

GOD-GUIDED TESTING

James 1:1-4

(NASB) James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

INTRODUCTION

Harold Wilke (1915-2003) became a pastor, an author, and a social activist who participated in the civil rights marches of the 1960s seeking equal treatment under the law for every American, including those with physical disabilities. Harold Wilke was also born without arms. One of his earliest memories is him sitting on the floor of his bedroom, at age two or three, trying to get a shirt over his head and around his shoulders and having an extraordinarily difficult time. He was grunting and sweating, while his mother just stood there and watched. He later realized that her arms must have been rigidly at her side; every instinct in her had wanted to reach out and do it for him. Finally, a friend turned to her and said in exasperation, "Ida, why don't you help that child?" His mother responded through gritted teeth, "I *am* helping him."

Which is the most realistic and most helpful approach for raising children: to try to protect them from every hardship and difficulty so they experience as few moments of struggle or disappointment as possible (kids might say, "Yeah!"), or to train them to learn from and be strengthened by difficult situations so they are prepared to succeed in life despite the struggles or disappointment they experience? Our text reveals James, **Jesus'** half-brother, favored the second approach. History reveals James quite probably had been the pastor of many of those to whom he wrote. This explains the warmth of a pastor's heart behind the 15 times he reaches out to his readers as "my brethren" or "my beloved brethren" (inclusive of Christian brothers & sisters). James viewed them as his spiritual children, many of whom he knew almost as well as his own family. In her book, *First Lady from Plains*, Rosalynn Carter told of the "wonderfully odd" things she learned about White House history while her husband Jimmy was President. The children of President James A. Garfield rode large three-wheelers around as they carried on pillow fights in the East Room. Teddy Roosevelt's five children slid down the staircases on trays stolen from the pantry, walked the halls on stilts, and once took a pony into a second-floor bedroom after riding up on the president's elevator!

James knew his readers this well; the "wonderfully odd" things about them and the wonderfully "*God things*" about them. When James wrote his letter, 15-17 years after **Jesus'** Resurrection, none of the New Testament documents were yet written. James wrote as a father concerned about his children whom he might not see again, many of whom were new Christians. He sought to guide and encourage them in their walk with the Lord. "The twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad," to whom James addressed his letter, commonly referred to Jews scattered across the globe due to multiple conquests of their nation. But James had in mind Jerusalem's Messianic Jews from the 12 tribes of Israel, whom he'd served as pastor before they were "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" (and beyond) due to deadly persecution of Jewish believers that began in A. D. 33 (**Acts 8:1-4**). Nothing in his letter is a pat answer.

Matthew 13:55 reveals that after **Jesus'** miraculous birth to Mary as a virgin (**Matthew 1:25**), she bore Joseph at least six more children. James was their oldest son, after **Jesus**. He understandably rejected the notion his Brother was also the Son of God who came to Earth to become our Savior (**John 7:1-5**). Yet, within days after **Jesus'** resurrection, aided by a special visit from **Jesus**, James fully embraced his Brother as his personal Lord and Savior (**Acts 1:13-14; I Corinthians 15:7-9**). The godly wisdom he gained from applying what he'd observed and learned from 30 years of living with **Jesus**, and his personal maturity, propelled him into becoming the foremost leader of Christianity's founding years; greater in stature and authority than Peter, James, Paul, or any of the early apostles (**Acts 12:17; Acts 15:1-29; Galatians 2:2, 9**).

Because Christianity challenges the claims of total allegiance demanded by governments and false religions, those who profess **Jesus Christ** is their ultimate authority, whom they serve as "King of kings and Lord of Lords (**Revelation 19:16**), have always been subjected to hostility and persecution by those who regard Christians as threats to their power. Historically, most people who embraced **Jesus** as Savior and Lord knew they could be persecuted. A 17-year-old Somali girl who converted to Christianity from Islam was severely beaten by her parents and regularly shackled to a tree. She fled her village to live with relatives but was shot to death in November of 2011. Why? When Muhammad founded Islam around A.D. 620, he said people who converted from Islam were to be killed.

Similar hostility made New Testament Jerusalem generally unsafe for believers. As was true during **Jesus'** public ministry, 99% of Judean believers remained observant Jews after they placed their faith in **Jesus** as their Savior and Messiah (Christ). They continued their Saturday synagogue worship. Then they met with 40-60 other believers in house churches on Sundays. They strove to be the best, most law-abiding citizens of Israel who quietly went about their lives and sought to testify about **Jesus** at every opportunity. But when anti-Christian hostility would peak, stirred by the Jewish leaders who'd crucified **Jesus**, these believers would be forced to flee Jerusalem and the province of Judah and move elsewhere for safety.

When James wrote his letter, he and his readers knew God had used this persecution to advance the Gospel. Persecution forced the Messianic Jews, most of whom wanted to remain in Israel, out of their comfort zones. **Acts 8:4** and **11:19-20** tell us, "those who were scattered because of the persecution" "went about preaching." Soon, Gentiles as well as Jews throughout the Roman Empire were hearing the Gospel of God's offer of eternal salvation through **Jesus**. This was the beginning of Christian missions!

When Pastor James exhorted the scattered believers, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials," he undoubtedly had in mind the rapid spreading of the Gospel that resulted from persecution that drove most early Christians out of Jerusalem. James central point in **James 1:2-4, 13-15** is that we can be *molded* by our trials to become better servants of our Lord, if we are not *folded* by our trials. In **James 1:2**, the Greek word for "trial" does not usually mean a "temptation" meant to ruin someone, but "a situation that tests us to prove or to improve our abilities." God-ordained trials can benefit us but self-ordained trials that we foolishly bring upon ourselves can ruin us. This same word for "trial" appears in **Matthew 6:13**, where **Jesus** urged us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (most modern translations—NIV, NRSV, Holman). The Message paraphrases **Jesus'** words as, "Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil." **Jesus** is warning us that if we're reckless or proud about our ability to handle situations that put us to the test, the Devil may eat us for lunch. Arnold Palmer won 62 PGA golf tournaments. From the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, many considered him the world's best golfer. After a thrilling victory, he met a special fan: the international blind golf champion. Palmer was surprised to be challenged to a round of golf for a \$1,000 a hole. But the man seemed to be counting so much upon playing with his hero that Palmer agreed to the match. After all, how could he lose? But when he asked this international blind golf champ, "When would you like to play," he answered, "Any night you're free."

Pride or recklessness can lead us into tests or temptations God never intended us to face. He warns us in **I Corinthians 10:12** (GNT), "If you think you are standing firm you had better be careful that you do not fall." This echoes **Proverbs 16:18** (NKJV), "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." If we're not foolishly rushing into spiritual danger, God assures us in **I Corinthians 10:13** (NLT) He will safely guide us through situations that most tempt us to abandon His will. "The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure."

"Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials" is not a trite or a pat answer. James wants us to view our trials as a sign of God's esteem for us. **Isaiah 64:8** reminds us, "LORD, You are

our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we all are the work of Your hands." An early Jewish commentary upon passages describing us as "the clay" and God as "the potter" declares, "A potter does not examine defective vessels." These are discarded. "What does He examine? Only the sound vessels" in which the potter still sees the potential to be made into something useful and valuable.

Myra Brooks Welch, born in 1878, came from a musical family. Her special love was playing the organ in her Church of the Brethren. But while still in her prime, arthritis crippled her so severely she spent most of the rest of her life in a wheelchair. When she could no longer do what most gave her joy, she faced two choices. She could allow this trial to fold her into bitterly believing God treated her unfairly. She would then spend her days in sorrow and self-pity. Or, she could take God at His Word, in verses such as **James 1:2-4**, and trust God was wondrously at work in her affliction to mold her into a better and more effective witness to the saving grace of **Jesus Christ**. She chose the latter but knew this would not happen easily. Sometimes when we are under the stress of a difficult trial, we can relate to the speeding motorist caught by radar from a police helicopter in the sky. An officer pulled him over and began to issue a traffic ticket. "How did you know I was speeding?" the frustrated driver asked. The police officer pointed sternly toward the sky. "You mean," asked the motorist, "even He is against me?" The NLT of **vss. 3-4** is, "For 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 strong in character and ready for anything."

The Greek word for "tested" in **James 1:3** is the word used for the refining of precious metals to remove their impurities. Most of the world's gold and silver ore would have little value if the impurities could not be removed so that these metals could be fashioned into what is useful and valuable, as coins and jewelry. One of the remarkable things about gold is that once the impurities are removed, it can be melted again and again without any loss in its quality and it can be reshaped for new and improved uses. Would you like to gain the "endurance" that gives you such "enduring value" to your Lord and Savior? Peter gives us these challenging and inspiring words (**I Peter 1:6-8**, NLT): "There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. ⁸ You love Him even though you have never seen Him. Though you do not see Him now, you trust Him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy."

The proven endurance gained from being purified by trials of what is unChristlike about us produces a threefold "perfect result." First, we become "perfect." The same Greek word is used for "perfect" in both instances. It means we become more shaped by God into the people He designed us to be as we cooperate with His refining, God-guided trials. Secondly, we become "complete." Faults and sinful impulses that would disqualify us from God's service are removed and subdued. Thirdly, we are "lacking nothing." This means we have not failed to reach the standards of service God wants to be able to count upon from us.

When a dear friend came to visit Myra Brooks Welch near the end of her life, before she passed on to Glory in 1950, Myra patted the arm of her wheelchair and said, "And I thank God for this." Rather than folding in bitterness over her trial of becoming an invalid, she decided to cooperate with the Lord as He molded her for greater purposes. After she could no longer play music with her hands, she discovered she could write lyrical poetry with her heart. She became known as "the poet with the singing soul." Writing required her to hold an inverted pencil in each of her badly deformed hands, to use the eraser end to slowly type the words. But the joy of her words outweighed the pain of her efforts. The Brethren Publishing House issued three volumes of her poems, the most famous of which is *The Touch of the Master's Hand*.

The ways of God are difficult to fathom. Our limited-vision, finite minds try to grasp what only the infinite mind of the Creator of heaven and earth can grasp. He sees past, present, and future better than we

see the present. If Myra Brooks Welch had enjoyed a normal, healthy life, she'd have been happier at the time. But her life's impact would have been far more limited. Few today would have heard of her. By trusting God in her painful and debilitating arthritis, however, Myra continues to bear fruit for **Jesus**. On March 4, 2002, someone posted a note on the Internet about *The Touch of the Master's Hand*: "Strange that after being raised by an atheist father, an alcoholic mother and various stations of the California Court system that I would stumble upon this poem at the age of 12 and somehow 'understand' just who was being talked about in relation to 'the master' in this poem. It is reasonable to say that this poem gave me a great deal of hope during a rather stormy and uncertain youth."

CONCLUSION

I will close by reading *The Touch of the Master's Hand* (1921):

"Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin, But held it up with a smile:
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried, "Who'll start the bidding for me?"
"A dollar, a dollar"; then, "Two!" "Only two? Two dollars, and who'll make it three?
Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice; Going for three—" But no,
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then, wiping the dust from the old violin, And tightening the loosened strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer, With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?" And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two? Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once, three thousand, twice, And going, and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried, "We do not quite understand
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply: "The touch of a master's hand."
And many a man with life out of tune, And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd, Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine; A game—and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice, He's "going" and almost "gone."
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that's wrought By the touch of the Master's hand.