

# Growth Through Hardships

Lesson 12 in “More Like Jesus”

**Lesson Aim:** That we might learn to see God's hand in all things, and humbly allow Him to teach us and shape us to be more like Jesus through the unpleasant experiences of life.

**Key Verse:** Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:2-4

## You're Kidding!

Hardships in life are probably the most awesome of the keys to Christian growth and maturity. The strength of our negative reaction to them indicates the level of both the self-interest within us and the potential of hardship to be a blessing to our spiritual person.

Hardships allow us to see ourselves for what we are, and to see God for what *He* is. God uses them to show us our fleshly attitudes and habits and to give us the opportunity to turn from their power, to become more like Jesus. Through them we can grow in love, joy, peace, humility, faith and servanthood, for example.

Our inherent default setting is to view difficulties through the eyes of human self-interest; a very earthly viewpoint. A key to Christian maturity is to learn to view them with spiritual eyes, that is, to see how they could affect our walk with God and our becoming more like Christ.

This lesson is not a detailed study of the theology of trials, temptations, testings and sufferings. Rather, it is a practical study to observe the positive effect they can have upon our lives. And we need to understand two things at the outset.

First, we can come to a place of inner wrestling from four directions:

- Through rejection, mockery, or persecution (etc.) for the sake of Jesus;
- Through the normal difficulties of life such as financial, physical, relational etc.;
- As we deal with sinful inclinations like pride, lust, anger or jealousy in our life;
- In response to the testing that comes as a part of God proving us. (Who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted?)

Secondly, while we give special honor to the suffering that comes for the sake of Christ, we also recognize that in any of the above cases, the anguish in the soul (mind, will and emotions) is much the same and can lead to spiritual growth!

## Scriptures to Consider

Deuteronomy 8 - Read it all. “Feel” it. Especially note vv 1-5 and 16.

Psalms 119:65-68, 71-72, 75-77 - Incredible!

Proverbs 17:3 - “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart.”

Romans 5:3-5 - “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because - - -”

Romans 8:16-17 - “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. <sup>17</sup> Now if we are children, then we

are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”

(Now *that* is goose bumpy! What an incredible, inspiring, encouraging and humbling truth for serious Christians!!!)

Romans 8:28 - “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

II Corinthians 1:3-7 - Fantastic! Our suffering equips us to comfort others!

Hebrews 2:10 - If Jesus had to suffer, why shouldn't we?

Hebrews 5:8-9 - “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered<sup>9</sup> and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Hebrews 12:1-13 - An excellent text on discipline!

James 1:2-4 - Our key verse. (Quite a reward for remaining faithful through trials, isn't it!)

I Peter 1:6-7 - Read the “so that.” Is it worth it?

I Peter 2:21-25 – “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps”

I Peter 4:1-2 - “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because - -”

I Peter 4:12-19 - “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you”

I Peter 5:6-11 - An incredible truth in v 10!

## **Melt Down**

My twin Karl and I built a smelter and melted government surplus wrecked aircraft scrap when we were in college.

The molten aluminum ran into a holding pot where the impurities known as "dross" came to the top. We skimmed the dross off before pouring the aluminum into molds. Only when the heat was applied and the metal became molten, did the dross come to the top, where it was removed.

One reason that God allows hardships, is to melt us a bit so the dross comes to the surface. There it is visible and can be dealt with. Godly virtues and attitudes can now grow in us!

It is pride in our heart that creates the setting for us to be tempted with unrighteous anger when we experience an injustice. Various expressions of the flesh create within us the potential for being robbed of our joy when we are rejected.

We can hide the dross until the heat of life's situations is applied. It is simply integrated into our lives. As we humbly allow God to show us ourselves in these times, and we confess our sinful attitudes and habits, He will cleanse and purify us and make us more like Jesus!

Typically, we resent those situations that "make me angry" or which humiliate us or hinder our achieving some objective. (It can be a fleshly or godly objective!) Sometimes we even blame God for things that we brought upon ourselves! Yet, with the proper perspective these are the very situations through which He would minister life to us in greater measure.

The best things in life can come through the most difficult things in life. Suffering is a servant of joy.

Satan means the situation for our destruction. Final destruction of course, but not only that. He means to rob us of our righteousness, peace and joy, and even our health, by tempting us to unrighteous anger and to jealousy, bitterness, discouragement and more.

God wants to deliver us from these fleshly and childish expressions, but first we need to recognize their significance and the messages they are sending about what lies deep within us. And we need to accept responsibility for them.

### **Why the Pain?**

Think about it. Isn't a situation painful and difficult because it confronts the desires of our flesh? Doesn't our flesh react against all challengers to its rule?

Christians hear two voices, those of the flesh and of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-17), and a battle ensues as we lean toward the voice of the Spirit.

Then, there is an agonizing tearing in our soul as we refuse the rule of the flesh and yield to the voice of God; something like pulling a very sticky bandage off of a very hairy chest. Thus the pain in choosing to obey the Spirit rather than the flesh!

### **Those Who Went Before Us**

Many who have gone before us have endured far more suffering for the sake of Christ than we have; yet with quietness in their spirits and joy in their hearts. No circumstance could rob them of their joy and peace because they were broken before God and were "looking for a better city." (Heb. 11)

They had learned the meaning of taking up their cross daily and dying to self. The persistent voice of self, that which often makes a situation seem so difficult, had been dealt with.

Read Mark 8:34-38, where Jesus says that we experience real life by dying to the rule of self. This is absolutely contrary to the inclination we are born with, and which Satan works daily to maintain in us. *That* is why we "wrestle!"

As in the life of Jesus, the events through which Satan means to defeat us can become the very source of our victory! Truly, God is sovereign and can work through all circumstances for our good!

### **Closing Thoughts**

Hardly a day goes by that we don't experience some kind of melt-down; that is, the kind of event in which some of our dross comes to the surface.

Frankly, at our very best we will never be "perfect" on this earth. Yes, Jesus joyfully anticipates our arrival in heaven to spend eternity with Him, but that's not because we've done so well. It's because of the mercy and love that so fill His heart toward us. In the meantime we must humbly welcome His dealing with us, even His hard dealing. It's the refiner's fire and we *need* it as part of becoming more like Him.

God's intention is to form the likeness of Jesus in us. He wants to restore His own image, which has been so terribly deformed by sin. The difficulties of life are among the tools He uses in the process. The wise, maturing Christian will welcome them in the spirit of the scriptures we have studied. He will embrace them as servants toward his goal of becoming more and more like Jesus.

Maybe we "ask for it" when we tell God that we want to go deep with Him. Sometimes nothing less than the intense troubles that He allows to come, could purify us to the degree that we have told Him we want to be purified!

And maybe troubles express His mercy toward us in allowing situations that give us opportunity to deal with hindrances to righteousness, peace and joy!

One should never assume that deep trials and suffering in his own life or that of another, are because sin. They might only

indicate the depth to which God is taking one for their sake and for His glorious purposes.

Finally, it is possible that deep trials are a compliment because they represent the degree to which one has asked God to take him; the purposes that God has planned for him; and the level of God's confidence in him, to persevere.

Many are called but few are chosen?

**Prayer:**

God my Father, I hardly know what to say to you. By resisting and resenting the difficult spots in my life I have missed many opportunities for you to work Christlikeness in me.

Father, the next time I feel this wrestling in my soul please remind me to seek your face, and help me discover what good thing you want to work in me.

I acknowledge that there is dross in my life. Please help me to see it; and if that takes some heat, please, in your love and mercy, apply it.

I *do* want to become a more mature Christian. Please help me to embrace the truths of the scriptures we have studied here and to apply them to my life. Thank you, loving Father.

**Questions for Thought and Discussion**

- 1) Which scripture speaks the most deeply to you?
- 2) How has the author used the term "suffering" in this lesson?
- 3) What does the strength of our negative response to hardships indicate?
- 4) What do you think of the statement, "Suffering is the servant of joy?"
- 5) Can you think of an area of spiritual childishness in your life that God has already sanctified through difficulties?
- 6) What area of spiritual childishness is God working on in your life at this time?
- 7) Do you think this is a practical lesson, or super-spiritual, pie-in-the-sky stuff?