

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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Fortified by Fire

Scott Hubbard

Few experiences expose our inner selves quite like the experience of suffering. When trials come, we almost cannot help but hold out our hearts for all to see.

Some sufferers bow their heads and bless the Lord, while others curse Him. Some say, through tears, “I trust You,” while others refuse to pray. Some collapse into God’s presence, and learn to love Him with a broken heart, while others turn their backs and walk away.

What makes the difference between such sufferers? Dozens of factors, surely. But one of the most significant is what we *know* about suffering. The apostle James, writing to Christians torn by trials, calls them to suffer faithfully because of what they know: “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, *for you know...*” (James 1:2-3).

Rejoice, James says, because you know something about suffering. And what did they know? They did *not* know many of the specific goods God was working in their trials. They did not know why *these* trials should be happening *now*. Nor did they know how long their trials would last. But they did know a simple promise, filled with power: “...for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1:3).

Testing produces steadfastness. If these three words can sink their roots down into our souls, then we might meet our trials with the most radical response of all: joy.

Tested by Fire

James begins his promise with a word lifted straight from the world of metalworking: “*Testing...produces steadfastness.*” Just as silver and gold are refined in the furnace (Psalm 12:6; Proverbs 27:21), so Christians are refined, or tested, by their trials (see also 1 Peter 1:7).

This image of testing – of metal cleansed in the flames – both confirms and confronts what many of us feel in our suffering. It confirms the basic fact that suffering puts us into the fire. We need not pretend, then, that the heat of our trials does not hurt us, nor that our souls, even years afterward, no longer bear the marks of the flames. Trials are a fire, and fire burns, even if our faith is strong as silver.

But James’s word *testing* also lovingly confronts how many of us feel in suffering. For if our trials are a testing, then our trials are not random or pointless; instead, they come from our Tester. And

not just any Tester, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – the good God, the kind God, the God who Himself knows what flames feel like.

Even when trials overtake us, we are still the apple of His eye (Deuteronomy 32:10). Even when the suffering

feels meaningless, we are still wrapped in His good and perfect will (Ephesians 1:11). Even when the flames rise higher, we are still hidden safely in His hands (Isaiah 43:2).

Pain’s Production

Often in suffering, we have eyes only for what our trials take away from us. We watch, speechless, as the fire swallows up so much we held dear. But underneath the ashes, our trials are *producing* something. “Testing...*produces* steadfastness.” If we will trust God and wait patiently, our trials will give us far more than they take away.

Yes, but how do we *know* that our trials are producing something glorious? That’s the question that returns on wakeful nights, and intrudes throughout the workday, and casts a gloom on our wavering faith.

We know that pain is producing steadfastness not because we can always see the production in process. Normally, in the moment, all we can see is

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the pain: the diagnosis, the divorce, the loneliness, the long wait. Instead, we *know* that our suffering is producing something because God, alongside His promise, displays this pattern in the lives of His people – without exception.

If we scour our Bibles, and the history of all the saints, we will find many Jobs covered with boils, many Ruths widowed away from home, many Hemans covered in the darkness of Psalm 88. But if we trace their stories, we will find, without fail, “the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). There never was a child of God whose suffering was for naught, nor will there ever be.

In every trial – from headaches to heartbreaks – God wounds His children only to heal them (Hosea 6:1); He casts them down only to raise them up (Isaiah 30:26); He sends His flames only to leave them refined. So we can hear God sing to us, in the words of John Rippon’s hymn:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply.
The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

Steadfast Saints

What does the gold look like refined? God’s testing produces ten thousand goods in us, many of which will be visible only with heaven’s hindsight. But here, James points out one of the ten thousand: “Testing...produces *steadfastness*.”

Steadfastness – translated elsewhere as *endurance* or *patience* – may not attract our attention as much as faith, hope, and love do, but it is among the most beautiful badges of Christian character. By it, we bear up under burdens, raise our hearts toward heaven, and press on toward eternal life, come hell or high water.

If we want to see the glory of steadfastness, James tells us, “take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (James 5:10). Steadfast Christians are modern-day Micahs, who can defy the devil even as they sit in darkness (Micah 7:8–9). They are patient Habakkuks, who can look upon a barren land and say, “Yet I will rejoice” (Habakkuk 3:18). They are mighty Shadrachs, who no longer fear the flames as they once did, because they know their Lord walks there (Daniel 3:25).

Steadfast Christians are increasingly undaunted by tribulation (Romans 12:12). They feel the sin that clings so closely, and do not hesitate to cast it aside (Hebrews 12:1). They walk through the wilderness of affliction without fainting (2 Corinthians

1:6); they groan for redemption without grumbling (Romans 8:25); they suffer scorn without stumbling (Matthew 10:22). Their eyes tell the story of battles won, temptations defeated, and the crown of glory awaiting (James 1:12). They are the oaks of righteousness among us, weathered trunks who brave the raging wind (Romans 5:3-4).

They are the saints in whose faces, set like flint toward glory, we sometimes catch a glimmer of Christ.

Out of the pain of our trials, God produces perseverance. Out of the flames of our suffering, God creates steadfastness.

Complex Joy

If we *know* the promise that testing produces steadfastness, we may gain strength not only to endure our suffering, but to trace a line from our present pain to our future perseverance – and, wonder of wonders, to find ourselves counting even trials as joy (James 1:2).

Such joy will not be a simple joy. It will not be the painted smile of a Pollyanna or the pep of a motivational speaker. It will instead be a complex joy, a joy mingled with tears and mixed with sorrow, all the way to bottom (2 Corinthians 6:10). In other words, it will be an otherworldly joy, the kind that can only come from the Man of Sorrows Himself. And being from Him, it will one day return us to Him on the other side of these flames, “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4).

In order to get there, we need to recognize our suffering for what it is: not ultimately a thief who steals our best years, nor a murderer who kills our dearest dreams, nor a madman who wields his weapons at random. Our suffering is, rather, a servant from God, sent to make us steadfast.



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