ESSAY · MAY 25, 2022

A Purpose for Human Suffering

Written by Bill Perkins

Why? It's the question that hits first and lingers longest. Why me? Why now? Why this? Most people don't even try to answer such questions. How could they? That's what makes the words of James, the half-brother of Jesus, so unexpected. He said the purpose of testing is to produce "perseverance" (James 1:2-4). Instead of looking at disappointment, he tells us to look at the character it produces.

An Uncertain Outcome

But the outcome is uncertain. That's the kicker. There's no guarantee adversity will produce character. That's why Jesus told Peter, "I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith will not fail" (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus knew hardship *could* strengthen Peter's character–if he maintained his faith in God. This spiritual reality changes our view of adversity. That's why James told his readers, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials" (James 1:2)

The first time I read that line I misunderstood its meaning. I thought he meant, "Rejoice that you have cancer. Be happy your dog died. Celebrate your failed business."

A Deeper Meaning

On the surface he appears to say just that. But a closer look reveals his true meaning. James didn't urge us to celebrate the trials we face. Instead, he urged us to find joy in the outcome of those trials. We don't celebrate problems; we celebrate that God uses them to transform us into his image. Adversity does for our soul what weightlifting does for our body. It makes us stronger. It empowers us to finish what we start.

If you're like me, you'd prefer building internal strength without pain. But that's impossible. We all face hardship and disappointment. Friends let us down, accidents hurt us, plans fail.

While we can't avoid hardship, we can cultivate joy during hardship. How? By believing God will use it to strengthen our character. That's the hope we must rivet our attention on, like the North Star, to guide us through dark nights.

The Next Time

The next time you want to ask God "Why?" reflect on the words of James. Ask God for the grace needed to see his purpose through the fog of pain. While such thinking may not relieve your suffering, it will give you a hope that will bring joy. .