

The early church faced significant persecution. For many, it meant the loss of their jobs and means of supporting themselves and their families. For others, it meant the rejection of their families and friends, or it meant torture and death. Many were questioning where God was, why was he letting this happen, and was it worthwhile to remain loyal to Jesus Christ.

What would you want to say to these early believers to encourage them?

James writes to Christ-followers who were struggling with this tension.

James 1:2-4 (NIV)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Why is our natural tendency to shrug off these words as being too idealistic?

If we remember that these words are actually written by God through James, and that God is very serious in what he speaks to us, how might we view these words differently?

What perspective is God adding here that could allow us to embrace suffering differently?

God tells us that suffering will occur but that he can take the suffering this world throws at us and turn it into something that accomplishes his divine purposes.

How does suffering make us mature and not “lacking anything”?

Suffering forces us to take a stand on what we believe versus what we experience. It challenges us to determine whether we live for our present or our future; or whether we live for God's purpose or for our own. As we go through suffering, everything that is not pure in our faith gets stripped away and we can see where we truly stand with regard to God's role in our life. It is often disturbing to see how much of our relationship with God is rooted in what he does for us.

When we come to the place of complete surrender of our lives to God's purposes, then we will be mature and will lack nothing in our relationship with God.

Hebrews 2:10 (NIV)

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

How was Jesus made perfect through his suffering?

Perfection comes from full surrender to the will of the Father in the face of death to self and to our desires. By suffering in the extreme way he did, Jesus surrendered fully to the will of the Father. It is easy to submit when blessings are being received, but the true test of faith is submission in the face of intense suffering. In suffering, we either call Jesus Lord or we choose to center our lives on ourselves.

Have there been times in your life when you felt tempted to abandon God due to the suffering you were experiencing?

Have there been times in your life where, in hindsight, you see that God used your trials to strengthen your faith in him and to make you more mature?

God continues to speak through James:**James 1:5-8 (NIV)**

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

In the midst of this discussion on suffering, what prayer request is blatantly missing?

Prayer that the source of the suffering be removed is not mentioned at all. If God has a sovereign purpose for our suffering, whether as a statement to the spiritual realm or for our maturity, then to remove it would be counter to his purposes for our life.

Why should we ask God for wisdom when in the midst of suffering?

If God isn't necessarily going to remove the suffering, then what we need is wisdom to know how to navigate it in ways that continue to strengthen our **relationship** with him and to allow us to **represent** him well to others.

God tells us that he will shepherd us through the "valley of the shadow of death" as long as we follow his lead (Psalm 23:4).

Asking for wisdom is much more practical than knowing "why" suffering is occurring. Even if we could understand the reason for suffering, it would not show us how to get through it. God promises that he will give us wisdom to get through circumstances. He will teach us how we should respond to crises, make decisions and how to sustain our relationship with God through it all.

Why does James stress the issue of not doubting?

Our tendency is to ask God for wisdom and then continue to be anxious.

Have you ever asked God for wisdom and then continued to fret about what to do?

What is the inconsistency in that?

It conveys that we don't really believe God giving us wisdom. If we ask God for something he specifically tells us to ask for (i.e. wisdom) and then question whether or not he will give it to us, we challenge the very character of God. That type of prayer doesn't travel very far. James says that when we ask God for wisdom, we need to trust that he is giving it to us and then to act accordingly.

Nothing we are experiencing has caught God off guard or unaware. He knew before we were born that we would face this trial and he has promised to walk us through it if we will turn to him for support and wisdom.

How do we know if we are headed in the right direction?

This comes back to the prayer of asking for wisdom; if you prayed it, believe you have been given it.

There are some questions, similar to discerning God's voice, which we need to ask in discerning God's leading:

- 1) Have you been seeking direction through the Bible?
- 2) Have you been asking for wisdom?
- 3) Is there unity in the Spirit within the family of God on this direction?
- 4) Has God opened a way for you to head?
- 5) Is there a sense of peace once you've made your decision?

If we believe God is giving us the wisdom we need, how will we approach the situation differently?

- We will not keep second-guessing ourselves.
- We will proceed with confidence, trusting God is leading us each step of the way.
- We will not be anxious because we know our lives are in his hands and we know God knows the way through the wilderness.
- Instead of becoming angry with God, we learn to rely on him more deeply.

Summary of Daniel 3:

King Nebuchadnezzar made a statue of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on a plain in Babylon. Everyone, when indicated, was to bow down and worship the golden image or be thrown into a blazing furnace. Choosing to stay loyal to God, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to the image and were consequently reported to King Nebuchadnezzar. The king once again issued the instructions to them about what they were to do and added the ominous end note, *"But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"*

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were three young Hebrew men who were taken captive as slaves from Israel and brought to Babylon.

What type of frustrations could they have potentially had with God during this time?

If they bowed down to the golden image under duress, could anyone have blamed them?

Why were they willing to suffer by being burned alive, instead of insincerely bowing before a statue?

Their response:

Daniel 3:16-18 (NIV)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

- 1) Was their decision consistent with scripture?
- 2) Do you think they had issued some prayers up to God as they were being taken before the king?
- 3) Was there a unity in their spirits to the course they chose?
- 4) Did they believe God would prepare a way?
- 5) Did they have a sense of peace about their approach to this moment of suffering?

What is so powerful about their statement in verse 18?

They are declaring that God comes first and foremost in their life and takes priority even over intense suffering, torture, and death. They are fully submitted to the will of the Father, even if it means extreme suffering. God first - self second.

How do you think standing together helped them through this trial?

What lessons can we learn from their friendship?

When we are united with spiritual friends we have the strength to stand firm in the midst of whatever suffering we may endure.

When we are all alone, it is easier to give into pressure and to allow our thinking about life, God, and holiness to become distorted. Spirit-filled friends hold us accountable and keep us on the right track in our thinking and actions.

If God had allowed them to be burned in the fire – would it change your perception of what they should have done?

Would God still be holy, just, and loving had he not rescued them?

How do you feel about God when you are going through suffering or hear about others going through suffering?

If we have given our lives completely over to God, then the question can never be “WHY?” it must simply be, “WHAT?”

“WHAT, God, do you want me to do, as your servant, in the midst of this pain?”

If we ask for WISDOM, he promises to give it to us.

Is there any area in your life where you need to surrender the need to know “WHY” and are willing to simply embrace the “WHAT”?

Spend time praying as a group for the various struggles each one faces and ask God to give his wisdom to know how to navigate through the suffering in a way that will glorify him and build his kingdom.