

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: I had a friend in Pennsylvania who trained pilots for a major airline. One Christmas Eve day, when everyone had the day off, Gary invited me and a couple other guys to come to their big training facility and try out their flight simulator. We went into a bunker kind of building and then out high in a cavernous concrete room. In the middle of the room there were two or three enormous boxes—rooms, actually—on huge flexible legs. We crossed the catwalk and entered one of the boxes to find ourselves in the rear of the cockpit of a 737. Gary would sit at a big console at the back while the pilots would sit up front.

After a too-quick lesson on the controls Gary went back to the control panel and suddenly we were looking out the windows on a runway at the Pittsburgh Intl. Airport. In a moment one of the guys had us gunning down the runway and then lifting into the air. It wasn't pretty but we made it. We could feel ourselves pressed back into the seats, feel the upward angle of the plane, and feel the landing gear thunking into place beneath us. Pittsburgh came up below us and we banked to the west, heading for Chicago.

Gary explained that from his controls he could throw anything at a pilot. For example, we were suddenly in the middle of a raging blizzard. And then an engine went out. One guy suddenly lost altitude and just when another was landing a wind gust caught the plane.

We all had our turns. When it was mine, Gary told me to land the plane—at O'Hare Intl. Airport. The world's busiest airport. At night. I brought her in over the lake and aimed for a strip of lights. Problem was, I came in a little too fast and high. We hit the ground hard enough to rattle our teeth then we hurtled down the runway. "*Slow down! Slow down!*" Gary yelled from behind me. "*I'm trying!*" I screamed. "*Pull back!*" he yelled. "*I'm pulling,*" I wept, sweating like a man facing the grim reaper. I pulled on the yoke as hard as I could and pushed so hard on the pedals I thought I'd go through the floor. But it was no use. The

great plane shook and the lights flashed passed and the yellow barrier at the end of the runway rushed at me. Then we plowed into the barrier in a wrenching, bone-rattling crash... Miraculously, we all survived with only bruises.

- B. On the drive down to the airport that day we three rookies were imagining ourselves pilots but we were terrible— dangers—and I was the worst of us all. It wasn't even because Gary threw something at us only a veteran could handle. It was because we were unfit for the even the normal pressure of the job.
- C. Turn to **James 1**. This is a little book for Christians under a lot of pressure. The Greek word for *trial* or *test* occurs seven times in the first 14 verses. Knowing how to translate it—how to put it in English—is tricky. Last week we looked at **vv.2-3**, “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face **trials** of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*” Then when he summarizes in **v.12** we see it again: “*Blessed is the one who perseveres under **trial** because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*”

But now look at **vv.13-14**... The same word appears five times but it is translated *tempt*. Let's coin a new word for a moment. We'll make *trial* a verb. “*When **trialed**, no one should say, ‘God is **trialog** me.’ For God cannot be **trialed** by evil, nor does he **trialog** anyone; but each person is **trialed** when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.*” That's kind of confusing.

- D. Here's the situation. James writes to Christians like us who “*face trials of many kinds.*” We naturally think he is speaking of the hard things that happen to us—the storm, the engine failure; we think of *those* as the trials. But James' focus is not on what happens to us but on how we respond. Our problem with life's troubles is that we are profoundly unprepared to handle them without sinning--without getting angry or resentful, proud or envious, without trying to escape or blame. It's about the same thing

as me trying to land a 737 at O'Hare. *Crash and burn*. We are way out of our league! But James brings the good news that we as Christians don't have to fail under pressure.

V.13... *"When trialed, no one should say, 'God is trialing me.' God... does not trial anyone."* At issue here is blame. Some terrible thing happens and sometimes the people who hurt blame God. Illus.: A church-going man who witnessed a terrible disaster said afterward, *"I'll never trust God again."* The problem for that man is not only that he cuts himself off from God, but also that he will become less and less able to handle life well. And there's no excuse for that. James point is:

I. GOD ISN'T YOUR TROUBLEMAKER (1:13)

God himself doesn't create trouble for you. We talk all the time about God's tests. But James tempers our talk. To be clear...

- A. Troubles and pressures are not good things. They are not inherently good. Sickness, angry people, storm damage, inadequate resources—none of those are good things. They are all the consequence of a fallen, sin-toxic world. God did not make any of those things. Those kinds of things were not in the Garden of Eden and they are not part of the New Creation God will bring. They are *not* good.
- B. What's more, as we will see in the next verse, troubles inevitably bring out the worst in people because we are sinful reactors. Under pressure, our instincts are almost always terrible. We almost always cope with trouble by sinning. And God doesn't have anything to do with that, either. It isn't his fault that we are this way. God created mankind to love and serve him but we have rebelled.
- C. So James' point is this: When trouble and pressure hit us and we respond badly (which, apart from Christ, we almost always do) we cannot say that God set us up, or that our bad behavior isn't really our fault. He gives two reasons:
 - 1. "For God cannot be tempted [triated] by evil [himself.] Not because he is aloof. God is as engaged with this world as we are. It is his masterpiece and he loves its people, so he is touched by rebellion and ruin as surely as us. The difference between God and us is that the

evil in those things can't get to him; can't provoke a bad reaction. To him they *aren't* trials.

2. So he certainly isn't going to use those kinds of troubles to tempt or 'trial' you. "*Nor does he tempt [trial] anyone.*" This world's troubles are good things gone bad; corrupted. **And it isn't God's nature to use something that is corrupted to do good.** God wouldn't make you sick so that you could become a better person.

However, although we get sick because of the fallen world we live in, God can repurpose that sickness for our good. Should he choose to, he can take it away all together. When Rom. 8 says that "*in all things God works for the good of those who love him,*" that describes a miracle of divine intervention akin to the resurrection. God takes "*trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword*"—all bad, sin-poisoned things—and *turns* them to good for his people. He usually does that by repurposing trouble rather than making it disappear.

- D. Let me make two things clear. One, occasionally God *does* personally bring disasters for judgment. He says so in **Is. 45:7**, "*I bring prosperity and create disaster.*" The Flood, for example, was God's direct judgment. The same is true with the Final Judgment. In such cases, God is not *testing* people. He is judging them. The opportunity for a righteous response is over. God's judgment is good, not bad.

Secondly, God can and does block trouble when he wishes, especially when we pray to be protected from sinning: "*Lead us not into temptation*" [same word—*trial*] "*but deliver us from evil.*" In other words, *Lord, preserve us from facing the temptations to sin that evil brings—because we know our weakness and we want to be faithful.*"

Remember that classic line from the cartoon strip, *Pogo*: "*We have met the enemy and he is us*"? That's true here. **Vv.14-15...**

II. TRIALS SEDUCE US TO SIN AND DEATH (1:14-15)

- A. You've all heard of the problem of evil, or what C. S. Lewis called "the problem of pain": how can bad things happen if God is all-powerful and all-loving? James has just addressed that. But the real *problem* of pain and trouble is not how God can allow it but how we invariably respond to it. Furthermore, the worst problem isn't how badly these things hurt us, but the damage we do by our responses.
- B. In Proverbs Solomon pictures sin like a seductive prostitute. James does a similar thing. He portrays the human response to pressure as an illicit affair. We're standing on the corner, watching the world go by, and... *whamo!*... something nasty happens. You're treated badly or you lose something precious. And out of that dark corner steps this seductress. "*Hello, big boy. Want a date?*" In other words, "*I can tell you how to handle this rotten situation. Want to hear it?*" And she whispers sweet nothings about revenge or escape or showing who's boss.

In no time, our desire to evade trouble or to strike back gets us pregnant and a surly, sour, little hellion is born.

Let's name him Sin. You never had a child who is as clingy as Sin. Talk about "raising Cain." And when Sin grows up, it gives birth to death. The child of our sinful ways of coping with the world's troubles ultimately kills us. It kills our spirits, our relationships with others and with God, and it kills our very bodies.

SUMMARY: That is our lot in life. Trials of every kind come our way and the next thing you know something precious *in* us and *around* us is dying. So James says in **v.16**, "*Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters.*" This is what trials do to you. This is why you get angry, why you envy and play favorites, why you quarrel and hurt each other. When Cain, man's very first son, grew murderously jealous of his brother, God said, "*Sin is crouching at your door but you must master it.*" But we never would... unless God intervened.

Now comes the good news: **vv.17-18...**

III. BECAUSE OF THE NEW BIRTH THE FATHER GIVES US, TRIALS HAVE A DIFFERENT OUTCOME (1:17-18)

- A. Trials—the storms and failures—are not gifts of God, though he miraculously repurposes them for our good. But the real gifts of God that come special delivery from heaven are always only “good and perfect.” The first word, *good*, in Greek implies something good that is added to you—and endowment, as if you suddenly had the ability to play piano or to always make people smile. The second word, *perfect*, means that God’s gifts are complete; in full flower. They don’t say, “Some assembly required,” or “Shipment delayed.”
- B. *“The Father of heavenly lights...”* God’s gifts are “good and perfect” because God is our Father whose home is bright with goodness and life. He doesn’t have a shadowy side. He never tries to trip you up or provoke you to fail.
*“Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee.
Thou changest not; Thy compassions, they fail not.
All Thou has been, Thou forever wilt be.*
- C. The best of all our Father’s good and perfect gifts is this (v.18): *He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.* Remember the sordid seduction we just read about and that terrible child Sin. Here is the alternative, a gift of our Sovereign God. **He implants “the word of truth” within us—the good news that Jesus saves us from our sin and death, so that we are born again.** We would never learn how to handle trouble righteously, so God gives us new life and new hearts and a “word of truth” that transforms our responses to life’s troubles. Our life is like the first signs of the coming New Creation—*“a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”*
- D. So that is why James says at the beginning, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”* All those trials—the suffering, the provocations, the catastrophes, the death—they are *not* good. And they do no good. And they are not

God's doing. But God has changed us inwardly—made us a new kind of people, reborn—so that even the worst things in the world cannot destroy us and we do not have to always fall for their seductions. In fact, they can enrich us. When we meet trials as people who trust God and who obey that *“word planted in us”*—the redeeming, forgiving, empowering, true Word that is Jesus and all he teaches. The effect is that our obedient faith, pressured by trouble, is refined like gold in a crucible. Faithful *“perseverance finishes its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*

Conclusion

Illus.: I got a letter the other day from my friend in prison. I told you about him some weeks ago. He has come to faith in Jesus. He told me in this last letter that he's almost done with the sixth and final correspondence course on the Bible. English isn't his first language, but he is eloquent nonetheless: *“I never thought to do something like this; and I almost finished. It is a lot things that I learned, because I don't have a clue about them, and that make me think differently and see differently. I'm still blind but I'm not in the dark any more. I learn to be more close to God and live a different life now than before.”*

At the end of the letter he said, *“I give this testimony to other people, all I say, that we need to have patience and the blessings will come sooner or later. We need to believe and have faith because God has good things for us... And we will feel the joy of his mercy.”*

James, and all God's people, say, *Amen!*