

Title: The Trial Trail
Date: July 10, 2022
Subject: Trials can provide the opportunity for true happiness.
Scripture: James 1:2 - 18

Hershey, Pennsylvania bills itself as “The Sweetest Place on Earth.” It even has streetlights shaped like Hershey Kisses. At the Chocolate Tour you can (according to chocolateworld.com/things-to-do/hersheys-chocolate-tour): “Take a delicious journey from tropical cocoa bean to wrapped candy bar in this free chocolate factory tour ride. Feel the warmth of roasting cocoa beans, smell rich milk chocolate and watch thousands of candies twist and turn on conveyor belts. Delight your tastebuds with a sweet product sample at the end!”

The Lindt Chocolate factory in Olten, Switzerland isn't to be outdone. It snowed chocolate! In August 2020 a malfunction in the cooling ventilation system used in processing roasted cocoa nibs sent chocolate particles outside the factory. Strong wind gusts picked up the powder and spread it around the neighborhood falling onto cars, trees, the ground. Imagine sticking your tongue out and trying to catch those flakes. Sounds like something out of Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.

Sounds like the way many people expect life to be. Soothing aromas of roasting cocoa beans followed by a light drizzle of dark chocolate. Instead, life is more of a rocky road.

You may have noticed signs and expected where we're headed on the Highway to True Happiness. In keeping with our opening candy theme, we nibbled at the edges on Father's Day with the focus on fear not, faint not, fret not and be faithful; chewed on hindrances to happiness; and munched on contentment and joy. This morning we're going to dive in to one of the more difficult aspects of having happiness.

The sermon notes are different today. There are lots of first letters to words and blanks. I didn't want to let the subject or Scripture out of the bag. I didn't want you to jump to conclusions or to tune out.

The Scripture is James 1:2 – 18. The title is The Trial Trail. READ James 1:2 – 18

The opening words of the passage “consider it pure joy” sound like when the announcer for a game show describes the prize package: “You'll be whisked away in luxurious first-class air...to exotic Bali...for fourteen days and thirteen nights of pampered pleasure complete with unlimited food. You'll wander pristine beaches, trek to the top of an active volcano to have a sunrise breakfast, dine on the beach at sunset, tour the monkey sanctuary, visit the elephant cave, swim with dolphins (who doesn't want to swim with dolphins?). When you return home, you'll be met at the airport by your new car...a 2023 Ford Mustang convertible...and all tax free!”

Now that would be a cause for pure joy. But to have that attitude toward trials?

The etymology of the word “trial” is try. It'd be nice if we could try on the trial and decide if we don't want it, we simply take it off right away. All we need to say is “It doesn't fit, not my color, not my style. See yah.”

Trial is defined as difficulties, challenges, problems, a testing of the faith. Oxford Languages Dictionary “a test of the performance, qualities, or suitability of someone or something.” Trial is related to suffering which has been defined as “a pressing, pressure, burden” (Vine’s).

As mentioned last week, we don’t have to like having trials. The apostle Paul didn’t. And nowhere in James does it tell us we’re to like the actual trial. The writer of the book “Faith That Works” gets specific: “No one in his right mind rejoices because the doctor tells him he has cancer. No one can possibly be happy when a friend betrays him. It is impossible for an individual to be jubilant over the death of a loved one. Financial reverses are never a source of abounding ecstasy” (Harold L. Fickett, Jr., p. 6).

The “liking” comes from what’s gained from facing trials. This is revealed in v. 4: “that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” It’s the idea of wholeness of character. The person won’t lack anything because he’ll have a depth in a spiritual being which is being formed by godly virtues.

It begins with perseverance which is described as “endurance, steadfastness, patient waiting for” (Strong’s Concordance). The first two more accurately describe it. Patience can be seen as simply waiting while endurance and steadfastness indicate going through something. Perseverance involves tenacity and resolve.

The subject is addressed later in chapter 5 where patience and perseverance are intertwined. A patient farmer waiting for land to yield its crop illustrates how followers of Christ are to be patient because they know the Lord’s coming is near. There’s also the example of the prophets who were patient and the acknowledgment that those who persevere are considered blessed. The NIV Study Bible notes (James 5:11) that Job had perseverance not patience as he wasn’t always patient. He responded to some of his friends as “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

Perseverance is the ability to stay put, a refusal to run away. This allows the trial to be turned into something good. A husband and wife visited a pottery shop where they watched an artisan working at a pottery wheel. The worker carefully shaped the pot by applying pressure and pulling on the formless lump. The visitors were in awe as a beautiful vase came into view. The worker shook her head as she pushed and smooched the vase back into a lump. The visitors were dumbfounded. She began the process again. The second vase was even better. Again, the worker wasn’t satisfied. The couple wanted to yell, “Don’t do it. It’s good enough.” As the vase was torn apart and the process started over, the visitors wondered if the worker knew what she was doing. She continued until she got the object she desired, one far superior to earlier attempts.

Perseverance must be practiced until the desired product is produced. Perseverance must finish its work. The finished work is maturity, completion, not lacking anything. Trials are the proving ground. Automakers test out new models to ensure they perform under the conditions life throws at them. Commercials show them tearing up mountains or the frozen north of Minnesota. The tests reveal whether the car is good to go or needs more refining. The testing of our faith shows its reality while strengthening and purifying it.

There’s a debate whether Benjamin Franklin was truly a Christian. But there were times when he came across as one who understood the things of God. He said, “Those things that hurt, instruct.”

John White wrote about the role of trials: “You might expect that positive and beautiful memories would be the ones to increase our faith. I always believe for instance that one or two really dramatic or miraculous answers to prayer would increase my faith immeasurably. Yet it hasn't worked out that way.” He says he and his wife “have seen some pretty big miracles in our day...The miracles of which I speak *have not increased our faith at all*. We are ashamed to admit it, but yesterday's miracle does not make today's obedience any easier for us.” He brings up the examples of Christians in the book of Hebrews in the material leading up to the faith chapter, chapter 11. At the end of chapter 10 they're called upon to remember what the Living Bible terms “the wonderful days.” What made them wonderful? They were days of trial and suffering which resulted in tremendous spiritual vitality and growth...” (John White, *The Fight*, pp. 105, 106).

Patrick Morley writes in his book concerning “startling ideas about true happiness.” One chapter is titled “Staggered by the odd goodness of God.” It's about suffering. He tells of an old southern woman who put suffering in proper perspective: “If the mountain was smooth you couldn't climb it.” Morley comments, “Everything God has caused or allowed in your life is for your good - to draw you into a deeper love relationship with him. Your sufferings are not merely setbacks. They are also springboards to the crucial task of knowing God well enough that you can trust him. We must learn to interpret the mysteries of life in the light of our knowledge of God. Until we can look the darkest fact full in the face without damaging God's character, we do not yet know him as he is” (p. 74).

In the middle of the teaching on trials and temptations, in v. 5, we find the encouragement to petition God for wisdom. The verse has been taken to refer to anytime we need wisdom. While it can be applied in that way, the initial application is seeking wisdom during times of trials.

When trials come upon us the natural questions are: “Why? Why me? Why now? Why this?” If we aren't careful, these can lead to a complaining and grumbling attitude and demeanor if they stay on the surface and remain self-focused. The emphasis for our questions should be shifted, tweaked, so we're seeking the purpose. We can ask, “What do you want me to learn? What do you have for me in this?” It shows we want insight into practical spiritual implications of the trial.

We are called to remember that the Lord is a generous giver. He doesn't have to be badgered and shamed into giving. He isn't sitting on his throne, drumming his fingers, scowling: “You have got to be kidding. You want what?” He's ready, willing and able.

The condition for getting wisdom is we must ask. The condition for asking is we must believe God will give what we need and not doubt or be double minded which is straddling the fence between belief and decided unbelief. We must believe God is wise, loving and will help us to understand what we need to know so we can grow in our spiritual lives and relationship to him.

Two trials are presented, though many don't consider one to be a trial. The first trial is poverty. The wisdom the Lord seeks to impart is for the person in humble circumstances to remember his high position as a child of God and heir of an incredible spiritual inheritance, including life forever with Jesus Christ in heaven.

The second is the trial of riches. Money can be a trial as people become dependent on their financial portfolio and possessions and don't rely on God. Nothing causes a person to be double-minded like money and the attitude towards it. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

Part of the intended wisdom for the rich is to take pride in their low position, to be humble and dependent upon God rather upon themselves. They're reminded of the brevity of life. Beautiful wildflowers appear quickly after a rain to adorn the desert landscape and then disappear even more quickly as the scorching sun and blistering heat wither the plant, destroying it. The inference for the rich is they'll fade from the scene, possibly experience a sudden loss of wealth while going about their everyday business. Life is too short to get hung up on things that don't matter in the end. As has been asked and answered about those who are wealthy and die - "How much did he leave behind?" "All of it."

The poor and rich need to focus on their position and status in Christ. Wisdom reveals the poor person has been exalted in Christ and the rich person is to realize he's a sinner saved by God's grace.

We come to the second call to persevere in V. 12. Again there's a connection to true happiness. V. 2 spoke about "considering it pure joy." Now it says "blessed" or truly happy. It's not blessed is the man who has trials. It's blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. It's an important distinction and one we need to keep in mind. Blessing doesn't come because people go through bad stuff. Blessing comes because of persevering and looking to God during the trials.

A reward is promised for those who withstand the test. It's a gift from God -- the crown of life, the glorious eternal kingdom with him. This is in contrast to the momentary pleasures and delights of earth as shown by the wild flowers that wither away. The reward goes to those who are victorious.

Trials are like the weather conditions and tools that work on and in the crops planted in the soil. They're the storms, hail, drought, plows, disks, and hoes. Perseverance is the soil, but the soil isn't the intended result. Out of the soil grows the crop of spiritual maturity and the gift of life forever with God.

Most Bible translations speak of temptation in v. 13. However, it's the same word from vv. 2 and 12 where it's translated trial. It signifies a specific situation where perseverance is needed, perhaps the main and major way in which our faith in Christ is tested. If a distinction is desired, trials can be phrased as a testing of our moral and spiritual nature while temptations are solicitations to do wrong aiming to show our weakness by deceiving and persuading us to do evil.

Barna Group conducted a study on the "changing state of temptation." The highest reported were spending too much time on social media, worrying, procrastination, and being lazy. However, one observer strongly suggests taking the results with a few grains of salt. He writes in a web article "Survey hints at the temptation to lie about temptation" (1/8/13; Fred Clark; patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2013/01/08/survey-hints-at-the-temptation-to-lie-about-temptation): "It's another one of those self-reporting studies that tells us more about what people want others to think about them than it does about what people are really like. A survey can measure the kinds of temptations people will admit to, but it's wholly inadequate as a tool for

measuring temptation itself.” His contention is people are ready to self-report weaknesses but not serious problems.

A more accurate representation of problems faced by people who claim to know Jesus as Savior comes from Discipleship Journal (Nov/Dec, 1992). Readers were asked to rank their greatest spiritual challenges. The top were materialism, pride, self-centeredness, laziness, anger/ bitterness, sexual lust, envy, gluttony and lying.

One of the facts of life is we will be tempted, not if, but when. Some folks feel it's irresistible that we're drawn like moths to light and there's nothing we can do. The truth is temptation is resistible.

It helps to understand the process. The first stage is the opportunity is presented to wrongly fulfill our desires/needs/passions/appetites. The text speaks of “dragged away and enticed.” It's like a fisherman using bait to cover up something harmful - the hook. Temptation offers the promise of providing happiness, make us happier, if we give in to it. Each of us is responsible for how we respond to temptations.

Sin is yielding to the temptation. Temptation becomes sin the moment the will is employed, the decision is made. When the offer to do evil unites with our evil desire it conceives and gives birth to sin. When sin is full grown, unchecked, it gives birth to death, which is spiritual death in contrast to the spiritual life God gives (v. 12).

Let's take temptation to the streets, rather the grocery store. Martha walks into the store and has hunger pangs. She walks down the candy aisle where she sees her favorite candy bar which is so good. The bells and whistles of hunger kick into high gear. The saliva starts forming and she can almost taste the candy bar. The thought occurs she could quickly grab it, shove it in a pocket. There's no one else in the aisle. No one would see. And it's just that the right height. She knows it's wrong to steal, but just once won't hurt. This is the temptation. She has the ability to choose - what's right/pleasing to God or what's wrong/evil/disobedience.

She can pray to God for strength and the ability to do what's right. She doesn't have to get down on her knees or close her eyes as she bumps her way through the store. She reminds herself it's wrong to steal. She knows this because she's spent time with God in the Bible. God and she would know. She can walk faster, turn her attention away from the candy to the shopping list and or the items on the other side of the aisle.

God promises he'll make a way of escape from temptations. Some ways readers of Discipleship Journal found helpful in countering temptation: 1) prayer, 2) avoid compromising situations, 3) Bible study, 4) being accountable to someone. They also noted temptations were more powerful when they neglected to spend time with God and were physically tired.

Charles Spurgeon provides insights relating to the circumstances of our temptations: “What settings are you in when you fall? Avoid them. What props do you have that support your sin? Eliminate them. What people are you usually with? Avoid them. There are two equally damning lies Satan wants us to believe: 1) just once won't hurt; 2) now that you've ruined your life, you are beyond God's use, and might as well enjoy sinning.”

Try as hard as people may, the truth is God can't be blamed for temptation. They feel since God created everything, he must have created evil and desires for himself and his followers to do evil.

He isn't the author of sin and temptation. It's contrary to his holy character and goodness. By nature, God is perfect and without sin. He has never sinned - never cursed, never stolen, never told a lie, never acted with wrongful anger, never said anything evil, never thought anything evil, never done anything evil and never will. Since evil isn't a part of his character, he can't be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt. He doesn't send experiences into our lives with an evil intent. These actions are contrary to Christians' experience. We're reminded that God is good and he gives good gifts to his children.

Jordan St. Cyr song Fires is about going through struggles and gaining victory. His story includes a daughter born with a brain disease and an uncertain future. Some of the words: "I remember how You told me, That life may not be easy, And everything that I need, You've already given me. I remember how You told me, I can trust You completely. So why am I doubting, When You proved that You'd fight for me? You've walked me through fires, Pulled me from flames. If You're in this with me, I won't be afraid. When the smoke billows higher, oh and higher, And it feels like I can barely breathe, I'll walk through these fires, 'Cause You're walking with me... I'm changed by Your mercy, Covered by Your peace. I'm living out the victory. Doesn't mean I won't feel the heat... I can face anything, 'Cause You're here with me. I can do all things 'Cause You strengthen me. I remember how You showed me, The price of my redemption. Lord, how could I question, When You proved that You'd die for me? I'll walk through these fires, 'Cause You're walking with me."

Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake in 2010 in which an estimated 100,000 to 316,000 people were killed. World Vision president Richard Stearns visited a church there a year after the tragedy. It met in a tent made from white tarps and duct tape. 6 amputees, ages 6 to 60, sat in the front row. The worshippers smiled and clapped as they sang song after song with hope, joy and praise to God. Demosi Louphine, a double amputee who lost her right arm and left leg, enthusiastically led the choir. Stearns met her after the service. He learned she and two daughters, ages 8 and 10, lived in an 8 foot by 8 foot tent that was 5 feet tall. It was just one of many in the camp of thousands of still homeless people. She'd lost her arm, leg, home and job yet "was deeply grateful because God spared her life." She felt like Lazarus because she'd been given new life after having been trapped under the rubble. Her desire was to live a few more years to raise her children and praise her Lord. Stearns commented about the trip's impact: "It makes no sense to me as an 'entitled American' who grouses at the smallest inconveniences - a clogged drain or a slow Wi-Fi connection in my home. Yet here in this place, many people who had lost everything...expressed nothing but praise. They have so much more to offer me than I to them. I feel pity and sadness for them, but it is they who might better pity me for the shallowness of my own walk with Christ" (Richard Stearns, Suffering and Rejoicing in a Haitian Tent Camp, christianitytoday.com, 1/12/11).