim it!’ ”

These days the Gospel is beginning to sound like a good used-car deal: “If you will just trust Jesus Christ, everything will smooth itself out. Life will become easy and enjoyable.”

But that is not what God says. In fact, Scripture indicates that life may actually become *more* difficult for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Look at the life of the Apostle Paul, for example. Before he was converted to Christianity, Paul was an important individual, a man of some means. He was living what most people would call “the good life.” But after he became a Christian, he faced difficulty after difficulty (see 2 Cor. 11).

Contrary to popular belief, God has not promised Christians an easy passage through life. He does make certain, specific promises to give us peace within ourselves—to give us joy and satisfaction inside, regardless of our outside circumstances. But these promises do not guarantee us a problem-free existence. In fact, it is God’s intention to bring all Christians face-to-face with trials and pressure.

The Three R’s

Everyone lives with pressure. Believers and unbelievers alike face problems in the job world and in family life. Somehow, unbe-

lievers manage to struggle aimlessly through these things. But God has a unique purpose in exposing His children to trials and tensions.

It would be no great challenge for God to keep our paths smooth and cleared of problems, but the epistle of James tells us that God wants us to be exposed to trials. *It is God's intention to bring us to maturity as His children.* To do that we must endure pressure, for only pressure can bring about the growth and development that God desires for us.

In learning to deal with trials and pressure, it is important to understand the proper *response* to trials, the *reason* we face them, and their ultimate *result* in our lives.

Identifying the Right Response

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2). In this familiar verse, the word *consider* is a command—a strong, sharp command. To consider means to arrive at a decision as a result of very careful deliberation. The area of trials, then, is an area that must be meditated upon. We must think it through carefully and come to a settled conviction.

The emphasis here is not on the number of trials you may face, but on the variety. You may lose your job—that is one kind of pressure. But then perhaps you lose a loved one, and on top of that you face some sort of persecution—these are entirely different kinds of pressure. It is not enough to learn the proper response to just one type of trial. We must learn to face the full spectrum.

The meaning of the word *encounter* is also very significant. Literally it means “to fall into something so as to be surrounded by it.” It is not as if we are to go out looking for problems, nor are we being asked to sit in anticipation of the next catastrophe. James is speaking about those things that we just fall into—things we could not have avoided.

Knowing this takes a load off of my mind. One of the first thoughts that occurs to me when something goes wrong is, “Where did I get off the track?” But James teaches that testing is not a result of wrongdoing, it is simply part of God’s plan. This verse does not say, “*If* you encounter various trials,” it says, “*When* you encounter various trials.” Trials are inevitable.

“Consider it all joy” (v.2). When trials do come, our response is to be one of joy. Jesus made a very similar statement, focusing specifically on the trial of persecution: “Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad” (Matt. 5:11,12). We are to count it or evaluate it as all joy when we encounter various trials. This is the right response.

Clarifying the Real Reason

It seems rather illogical to be joyful about facing problems. There must be some explanation. The word *knowing* at the beginning of James 1:3 connects with the command given in verse 2. We are to “consider” this, “knowing” something else; that is, “that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”

In this verse, trials are referred to as *the testing*, meaning “to prove or approve something,” or “to put it to the test.” It is an expression that would be used to describe the process of refining metals.

Years ago, I worked in a steel mill. In the steelmaking process, the metal is exposed to a very high temperature. Part of the purpose for this is to burn off the dross—the impurities that have gotten mixed into the iron and other metals that make up steel. It is a purifying process.

In the same way, trials serve as a means of testing and proving faith. *Pressure reveals the true character of our faith.* And as our faith is put to the test, endurance is produced in our lives.

What Is Endurance?

The word translated *endurance* is another compound word, comprised of the words “to be under” and “remaining.” Some people get it confused with patience, but patience is too passive to be compared to endurance. Endurance describes someone under a tremendous load or burden who firmly and resolutely chooses to stay under that burden.

Endurance isn’t knowing how to get out from under pressure, it is *knowing how to live under pressure.* Our faith, as it is purified by trials, produces what one commentator called “staying power.” It is

the ability to stick with something even when the pressure seems overwhelming.

Endurance is *not* passive resignation. Some people in the face of trials just give up. They resign themselves to the fact that nothing can be done. But God is not interested in applying pressure so that His people give up, saying, "Well, what can I do? I guess I will just have to learn to live with it." No, there is an active quality to endurance. It is a confident stand under pressure which drives us forward. It is that tenacity of spirit which holds up under pressure while awaiting God's time for reward or dismissal.

A Process Over Time

The word translated *produce* is an intensive form of the word meaning "to work" in the present tense. To put it another way, trials are working endurance into our lives. This explains why pressure does not come for just a short period. It is a process that occurs over time.

This is where the real problem lies, isn't it? We can put up with most things for a day or a week—maybe a month. But when they drag on for a year or two, that is another story. And yet, that is when real endurance is produced in our lives. We have all watched people going through tremendous trials and difficulties, and we think, *I am amazed at how they have held up under this*. What has God done? He has produced in them a staying power, a firmness that we admire. It is something we would all like to have, but the only way we can ever obtain it is by going through the kinds of things they have gone through. There's no other way to get it.

The World's Response

The world puts great value in living life without that kind of pressure. It tells us to get rid of the difficulty, whatever the cost. So what happens to our marriage relationships? As soon as things are not going smoothly anymore, people go their separate ways: *Forget this business! I do not need this kind of pressure in my life*.

Sadly, when many people come to Christ today, they come believing that by doing so they will be sheltered from difficulties. They have brought their world standard with them. The idea that

God wants everyone healthy, wealthy and happy is a direct contradiction of the Word of God. Such thinking produces nothing but complaining, grumbling and discontented Christians. Why? Because God has promised that trials *will* come. When they do, the first thought is *This isn't fair! I am a Christian now. This is not supposed to be happening to me!* Instead of appreciating the fact that God is doing something special and unique in their lives, they fall into a pattern of grumbling and complaining.

The Road to Maturity

Endurance is not an end in itself, but it is an essential ingredient in bringing about maturity in the child of God. This is true of our own children, isn't it? If we protect them from all the bumps and bruises of childhood, what happens when they leave home? The normal, inevitable bumps and bruises of life come and they cannot handle them. They have never learned to live under the pressure. They are not *mature*.

On the other hand, as parents we need to regulate that pressure. We are not to place so much pressure on children that they are destroyed by it.

I have already shared with you that I worked in a steel mill. Part of my job there was to keep an accurate record of the temperature of the steel. If the temperature got too hot, the steel would melt. Then you had a puddle, and that was a problem. But God is not interested in making puddles out of us. He is watching the temperature. He will turn it up a little more, a little more, until—

“Lord, I am melting!”

“Be quiet. I will know when you are melting.”

“Lord, I am *dripping* at least!”

Manifesting the Righteous Result

“And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). You cannot speed up the process of producing maturity. Part of the process is building endurance, and that simply takes time.

Some of you exercise—you jog or run. Imagine someone who

has not exercised in twenty-two years saying, "I think I will go out and run five miles. And just to get it out of the way, I think I will do it in about seven minutes per mile." What would your reaction be? "Ha! That will not work out very well." Why not? Because you have to build up some endurance, and *that takes time*. Muscles become weak and flabby with the passing of time. If we could just plug in somewhere and in a half hour restore our bodies to what they were when we were twenty (although for some that might not be any better), who wouldn't give it a try? But when they say you have to spend time exercising every day, most of us decide it is not worth it.

We must be careful not to interrupt the process God is carrying out. We must learn to appreciate what God is doing without trying to cut it short. That is the reason for the command: "Let endurance have its perfect result" (James 1:4).

But Nobody's Perfect!

"That you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4). This verse is not saying that we will come to a point where we will never sin again. In fact, later James writes, "For we all stumble in many ways" (3:2). Even *he* did not believe that it is possible for us to be sinlessly perfect in this life.

The word *perfect* refers to our level of maturity. It is the idea of being what God expects us to be. For example, we might say of one of our own children, "Oh, he has been the perfect son" or "the perfect daughter." Are we saying that they never do anything wrong? No! We are saying that they are right where we want them to be. We are pleased with their maturity. In the same way, God is in the process of bringing us to adulthood.

In my time in the ministry I have often noted the new believer's tendency to jump from one thing to another. He will plunge into one area, be involved there for a little bit, then he will plunge into something else. They are like very young children. Babies have very short attention spans, but because of that they end up learning a lot of different things. It is part of their development. You do not give a child a five-hundred-page book and tell him to go amuse himself for four or five hours. Instead, you provide him with a diversity of things. With time, if he is maturing as he should, he will develop the ability to stick with one thing.

It works the same way in the Christian life. Most ministries are developed by people who possess a staying power—people who have the ability to see the potential for an area of ministry and the discipline to get it started. And with all the pressures, all the disappointments, all the hassles, *they are able to stay with it*. This is undoubtedly the result of a life of endurance under pressure.

The Role of Wisdom

“Now let me get this straight,” you say. “When trials come, I am supposed to quote a verse to myself, like ‘Consider it all joy’ or ‘God causes all things to work together for good’, and then I will become strong and able to handle anything life can dish out. Right?”

Wrong. Although this is the way some Christians approach difficulties, it is not God’s plan. God’s plan is for us to come to Him. This is why James says: “If any of you lacks wisdom, *let him ask of God*” (James 1:5, emphasis added).

The way this verse is constructed may be a little confusing. By saying, “If any of you lacks wisdom,” James is not saying that some might need wisdom to make it through a trial, while others could possibly get along without it. He assumes that we all have this need. We have the facts; we have the knowledge—now we need the wisdom to put it all together.

We saw earlier that God’s purpose in trials is to make us “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). So it makes sense that if we lack wisdom, we should look to God to supply it for us.

What Is Wisdom?

Wisdom is sometimes defined as the right use of knowledge. It is the application of the truths we know to the situations we are confronting. The foundation for wisdom is knowledge: You have to know the truth to be able to apply it to the situation. So if you do not know what James has said in James 1:2–4, you will have a hard time taking God’s truth and applying it to your situation.

Wisdom, then, is a *supernatural perception given by God*. People often ask, “Why is God doing this in my life?” We can share with them some general truths, but the ability to cope with what God is doing in their lives and the ability to apply scriptural truth to their

own specific situations is something they must seek directly from God. “If any of you lacks wisdom, *let him ask of God*” (James 1:5, emphasis added).

The phrase “let him ask of God” is an imperative (a command). Everyone who is undergoing a trial is commanded to be constantly asking God for the wisdom to apply His Word to their situation.

How many times have you heard a believer say, “I do not see any purpose in this. I cannot see how anything good could come out of this tragic situation. I know God is a God of love, but why would He allow *this*, of all things, to happen?” What they are really saying is, “I need wisdom. I do not understand. I have the facts of God on one side, my personal situation on the other, and it seems there is this huge chasm in between. I need God’s wisdom to show me how the facts and truth of His Word blend together in my situation. Then I can ‘count it all joy.’ ”

This is a real encouragement to me. It means that God has tailor-made every situation that comes into my life. Most believers know the general truths that encompass their life in Christ, truths like “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28), and “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). And yet, when we are going through a particular trial or situation—well, that is *personal!* Through James, God is saying, “Now, you come to Me for wisdom, and I will show you how to apply My truth to your particular, individual need.”

Coming to God for wisdom requires humility and a constant recognition of our own need. There is no room for self-sufficiency and spiritual pride. Nowhere does God say that being a believer and knowing the facts of the Word are enough to get you through trials. That can get you off to a good start, but over time the burden begins to press down. The trial gets heavier and heavier, until we suddenly start thinking, *Is this thing adding pounds? I am sure it was not this heavy when I started out!* But it was—the devil is always busy deceiving!

When I was in seminary I helped someone move a piano into a trailer. Today I am one of those people who has “back trouble” in all those situations. There we were, two of us on one end of a piano. We were doing great until we got part way down the stairs. Simul-

taneously we realized we were not going to make it. We started crying out for help. It was a little humbling when the man in charge came over and—with one hand—picked up our end by himself!

Isn't this the way we do things? We say, "I can handle it, I can handle it . . . uh oh, Lord, *help!*" It is nothing for Him to just reach in and take control, but He would rather we come to Him constantly for wisdom. Beware of the attitude of self-sufficiency during a time of testing—especially at the beginning.

"Who gives to all men generously and without reproach" (James 1:5). God is a giving God. I may get embarrassed sometimes by coming to Him again and again about the same issue: "Lord, I know we have been through this before. I have been a believer for a long time. I have seen Your hand at work. But I have to say I am stuck again. I do not understand. I do not have a biblical appreciation of what is going on. I need wisdom from You." But this is good for me. It brings me into a position of humility before Him, and that is when He can help me and give me insight.

"It will be given to him" (James 1:5). God has promised that the wisdom we seek will be ours. Because He "gives to all men generously and without reproach," He will not bring up the past. He will not bring up your failures. He will not ridicule you for your weaknesses. He is simply waiting to help.

The Truth About the Christian Life

The Christian life is not one of blissful ease and comfort. God has assured us that we will face trials. But these trials are designed specifically for us to bring us to maturity. By learning to *endure*—to live under pressure—we can grow to adulthood.

God has not left us to fend for ourselves. He has promised to give us the wisdom we need, as often as we need it, to understand and cope with the myriad of pressures we face. While He is indeed "turning up the heat," He is also carefully monitoring the temperature. It is a joyful thing to know that He will not make a "puddle" out of anyone!

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