

God's Gym

There was a time in my life when I was seeing a personal trainer 3x/week. I hated every single second of those sessions. I dreaded going...I thanked God when they were over....and yet for some reason I kept going...Like a lamb to slaughter. **PHOTO 1**

I did this for about two years. I lost a good deal of weight...I was much stronger physically...My trainer kept telling me that one day I would love the pain. She would say in a German Accent...."Your muscles are weak...You should punish them for being so weak" One day, she said, I would begin to love the workouts and even look forward to them.

She was right... well sort of... I did finally discover a workout that I enjoyed. They were hard, but I wanted the results so bad that it was worth it. I found out that I loved what the workouts produced in me...I loved the outcome...and thus I began to love the process. James I think would agree...Consider it joy he said...But I think what he was talking about was much different.

Last week we learned that joy and happiness are actually opposites. That joy comes from the Holy Spirit and Happiness comes from our flesh. Happiness is Happen ness because it depends upon what happens to us. Joy on the other hand is never affected by the events in our lives. The joy we speak of is only available to believers because the source is the Holy Spirit.

So we have been working our way through this incredible verse....

James 1:2-3 (ESV) 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

When trials come, we have a choice and James says you can choose Joy. Notice that he speaks of trials coming.

The actual Greek word here means "to fall in to" James is speaking of the events in our lives that surprise us...that we stumble in to. We don't see them coming until they are upon us and we are in them.

James speaks of trials of various kinds. Trials can range the gamut.

But today we are going to look at the reason James tells us to count it all joy....It turns out that trials produce in us steadfastness...the ability to persevere. To stay in the trial long enough to gain the lesson.

So, one reason James says to count it joy is that whatever trial you are in, God will use to produce in you perseverance. You will learn things in trials that you can't learn anywhere else.

Remember that when you find yourself having fallen into a trial you must first realize that God has allowed that event into your life in order to make you better, stronger, and more like Jesus.

In trials we pray harder, listen better and draw closer to God. If our lives were totally without trials, we probably would not even realize our need for God.

God created us so that He could have a relationship with us. God is all about relationships particularly eternal ones.

So it is the trials of our lives that get us to focus on God. It is in the trials of our lives that we realize our true need for God and our inadequacy of dealing with events on our own.

God allows trials in our lives so that He can teach us something as the trial develops and plays out in our lives.

When we look at the events in our lives from a spiritual perspective, trials are moments of opportunities...moments to grow in faith....moments to test the foundations of our beliefs...moments of surrendering a control that we never had. Trials bring life...spiritual life...into perspective.

Notice something here though. James implies something that may not be totally obvious to us. Trials are moments of spiritual testing for us.

Trials show us the depth and dependability of our faith. You never know where your faith stands and what it is built upon until you have to depend upon it.

Trials in many ways are like hurricanes. They come and last for some time. It is during a hurricane that you discover how strong your foundation is...They can tell you that your house can withstand 125 mph winds, but until it actually does so, you don't really know.

You and I can say that our faith is strong and unwavering, but until a trial hits we don't really know. It is in trials that we learn about the condition of our spiritual relationship with God. In trials, God clarifies everything .

So trials are spiritual tests....chances to prove to God and others the strength, depth and solidity of our foundational faith. It is in trials that you actually learn if what you say you believe is true.

Trials are also opportunities for God to show you the weak spots of your spiritual fortress. In a sense, it is a chance for you to punish your weak spiritual muscles. They show you areas to focus on to grow stronger in your relationship with Christ.

So when we realize that we have fallen into a trial, James tells us to stop and realize what is occurring in our lives.

Two responses to trials

Flesh Response

Usually our knee jerk response when something happens in our lives is to make it stop. To do whatever we can do to lessen the pain of the moment. To shift our focus in order to see our circumstances differently.

We often, left to our own ideas, compound our mistakes. We start with a challenge that would play itself out over time, but we want a shortcut. We want to do something to get us out of the situation as soon as we can.

Often it is our second decision that gets us in the most trouble. Rather than admit our mistakes we compound them by trying to cover up or solve the first one. We depend upon ourselves or our friends or our world to tell us what to do.

Spiritual Response

He wants believers to see trials...not as horrible curses from an angry God, but rather opportunities of revelation from your loving God. God allows the trial in your life to reveal something about Himself to you that you would not have known or realized in any other way.

God found you worthy enough to want to grow your faith and relationship with Him by allowing a trail in your life.

Trials produce opportunities...spiritual opportunities to literally change us to be more like Christ. But in order to learn the lesson...James implies something here that we will unpack in the next few sessions. You have a choice when a trial comes....You can bail, you can look for a shortcut to get out or you can stay and learn what God wants you to learn.

So imagine that you and I are going through life and things are going really well. Then a trial strikes and we realize a challenge in front of us. James tells us that in that moment we have a critical decision to make.

Are we going to look at this as an opportunity from God to grow and develop? Or are we going to see this from our human perspective and just try to fix it or get out of it?

Unfortunately, too often, most of us just want things fixed and the trial over.

We seek comfort over growth. We immediately try to fix the problem so the trial will go away. We pray and ask God to take this trial away from us, but we forget that He allowed it for a purpose.

A trial may enter your life so that God can show you that He is sufficient...or that He provides...or that He is in control...or that He can provide...or that He is near...or that He is above all things. The lessons that He has for us are almost endless it seems. We have so much to learn about Him.

God has each of His children on a spiritual growth curriculum. We are all in the same school but studying different topics at different times. In the end, we all complete the courses we just do so differently.

When people ask me "Why did this happen to me?" I know that the answer is "because this is the best way for God to teach you something about Him and about you. It is a lesson that is necessary and it must be important because God never wastes pain"

So the stakes are high. You need to grow. God chose the lesson. But did you notice that there is a choice here? You actually have the free will to handle the trial your way. James straight up says it is a test.

James 1:2–3 (ESV) 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

James says that we know...that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness....or perseverance. Do we know this? Is it obvious? I suppose it is. Trials will build our perseverance....but in our flesh...we don't like it. And most I think would say...I would rather have a wrinkle free life and avoid trials so I don't need to have perseverance.

Our mindset as humans is that we want comfort. If a trial comes we want the discomfort to stop. We have already discussed that we tend to only see the immediate, not the bigger spiritual picture of what is actually going on.

But remember James is talking to brothers and sisters in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit and we are committed to God's plan for our lives not the lie of comfort that the world seeks.

So James says...remember our goal is to build strong spiritual muscles...you know that in order to do that, you must spend time in God's Gym. Because you seek the goal of having faith like Christ, your goal in trials must be perseverance rather than comfort.

The world says "Get me out of this" but believers in Christ say "God grow me through this."

Think about it this way. God has the power to stop any trial or discomfort that you are experiencing. He could do so immediately.

But we don't serve a God who just throws trials upon us to watch us struggle. The struggle has a purpose. The struggle gets us to the goal. It is in the struggle that we are shaped.

If God has a lesson for us to learn...and He chose the perfect and best trial in which we can learn it. Why would He stop the lesson before we grow? It's like having a personal trainer that tells you that walking through the gym to get water is good enough for today.

The key to trials as God teaches us through James is to first and foremost consider them joy. Every trial is essentially an opportunity to work out in God's Life Gym. You will have some spiritual weights to life and it may be very uncomfortable, but the goal is outside the gym. The Goal is bigger than your immediate moment or your immediate discomfort.

If you want to be spiritually ripped like Christ then you must make the most out of every workout or trial that God sets in your path.

So obviously James want us to know the two keys to getting the most out of the lessons that God has for us.

First, we are to realize that what is happening to us is spiritual not physical. God is taking us to a spiritual gym where he can shape us. That realization is Joy. And awareness that what is happening here is a spiritual and the goal is much greater than this moment. James says, first consider it Joy. That is a prerequisite and necessary first step. If we don't realize that greater goal, we will never accept the next truth.

Second James tells us that once you realize you have a greater goal...commit to the process and persevere though the lesson. Your faith is being tested, you are being molded to be more like Christ, you are in a lesson ordained and orchestrated by God, your transformation is guaranteed. But you must commit to Joy and to persevere through the trial.

Let me share with you something that may help you and I commit to staying in and persevering through the trial. The lesson is not going away. Seriously, this is a key truth that is the foundation of your spiritual growth.

God has a lesson. God will do whatever is necessary to teach us that lesson. Each lesson is critical to our spiritual journey. If the trial that God places in our lives doesn't get our attention or we don't persevere...the next trial will be more intense...because...please don't miss this...the lesson is not going away.

As parent's we know this. If we want to teach our child to stay out of the street when playing we will first tell them. If they learn the lesson great. If not, the next step may be a bit more intense and a bit more uncomfortable for the child...If that doesn't work the intensity and discomfort increases...and if you are a loving parent, it continues until the child learns the lesson. You will allow almost whatever it takes to make sure the lesson is learned. Because their very life depends upon it.

The same thing happens with our Spiritual Father who has a critical lesson for us to learn. After we consider it joy we need to commit to perseverance. Why? So we don't have to go through another trial that is likely more uncomfortable to learn the lesson.

What James is saying is so critical because we need it to get the most out of what He is going to tell us. James is telling us...

When you realize that you have fallen into a trial, first realize what is happening to you. A spiritual process has started. God has brought you to His gym. Spiritual class is in session. Think about the outcome of the trial. I am going to be more like Christ. God loves me so much, that He has brought this trial into my life. He has found me worthy of a trial. He sees potential growth in me that I didn't even know I had.

He is going to teach me about me and about the Power of the Spirit that He put in me. Yes it will make my flesh uncomfortable perhaps, but it will grow me spiritually. I am going to face this trial as one who is spiritually aware of God's plan for me. I am going to embrace it as a necessary workout of my spiritual muscles. In other words, I am going to consider it Joy.

Second, from the very beginning I am going to decide in advance to not leave this lesson until God decides the workout is over. If I gain nothing else out of this trial at least I will know that I can persevere and seek all that God has for me. If God has a lesson for me, I will never fail to learn the lesson because I skipped class or snuck out early.

The testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

The truth is that every trial that we experience here on earth will build us up spiritually. No matter what the trial is about..God's comfort..God's sufficiency....God's presence..whatever the trial...each one will build our perseverance. In God's gym each lesson teaches us to persevere though the lesson. We are all usually amazed at what our bodies can actually do...we are amazed at what other people can do physically...iron man for instance. But God wants us to know that spiritual growth and potential is off the charts as well.

1 Corinthians 2:9 (ESV) 9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" —

You have the potential to become a spiritual ironman. To build a spiritual strength that you didn't even know you had. You have potential within you and you will never experience unless God takes you through that trial. The Holy Spirit in you wants to flex and show you the spiritual power that He possesses within you. You and I have no idea what God has prepared for those who love Him.

Like Joni last week... I have learned the weaker we are the more we need to lean on God...and the more we lean on God the stronger we discover Him to be.

So why do we persevere through trials? Because we love Him. We are disciples who are surrendered to Him. We have already decided to pursue spiritual things instead of the physical things this world offers to us.

We didn't join God's Gym to build physical muscles....we joined God's Gym to build spiritual muscles.

James 1:4 (ESV) 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Notice that James introduces a choice here. We are to let something happen. That means that we have the option not to. Our patience produces something in us. When we enter trials, there is something that happens when we stay in them and allow God to do what He wants to accomplish

If we choose to stay in the trial then our patience can have its full effect. What is the effect? We can become perfect and complete lacking nothing. The promise here is a spiritual one. We can be like Jesus.

When you see a promise in a verse learn to read it backwards. In other words, If I want to be perfect and complete lacking nothing...what do I need to do? I need to persevere through trials....I need to consider the joy of what God is doing spiritually and I need to let the trial play out as God deems best. I need to be patient and persevere....

Do you wonder why James says to let the trial play out? Because in our flesh we will accept any shortcut that promises us comfort and Satan knows it.

If we look at trials from our perspective all we want is a quick solution...a quick fix...we don't focus on what we are suppose to be learning...or trying to understand why God has allowed this trial into our lives....We are in a trial and we don't like it. That is why it is called a trial.

In our sinful flesh, we have labeled these events as negative and we want out. In our flesh we don't consider what God is doing Spiritually or that God has deemed us worthy of growing through trials.

Often I will see people who are going through trials and they jump at the first life line thrown to them. Almost any suggestion someone makes or any opportunity that arises and they are all in.

Usually the opportunity requires that they compromise their faith. They take a shortcut and do what they would normally not do in order to make the discomfort stop. They may lie, bend the truth, blame others, find reasons to rationalize what they know is not what God wants. Satan knows this because he knows human behavior.

Remember that trials are in our lives to test our faith. The first test is to decide if we are going to persevere through this trial and honor God or are we going to do whatever is necessary to end the trial.

I am often dismayed when someone presents me with a solution to a trial and their first statement is "I think God is ok with this because He wants me to have what I want." Or they say, "I have prayed about this and God is ok with it."

If your plan to end your trial involves any question of obedience to Christ....then the shortcut in front of you is not from God. The minute you start trying to rationalize what you are about to do...you are operating in your flesh and not in the Spirit.

As soon as you show Satan that you are willing to compromise...he comes along and puts wind in your sails. He can't make you disobey God, but once you entertain the idea...He is your biggest supporter.

Now obviously, if you I and I choose a shortcut to get out of our trial, we will not learn what God wanted us to learn when He allowed the trial into our lives in the first place. Now we have said that the lesson will not go away....God is going to make sure that He accomplishes in us what He promised. If you don't like school, you will really not like Summer School, but you will learn one way or the other, the choice is yours but the lesson is God's.

So we may have short circuited this trial or lesson, but then another one is coming and it will likely be more intense and more uncomfortable. If you think about it, remember you will intensify the discomfort until your child learns to say out of the street. The lesson will be learned it is just a matter of how uncomfortable they want to become before they learn it.

Same thing here. God wants to teach you something so He allows a trial to get your attention. He has already committed to making sure that you learn this lesson...whatever it is. He will either finish this trial or allow another one later. Spiritual maturity is the presence of mind to surrender to God's full and total trial so that you can be complete and lacking nothing and thus not experience this trail again.

So James tells us that when we find ourselves having suddenly "fallen into a trial" we should immediately move into what God is doing Spiritually.

When you face a trial your flesh will move you to pray...Why did this happen to me? God get me out of this...fix this...shorten this...give me...grant me...protect me...end this...God make me comfortable and happy.

Sort of like the prayers I prayed during every session with my personal trainer. God I hate this...God get me out of this. I never..ever...got to a point where I enjoyed those physical workouts...I never really caught the bug....never grew to love the pain...because I never bought into the desired outcome.

I finally learned that I don't want to be physically ripped...don't enjoy the process of getting there and I finally quit. I learned that weights were heavy and God put them on the ground for a reason. Don't lift them against God's gravity. So, I fired my trainer and went out to eat...often.

My trainer was right though. I did learn to love workouts, but they were spiritual ones. I found that I enjoyed learning and experiencing more of what God wants to do in my life.

I found out that I loved what the workouts produced in me...I loved the outcome...and thus I began to love the process. I learned to persevere in them, accept them, and in an odd way look forward to them and appreciate them. Each trial brings me closer to my goal...being Spiritually ripped. Preparing to go to a place where trials are not necessary for learning.

But when we make the choice to operate in our Spirit, Our first prayer should be along the lines of "God you have allowed this so you are teaching me something really important. Thank you God for considering me worthy of this opportunity. I know that you want to complete me and this must be the best way to do it. I don't see how, but I trust you. I am uncomfortable and scared, but I trust you. God what do you want me to learn through this experience? What do you want me to build up in my Spiritual muscles?

God during this trial lead me not into temptation and deliver me from the Evil One. God I commit to persevering and remaining in this trail as long as you deem it necessary. I know that Satan is going to produce a short cut out of this situation...He will try to get me to compromise my faith and rationalize my actions. God protect me and let me heed the warning that you gave to Peter.

Luke 22:31–32 (ESV) 31 "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

God this trial is real....it is scary...it is uncertain...it is uncomfortable...it is testing my faith...and I am scared....But I choose to face this trial spiritually instead of physically. I have a chance to be more complete and one day will lack nothing. Until then this is necessary to get me there. Since you are aware of all this...and you are not scared....I will lean on your Spirit in me....I want to get every ounce out of this trail that you have for me.

I don't want to have to learn this lesson again. God I know that you never waste pain or tears, God could you make sure that through this trial everyone I encounter encounters You too. Use my discomfort to bring others into our family. Allow my suffering to advance Your Gospel. If I am this scared, the lesson must be a good one. Help me to once again surrender my will to Yours.

God help me to live out the promise that you gave us through James....

James 1:2-4 (ESV) 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Trials of various kinds come into our lives like the waves of an ocean. Some are small but will knock you over if you are not ready. Others are bigger and could drown you. Some seem like nothing but have a huge undertow that could lead you away. Some are rogue waves seemingly coming out of nowhere but wacking you hard. Others are like hurricanes, you know they are coming, but they are massive and you know it.

God through James tell us that we can drown or we can learn to surf. As believers, we can ride the waves with Him. Eventually looking forward to the bigger waves of faith because our spiritual muscles are strong and have been built over years of riding spiritual trials with God. We have spent time in God's Gym of life experience and persevered.

We are moving toward being complete and lacking nothing. Let's Pray.