

Count It All Joy

Everyone, Christians and non-Christians go through hard times. As I'm writing this I am discouraged by the way one person is dealing with another (with me in the middle of the problem). I have to be writing one lesson and thinking about the next as I prepare to teach a third one. My family is all facing a trial we were not prepared for, and I have been diagnosed with some lyme's-like illness. I am watching the economy tank and wondering if I should be working or just keep teaching as we are concerned about the financial health of the company my husband works for. I have a friend in a bad marriage and another one who is depressed; my in-laws are in their mid eighties so I wonder if we're giving them enough of our time and attention. I'm also dealing with issues in my church and the normal physical decline of an aging woman.

Not one of these things would constitute "hard" but all together, I have a lot on my mind all the time. Some weeks are harder than others – some days are harder than others. As long as it doesn't all blow up at once I live in relative peace! That's life in a fallen, sinful world.

Many of us know all the verses that are to keep a Christian from being overwhelmed by their troubles. God's grace is sufficient for all my needs (2 Corinthians 12:9). God is my refuge and my strength (Psalm 28:8). He is my ever-present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1). All those things are true but they don't remove the pain or the problem. We still have to learn to cope with them. We usually want to know how He will help me *today!*

Hardship is definitely a time when being prepared before it hits is the best possible plan for combating it. We need to know how we are to respond – what God will do and what He expects of us in hard times. The Bible has a lot to say about it but we'll look at just a few passages.

First, let's talk about what a trial is. Where do they come from? One New Testament meaning of "trial" is "to prove by testing". What do they test? According to one commentator, "Trials are events that demonstrate the genuineness of our faith in Christ and refine the quality of our spiritual lives." Trials test our faith. The same commentator said a trial is a painful circumstance allowed by God to change my conduct and my character (James MacDonald, *When Life is Hard*, page 26). Our conduct is what we do and our character is who we are. God uses trials in our lives to correct our thinking about what we should do in order to develop faithfulness to Him.

The Bible uses several different words that can all be part of trials. Suffering, hardship, tribulation, chastising, and discipline would be at the top of the list. Hard times can vary in intensity and in duration. They go from minutes to years and from mild to wild.

One thing is certain, everyone will go through trials. In fact as children of God we *know* that we will. Most of us are in one all the time – or it seems that way. They can be physical, emotional, relational, economic or circumstantial. Think about it- don't you and I all have something right now that would qualify as a trial? A decision that requires a godly perspective? A relationship that takes a little extra grace or mercy because of some one else's or maybe even our own sin? A diagnosis we didn't want to

hear? In this economy we all have to be thinking a little harder about finances, for some its just inconvenient and for others it may be a trial.

One of the things that people like to debate is whether God brings these trials or if He allows them. God never tempts anyone to do evil so if evil is done against you then you can know that God did not bring it to you (James 1:13) – but if it has happened He has obviously allowed it in our lives. He is more powerful than any evil force. The Bible assures us, “Greater is He who is in you than He who is the world.” (1 John 4:4). He could have protected us, but knows that we have to get through some difficulty to grow. Or, we choose our trials by not resisting temptation or seeking out trouble for ourselves. He will give us over to our desires if we ignore His warnings long enough.

That leads us to another thing we have to determine with each difficult circumstance we face. Is the trouble in our life a trial or is it a consequence? This is a very important question because the two things require different responses. A trial is something we have no control over. We don’t ask for them or choose them, God allows them and He uses them. We said that one definition of trial is that they are “painful circumstances allowed by God to change my conduct or my character.”

A consequence is a direct response to our own sin. If we do something wrong we may suffer because of a bad decision or bad actions. The way out of a consequence is repentance. When we do something wrong we have to make it right with God and with other people if need be. “Trials we embrace and learn from, consequences we repent and turn from.” (When Life is Hard, page 34).

So, let’s say I run into you on the street and you say to me, “God is really refining me, I am in the trial of my life!” I say, “Really, what’s going on?” Then you proceed to

tell me that you had been embezzling money at work and you have been caught. You are now going through the court system and your marriage is breaking up because your husband is so mortified by your behavior. Is that a trial or a consequence? Could you have prevented it?

Or, I run into you on the street and you say, "I was just diagnosed with cancer, my husband is being laid off from his job, and my son was just in a terrible car accident and is still in rehab." Trial or consequence? Could you have prevented any of it?

We bring on consequences and God allows trials. But why, biblically speaking, does He allow them?

Turn with me to Hebrews 12: 5-9. **And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?**

There's no questioning what this passage is about! He is talking about the discipline of the Lord. He uses the word six times in seven verses. Interestingly we think that discipline and punishment are synonymous, but that's not the case. The same word that's translated discipline in Hebrews is "training" in Titus 2:11-12, which says, **"For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.**

When our eyes are opened to the Truth of Jesus Christ, it is to train us in spiritual matters. Discipline is training, teaching – like parents do for their children.

I do have a friend who calls God’s discipline “a spiritual spanking.” We said at the beginning of this series of lessons that salvation is the bottom rung of the Christian ladder. When God wants us to move on up the ladder and we don’t go, He will insert a little discipline to get us moving.

The writer of Hebrews asks the question, “Have you forgotten the exhortation?” These words are from Proverbs 3:11, 12. **My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.** The writer is asking, “Have you forgotten what the scriptures say?”

Scripture encourages us two times not to shy away from our trials. The first in Proverbs 3, warns us not to despise the discipline of the Lord and not to grow weary in them. Hebrews says that we’re not to regard them lightly as if they were not meaningful. We can’t be flippant, or casual or even indifferent to our trials.

Don’t we sometimes say to God, “I’m sick of this?” I’m getting really tired of this.” “I don’t think you’re seeing the end of my rope as closely as I do!”

If we know that God wants a transformation of our character, how should that change our cries to God? What if we were to start to ask, “What God? What do you want me to learn? Is there a sin I’m not seeing? Is there a character trait that I have not developed? Show me, please.” Do you think our trials could be a little shorter if we didn’t resist them?

Sometimes God is very clear. The word reproved in verse 5 can also mean convict. It has a sort of harsh tone to it. When the goal is character transformation then God isn’t coming at us with kid gloves. That’s what we do to each other and it’s why we’re not very effective sometimes. When it’s from God His communication will be direct – we won’t have to guess what He’s reproving! But, we shouldn’t be wearied as though we don’t know full well that there is

good up ahead. God always has a plan so we should not get down, grow weary, lose heart, become depressed, however you want to word that. We can't give up because "God disciplines those He loves." These trials are proof of God's love.

One of the books I used to study for this lesson is called "When Life is Hard" by James MacDonald. Listen to what he says, "Never forget this: The motivation for God's action in allowing your life to become hard is love. He *loves* you. His eyes are upon you. His attention is toward you. All of his thoughts are about you. The goal of all your pain is restoration to a deeper sense of His love. But keep in mind that this is biblical love – a love that is willing to take you through a valley to get you to a hilltop. No pseudo solutions or quick fixes with God. He is going for change in you at the deepest and most lasting level." (page 31) This is a profound truth.

God loves perfectly and His plans for you and me are perfect. Do our responses to our difficult circumstances demonstrate the faith that God is testing for?

The next phrase is in Hebrews 12:7. It says, **It is for discipline that you have to endure.** "So, we have to get through the trials to get the training. Often we want to cut and run. Things get difficult in our church or in our workplace and rather than staying to help deal with it or make necessary changes – we bolt. It's too awkward or too uncomfortable and we don't want to have to feel any of our own pain and we're really not all that interested in some one else's. People hear sermons they disagree with and rather than go talk to the Pastor – which is clearly the biblical way - (Matthew 18) they walk out and never return. The truth is we're a bunch of babies when it comes to having our comfort taken. Trials will test our ability to be uncomfortable and trust God to be our Comforter.

In each and every believer (human being) there is a gap in our character. Only God knows how to take us from what we are now to what He created us to be. If we refuse to endure the trial then we won't get God's best for us.

The rest of verse 7 compares God's discipline to the discipline of parents. We have to be careful about this – because at least for me – I know that sometimes my discipline wasn't for

training or teaching purposes but was designed to get back at a child for ruining my day! I was calling it discipline but it was clearly punishment! Not pretty.

The truth of the matter is that we do respect parents who taught us through discipline. My own Mother was one of these parents. Didn't get a paper done? I'm not writing the excuse. Stole that candy? You will pay for it or give it back. Didn't get your newspapers delivered on time? I'm not taking the angry phone calls. Parents discipline their children so they don't make the same mistakes. God is also doing that but He will never do it out of anger, an emotional response, or any kind of retaliation. Parents sometimes do. God is always interested in our good, our character growth, and our faith in Him.

Look at Hebrews 12 again, verses 10 and 11. **For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.**

These two verses answer the “why does God discipline us?” question. He disciplines us so that we will share His holiness and that it will yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness. God commands us to be holy (1 Peter 1:16).

If you have lived as a Christian doing something you know God is unhappy about, then you know what it is to live without peace. If you have lived with guilt or shame, in a constant battle in a relationship (especially if it's a family member), or getting up everyday absolutely hating the work you do, then you know what it is to live without peace. How wonderful it is to live in righteous peace. To know that all is well because God is in control.

While the discipline is painful for a time, it is training us and preparing us to live in peace with God. But look at the very last phrase. That peaceful righteousness is yielded only to those who have been trained by the discipline.

When we refuse the discipline, when we say, “No, Lord, this is too hard or too uncomfortable.” and we bolt- then we do not receive peace! Our character is stuck in the same old spot and we are stuck without the promise of peace. This is a conditional promise of peace. If we don’t hang in there for the whole training – we don’t get the peace.

What trials can you identify in your life right now? Fight or flight? Are we staying in under the weight of it – are we willing to receive the discipline of the fight? Or, are our minds on the flight? Are we looking for the way out? Believe it or not, God says we forfeit some joy when we bolt.

Let’s look at a second passage. James 1:2-8, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

We’re going to look at this passage phrase by phrase, but first let’s remember what joy is. John MacArthur says this about joy: “Spiritual joy is not related to circumstances. It is a gift from God to those who believe the gospel of Christ, being produced in them by the Holy Spirit, because they receive and obey the Word of God, mixed with trials, and keep their focus on eternal glory.”

Another one taken from “When Life is Hard” is this: “Joy is a supernatural delight in the Person, purposes, and people of God.” When our circumstances are truly hard we have to

look at the Person of God and for the purposes of God and to the people of God. These are the steadfast aspects of life that make difficulties bearable.

First notice that James specifically addresses brothers. This means that first of all, you have to be a believer in Jesus Christ – a Christian brother or sister – in order to experience or know this joy in trials. Only Christians experience real joy and let's face it, it takes faith in Jesus Christ to consider a trial joy! For unbelievers life is pretty much about the here and now and my personal happiness. In that mindset, trials are a hindrance or at best an interruption, they're keeping me from an immediate pleasure. As Christians, we see a higher and deeper calling on our lives, we see good reason to go through trials. James give us a clue about how to do this.

Verse 1 starts with “count it all joy”. Other versions may help us because they start with the word “consider” it all joy. It's literally the idea of “press you mind down on this”, weigh your trial, get it into perspective, think about what it means in your life.

When we “count it all joy” we have to start with purpose. What is our purpose in life? We are here for God – to glorify Him, worship Him, and even enjoy Him according to the Westminster Catechism. We are to display in our everyday living and response to trials and joys – that living for God is a superior way to live – not that it makes us better than those who are not Christians, but it will make us better off. Living for the Lord is a better way to live.

This is one of the reasons that Christian business people go through bankruptcy, why they have prodigal children and get serious illnesses. The way we handle these things should be so distinct from the way the world handles them that we are seen as salt and light to those who don't know Christ.

Think about whatever trial God has placed you in right now. How could you and I bring glory to God? How can we shine a light on Him for others to see?

As humans we have some tendencies that hurt us – even as Christians. If we turn to something other than God in our difficult circumstances we won't display this light to others or receive joy. If we turn to food for our comfort (we even call it comfort food!) or we fill our minds with empty entertainment so we don't think about our trials, it may temporarily dull the pain but it will not produce the joy!

In 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul says that our light afflictions are just for a moment but are working for a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Only by remembering why we are here and the purpose of trials can we know that greater weight of glory!

How can you and I point others to God in the trials He has given us today?

“When you meet trials of various kinds,” The word for meet means literally when you fall into. Isn't that what happens? We're just running along, everything seems to be going well and blam, we fall into a pit, We're in a trial we never saw coming. The various kinds are obvious. My trial is not your trial and neither is what God uses in your life going to be what moves me. In our lives we may face a trial of illness this year and the loss of material possessions the next and a prodigal child another time. The Lord will give us what we need to test our faith, producing steadfastness.

First of all, look at another benefit of these trials. Surely they separate what the Bible calls the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ you will respond very differently to trials than you would if you were not a believer. How gracious of God to show us before we die whether or not we are truly one of His children while there is still time to turn to Him if we are not. Matthew 7:20 says

we'll know Christians by their fruit. If we are not able to withstand trials we can know that the Holy Spirit is not in us and that we need to turn to the Lord in repentance and surrender our lives to Him.

Many times when people cut and run from trials they're showing their lack of faith. In 1 John 2:19 John says, "They went out from us, but they were not really with us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us." The test of faith will show the true heart of one who doesn't have faith.

When our faith is being tested there are three basic questions we need to ask (When Life is Hard, page 59) These are questions that have to have answers supported by scripture.

1. Do I believe that God is in control? (If you don't think he is, you need a verse that supports that thought.)
2. Do I believe that God is good no matter what I see, hear, or face?
3. Will I wait on Him by faith until the darkness becomes light?

God is trying to get us to a place in our lives where we will confidently answer these questions with complete faith that He has our best interest and good in mind as we go through trials of various kinds.

Psalm 27:13 says "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Do you and I believe that we will see the goodness of the Lord, not just in heaven, but right here in the land of the living?

What is steadfastness? Simply put, it is faithfulness, staying power. In the Greek the words mean to "remain under". God wants to give us the ability to remain under the trial.

This goes back to that idea that we have to remain under the trial in order to get the best good that God has for us. If we don't remain under it we give up the blessings of the lessons and/or spiritual growth that God has for us!

Now, I will be the first to admit that our, specifically my, first instinct is to get out. When things get uncomfortable at church – I want to worship somewhere else. When my kids wanted to rebel, I didn't want to be a parent at that moment. If the money gets tight I want to whip out the credit card. I want to complain and lash out and run or get out of the fight and not stand up for principles. None of these are remaining under.

Even the thought of these is wrong – I've been wrong a lot of times. So, what is the right thing to do? It's a hard thing to do. 1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you." Remain under the pressure by God's grace and in His strength and when you pass the test by persevering, His blessings will follow. Gold that doesn't stay under the refining fire will never be a thing of beauty. The person who refuses the trial will not get better but will eventually get bitter.

This is hard stuff but we have to decide if we will remain under the pressure of our trials and wait for God to accomplish His purposes in our lives. If we want all that He has that's the requirement. This does mean that if you or I are in a financial bind that we sit back and wait for God to send money. Start looking for more or better work. It doesn't mean that we don't seek help if our marriages are falling apart. Perhaps there is someone who has been holding a secret from the past that keeps them immobilized from growing in faith and understanding, Tell the secret to someone you trust and who can strengthen

you in the Lord. Endure the trial for the spiritual growth and God's blessings when it's over.

Let's look at a few verses to see what it is that trials do for us in a more specific way.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10, But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. "

Hard times reveal our weaknesses but it is during those times that God shows Himself strong for us. When we remain in or under the trials that God gives us we will get to see Him at work. He will reveal Himself to us in new and powerful ways that will teach us about Him and how trustworthy and faithful he is.

As I started to prepare for this series of talks a friend said to me, "Please don't buy any more books until you come look at our shelves. We have a ton of Christian books." About that time, I was in the car one day and I heard James MacDonald give one a sermon from a series that now make up the book, When Life is Hard. God prompted me to buy the book, but I thought it seemed silly to spend any more money when I could go borrow the books. So, off I went to my friends and took about 6 books on suffering! I read two little ones and started two others. They weren't right and I felt like I was supposed to be getting this "When Life is Hard" Book. Well, by then, it was almost time to write, so of course I ended up spending more for it than I should have. But this is also interesting. I went to Barnes and Noble because we had a gift certificate from Christmas. I went right to customer service and asked and they checked the computer. The lady

looked up and apologized saying they didn't carry it. Well, now what? I need to get moving on this thing. I go to the shelves – and there it was – 1 copy!

This book spoke to me about *my* trials – one that I am in right now that I hadn't even seen as my trial. I really thought I was helping someone else but God clearly showed me that this was for my spiritual growth. It has changed the way I feel about it, the way I have responded to it and most of all the way I pray about it! God has shown Himself strong in an area where I was very weak.

Now, let's look at 1 Peter 4:12-19, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. These verses are going to give us four very clear instructions about how to handle our trials. The first thing he says is not to be surprised by them. Christ suffered and so we should expect to suffer. When we suffer we are sharing in His suffering. So the four things we should do are #1, "Rejoice."

Verse 13, But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. His glory will be revealed and if I live for Him – regardless of my circumstances - I can help to show some of that glory before He returns, right here and right now. Others see the glory of the Lord when we can be joyful in trials.

The second instruction is "Don't be ashamed", Verse 14, 16, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name "

In Hebrews 12:2 we learn that Jesus endured the cross despising the shame. We are not to be ashamed if we suffer because of Christ. If we are insulted or left out of things because of our faith we should not be ashamed but persevere. Keep on talking about Him, keep on pointing others to his love for them. We are to keep that mind that endured the cross and despised the shame. (If one of us is suffering because of a consequence to sin – then maybe we have to admit that shame is appropriate!).

The third instruction is to examine ourselves. Look at verses 15, 17, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.. (17) For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”

These verses seem to be saying before we get on our holy high horses and start criticizing the non-Christians in our midst – what about me? What about you? How am I doing as one of God’s children? Am I understanding? Am I an evil doer or a meddler? Am I obeying God? Am I enduring the trials God has given me? Am I eager to find fault with someone else to make myself look better?

Verse 18, “And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” The only reason you and I are bound for heaven is because of the grace of God. The only reason that the sun comes up everyday and the rains come on the crops of the evil and the good are because of God’s grace. We could do nothing without Him, least of all save ourselves. The Bible says that no one is righteous – no not one. Without the work of Christ we would all be headed for hell. It is all of grace, even our own faith was given to us by God. We can do nothing spiritually without Him. That’s what it means to be scarcely saved. Macdonald points out that we “are hanging on by the

grace of God.” He says that if our “self-evaluation doesn’t leave us quiet, broken, and humble before God, it wasn’t an effective self evaluation.” It’s easy to see the sin of others but do you and I see our own sin?

The last instruction is right from verse 19. “Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” Trust your Creator and do some good. When you face a trial don’t stop learning, don’t stop teaching, don’t stop serving in whatever capacity you serve God. Every Christian should have a job in the church. We don’t get too old to serve and we don’t get too burdened down with trials to serve. Even the person going through a serious illness can pray for others. Peter says, “Just get back to work.” Don’t quit. Don’t give up.”

In Romans 8:28 God promises, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Ultimately it is God’s goal for each one of us to be conformed to the image of Christ, to be like Jesus! He will use whatever is necessary to get us there. Everyone faces trials. The question we each have to answer is “What will I do with them? Will I learn from them or will I run from them?”

Entrust your soul to a faithful Creator. God is faithful. He is good. He is control. We can trust Him in the worst circumstances we have ever faced.

That’s what I have to do and that’s what every Christian has to do. Because we serve a gracious, merciful, loving Father we can trust that He will work all things together for our good when we are his child called according to His purposes.

