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ENDURANCE

Embracing Obstacles as a Means to Maturity

Memory Verse

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.

James 1:2-3



DAY 1

SETTLE

Spend a few moments quietly before the Lord. Take a deep breath in and then slowly exhale. As you sit in the silence, ask God to use the time you spend with Him over the next six weeks to help you know Him in new and exciting ways.

FOCUS

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!

(James 1:1)

When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.”

And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

(Matthew 13:53-58 NIV)

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.

(Mark 6:3 ESV)

After this, Jesus traveled around Galilee. He wanted to stay out of Judea, where the Jewish leaders were plotting his death. But soon it was time for the Jewish Festival of Shelters, and Jesus’ brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! You can’t

become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!" For even his brothers didn't believe in him.

(John 7:1-5)

REFLECT

This week as we begin our thematic journey through the New Testament Book of James, we will be camping out in the first four verses of the letter and considering the habit of endurance. But before we dive into our first theme, let's take a look at the first verse and consider the author.

According to James 1:1 (page 11), who wrote this letter?

The letter tells us that James himself wrote it. But which James? There are three notable men who share this name mentioned in the New Testament. So, let's take a quick look at who they are and identify our writer.

First, we see James the brother of John and son of Zebedee, who was among the first disciples Jesus called to follow him. Also known as the Sons of Thunder, this James and his brother, John, were fishermen and major players in the Gospel stories. Among the disciples, this James was part of the inner circle of those closest to Jesus, which also included his brother, John, and Peter. Another notable fact concerning this disciple James is that he was the first of the apostles martyred for his faith.

Next, we see James the son of Alphaeus, also one of the original twelve disciples, who is sometimes referred to as James the Less.

Although he was present at the major events of Jesus's ministry—such as the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on the water, many healing miracles, and even the ascension of the Lord—we don't actually see him singled out in any particular situation.

Lastly, there is James the brother of Jesus—or, to be more precise, the half-brother, since they were begotten by different fathers (Holy Spirit for Jesus and Joseph for



James). So, which James wrote this letter that was widely circulated to the first-century church?

Although there is some debate among scholars, traditionally the authorship of this book has been credited to James the half-brother of Jesus. As the second-born son to Mary,¹ James grew up in the same household as Jesus. They would have known each other intimately. Surely as boys Jesus and James played together and did chores alongside each other. They must have shared meals at the same table and likely slept in the same room. They were the two oldest children of the household, so it would have been their responsibility to set the example for their siblings.

James knew Jesus well. They were family. Yet, as we've read today, it is clear that Jesus's brothers did not believe He was the Son of God, at least not at first.

My son Josh had the opportunity to lead a Bible study while in college. He invited a random crowd of peers to his apartment and ended up hosting a group of students who, by and large, had grown up in church. Most of them knew the Bible stories and had been to vacation Bible school, but they did not seem to have a personal relationship with Christ. So, Josh chose to lead them through the Book of James. When I asked him why he chose that book, he said this:

Well, a couple of reasons. One, it's practical and straightforward. There is a lot of life application in there. But mainly, I figured if James grew up surrounded by Jesus and His teachings and still didn't get it, maybe my formerly church-ed friends could relate to him. I think most of them grew up hearing about Jesus and His teachings too, but they don't believe He is the Son of God. Maybe they need what James needed—to meet the resurrected Christ. Maybe understanding James will lead to the discussion of the need for a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord.

That conversation was profound to me. I wondered how many people have heard about Jesus, done the church thing, and still have never known Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives in a personal, life-changing way. Many, I would guess.



How many people have heard about Jesus, done the church thing, and still have never known Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives in a personal, life-changing way?

When you were growing up, what was your understanding of who Jesus is?

Who introduced you to Jesus for the first time?

Review Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:3; and John 7:1-5 (pages 11–12). What do you think it would have been like to be one of Jesus’s siblings?

James, the unbelieving brother of Jesus, later became the leader of the first-century church in Jerusalem. What a drastic change! How does that kind of life change happen? It happens when a person meets the resurrected Christ in a personal way. Just knowing about the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth or learning a Sunday school story or even growing up with him isn’t enough. To have real life change like James experienced, you have to come to know Jesus as your personal Savior—God’s Son, the One who takes away the sins of the world. Surely this is what must have happened to James.

In the first four books of the New Testament, we read many accounts of the life of Jesus, and there is little mention of his family. But what we do read gives us a clear picture that they did not see him as the Son of God. I often have wondered what they thought of Him.

C. S. Lewis, a great writer and theologian, wrote in his classic book *Mere Christianity*, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.”² Perhaps these were the

choices Jesus’s siblings considered. By rejecting him as Lord, they might have regarded him as either a lunatic or a liar, as Lewis stated, or as a con artist or someone who had delusional thoughts. But as we journey further into the New Testament, we see in Acts that James has had a radical change of heart. He has gone from skeptic to believer.

Though we don’t know if Jesus’s other siblings had a change of heart, for James there was a drastic turn of faith. This former doubter and skeptic became a leader in the first-century church—in Jerusalem and beyond. The early community of Christians, known as followers of the Way, looked to him for direction, correction, and encouragement.

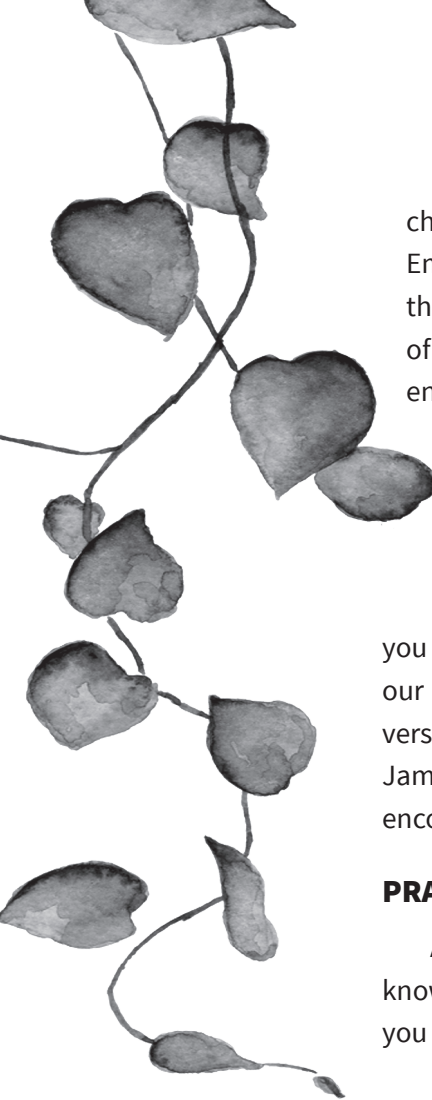
Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. Note those to whom Paul says the risen Jesus appeared.

What do you think James must have felt upon seeing Jesus post-resurrection?

Read Galatians 2:9. What name does Paul, the writer of Ephesians, give to the big three he lists here?

James overcame his doubts regarding who Jesus was. What doubts have you struggled with in your own faith journey?





As James emerged in leadership, the early church faced very challenging times. Persecution had broken out throughout the Roman Empire. Men, women, and even children were hunted and killed for their faith. It was a scary time to be a follower of Christ. So, as a leader of the early church, James wrote this letter to give them guidance and encouragement that would strengthen their faith.

This is a short letter by biblical standards—only 108 verses in five chapters—but it is rich with practical teaching. Contained within this letter is great wisdom for everyday life. Much of it is simple, but as you will soon see, simple does not always mean easy.

If you have not already read through the entirety of James, I encourage you to do so. It won't take you long, and this will give you an overview for our thematic journey through these Scriptures. As we unpack selected verses together over the next six weeks, I hope you will find the words of James to be life-giving. His instructions are not only wise but also filled with encouragement to help you live well—and more than that, to thrive!

PRAY

As we begin this study together, ask God to give you a fresh desire to know Him. Ask Him to show you new dimensions of who He is and to give you a passion to seek Him as the greatest love of your life as never before.



DAY 2

SETTLE

As you begin your time with the Lord today, put yourself in a different physical position. You may want to kneel, place your hands over your face, lie on the floor, or stand with outstretched arms. Try a new posture before the Lord and ask Him to meet you in a new way during your time together today.

FOCUS

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.

(James 1:2)

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

(Romans 5:3-5 ESV)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

(Romans 8:28 ESV)

REFLECT

It is summer as I'm writing this, and my husband, Jim, and I have planted some tomatoes. In the past we haven't had much luck with vegetables, but Jim loves a ripe tomato sandwich, so we thought we'd give it another try. At the end of the first week, our little plants had doubled in size. Now just

two weeks after planting, there are signs of flowering buds where juicy red tomatoes will soon be. Those little plants are thriving!

I love to watch things grow. Whether it's children, plants, friendships, churches, stocks, or something else—growth is exciting. It usually indicates health. It's what I want for my life, and it's what I pray for yours—that you would thrive! But what does that mean? Let's define it.

In the context of this study, thriving is living in the sweet spot of God's will. It is being in a right relationship with God so that, no matter the circumstances, we can grow more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Thriving when things are going well is easily doable. For my tomatoes, there has been a good bit of rain and lots of sun in the first two weeks, and as a result there is a lot of growth.

Think back to a time of life when you felt like you were thriving. What were the conditions of your circumstances, and how did they affect you?

What conditions help you thrive spiritually?

With sun and rain, my tomato plants are thriving, but what will happen to them if conditions aren't so favorable? Will they be able to thrive then? And what about us? How can we thrive when conditions are not favorable—when troubles come?

Our memory verse for this week is James 1:2: “Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.”

What? Pure joy? Is that how you feel when troubles come your way? Probably not, because if you're like me, my first reaction to problems could rarely be described as joy—and when I say rarely, I mean almost never. When

troubles come my way, I don't like it. Do you? If you do, you're either a little weird or vastly more spiritual than I!

When have you experienced a difficult season of life, and what was your first reaction to it?



Let's circle back to the author of the book we're studying, James. As we learned yesterday, James had a dramatic faith shift after meeting Jesus post-resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). James personally saw his resurrected older brother, and the proof was overwhelming. His fears were resolved. James came to know Jesus not only as a sibling but also as Lord, the Son of God, his own personal Savior. Personally, meeting the resurrected Christ has a way of easing doubts and fortifying faith. James became a believer. In fact, as we've seen, he emerged as a leader of this new faith movement known as The Way.

In Acts 1–12 we see that Peter, one of the three disciples closest to Jesus, took on the initial role of leader in the new and rapidly expanding Christian movement. But after Peter's imprisonment and angelic jailbreak, which we read about in Acts 12, the Roman guard began to search for Peter and couldn't find him. We hear little from Peter from this point on in the book of Acts, though we know he continued to carry on ministry as we read about in the letters 1 and 2 Peter. It was under these conditions that a new leader was needed. James the brother of Jesus emerged as the head of the church in Jerusalem.

It was around this same time that persecution began, with sporadic and locally intense persecution of Christians spreading throughout the Roman Empire. Emperor Nero declared Christianity altogether illegal by AD 64,³ and most believers lived out their faith quietly. It was a scary time to be a follower of Christ. In Acts 12 we see the first of the original disciples martyred: James the brother of John (not Jesus's brother). When Herod saw how the crowds

were pleased at the disciple James's death, he had Peter arrested as well, as we've noted. After that, full-scale persecution followed.

Read Acts 12. In this power-packed chapter, a great deal happens that affects the Christian movement. Note the significant events here:

It was in this environment of persecution that James took time to write this letter in hopes that it would give strength and direction to the followers of Christ. It is a letter that starts and finishes strong. Few words are wasted. James was intent to get right to the heart of the matter.

Let's break down his opening comments. He begins, "Dear brothers and sisters" (James 1:1). In other words, "To those of you who share my love for Christ." He continues, "When troubles of any kind come your way" (James 1:2).

Now, let's stop right there. Wouldn't it be nice if we could replace the word *whenever* with *if*? But James doesn't say, "If troubles come our way." He uses the word *whenever* because it is not a matter of if but when. Every living person experiences difficulties. There is no escaping struggles in the human condition. Instead of hoping that we never experience troubles, we would better spend our time preparing for when they come our way.

Picking up again with verse 2, James writes, "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy."

It is a mature person who can be in a difficult circumstance and recognize the opportunity it presents for growth. And it's an advanced maneuver of a mature person to actually feel joy while in the struggle, knowing that God will do something amazing despite the pain if you turn to him.

Looking back on some of the more stressful times in my life, I can see in hindsight the work God was doing to stretch and grow me. At the time, however, it was just hard, often painful. At the time there were tears. There

was anxiety. But in my pain, God was at work. Although He did not cause the stressful situations I've endured, He has been at work in them; and now I can see that God has used so many of my past struggles to develop my faith and strengthen my character.

Romans 5:3-5 (ESV) tells us that we can “rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

James knew this passage to be true. The difficult circumstances for first-century believers presented the opportunity for them to draw close to the Lord, lean on one another, and allow their newfound faith to be strengthened. But they had to permit God to work in them in those moments, and in order to do that, they had to endure the troubles with faith.

We face crises of our own, and as we will see later this week, these moments give us the opportunity to allow our character to be refined. The key is to turn to Jesus in our troubles. Our troubles present a unique circumstance conducive to growth, one in which we can move past our fears and doubts and embrace Him in the pain.

Think again of the difficult time you named earlier. As you look back on it now, what did you learn from it?

Has there been a difficult season when you turned to the Lord for peace and help? If so, how did that time affect your faith?



Back to my tomato plants. Due to the perfect conditions of sun and rain in these first two weeks, our tomatoes have had a good start. But what will be even more impressive is if they endure the times when there isn't enough rain, and the Georgia summer sun is beating down on them. If they can thrive in those conditions, with a little help from us, well, that will be even more exciting. Because thriving in the face of obstacles shows fortitude. And if those tomatoes thrive through a tough summer, they may just taste sweeter when they're ripe.


The same thing can happen for us. As you endure your tough seasons with faith, there is often a deep peace and sweet fruit that will be produced through that perseverance. Press on, friends, so that you can thrive!

PRAY

As you pray, reflect again on Romans 8:28 (ESV):

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Lord, thank You for being with me in my struggles. Help me to see them as opportunities to lean on You and seek You in new ways. As others watch my life, may I be a light of joy despite whatever circumstances I may be facing. Thank You, Lord, for peace in the storm and Your presence in my pain. Amen.



As you endure your tough seasons with faith, there is often a deep peace and sweet fruit that will be produced through that perseverance.



DAY 3

SETTLE

Listen to a song that brings you peace as you quiet your heart today. It may be a song from childhood or a hymn or worship song that has come to have special meaning to you. Allow the words to wash over you and bring you a sense of calm before the Lord as you seek Him.

FOCUS

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

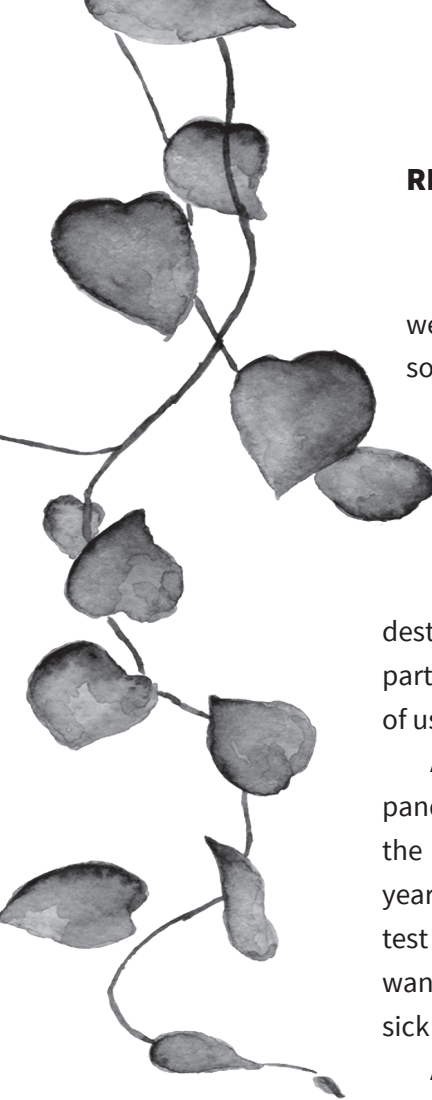
(James 1:2-3)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

(2 Corinthians 1:3-7 NIV)

Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.

(1 Peter 4:12-13 MSG)



REFLECT

Life is full of unexpected moments.

In talking with my son's fiancée, Hannah, a few weeks before their wedding, I encouraged her not to be too disappointed when—not if—something went wrong the weekend of the big event. “Something always happens,” I told her. “But don't worry. As long as you two are there and you have the pastor [who happened to be my husband!] and the license, all will be fine! So again, not if but when something happens, let's all just smile and make the best of it.”

Fast-forward to the weekend of their wedding. It was a beach destination ceremony. We arrived early, and the entire family and bridal party were staying in a house together. Then it happened—the thing none of us expected that threw a wrench into the festivities. And it was me!

After remaining COVID-19 negative for two years throughout the pandemic, I woke up at 4:00 a.m. on the day of the rehearsal dinner with the symptoms. After two years of masking and washing my hands, two years of caring for others but never being sick myself, it was my turn. A quick test confirmed my fear: I was the wrench. It was not what we expected or wanted, and all being in a house together with nowhere to go made being sick and staying isolated challenging. What would we do?

As I lay there at 4:00 a.m. exploring my options, I realized that I was about to miss most, if not all, of my son's special weekend. The sadness came like a wave. The anxiety like a typhoon. Who would handle things? What all would I miss? The questions kept coming.

As I lay there overwhelmed with what this would mean for us, I began to cry out to the Lord. And, friend, I'm going to get honest with you: I was upset. I asked the Lord, “What did I do? Is this a punishment? Do you see me? Are you paying attention? Is this my fault? Please, God, not now!” My emotions were everywhere—and so were my questions.

But then, there was peace.

Now don't misunderstand me, in the peace there were still questions. The night before I realized I was sick, I had been with my parents. Had I infected them? What about the bride and groom? Were they okay? I'd been

all over the place the last few days. Who might I have infected? A few hours later when Jim started coughing, I knew I was not the only wrench.

It wasn't what we wanted for our son's special day. But there was nothing I could do to change the circumstances. In those early-morning moments, as I lay there waiting to send a text that would shake my family, God spoke to me. He said, "Look out the window. You have the perfect view of where the ceremony will be. You won't miss much." And then He said, "Jen, you may miss some things this weekend, but they love you. You may miss some of the wedding, but you will be present to watch the marriage, and that's where the real magic happens." Then there was peace in my little storm.

The advice I'd given to sweet Hannah was advice that I now had to embrace. So, despite feeling terrible, I stood on a balcony and waved to my son with a smile plastered on my face. This wasn't what we wanted, but we would get through it.

The entire weekend was bittersweet. I was disappointed, my son was stressed, and my husband was sick; and when my dad began to cough, I was concerned at a new level. But God was present. He kept reminding me, "Life is messy. Don't get bitter. Keep smiling, it's going to be okay." We all recovered, by the way, and the pictures are beautiful.

I intentionally had to remind myself that sometimes life just happens. Even when it's not what we want, God is still on the job. He hasn't abandoned us. In fact, the only place to find peace in those moments is in Him.

When has life not turned out as you dreamed?

When that happened, what was your first response?

What would you like your first response to adversity to be?

As you've faced problems in life, what questions have you had for God?


Yesterday we dug into the first few verses of James. Today we will revisit those verses and add to them these powerful words from the apostle Peter:

Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.

(1 Peter 4:12-13 MSG)

James does not say that we must rejoice *for* the problems in our lives, but that we can choose to rejoice *in* them. There is a huge difference. Honestly, when I'm talking with someone who is facing a tragedy such as the death of a spouse, a miscarriage, or something horrific like rape, the idea of telling them to rejoice in the opportunity for growth seems completely inappropriate. Finding any joy in moments like that is so very hard to do. However, there is something so precious about leaning heavily into God's presence in our pain and then allowing His comforting peace to flood over us.

Reread 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (page 23). What does this passage tell us to do in times of trouble?



When life is hard, remember God hurts with you and wants to be your comforter.

What are some ways God has comforted you during difficult seasons?

How has that prepared you to comfort others?

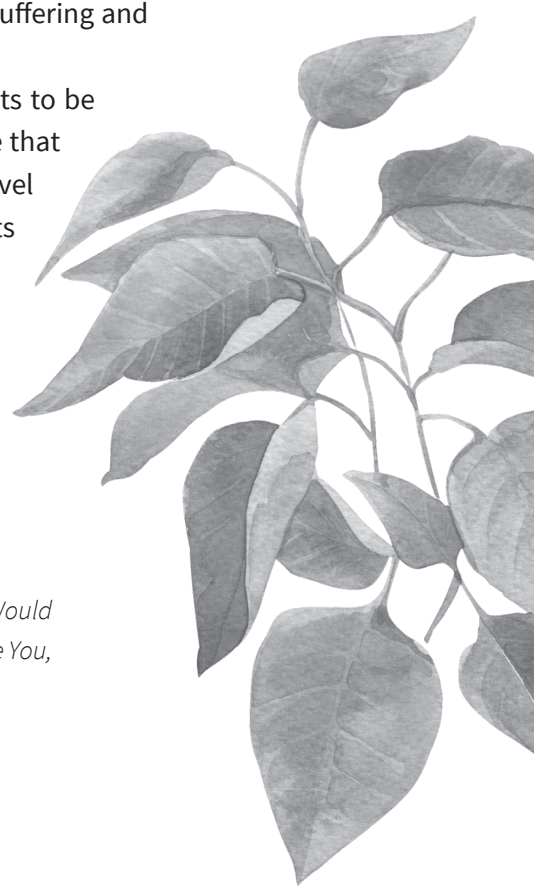
Today we have read passages from James, Peter, and Paul, three of the greatest leaders of the early church. A common theme from each of these passages, as well as throughout the New Testament, is that troubles are a part of life. The faith of first-century Christians left them under constant threat of death. James, Peter, and Paul wrote to encourage believers then and now. Their instruction is to take courage during times of suffering and look for God to make Himself known in the pain.

When life is hard, remember God hurts with you and wants to be your comforter. If you will turn to Him in your pain, He can use that hurt to develop your character and produce in you a deeper level of spiritual maturity. Friend, know that God is present and wants to help you thrive, even in the hardest times of life.

I don't know what pain you've been through, but I do know that God loves you, and if you will allow it, He can use those times of pain to strengthen your faith. Know this today: You are loved; the God of the universe smiles upon you and wants the best for your life!

PRAY

Dear God, You know my hurts. You know the pain I continue to carry. Would You heal me and grow me into the person You created me to be? I love You, and I need You! Amen.





DAY 4

SETTLE

Stand up and take a deep breath in. As you exhale, release the troubles you've been carrying. Now, do it again. At least for the duration of this time with the Lord, lay those troubles to the side and give God your full attention. (It may just be that you choose not to pick up those burdens as you close today, too!)

FOCUS

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

(James 1:2-4 MSG)

*You have tested us, O God;
you have purified us like silver.
(Psalm 66:10)*

*I have refined you, but not as silver is refined.
Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.
(Isaiah 48:10)*

*"It will come about in all the land,"
Declares the LORD,
"That two parts in it will be cut off and perish;
But the third will be left in it.
And I will bring the third part through the fire,
Refine them as silver is refined,
And test them as gold is tested.*

*They will call on My name,
And I will answer them;
I will say, 'They are My people,'
And they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"*

(Zechariah 13:8-9 NASB)



REFLECT

Early in our marriage, my father-in-law gave my husband, Jim, and me some valuable advice. He said, “You two are going to need to toughen up. You can’t bleed every time you get cut in life. You need to develop some spiritual calluses. Every time you get cut, you don’t have to bleed out.”

We were young and tender. The idea of someone not liking us or talking poorly about us, especially in ministry, left us wounded. It hurt, leaving us disillusioned; and as a result, we would shut down. But shutting down when we faced hard times, or worse, playing victim, didn’t do anyone any good. We needed spiritual calluses. We needed maturity. We had to toughen up so that we could face difficult times and endure them with integrity and grace.

So, Jim and I asked God to help us find a spiritual and emotional maturity in how we faced obstacles. And do you know how God accomplished that? It was by putting more obstacles in our path. Ugh! Be careful what you pray for, right?

It was a process that refined us. With each problem, we turned to God, asking Him to stretch us and teach us and not let us miss the opportunity for growth. One of the tragedies of life is wasted opportunities. If we had to endure problems anyway, we wanted God to use them in some way. We didn’t want to waste a hurt.

What is something that wounded you in the past?