

# How to Profit from your Problems

Developing a Faith that Works, Part 1

James 1:1-12

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 4 June 2006

Have you ever had a really hard test? I read this week about a university student who studied all semester in anticipation of a notoriously difficult final exam in his ornithology class. Having worked really hard, he was stunned when he walks into the classroom to sit the exam. There was no work book, no multi-choice questions – just twenty-five pictures on the wall. And they're weren't photos of birds in resplendent colour, but pictures of bird's feet. The test was to identify the birds. "This is insane," he protested. "It can't be done." "It must be done," said the examining professor. "This is the final exam." The student replied, "I won't do it. I'm walking out." "If you walk out, you'll fail the exam." "Well go ahead and fail me," the boy said, heading for the door. "Okay, you've failed," said the professor. "What's your name?" The boy rolled up his pants, took off his shoes to reveal his feet, and said, "You tell me!" Tests can be difficult. Scott Peck started his classic book, *The Road Less Travelled*, with the sentence: "Life is difficult." Life is really just one long series of tests, one problem after another. Think about it. Every one of us in this room today is facing some kind of problem, some kind of difficult, testing situation. It might be massive or just mundane. But the crucial question is: how are we going to respond?

Over the next few weeks we're going to spend some time working through this letter from James. James was one of the key leaders in the early church. He wrote this letter around 40AD to "the twelve tribes" – Jewish Christians – scattered by persecution throughout the Roman Empire. They were suffering from prejudice, poverty, a pluralistic, pagan culture. In many cases, their response to these pressures, these "trials," was inconsistent with the faith they professed. So, in these first few verses, James tells them – and us – how to respond to problems in a way that honours God. It all comes down, he says, to perspective.

## **See your *problems* as opportunities for spiritual growth** (James 1:1-4)

First, James says, we need to see our problems as opportunities for spiritual growth. "Consider it pure joy," he writes, "whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." He's not saying that when trials come, when suffering strikes, we mustn't be disappointed, or that we're not allowed to grieve. Those emotions are perfectly natural. What he's saying is: In the midst of your grief, be encouraged. Whenever God allows you to suffer difficulties, he is testing your faith. That word "testing" refers to the process of heating silver or gold in fire until all the impurities are burned away, and the molten metal is so clear, so pure, it reflects the refiner's image. Whenever we face trials, however mundane, our faith is being refined. Our character is being purified. I heard this week about a survey in which hundreds of people were asked to identify the factors that were most formative in their spiritual growth. Do you know which was overwhelmingly the number one response? "Times of suffering and pain." That makes sense. If teachers want their students to grow, they challenge them with problems to work out. If athletes want their muscles to grow, they challenge them with resistance. It's the same with faith. Just this week I've been struck by the number of conversations I've had in which people have said to me, "John, I don't know why God has allowed this suffering to occur, and it's been difficult, but I've grown spiritually in a way I never expected."

Having said that, spiritual growth isn't automatic. James says that, "perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete" (v4). So often we don't allow perseverance to finish its work. We don't persevere. Our work environment gets painful, so we quit. A relationship turns sour, so we bail. We choose to escape our problems prematurely. And miss the opportunity for growth. If you're facing a test today that is painful and frustrating, don't see it as something to be escaped, or something to be sullenly endured. See it as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

### **See your *God* as willing to help you handle your problems** (James 1:5-8)

Because James goes on in v 5 to say, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault." When you are struggling, God is with you in it and he wants to help you pass the test. He's "generous." The Greek word involved here literally means "single." James is saying that God is single-minded in his concern to give us those gifts that we need to pass the test, to grow more like him. Did you know that each year thousands of letters sent to God from all over the world for some reason end up in a sorting office in Jerusalem. In one of those letters an Israeli man asked God for 5,000 shekels (\$1,000), to ease his poverty-stricken situation. Postal workers were so moved by his plight that they sent him 4,300 shekels. After a month the same person wrote again to God, but this time his letter said, "Thank you, God, for the contribution, but next time please don't send it through those postmen. They're thieves; they stole 700 shekels." Often we're like that. We pray, "God, give me some shekels, *free* me from this situation," when in actual fact we should be praying, "God, *form* me through this situation. Help me grow through this." Because that's a prayer, James says, that God will always answer.

The real question is whether we're able to receive his answer. In v 6 James says that when we ask we must believe and not doubt, "because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything." Some people have interpreted this statement to mean that if you ask God for something, such as healing, and you're not healed, then it's because you didn't have enough faith. You "doubted" God. Is that what James is saying? Perhaps there's a clue in the fact that the apostle Paul uses the very same word translated "doubt" to describe Abraham, the great hero of faith. He says in Romans 4:20 that Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God." Yet, as Paul very well knew, when Abraham first heard this promise – that he, a hundred year old man, would have a son – his response was to laugh (Genesis 17:15-18). He doubted God. yet, in spite of his uncertainties and questions, he chose to obey God anyway. That's the kind of faith God requires – not doubt-free certainty, but tenacious obedience. And that's what James is talking about here. He says in v 8 that a person who doubts is "double-minded." The Greek is *dipsychos*, literally "double-souled." It's not a matter of the intellect so much as a matter of the heart or the will. Augustine, the early church leader, in his younger and wilder years, once famously prayed, "Lord, give me chastity, but just not yet." He longed for sexual purity, but he didn't want to change his lifestyle. He was double-minded. James is saying that God is willing to help us handle our problems in a godly way. But maybe we have to decide if that's what we really want.

### **See your *selves* as you really are in God's eyes** (James 1:9-11)

And in vv 9-11 James says the way to resolve that question is to see ourselves from God's perspective. Not long ago, there was a CEO of a Fortune 500 company who pulled into a service station to get petrol. He went inside to pay, and when he came out noticed his wife engaged in deep conversation with the service station attendant. It turned out that she knew him. In fact, back in high school, before she met her husband, she used to date this man. When the CEO got back in the car and they drove off, he said to his wife, "I bet I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you're glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a service station attendant." "No, I was thinking if I'd married him, *he'd* be a Fortune 500 CEO and *you'd* be a service station attendant." We live in a world where we're told to measure our worth and identity in terms of wealth, success, status. For many of us, this is probably the greatest "test" to our faith. Money, success, status – how we appear in the eyes of others – these things have such a subtle power to lure us away from a whole-hearted commitment to God and his purposes.

It was no different for the first readers of this letter, many of whom were impoverished and ostracised, and desperately wanted the approval of their pagan neighbours. So James says to these Christians in "humble circumstances," take pride in your "high position." You are citizens of heaven, children of God, temples of his Holy Spirit. There's no higher honour. So don't jeopardise that by friendship with the world. And, conversely, James says that rich Christians should take pride not in their wealth, which is so temporary, but in their "low position" as members of Christ's

body. That's the secret to remaining faithful to God in this world: Seeing yourself from God's perspective.

### **See your *future* from an eternal perspective** (James 1:12)

Finally, James says that if we are to remain faithful to God in the face of life's greatest trials, we need to see our *future* from an eternal perspective: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (v12). For us today the word "crown" conveys images of royalty. But people in the Greco-Roman world probably have thought more of the laurel wreath given to the winning competitor in an athletic race. James probably has the same image in view. He's saying, "Keep your eyes on the prize, a crown that will last forever, and that will motivate you to finish the race, to remain faithful to God to the very end." James should know. The historian Josephus says that in 62AD James himself was stoned to death because he refused to renounce his commitment to Christ. He kept his eyes on the prize. But today, if the truth be known, we don't often fix our eyes on heaven, do we? That's why we so often live like this world is all there is.

So I was inspired recently to hear the story of Richard Felix. He has recently written a book called, *The School of Dying Graces*. He tells of his wife, Vivian's, long and terminal struggle with breast cancer. She endured all the tortures that might promise healing: a lumpectomy, three rounds of chemotherapy, a double mastectomy, radiation of the lungs and brain, a bone marrow transplant, a miracle drug, and experimental therapies. After almost two years of this agony, her oncologist told her that the Beast (which is what Vivian called her cancer) would win. She could expect to live four to six more weeks. Vivian and Richard went to their favourite ocean-view restaurant, which had been the setting for so much of their life together, and now would be the setting for the beginning of the end. Vivian told him she needed to prepare to die. She said, "Would you take responsibility for praying for a miracle, so that I can turn my focus away from the disease and onto the presence of God. I plan to enrol in the school of dying graces." Richard writes of how difficult it was to see her enter "her personal Gethsemane, a place of great suffering." But he says, "It became holy ground for her most intimate encounters with God." And then, one day in June 2000, Vivian Felix's battle with cancer ended. She'd passed the test. Finished the race. Trusted God to the end. And received the crown of life. Because she had kept her eyes on the prize. What's your personal Gethsemane? What test are you being asked to sit at the moment? Keep your eyes on the prize.

### **Study Questions**

1. Why does James say, "Consider it pure joy my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds" (v2)?
2. Can you think of a situation in your life where a time of difficulty produced a season of spiritual growth?
3. Can you recall an instance where you did not let "perseverance ... finish its work", and escaped prematurely from a problem that could have brought spiritual development?
4. What does James mean where he says that when we ask we must believe and not doubt, otherwise we won't receive anything from God (vv6-8)? Does the life of Abraham provide an answer (Gen 17:15-18)?
5. For a Christian, what's the antidote to materialism (vv9-11)? How could you apply that to your life this week?
6. I think G.K. Chesterton once said, "You cannot know *who* you are until you know *whose* you are." Do you agree?
7. Paul writes, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. We do it to get a crown that will last forever" (1 Cor 9:25). What is the primary goal of your life? Are you in strict training?