

Defined By Trials

Who among us gets up in the morning and looks with excitement to the trials of the day? Then, having had a difficult day and dealing with problems, comes to bed and sleeps without worry? Most likely no one looks forward to trials and if you do, we need to talk after the service. Let me ask something different, who needs trials? The truthful answer is we all do. It is the trials of life the shape you, grow you and toughen you and define you. The old adage that, “If it doesn’t kill you, it will make you stronger” can often be true.

Who we are is defined by how we were raised, the way we were taught, how our parents and the experiences and trials in life shape us. How many times have I heard, usually from a woman, but not always, that she will change the man she wants to marry? This will be a trial for both. First a person does not change unless they want to change. Secondly, some of our bad habits and personality traits are deeply ingrained by the time we are adults and change can be very difficult. Some people will change for a period of time because that is what it will take to get the girl or guy or job. However, once they have got what they set out to get they slide back into their old ways and this can prove disastrous. Life changing change comes from life changing events; like a near death experience, which can bring change, short-term or for life. Receiving the Holy Spirit when Jesus saves a person brings lasting change, eternal change. Think back over your life to when you grew the most – was it not when you were challenged and molded by trials. **Dealing with the living of life and its trials is only done well in the strength of the Lord given through His Holy Spirit.** This is why God inspired James to write beginning in verse 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.” The Lord uses trials to produce growth and change within us.

A soldier can act brave during training, but the test comes in battle. The same is true for Christians. **Many Christians are confident in their faith until it is tested by trials, hardships and disappointments.** How a person handles trouble and trials reveals whether their faith is forged in the strength of Christ or is a faith that is like the second seed in the parable of the sower. Jesus spoke of living out one’s faith, **“Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.”**

(Matthew 13:5-6) These people heard the gospel of Christ with joy but did not develop any depth to support faith. They did not put effort into their relationship with Christ and their spiritual roots were shallow and not developed. When trials and temptations came they fell away. They were not true believers that turned their back and walked away from Christ, in truth, they were never true believers. Faith had not taken root in their heart and soul, but was an intellectual response without holistic change. True faith is like the **“Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”** (Matthew 13:8)

The seed died and gave birth to many, just as a believer must die and be reborn. One key factor to determine if one’s faith is true, is it reproducing **“a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”** Only when you die to yourself and are reborn spiritually in Christ and effort is made to grow spiritually will your faith have the deep roots of true faith to not only withstand the trials, but also flourish because of the trials and reproduce with abundance.

God’s chosen children are not exempt from trials and troubles; these are inevitable because we live in a fallen and broken world. Paul, who was an apostle’s apostle,

wrote that trials are part of a believer's life. Paul said, "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Corinthians 4:7-11) Because we live in a broken world we expect trials in our marriage, job, school, family and in our church. In addition to these trials of the world Christians must also understand there will be trials because their faith places them at odds with unbelievers and the world. Jesus was clear, saying to believers, "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours." (John 15:20) There is a price to pay for accepting Jesus' offer of salvation and this is the purpose and theme of James' letter. James writes that there is evidence if one's faith is true in the living of their lives and especially how one lives during times of trials. James' letter is not only clear concerning what God demands on the life of true believers and what a life of faith looks like, but his letter is valuable for unbelievers who mistakenly believe they are saved. James wrote not only to outline the path of life of believers but for people to understand that the devil wants people to believe they are saved by means other than true faith in Christ because he then robs God of the glory that only He deserves. This is why Satan has worked hard to bring about false religions. I believe we are living in a time of increasing trials that will separate, as Christ said, "...he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." (Matthew 25:32) This must be done as the world prepares for the return of Christ. So, as true believers we must prepare ourselves and our children for the coming trials that will not only prove our faith but grow us spiritually.

Scripture gives us a number of purposes for why the Lord allows trials to come into the lives of His children. I want to explore 8 purposes for trials; we will quickly look at these and then end with a story of a trial in the life of a non-believer and its tragedy and a trial for a believer and its triumph.

Purpose Of Trials

1) Trials test the strength of one's faith. Trials show us the strengths and weakness of our faith. If a person responds to trials by becoming resentful, bitter or with self-pity it exposes that their faith is not focused on Christ and reliant upon His strength. On-the-other-hand a person who turns to the Lord for strength and seeks to understand the Lord's purpose for the trials they are going through and desires to grow closer to the Lord through the experience of the trial, well that person has a strong faith and their faith will grow stronger.

God warned the prophet Habakkuk that He was sending the Chaldeans to conquer and enslave God's chosen people to punish them. The prophet accepted the punishment as God's plan and responded, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17-18) The prophet was committed to God and knew that God's plan was right and for the ultimate benefit of His chosen. No matter what the trials are the prophet says because of his salvation given by God he is committed to live as God chooses.

2) God brings trials into our lives to humble us, to remind us we are dependent upon the Lord and not on our own abilities. The greater the blessings one receives the more Satan will tempt them to see these blessings as the result of their own efforts and if they listen to the devil they will become arrogant and

proud. The apostle Paul had much to be proud of, for he had accomplished much for the kingdom of God. Paul understood the problem this could cause and wrote of God's solution, "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited." (2 Corinthians 12:7) A thorn in the flesh was not what Paul desired, but he understood God's purpose and by faith accepted God knew what was best for him and lived by faith.

- 3) God allows trials in our lives to wean us from our desire and dependence on worldly things. We are taught to pursue knowledge; there is the knowledge of God and knowledge of the world. It is God who gives knowledge and it is good. However, the tendency is, as one gains knowledge of the world and the social status and material wealth worldly knowledge brings the more one is tempted to let the knowledge of the world define them instead of being defined by the Lord. America is wealthy beyond what most of the world can imagine and as America has grown in its material wealth its people have seen their need for God diminish to the sad state we find ourselves in today. Jesus taught on this very problem, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Luke 16:13) True believers made the hard choice of whom they serve and it is Jesus, in times of plenty and times of want, in easy times and times of trials.
- 4) The purpose of trials is to bring our focus to the eternal hope of heaven. The harder and longer our trials the more is our desire to be with the Lord. You have often heard me quote Paul from his letter the Philippians, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul's focus was on going to heaven and at

the same time he was concerned with serving people and giving them the saving truth of the Gospel. Now as they say here is the rest of the story,²² “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” (Philippians 1:21-23) Paul knew he had work to accomplish for God’s kingdom, fruitful labor, (which is true of all Christians for we are to be fruitful for God’s kingdom) but at the same time because of his labors and trials he longed for the eternal blessing of being with Christ.

- 5) The purpose of trials is to reveal what we really love and cherish. The story found in Genesis chapter 22 of Abraham’s obedience to God is an example. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac demonstrated his love of God beyond all else and he had faith that God would fulfill his promises. Nothing in this world or any person should be more precious to us than our relationship with God through Christ. In Deuteronomy God told the people of Israel what He required of them, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deuteronomy 10:12) This is the source of the first half of Jesus giving the 2 great commandments in the New Testament found in Mark 12:30-31, Canyon Bible’s defining passage and also found in Matthew 22:37-39.
- 6) Trials are given us to teach the value of God’s blessings. Our upbringing, being American and human reason tell us to value the things of this world. But through trials our faith is strengthened and our focus returned to the spiritual things of God beginning with the greatest blessing, that of our salvation. King David praised God saying, “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.”⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will

lift up my hands. ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food (*I wonder if David was speaking of bacon?*), and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, ⁶ when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.” (Psalm 63:3-8) David’s hope and our hope is in our Lord, not this world.

- 7) God uses trials to develop in His saints enduring strength so they will be of greater usefulness to His kingdom. It was by the Lord’s strength that Daniel and his 3 friends embraced the fiery furnace and impacted an entire earthly kingdom and the apostles of Christ changed the world forever. Paul wrote, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10) James wrote his letter that we might ask ourselves how our faith compares with Paul and other saints who showed true faith in the living of their lives.
- 8) God gives us trials to prepare us to better help other people as they go through their trials. Jesus told Peter, “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.” (Luke 22:31-32) As Peter came out of the trials he would be stronger and able to help his brothers. Your trials and your working through and growing because of trials based on the strength of Christ is to be used to help others through their trials in unique ways that only you are able to do.

As we have seen trials are productive for those of true faith, so as believers we need to have the right attitude towards trials and respond in the right manner,

which is faith in Christ. James writes to help us understand this. James wants us to put feet to our faith and walk with Christ by His power. Peter would have said “Amen” to James’ instruction and himself wrote, “**In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.**” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

We have arrived at the point where I am going to tell you a story that I hope you will be able to relate to and will give you hope and strength in your own walk of faith. There are thousands of stories throughout history and there will continue to be stories of brave and faithful men and women until Christ returns. Here is one such story that shows the absence of faith and the opposite, true faith that resulted in profound effects.

Trials - “Never Let A Good Scar Go To Waste”

This is the a small part of David Roever’s story and his response to the question, can God use our trials and bring about positive results from our suffering. As a young man for years he viewed trials as something that affected only his external world, and any blow to what he owned or how he looked would discourage him and leave him feeling cheated. Today, David travels around the world, talking with people about how he discovered that no matter what happens to the outside, it's the internal life that trials really touch. David now knows the bigger the trial; the more potential to see God's power and peace at work in the inner person.

During the Vietnam War, David went through rigorous training to become part of the ultra elite Special Forces team the Navy used on dangerous search-and-destroy missions. During a nighttime raid on an enemy stronghold, David experienced the greatest trial of his life. When he and his men were pinned down by enemy

machine-gun fire, he pulled a phosphorus grenade from his belt and stood up to throw it. But as he pulled back his arm, a bullet hit the grenade, and it exploded next to his ear.

Lying on his side on the bank of a muddy river, he watched part of his face float by. His entire face and shoulder alternately smoldered and caught on fire as the phosphorus that had embedded itself in his body came into contact with the air. David knew that he was going to die; yet miraculously he didn't. He was pulled from the water by his fellow soldiers, flown directly to Saigon, and then taken to a waiting plane bound for Hawaii.

But David's problems were just beginning. When he first went into surgery -- the first of what would become dozens of operations -- the surgical team had a major problem during the operation. As they cut away tissue that had been burned or torn by the grenade, the phosphorus would hit the oxygen in the operating room and begin to ignite again! Several times the doctors and nurses ran out of the room, leaving him alone because they were afraid the oxygen used in surgery would explode! Incredibly, David survived the operation and was taken to a ward that held the most severe burn and injury cases from the war.

Lying on his bed, his head the size of a basketball, David knew he presented a grotesque picture. Although he had once been a handsome man, he knew he had nothing to offer his wife or anyone else because of his appearance. He felt more alone and more worthless than he had ever felt in his life. But David wasn't alone in his room. There was another man who had been wounded in Vietnam and was also a nightmarish sight. He had lost an arm and a leg, and his face was badly torn and scarred. As David was recovering from surgery, this man's wife arrived from the States. When she walked into the room and took one look at her husband, she became nauseated. She took off her wedding ring, put it on the nightstand next to

him, and said, "I'm so sorry, but there's no way I could live with you looking like that." And with that, she walked out the door. He could barely make any sounds through his torn throat and mouth, but the soldier wept and shook for hours. Two days later, he died. You see, his hope was in a mere human instead of in Christ. That woman's attitude represents in many respects the way the world views a victim of accident or injury. If a trial emotionally or physically scars someone or causes him to lose his attractiveness, the world says "Ugly is bad," and consequently, any value that person feels he has to others is drained away. For this poor wounded soldier, knowing that his wife saw no value in him was more terrible than the wounds he suffered. It blew away his last hope that someone, somewhere, could find worth in him because he knew how the world would perceive him.

Three days later, David's wife, Brenda arrived. After watching what had happened with the other soldier, he had no idea what kind of reaction she would have toward him, and he dreaded her coming. Brenda, a strong Christian, took one look at him, came over, and kissed him on the only place on his face that wasn't bandaged. In a gentle voice she said, "Honey, I love you. I'll always love you. And I want you to know that whatever it takes, whatever the odds, we can make it together." She hugged him where she could to avoid disturbing his injuries and stayed with him for the next several days. Watching what had happened with the other man's wife and seeing his own wife's love for him gave David tremendous strength. More than that, her understanding and accepting him greatly reinforced his own relationship with the Lord.

In the weeks and months that followed, David's wounds slowly but steadily healed. It took dozens of operations and months of agonizing recovery, but today, miraculously, David can see and hear. On national television, we heard David make an incredible statement. I am twice the person I was before I went to

Vietnam. For one thing, God has used my suffering to help me feel other people's pain and to have an incredible burden to reach people for Him. The Lord has let me have a worldwide, positive effect on people's lives because of what I went through. I wouldn't trade anything I've gone through for the benefits my trials have had in my life, on my family's life and on countless teenagers and adults I've had the opportunity to influence over the years. David experienced a trial that no parents would wish on their children. Yet in spite of all the tragedy that surrounded him, God turned his troubled times into fruitful ones. *Adapted from Gary Smalley and John Trent, Ph.D., The Gift of Honor, pp. 56-58.*

My beloved, you have heard the Word of God today. You heard David's story. What are you going to do with what you have heard? How are you using the tough times and the lessons learned through trials in your life to serve others in the name of Christ? **True faith is founded upon total dependence on Christ and living in His strength to reproduce fruit for His kingdom.** Embrace the trials of life with true faith and experience spiritual growth from the Lord.