



Developing Perfection

How Can You Improve Your Life?

Several years ago, when I still thought I was young and athletic, I was playing dodgeball with the youth of the church. They thought it was pretty cool that the pastor had jumped into the fray and quickly out of all the ones in the game, I became the primary target. The strongest of the boys reared back and heaved the ball at me, barely clipping my heel as I jumped to avoid the throw. Unfortunately, not only did the teen get me out, but my Achilles Tendon was also torn in the process. Because of a variety of circumstances including a trip to Russia and a week leading a children's camp up in the mountains, it took over a year and a half to recover from the surgery. How was I to see this injury? Was it a random accident, stuff just happens? Should I have looked at the bright side? At least I didn't break my leg or tear up my knee. Was there actually a purpose to the injury, a divine motivation for it occurring? James, the brother of Jesus has a take on calamitous events we face and perhaps we can gain insight as we see what he has to say.

He writes in his letter to us all, **Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.** (James 1: 2-4 NIV) Nobody looks forward to trials, I'm sure you don't. It is not something you probably pray God gives you. Many have asked me to go to God for them about the situations they face but not one person has asked me to pray they will face more hardship and trouble. James insists that you see it this way when you face trials of any sort. It is a reason to have pure joy or complete joy. The term translated joy means just that, how you feel when you are promoted, rewarded, or celebrated. It is the same term Jesus used when he told the parable of the faithful servants who did a great job and were rewarded by their master. **"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'"** (Matthew 25: 21 NIV) With happiness you should face trials says James. Certainly you cannot call that the norm. It isn't how most people see hardship.

Let's examine this short section of James's letter in a bit of detail. He tells you and me that when it happens that trials or calamities or afflictions fall all around you, you are always to know that they are the testing of your faith. In fact, the way it is worded, you are always to know that troubles are a test of your faith; it never isn't. That is how you are to look at every single difficulty you face. It is a test of your faith. Unemployment? A test of your faith. Illness? A test of your faith. A car wreck or a broken relationship? A test of your faith. Not many see it this way. Maybe you aren't ready yet to view your troubles as a test of your faith. Perhaps they are too fresh for you, too upsetting. Yet, James maintains this declaration as one who knew Jesus intimately and experienced great hardship himself. Trouble and affliction is a testing of your faith.

When your faith is tested like this, by some hardship or sorrow or pain, it always produces in you perseverance, the ability to bear under heavy weights. When I was younger, I often lifted weights and it did something for me. It made me stronger. Troubles do the same for you. They give you the ability to accomplish tasks you couldn't before, succeed in ways that were not possible in the past. It could be argued that Abraham Lincoln might never have led the United States successfully through the crisis of the Civil War if he hadn't developed great mental toughness through his many failures and trials. The same could be said of Thomas Edison. He

may not have made so many incredible inventions if his mental toughness wasn't developed through all his failed experiments.

James insists that if the ability to persevere, to keep at it when most others would quit is not installed in you, your maturity will be stymied. In fact, it is more like your move toward perfection will be derailed. The statement of James is firm. You become fully developed, reach your potential if perseverance is established as part of your personality. And how do we acquire it? Through calamities. It must be pointed out and perhaps this is indeed obvious, that there is a difference between a threat and a calamity. When the great army of the Assyrians surrounded Jerusalem, that was a threat. Soon God would destroy the Assyrian army through a deadly plague. The invasion was a threat. I recently heard that the dreadful Clyde Barrows of Bonnie and Clyde infamy became tired of the hard work he had to do in prison and so to avoid it, he cut off two of his toes. Just a few days later Clyde's mother gained his release from prison. In his case, the hard labor was a threat and not a calamity. We see the opposite also. When Ruth from the Bible lost her husband, that was a calamity. A friend of mine suffered great brain damage when he fell off a lift in a warehouse. That was a calamity.

The difference between a threat and a calamity can be profound. We experience great relief when a threat doesn't become a calamity. You think you will be fired but you get a second chance. It turns out you don't have cancer. The car veers out of your way at the last second. Consider this and I pray it will never be this way for you. Often times a threat when it reverses course has the opposite effect on you of a calamity. Let me explain. When the threat of a catastrophic illness that Hezekiah faced went away, rather than becoming more faithful and spiritually strong, he in fact grew more faithless, falling for the affections of the Babylonians. The same is true of Clyde Barrow. After he was released from prison, he became more terrible and lawless. On the other hand, Ruth grew more faithful and an example of godliness after the death of her husband. My friend who fell from the lift is now one of the godliest people I know when before the accident he had no interest in God.

Consider Jesus' comment when the disciples asked Him if it was sin that led to a man being born blind. **"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."** (John 9: 3 NIV) I realize that most take this statement as Jesus indicating that he was blind because the blindness would be an opportunity for Jesus to heal him and reveal the power of God. I think however, and I am certain this is the case, that there is something much more profound being stated here. It is in calamity, in this case the man's blindness, that the work of God is displayed in us most perfectly. The Apostle hints at this in his second letter to the Corinthians. **That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.** (2 Corinthians 12: 10 NIV) The Israelites suffered a great calamity when after refusing to invade the promised land, God forced them to wander in the desert for a full forty years until every adult of that generation died. The result was that the Israelites became a vibrant people of faith and full of courage and moral strength. Calamity perfected them. What if Jesus never healed the blind man? Would he have been able to reveal the work of God in his life? Of course. Miracles and prosperity did not always make the people who experienced them stronger. In fact, many in the Bible grew weaker in their faith and poorer in character. Samson's strength did nothing to make him a better person and neither did all of Solomon's wealth and acclaim. The Jewish leaders knew full well that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and yet that very miracle solidified their resolve to find a way to kill Christ.

Listen to this fascinating statement made by the Apostle Paul. **During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.** (Hebrews 5 :7-10 NIV) That is a most mystifying declaration if you don't realize what a magnificent effect calamity has for all of

us, even Jesus. Rather than turning away in anger and bitter despair when calamity hits, keep in mind what a great work of God is going to be done in you and your hardship, though tough, will have a wonderful result that you will forever be thankful.