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PRAYING FOR PATIENCE

(the thing every Christian needs but is too afraid to pray for)

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James tells us to be joyful when we face outward trials and difficulties (*James 1:2*). The reason he gives for guiding us towards this pretty unnatural response is that trials create in us patience – endurance, steadfastness (v. 3). The equation James lays out is simple: faith that is never tired will never be truly steadfast; faith that is tried has the possibility to endure and even to grow. In fact, James goes on to say that the process of trials producing steadfastness ultimately yields a complete and entire Christian who lacks nothing (v. 4).

Quite a few students of the book of James have noticed the connection between trials and patience. Some of them have responded to this connection by saying jokingly or seriously, “I don’t pray for patience.” I’ve even been guilty of saying this myself. It occurred to me though when I heard someone say this for the umpteenth time recently that maybe this wasn’t such a good thing to say, even jokingly.

James’ words as recorded in *James 1:2-4* form a sequential chain; trials produce patience and patience carries out a perfecting work that yields a perfect and entire Christian. The chain begins with trials. Not to desire patience because of a desire to avoid trials is to equally not to desire completeness in Christ. When the first link of the chain isn’t there, neither are the ones that follow.

God does not expect us to run head first into trials – in fact, His word teaches quite the opposite. Jesus told us to pray for God both to lead us from prospective temptation and to deliver us from any evil that might come our way (*Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4*). Paul instructed Timothy to teach the church to pray for the government to ensure that Christians enjoyed a “quiet and peaceable life” (*1 Timothy 2:2*). In fact, being able to remain faithful isn’t always about enduring; sometimes it is about escaping and through escaping being able to bear what we face (*1 Corinthians 10:13*).

Even though it is normal not to seek out trials, it would be abnormal not to receive any based on what God has told us. We live in a world that has been shaped by the consequences of sin and that “groans and labors” continually because of it (*Romans 8:21; cf. Genesis 3:17*). Godly people can expect everything that happens non-Christians to happen to them and more – in fact, trials will come into our lives for no other reason than that we are godly (*2 Timothy 3:12; cf. John 15:19-20*). More importantly though, trials are referred to by the author of Hebrews as the Lord chastening us as a father chastens his son; God allows us to be tried for our benefit and would be unloving if He didn’t (*Hebrews 12:3-11*).

James’ words as well as those of the author of Hebrews demand more of our thought and attention. As bad as trials might seem and as dangerous as they might be to our faith, they are also tremendous opportunities supplied by a loving God for us to grow. Remember, the first link in the chain to Christian completion is trials. I don’t think trials are the only way for a Christian to **a** grow – the inspired Word of God, for example, also leads us to maturity (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*) – but I am certain that trials play a role in our growth and development.

I'm not saying that we should pray for trials – this would run counter to Jesus' instructions to pray for deliverance. However, I don't think we should fear trials to the extent that we stop praying for growth. We shouldn't fear whatever God deems to necessary to bring into our lives, as while the Devil (who enacts the trials God allows – *cf. Job 1-2*) intends trials for our destruction, God intends them for our glory and betterment.

Are you facing trials? I have no doubt that you are or have (or both) and that you probably will experience more. Don't stop praying for patience or any aspect of Christian growth. Instead, take James' advice and pray for wisdom with an unwavering faith in God's benevolent nature (*James 1:5-8, 17*). He will see you through any trial.