

to us, as we study them, to be so momentous, that we think everything ought to stop till they are settled. But Christianity is not a country which still needs to be discovered. It is a home of human souls, wide, well known and intensely loved, from whose soil a hundred generations have been nourished; and, though there is at present pressing work in theology for the soldier-thinker to do, who marches to the borders to defend the faith against the inroads of scepticism, and for the pioneer-thinker, who goes in search of lands in which belief may find new dwellings, yet to cultivate the fields of the old home as faithful husbandmen, that its children may not lack their food, but grow up in spiritual health and strength, will ever be the main work of the Christian ministry.

JAMES STALKER.

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### THE FUNCTION OF TRIAL.

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes of the Dispersion, Joy to you. Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold trials, knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience; but let patience have a perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.”—JAS. i. 1-4.

JAMES was “the Lord’s brother,” or, as we should say, His first cousin, His close kinsman—the Greek word for “brother” having a larger meaning than ours. Was not this the most honourable of his titles, and the surest passport to his readers’ esteem? Apparently he thinks not; for he designates himself “*a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*,” as if this were the highest title he could claim; as indeed it was. For the Lord Jesus Himself affirmed that “to do the will of His Father” was better than to be His brother after the flesh; and when “a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice,” and exclaimed

on the blessedness of the mother who had such a Son as He, He replied, "Blessed rather are they who hear the word of God, and keep it." James had learned the lesson. He felt that an obedient spirit was more than kinship of blood; that to be a servant, doing God's will from the heart, was better than to be a brother of the God manifest in the flesh.

That he held Jesus Christ to be nothing less than God manifest in the flesh is apparent from his calling Jesus Christ his "Lord," which was the common Jewish name for the Father Almighty, and from his bracketing the two names together in the phrase, "a servant of God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ." If any modern teacher were to sign himself "a servant of God *and* of Calvin," or "of Arminius," should we not shrink as from a wanton blasphemy, and charge him with having spoken of a mere man as though he were "the fellow of the Lord of hosts"? Judge then what James meant when he described himself as equally bound to the service of Jesus and of God.

James, the servant of God and of Christ, writes to "*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*"; i.e. as we have seen, to the foreign Jews who were settled in all the great seats of commerce and learning throughout the civilized world, to the Hellenised Jews who read their Scriptures and worshipped God in the Greek tongue. To these Hellenists, to those at least who had embraced the Christian faith, James the Jew writes in Greek; nay, he even addresses to them the Greek salutation. When Hebrew met Hebrew, the one saluted the other with "*Peace to you*"; for they had learned that the real blessedness of life was to be at peace with all the world, themselves, and God. But when Greek met Greek, the one saluted the other with "*Joy to you*," the Greeks being lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of peace. Of course, when they used this salutation, they did not always recognise its full meaning, any more than

we, when we say, "Good-bye," always remember that the word means, that it is a contraction of, "God be with you." But St. James both compels his readers to think of its meaning, by continuing, "Count it all *joy* when ye fall into manifold trials," and at once proceeds to put a higher, a Christian, meaning into the heathen salutation. *His* joy, the joy he wishes them, is not that pleasant exhilaration which results from gratified senses or tastes of which the Greeks were conscious when things went to their mind; nor that heightened and happy consciousness of the sweetness of life which they held to be the supreme good. It was rather the "peace" for which the Hebrew sighed; but that peace intensified into a Divine gladness, elevated into a pure and sacred delight. It was the joy which springs from being restored to our true relations to God and man, from having all the conflicting passions, powers, and aims of the soul drawn into a happy accord. It was that fine spiritual essence which radiates new vigour and delight through all the faculties and affections of nature when we stay ourselves no longer on the changeful phenomena of time, but on the sacred and august realities of eternity.

A peace all shot through and through with the rich exhilarating hues of gladness, *this* was the "joy" which St. James invoked on the twelve tribes of the Dispersion, as we learn from the verses which immediately follow his salutation.

To those who stood outside the Church, and looked only on the outward appearance, in wishing them "joy" he might seem to be mocking them. For in all outward respects they were of all men most miserable. Their lot was full of pain, adversity, shame. The Christian faith was not yet formally persecuted by the Roman government indeed; for James was writing within twenty years after the death of Christ, and for ten years after that death the

gospel was not carried beyond the limits of Syria. So that, in all probability, those who first read this Epistle had not accepted the faith of Christ more than five or seven years. It had not been long enough in the Roman empire to attract the attention of the authorities, nor had it as yet touched the general population. But, as we all know, private hostility precedes public persecution, and is often harder to bear. And there was that in the position of foreign Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Christ which would infallibly involve them in " manifold trials " and tribulations. Their Jewish neighbours had listened to the same teaching with themselves, examined the same credentials, and they had deliberately rejected the Man of Nazareth. They would therefore regard their brethren who accepted Jesus of Nazareth as base and impious apostates. Not content with casting them out of the synagogue with stripes, they would refuse all private intercourse with them. They would speak against and denounce them. They would prejudice the minds of the heathen against them; and the heathen would be only too apt to conceive a prejudice against men whose sanctuary held no image, whose ritual embraced no " mysteries," and whose pure austere life was a standing rebuke to their vices and pleasures. The Jews themselves were eyed with suspicion, and were the first to suffer when the mob of a Roman city took the law into its own hands. But *these* Jews, whom the Jews themselves loathed and denounced, would be held as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things.

We may be sure, then, that the life of the Christian Jews was made hard and bitter to them by the rancour of their fellow countrymen, and by the growing suspicion and animosity of the alien races among whom they sojourned. " Joy " would seem to have forsaken them. To meet them with a " Joy to you " would sound like a jest or an insult,

as it would have been had this joy been simply the result of happy outward conditions. But their spring of joy did not flow from the mere surface of life. It bubbled up from the deep underlying strata, and still ran on whatever changes vexed the surface. It was the joy of happy *spiritual* conditions, the joy which springs from being harmoniously adjusted to one's supreme relations, of knowing that all things are ruled by God, and over-ruled for good.

"*Joy to you,*" says St. James; but he instantly adds, "Count it all joy *when ye fall into manifold trials.*" And how should joy ever fail men who were hated and despised alike by heathen and by Hebrew neighbours, if they could find joy in their very trials, and *nothing but* joy? This is what St. James meant. "Count it all joy" means, "Count it *nothing but* joy," "Count it *pure* joy," "Count it *the highest* joy," when trials of many different kinds surround and confront you. They had trouble enough, and therefore they might have joy enough, if they could but learn the secret of extracting joy from trouble.

And why should they not learn it? It is simple enough. A paradox to the thoughtless, it is an axiom with the wise. For "trial" means "test." And it is as we are tested that we learn our own weakness, learn what and where it is, and are set on correcting it. Hard and sorrowful outward conditions are so manifestly tests of character, and calls to strength and nobility of character, that many of the philosophers of antiquity systematically ordained and submitted to them. They held the keen edge of penury and self-denial to yield a discipline so valuable, that they set him down for a fool who, in order to become wise and good, would not cheerfully submit to it. And though the gospel of Christ does not bid us invent trials and impose them on ourselves, though it admits that no chastening is for the present joyous, but grievous, it nevertheless teaches us that the losses and sorrows we meet as we pass through life

are, or ought to be, a discipline in righteousness and perfection. It is not the gospel that brings the trials; it simply teaches us how to turn them to good account. Here they are, ordained by a Will which we can neither evade nor resist. The only question is, how we shall meet and bear them. At this point the Gospel steps in to show us how we may so use them as to get joy out of them, the true abiding joy, that of becoming perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. It affirms that we are infected with a moral weakness, or disease, of which our sorrows are the natural and inevitable result, and of which they may become a sovereign remedy. For the sorrows bred by sin dispose us to hate and renounce the sin which produces them. The sorrows that disclose an unsuspected weakness set us on seeking a strength that shall be made perfect in weakness. Nay, even the sorrows which involve shame and remorse have a cleansing virtue, if only our sorrow be of a good sort.

“But the Jews of the Dispersion,” it may be said, “were not suffering for their sins, but for their virtues, for their faith in Christ and their obedience to His law!”

True, but in suffering for our faith, may we not also be suffering for our faults—for the weakness of our faith, for instance? Are we not evidently suffering for the faults of our neighbours, and so “filling up that which is behind of the affliction of Christ,” suffering with Him, that we may also share His joy? The faith of these Jews *must* have been weak and immature. If all had gone well with them, if the world had smiled on them, might not their faith have lost even what vigour it had in that soft relaxing air? Might they not have conceded first this, and then that, to neighbours who were so kind to them, till hardly anything was left? It may be that, but for the “many trials” which the hostility of the world and the synagogue brought upon them, they would have remained

very imperfectly Christian to the end of their lives, even if they had remained Christian at all. Their trials put them on their mettle. When nothing was open to them but publicly renouncing Christ, or cleaving to Him in the teeth of a hostile world, their choice was clear, their duty plain. They *must* cleave to Him; and, cleaving to Him, they would be driven closer and closer to Him by the very opposition designed to detach them from Him. Their very weakness may have made tribulation all the more necessary for them.

On one point, happily for us, St. James is quite clear: *viz.* that tribulation *is* discipline; that by the divers trials which befall us God is making, or seeking to make, us perfect and complete. And where can we find a more welcome and inspiriting view of tribulation than this? Sickness, sorrow, loss, bereavement *will* come to us, as they come to all. We cannot hope to escape them. And as we must bear them, let us at least get out of them what comfort, what good, we can. We may get the truest comfort, the highest good, from them—maturity and completeness of Christian character, which is a good for the next life as well as for this.

For, says St. James, trials are tests: they come for “the proving” of our faith. They teach us how much faith we have, or how little; what our faith can do, and what it cannot. To “know ourselves” is the last attainment of human wisdom, so complex and mysterious is our nature, so “deceitful” our hearts, even when they are no longer “desperately wicked.” Trials teach us to know ourselves, what we really are, on what we rest, to what we most strongly cling, whether we really prefer truth to gain, for example, and duty to pleasure, whether we believe most in the things which are unseen and eternal or in those which are seen and temporal.

It is God, our reconciled God and Father, who appoints

these tests, God who applies them. And therefore we may be sure that they come for good ends. God does not try us simply to show that we have no faith worth having, or that we are far weaker than we thought. He puts us to the test to convince us that we have some faith, if only enough to make us grieve over our failures, and to increase our faith. We may be sure that His intention is kind from what we know of Him. If we are not sure, St. James assures us. He says, "*the proving of your faith worketh patience*"; i.e., for so the word means, it results in a firm and steadfast *constancy*, in a *fidelity* which can face all seductions and allurements, all menaces and fears. And the moment we consider it, we find the saying true. Who *are* those who are truest to their convictions when the minds of men are perplexed with fear of change, when doubt takes new forms, or the world arrays itself in new charms, or the very Church becomes the home of a decent worldliness, or of a bitter animosity to new and larger forms of truth and goodness? It is the men who have been *tried*, who have sustained "manifold trials"; it is the men who have been "rooted and grounded" in the truth and charity of Christ by many a storm of change. "Tried" and "faithful" are all but synonyms in our common speech, so close, so obvious, is the connexion between trials and fidelity.

But if our trials are to produce this constant and faithful temper in us, we must "*let patience have a perfect work.*" Since chastening is grievous to us, the danger is that we should seek to escape it as soon as we can, forgetting that only "he that endureth *to the end* will be saved." The acid that tries the gold *bites* the gold, or, rather, it bites the alloy in the gold. Tests are painful; and they make unwelcome calls on our energy and fortitude. We must therefore let patience have her perfect work, we must suffer our constancy, our fidelity to God, to be exposed to



many and searching trials, if we would reap the full benefit of our trials.

And what is this full benefit? "*That ye may be perfect and entire, lacking nothing,*" or lacking in nothing. The word here rendered "perfect" is elsewhere (1 Cor. xiv. 20 and Heb. v. 14) taken to denote *manliness* or *maturity*. So that the full benefit of trial is, that, if we endure it with a patient fidelity, we become *mature* men in Christ Jesus, nay, *complete* men, lacking nothing that a Christian man should have and enjoy. And what higher reward could possibly be set before a reasonable and religious being? What we want, what we know we want, most of all, is to have our character fully and happily developed, its various and often hostile affections and aims absorbed and harmonized, by having them all brought under law to Christ. To become such men as He was, and to walk even as also He walked, is not this the supreme end of all who call and profess themselves Christians? is it not our chief good, our highest blessedness?

Our sorrow and unrest spring from our immaturity, from the partial and ill-balanced development of our spiritual nature. One man is kind and generous, but he is also vain; he has a boastful and inaccurate tongue; he is too much the creature of changeful impulses, or yields too easily to the several influences brought to bear upon him from without. Another is modest, gentle, patient; but he has little courage, or generosity, or ardour. One is pious and devout; but he is also selfish, and lays too strong a grasp on this world's goods. Another is forward in every good work, but lacks the contemplative spirit which alone could guide him to work wisely. And still another loves truth, and asks nothing better than to be allowed to study and meditate upon its mysteries; but he shrinks from active service, from the toil of ministering to the ignorant, the sick, the poor, the rude. "The child is father of the man,"

says Wordsworth; and we may add, "And the man is often as childish as his father." None of us are ripened and mature men, complete at all points, lacking in none.

And how shall we be made complete save by manifold trials borne with good fidelity? How are lads changed into men mature enough to face and use the world? By being kept at home, guarded from all strain, all temptation, all hardness—no wind suffered to visit their cheek too roughly? or by being sent out to face all weathers, even the worst; to mix with men of many kinds, even the worst; to withstand all temptations, even the worst? As lads are made men, so are the sons of God made complete men in Christ. The Church has *milkshops* enough and to spare! It would have nothing else but for the manifold trials which God calls some of us to face, in order that, by faithfully and patiently meeting them, we may be trained in the image and for the service of that Son of man who Himself was made perfect by the things which He suffered.

Let us then ask for wisdom and grace to "count it all joy when we are compassed about by manifold trials, knowing that the proving of our faith worketh patience," and that if we "let patience have her perfect work" in us, not hurrying to escape from the trials by which our fidelity is tested and trained, we ourselves shall grow into "perfect and entire" men, "lacking nothing," though now we lack so much.

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