

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“FOR A REASON”
James 1:1-4

☑ **“Everything happens for a reason.”**

? Has anyone told you that? Have you said it?

It’s one of those stock phrases a lot of us use when things are going badly. On one level, it’s true: no incident is totally random. For every effect, there is a cause.

Still, those causes are often elusive. We don’t have all the answers. You and I do not know as much as we like to think (at least, I don’t).

☑ **“Everything happens for a reason”** generally assumes an outside cause, but that isn’t always the case. To quote a meme I saw: **“Everything happens for a reason. But sometimes the reason is that you’re stupid and you make bad decisions.”**

Besides, **“Everything happens for a reason”** is a pat answer – and those are of little comfort to people who are really struggling. They can do more harm than good.

☑ **“Everything happens for a reason.”**

? Yes, but: Are our sufferings meaningful? Do they have positive value? Are the outcomes worth the pain?

☐ Please turn to James 1:1-5 if you have a Bible. On the surface, it *sounds* as if this Scripture presents a cut-and-dried, simplistic answer. I suggest that it does not.

¹ **James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,**

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

² **Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**

To whom does James address his letter? **“The twelve tribes.”** What does he call them in **verse 2**? **“My brothers and sisters,”** and in **verse 3** he speaks of their **“faith.”** How does he identify himself? He is **“a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”** This is written by a Christ Follower, to fellow disciples.

? Is our suffering meaningful? Does it have positive value? Is the outcome worth the pain?

◆ Based on the exhortation to **“Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials”** we have to say Yes. **It can be for servants “of the Lord Jesus,”** people of God who walk by faith in the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The suffering of Christians *can* be meaningful, *can* have positive value, *can* be worth the pain. But if it *can* be and *can* have, it can also *not* be and *not* have.

I have known professing believers whose adversity crushed them, not for months or years, for the rest of their lives. Not only physically or emotionally, spiritually!

I have known active Church members who were perpetually embittered, envious, or resentful because of what did or did not happen decades ago.

‡ How can our sufferings be meaningful in good ways? How can they have positive value? What can we do so that the outcome will be worth the pain? How can we “**consider**” our distress to be “**pure joy**”?

There are three necessary conditions.

✎ {Jn 1:13; 3:8} First condition: we must be “**children of God ... born of the [Holy] Spirit.**” This is what makes us “**brothers and sisters**” in Christ.

✎ Second condition: our suffering must be a catalyst for spiritual growth.

■ James refers (verse 3) to “**the testing of your faith.**” “**Testing**” is technical language for refining silver or gold. The smith heats the precious metal in a crucible over an intensely hot flame in order to burn off the impurities.

{Lk 8:6, 13} The heat of affliction is not inevitably constructive. Do you remember the Parable of the Sower? Some “**seed ... fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.**” These are people “**believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.**”

However, suffering can be meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile *if* and *when* it becomes a catalyst for growth in Christ. That is the second condition.

✎ The third is “**perseverance.**”

■ Verses 3-4a: “**You know that the testing [the refining] of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work...**”

📖 “**Perseverance**” has to do with “**remaining under.**” Visualize a person carrying a heavy load for a long time, even though they are weary and their muscles ache – and not standing still, but moving forward, even if their steps are slow and halting.

📖 This is not plain endurance. Such “**perseverance**” is consistent, sustained discipleship, confirmed in moral integrity and acts of *αγάπη* [agapē] love, especially amidst struggle.

Endurance contents itself with simply hanging on. Perseverance is about finding a future.

Of course, it is better to endure than to give up on life altogether. Yet when existence is all that matters, we are liable to buy survival at the cost of honor and virtue.

Have you noticed that sexual morality and the moralities of economics, consumption, and violence take a severe beating when the highest goal is just to make it through another day? This is true for individuals and communities.

Have you noticed how easy it is to become self-absorbed, indifferent to our neighbors, and resentful of them when survival is all that counts? When that is our mindset, *αγάπη* [agapē] love takes a back seat.

Bare endurance robs hardship of much meaning and value. It makes the pain less worthwhile. In contrast, perseverance *can* add meaning, value, and worthiness to our suffering. Perseverance is the third condition.

■ If we are children of God, *and* our woe is a catalyst for spiritual growth, *and* we persevere then, James 1:4, “**perseverance**” can “**finish its work.**” Consequently, we “**may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**”

★ This is why the LORD God allows us to undergo misfortune. His purpose is for us to grow up and become whole. Our maturity is his ultimate objective.

It’s a radical statement, in the Church in the U.S. as much as in the world. Most people think, speak, and act as though God’s definitive goal for us is that we should be happy, or comfortable – or at the very least – safe and secure.

That is way off base. God’s ultimate aim for is not our happiness, not our comfort, not even our safety and security. It is our maturity.

📖 {1 Jn 1:8; Jas 3:2} A clarification about what maturity is *not*: it is not sinlessness. Until we step fully into eternity, that is beyond us. “**If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.**” As James remarks elsewhere in this epistle, “**We all stumble in many ways.**”

📖 Maturity *is* a healthy degree of development in behavior and character, proven in reliable obedience to God. Framed in more theological terms, it is a relatively close resemblance to Christ.

As we read in Romans 8: ²⁸ “**In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purposes.**” ²⁹ **For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to**

the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters.”

Permit me to make several observations.

† Observation: hardship is inevitable.

■ {1:2} James does not write “**if you face trials**” but rather, “**whenever you face trials.**” He will refer to suffering again and again in this epistle. We *will* be afflicted with “[troubles] **of many kinds.**”

This applies to devout, loyal Christ followers and atheists and practitioners of other religions alike. Anyone who says differently is either mistaken or lying.

† Observation: I have been using the word “**can**” a lot in reference to the meaning, value, and worthwhileness of pain and suffering. So far in this message I have used it sixteen times!

■ James himself says: “**so that you may be mature and complete.**” This is the language of possibility, probability even – but not absolute certainty. For if it *can* be and *can* have, it can also *not* be and *not* have.

† Observation: for possibility to become reality we must cooperate with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human difficulty is meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile as we follow God’s lead and work together with him.

■ Hence, James exhorts us to “**Consider it pure joy**” and to “**Let perseverance finish its work.**” This does not just happen by itself; we must make

intentional choices to think and behave in concert with the Lord.

† Final observation: The Triune God is kind and merciful beyond our deserving and understanding. That is to say, he is gracious.

Our trials sometimes cause us to stumble, and even to fall. Not always, but sometimes.

We might be tempted to minimize our sin as if it does not matter at all, in effect denying our need for grace. Or we might be tempted to magnify our sin as if it is all that matters, thereby denying the power of God's grace.

{1 Jn 1:9} Let us not do that! **“If we confess our sins”** the Lord **“will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”**

☑ **“Everything happens for a reason.”** For every effect, there is a cause. This is true enough, but don't say it to suffering people. We know less than we think. At *best*, this platitude gives little comfort; at *worst*, it feels like salt being rubbed in the wound.

But this we can say with confidence: suffering can be meaningful, it can have positive value, and the outcome can be worth the pain. By the grace of God, it can become the catalyst by which we become mature and complete in Christ.

James 1:1-4 is the Word of the Lord.