

Learning to Rejoice In Difficulties

Rich Nathan

August 31-September 1, 1996

Growing Into Maturity

James 1:1-4

This morning I am going to begin a new series out of the book of James. It is a series that I am calling "Growing Into Maturity." Part of the reason why I am going to start a series on Christian maturity is because of the number of people that we now have in the church that have recently (and by recently, I mean the last year or so) made decisions to become followers of Jesus. I mentioned to you last week that we had a marvelous response to Summer Harvest. I do need to make a correction and that is that I had been told that there were slightly more decisions for Christ at the crusade than there actually were. Last week I mentioned that there were 150+ decisions for Christ through the Summer Harvest. Actually, the number was a 130+. So, I definitely don't intend to inflate or mislead through numbers, but the correct number is 130+, which is still a marvelous total.

In any case, we have had so many folks making decisions for Christ that we need to be speaking about maturity. And frankly, I am concerned as I look out at the larger body of Christ that many Christians believe that becoming mature is automatic. That so long as I hang around for 15-20 years, I will by definition be a mature Christian. All we have to do is just log additional time. So long as I punch the clock, I must be moving forward.

Nothing could be further from the truth than that Christian growth and Christian maturity is automatic. The fact is that we can all point to people who made decisions for Christ 20-25 years ago and are still nothing other than big spiritual babies, still functioning like babies, still relating like babies. It is appropriate when a 2-year old acts like a 2-year old, talks like a 2-year old and makes messes like a 2-year old. But when 20-year old acts like a 2-year old, or a 50-year old acts like a 2-year old, we have a real problem on our hands. My series, therefore, is not just for those who have recently made decisions for Christ, although there is a high degree of motivation to teach this because of the number of decisions for Christ that we have recently seen, it is also for the larger bulk of us who while having made decisions many years ago for Christ, may not be as mature as we ought to be.

Let me read to you from today's text. James 1:1,

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings! Consider it pure joy, my brothers; whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Now, because we are going to be doing a multiple week study of the book of James, I would like to give you some background to the letter in this first week.

Then we will look at the subject of today's talk, which is going to be learning to rejoice in difficulty.

We start the letter off: James, a servant of God. Who is James? Who is it that wrote this letter? Of all the people in the New Testament, who could be likely candidates for writing the letter? There are only two who have the stature, the prominence, that they could introduce themselves without really much other description. James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, who was one of the original twelve—in fact, that James was part of Jesus' inner circle. Peter, James and John. And the second person is James, the brother of the Lord.

Now, the first James, the son of Zebedee, one of the original 12 disciples, was martyred in 44 AD. It is possible that he is the author of this letter. Church history is virtually unanimous, however, in assigning this letter to the other James, the Lord's brother.

James, the Lord's brother, is a man who is mentioned over and over throughout the New Testament. First of all, you need to know that Jesus had many brothers and sisters, actually half brothers and sisters. As most of you know, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, by a miraculous act of conception via the Holy Spirit. The Bible does not give us permission to speculate about exactly how the virgin birth took place. There certainly is no hint of copulation between God and a person. There is none of that. All we are told is that there was a miracle and Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary.

But the Bible is also clear that Jesus had many other brothers and sisters. Mark 6:3 mentions his brothers by name. John 7 tells us that he had a number of brothers who did not believe in him. The portrayal of Jesus' brothers and sisters in the gospels is of an entire family who during Jesus' earthly life, did not believe in him. Did not think that he was the Messiah. Did not follow him.

By the way, we have a controversy in the church world in that Eastern Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholic Christians have taught for many centuries that Mary continued as a virgin to her death. The doctrine is called The Doctrine of Perpetual Virginity. Mary continued as a virgin to her death and that she never had other children other than the Lord Jesus Christ. The suggestion is that all of these people mentioned as brothers and sisters of Jesus were Joseph's by a prior marriage – thus they were his step-brothers – or, as some Catholic interpreters suggest, were not brothers at all but cousins. I think that both thoughts are suspect in the light of the Bible's teaching. They both are designed to support a dogma, a doctrine of the church, which is from a Greek perspective that sex was unholy. Therefore the church thought that Mary was a perpetual virgin. But the Bible is not against sexuality in marriage. Actually it is very pro sex in marriage. Just read the Song of Solomon. The most natural reading of the text is that Mary had other children after Jesus.

So it appears, to me at least, that Mary had other children after the birth of Jesus in the normal way. She slept with her husband, Joseph, and they had a large family. James was one of the brothers.

And the Bible teaches that James, this half brother of Jesus' through his mother Mary, this James was converted as a result of seeing Jesus Christ raised from the dead. One of the people who Jesus specifically appeared to, along with

appearing to the 11 apostles minus Judas, along with appearing to the apostle Paul, one of the people that Jesus, the risen Christ, appeared to was his half brother, James. And if you are taking notes, you may want to jot down in your notes 1 Corinthians 15:7.

What do we know about James following this encounter with the risen Lord and his conversion? We know that James went on to become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, the mother church of Christianity. Paul calls him the “pillar of the church.” And we see James in Acts 15 presiding over the church in Jerusalem. James was not only the presiding elder, the bishop over the church in Jerusalem, but we also learn from scripture that James was apparently a very powerful evangelist.

I want you to see something here. In Acts 21:20, if you have a Bible, I would like you to turn there. Acts 21:20. This is on the occasion of the apostle Paul visiting Jerusalem and the reporting to Paul of what is going on in Jerusalem. They say:

“When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul, ‘You see, brothers, how many thousands of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law.’”

Literally, the text reads: “You see how many tens of thousands of Jews believe.” The expression would be used for the number 50,000. Paul is getting a report that there were 50,000 Jews who embraced Jesus within the cultural context of Judaism. They retained their distinctive Jewish heritage, they related to Jesus using Jewish metaphors, probably calling him Son of David, Anointed One. So they continued to relate out of the thought forms of Judaism, yet their allegiance was to Jesus. 50,000 Jews. We are talking about 10% of Palestine.

Don’t let anyone ever tell you that Jews don’t believe in Jesus. All of his original followers were Jews. He was a Jew. The original 12 were Jews. And we see this huge population of Jews who turned to Jesus. After the Roman invasion of Palestine, these Jews were both persecuted and were alienated from the larger Jewish community and they were eventually assimilated into the growing Gentile church.

But James was a leader in the church, half brother of Jesus, likely a powerful evangelist. We read outside of the Bible about his death from a number of sources. It appears that he was killed by some Jewish priest in the Temple as he was going up to worship God. As a good Jew, he made daily pilgrimages to the Temple to worship and pray. It is recorded that he was either stoned to death or clubbed. James became a martyr in the early 60’s of the 1st Century. For those of you who are interested, there is an account of it in the Jewish Roman historian, Josephus, who wrote about the happenings in Palestine in the 60’s and early 70’s of the 1st Century.

What is the occasion or setting of this letter sent by James?

I believe the occasion is the persecution that broke out against Christian Jews by their non-Christian brethren that is recorded in Acts 8:1. It says,

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and

mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."

We have a situation of an outbreak of persecution against these Christian Jews and their scattering away from Jerusalem. That is why it says in James 1: *"To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations."* Stephen, a great leader and miracle worker in the early church, had just been stoned and martyred. It says the church was mourning for him deeply. And James writes on the occasion of severe trials that these new Jewish Christians were undergoing.

You say, "Well, what was the nature of the trials?"

You have to remember that Christianity has always had its widest appeal to the oppressed. That the main growth of Christianity has always been among the poor, among the dispossessed, among the guilt-ridden. In the first century, it was the poor, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the alienated who responded to a message of forgiveness for their sins, hope for the future, justice through the coming of Christ and his vindication and his judgment. These were the people who responded and said, "What we are hearing in Christianity is good news."

So, these folks would naturally be living in a state of trials. They were poor. Then, of course, they were undergoing this persecution. Apart from the outbreak of persecution, which would have been in the 40's, Christian Jews in Palestine had a hard way to go in general. They would always be the last hired, first fired. They could not expect to get justice in Jewish courts. They would be like minorities in America are today. Always having to work a little harder to get ahead. Not sure they are going to get a fair shake from the justice system. Always being on the margin, always being on the outside.

It is in a setting of writing to poor people, hurting people, people undergoing stress and trials, that James writes this letter urging his beloved Jewish brothers on to maturity. This first talk is going to be titled, "Learning to Rejoice in Difficulties."

You face trials of many kinds. James speaks about trials of various kinds - this phrase can be translated as multicolored or a rainbow of trials. Any and every trial. The different ways that trials arrive can be as multifaceted and multicolored as the people to whom suffering comes. Now friends, I think it's important to know exactly what James is referring to when he speaks about 'trials of many kinds.' Those that can claim the promises that we're going to be reading about in James 1:2-4. To whom does this apply? Well, I think that there are basically three categories of trials that all difficulties fall under for the Christian.

First of all, there are trials that we undergo because we have forsaken Jesus. Many times Christians encounter great difficulty and great pain because they have broken ranks with the Lord. They have stopped following their commander, broken ranks with him. They have separated themselves from him and are off doing their own thing. Now they are experiencing the discipline of the Lord. As they're off doing their own thing, they suffer. This suffering may be the natural consequence of doing something stupid or wrong.

Or it may be the result of the discipline of the Lord. I'm thinking of having promiscuous sex outside of marriage and getting a sexually transmitted disease.

I'm thinking of overspending and living under the burden of huge credit card debt. I'm thinking of being lazy in school, not putting in the effort and then failing an exam or doing poorly overall and not being able to get a good job as a result. I'm thinking of having destroyed a relationship because you've gossiped about your friends. I'm thinking about ruining your marriage through spousal abuse. Nowhere in the Bible does it say when you encounter trials that are a direct result of your forsaking of Jesus that you are to rejoice — to leap in the air and clap! Rather, the Bible says to you who have broken ranks with Jesus: get back in line, turn around, and repent! Honestly acknowledge your failure and become a good follower again. The trials that are being spoken of in James 1 have nothing to do with those things that are the result of forsaking Jesus.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are also trials that occur because we follow Jesus directly. Because we follow him. Matthew chapter five talks to us about that. Jesus says *"blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil about you because of me—because of me! In that case, rejoice and be glad!"* There are trials and sufferings that take place because you're a Christian. Jesus says in the book of John 'the reason the world hates you is because it hated me.'

When a husband gets down on his wife because she's a Christian, because she reads her Bible, because she want to go to church, because she wants to tithe to the church. When friends won't be friends with you anymore because you made a Christian commitment. When people try to put you in an unfair box, accuse you of all kinds of bad motives, call you an extremist, ultra-fundamentalist or worse, because you are a Christian, certainly those are some of the trials that James is saying to you: rejoice. You can rejoice! And the reason that you can rejoice is because Jesus tells us in Matthew chapter five that when you get insulted or persecuted because you are following him, your reward is going to be great. You have a great future ahead of you.

However I don't think that James is restricting the various kinds, the multicolored set of trials to only those things that directly result from our following of Jesus. James has a broader perspective here. I don't think he's just talking about persecution for the cause of Christ. I would suggest that James is speaking about trials and suffering even as we follow Jesus, not because we follow him, but even as we follow him. Even though we follow him. In other words, here I am, I'm a Christian, I'm essentially walking in the light. I'm living in obedience to Christ, I'm praying in the morning, I'm reading my bible, I'm going to church, I'm endeavoring to serve the Lord, I'm tithing.

And then I encounter a trial – and by the way that little phrase "when you face various trials" is literally the same verb as is used when a ship is sailing along smoothly in the water and then runs up on a reef. James is talking about those times when your life is going along well and then your boat just slams up on a rock. You're taking on water; you're bailing as hard as you can even though you're following Jesus. The multicolored trials can be financial, you're laid off, your car just dies, your car engine explodes, there are unexpected dental bills, and there is a huge tax bill, unexpected medical bills. Your trials can be financial, your trials can be vocational, you cant find a fulfilling job, the market is glutted in

the field you studied for, you're working for a terrible boss, you are always overlooked for promotion. Your trials can be physical—you have an illness, you can't get pregnant, you've got a long-term chronic disease. Your trials can be relational, you've been unfairly slandered, and your words have been misinterpreted. You have a kid who's rebelling or parents who are ill. Maybe you're single and you want to be married. Your trial can be ministry related. Your group is collapsing, you have been dismissed from a role you love, and a leader fails to recognize your gifts. James is talking here about all those times in life when you're sailing along smoothly and without warning you smash into something by surprise. Even though you're living in general obedience to Jesus.

You've hit the rock. You are taking on water. Your adrenaline is pumping. You are bailing water. Just as there are trials of various kinds, there are reactions to trials of various kinds. How do you respond to vocational pressure? Relational problems? Physical problems? Financial stresses? Ministry difficulties? How do you respond?

Let me suggest a few common ways that folks respond. **Fear.** Oh my goodness. Life is falling apart. What is going to become of me? What is going to become of my family? I had better run. Especially if there is a relational problem, I had better get out of here. I had better get out of the church. I had better get out of the group. I am going to run away and hide. Fear.

Self-pity. Why me? Why did I have to hit this rock? Why doesn't anyone care about me? No one understands. I have to become isolated and lick my wounds.

Envy. How come these other people aren't suffering the way I am? The Psalmists, by the way, know all of these emotions. Psalm 37 speaks to us about fretting and being upset because we seem to be doing worse than other people. Why am I still single and this other person is married. Why is my marriage going so poorly? Why am I the only one who can't find a decent job? Envy.

Anger. How dare they do that to me? How dare they relate to me that way? How dare they speak to me that way? How dare God, after all I have done for him, not serve me, not help me, and not bless me.

We have fear, self-pity, envy, anger and I would suggest one more. One more reaction is **sin**. Some people under pressure continually head toward sin. In fact, I would say that the classic pattern of addicts is that when they get squeezed, they always run toward their escape, under pressure, they are back eating the cake. They are back hitting the bottle. They are back doing the sexual thing. They are back working at midnight. That is why a little bit later in James 1, James says, "*Don't let anyone say when they are tempted that they are tempted by God.*" Don't say, when you are being tried and pressured and you leap into sin, that this is the way I must deal with it.

All the reactions that I have just listed are rather negative. And a German pastor named Helmut Thielicke, who lived through the Nazi takeover of the churches, the very bleak period during Christian history during WWII and the aftermath of attempting to restore. Helmut Thielicke, who is one of my favorite preachers, said that the major defect in American Christianity is that American Christians don't know how to respond to suffering.

You know, trials and suffering is spoken about so often in the Old Testament that it is extraordinary that we Christians respond so badly to pressure—self pity, anger, running, fear, sin. I believe the first thing that we need to see regarding trials is that we have a choice in our response. Very often, when people go through trials, they believe they have a right to be self-pitying or angry. And they also believe that this is the only way to relate to the present pressure and difficulty.

One of the glorious things about being a Christian, becoming a follower of Jesus, is that we are set free to choose our responses. The Bible suggests that before we come to Christ, before the Spirit of God dwells in us, we are bound and tied up and unable to choose for God. The wonderful thing that happens when you receive the Holy Spirit through the born again experience is that you become free to choose a different course. You become free to choose a different response. You become free to choose for God even when the pressure mounts.

It is this freedom of choice that is one of the most wonderful things about being a Christian. Before I am a Christian, I always head toward anger. I always head toward self-pity. I always head toward envy. I always head toward sin. But now that the Spirit of God enters my life, I am free to choose another way.

2 Corinthians 3:17 says, *“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is set free.”*

I think a lot of Christians don’t know that they really can choose to respond differently to pressure. In fact, it is unfortunately considered uncompassionate when you challenge people’s responses to trials and suggest to them that there is another way. How dare you talk to me about my bitterness? My isolation? My escape? You are nothing but a hard-hearted Pharisee. You don’t understand.

Even some counselors believe that everyone must become angry under pressure. That if you suffer, you must go through these different stages. The Bible never suggests that you must. I am so glad for Christian counselors because they can compassionately say to the sufferer, to the one under pressure, the one whose marriage is failing, ‘I understand that your situation is extremely painful. I can’t even imagine what it must be like for you to have your husband leave. Or to go through this chronic illness. I know this must be incredibly difficult, but I would be less than your friend, I would be less than loving to you who are a Christian to say to you that on top of this pressure, you must bear the spiritual burden of an angry spirit, or the spiritual burden of a bitter spirit. That on top of the pressure that you are undergoing and the trials, you must also walk away from an intimate relationship with God.

Friends, to me, compassion means helping a person toward freedom from what cripples them. Giving hope to a person and suggesting to them that they don’t have to live this way. Popping a door to their jail cell and saying that there is a way out. That there is light at the end of the tunnel. There is hope here friend.

What is the better choice? What is the better option? What is the better reaction?

James says that it is joy. **Joy.** Consider it pure joy, my brethren, whenever you face trials of many kinds. James is linking together two words that

we virtually never connect. Joy and Pain. Joy and Suffering. Joy and Trials. Anger and pain, frustration and pain, self-pity and pain—we understand that. But joy and pain? How can this be?

And by the way, friends, James is not being original here. He is following his brother and his Lord, Jesus Christ, who also continually linked together joy and suffering. I read to you before from the Sermon on the Mount: *“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad.”*

This is also the teaching of the apostle Paul in Romans 5:3. He says, *“Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings.”* Joy and suffering. He links those two together.

This is also the teaching of the great apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1. Peter says, *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”*

James is not standing alone, but rather every writer of the New Testament says the same thing. The Christian can choose a response of joy in the midst of difficulty.

What does this mean, to have joy in trials, what am I supposed to do, say “Yippee... I’m stuck in a traffic jam and I’m forced to miss my appointment! Isn’t this great! I’m single and I want to be married! Wonderful, another bill is due! As one writer likes to put it, ‘Fantastic! There’s too much month left at the end of the dollar.’”

James, just like the rest of the New Testament writers, does not say ‘rejoice in the trials themselves.’ You can’t rejoice in the pain itself. Nobody likes pain. James says rejoice in your knowledge of the outcome of the trial. Rejoice because you know how this movie is going to turn out. Rejoice because you’ve read the end of the book. Rejoice because it is not a mystery what this trial will produce in your life.

The reason why Christians rejoice in trials, according to the book of James, is because they know that trials alone develop maturity. Listen to what he says: ‘consider it pure joy my brothers when you face trials of many kinds.’ Why?

Here’s the reason, verse three: *‘because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance, perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.’* Christians rejoice in trials because they understand the spiritual dynamics that are at work in difficulty, because they now grasp the purpose of God in trial. God has let us into the factory and he’s allowed us to observe this incredible manufacturing process in which trials flow in at the top of the machine, and from the bottom by this incredible, marvelous act of God, what gets stamped out is Christian maturity.

Think about it. By the miracle of God’s trials we get transformed in our life into something really precious: Christian maturity. That’s why we rejoice. It’s like discovering a machine that turns lead into gold, or water into gasoline. Or you’ve got this machine where you put newspaper into one end and you turn the crank and out the other end come hundred dollar bills. If you had a machine like

that in your basement, you'd be cranking down there day and night. It's amazing, what an incredible transformation, and newspaper into hundred dollar bills!

James says that we know something. Through this spiritual processing of God, God can turn trials into maturity.

Let me put it this way: Do you want to become a mature Christian? The Greek word by the way for 'mature' is *teleoi*. It means reaching the goal, fulfilling your potential, becoming all that God intends you to be. Do you want to become all that God intends you to be?

Not only mature, but James also says that you may become mature and complete, lacking nothing. The word complete means perfect or whole. Would you like to become all that God intends you to be and also become whole? Where all the broken places in your life, all of your stuff, all the unhealed things from your family background, and traumas and sinful choices—all of that stuff gets healed. Mature and whole! Would you like that?

James says the reason we Christians rejoice is that we know something — we know that pain is almost always a necessary part of the maturity process. And when we undergo pain, we have to reckon that this maturity process is going on. Ah, my boat has gone up on a rock, but if I go through this process, God is going to produce out of it maturity.

Now friends let me underline a point that I started with today. Many Christians live with this enormous fallacy that spiritual maturity is automatic. That because God has filled me with potential, gifted me, called me, and then I will become automatically all that God wants me to be. That I will be whole, healed, useful to him.

Friends there's nothing more common in life than failed potential. Athletes that never measured up to their press releases, and their expectation of those that drafted them. How many baseball players are going to be the next Mickey Mantle? How many basketball players will be the next Michael Jordan? How many football players are drafted number one and end up being busts in the pros? How many kids never reach their potential in school, always are underachievers? There's nothing more common in life than failed potential. It is not an automatic, that just by hanging around you will become all that God intends you to be.

There is another possibility other than spiritual maturity, and that is continued spiritual immaturity. Let me put this plainly. Do you want to continue to be a spiritual baby until you die? Or to use John Wimber's words: 'Would you rather grow up before you grow old?'

You know in the New Testament, there are many groups of Christians and many churches that have not grown up before they grew old.

So now, what do spiritual babies look like? How do I know if I'm growing up? If I'm reaching my potential in Christ or if I'm still, even though I've been a Christian for five or ten or thirty years, I'm still in infancy. I've listed for you on your outlines just a few characteristics of spiritual babies. Spiritual babies are unstable.

The apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:14. *"Then we will not longer be like infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every*

wind of teaching." Spiritual babies are unstable. They're up and down; they're hot and cold. They're into something for a little while and then they're bored and then they're into something else. "I'm really into kids now, now women's discipleship, now music, now the food pantry. There's an instability in spiritual babies, and inconsistency. "I'm really going to commit myself to small groups, I'm going to do it!" Spiritual babies show up for two weeks and then get busy, and don't show up for six months. "I'm really going to start having a quiet time, I really am." A spiritual baby does it for two mornings. They're totally into Jesus one month - "I'm going to serve, start witnessing" and then they blow out for six months. And then they're in to him again.

The mark of a mature person is stability, consistency—year in year out, they're people that you can count on, rely on. When they make commitments they're there. They're not roller coaster Christians.

The second thing that you see with spiritual babies is that they're undiscerning. The apostle Paul talks about being pushed about by every wind of doctrine and teaching. Hebrews five, verse twelve, speaking about spiritual babies says that you need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk is still an infant and is not acquainted with teaching about righteousness but solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to train themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Spiritual babies are undiscerning. Every spiritual snake-oil salesman who comes down the pike constantly takes them for rides, doctrinally. They're sitting ducks for every shyster who publishes books about Jesus is going to come back in 1988, or if you just go to this meeting a revival is going to break out here. They're sending money to teachers who teach foolishness. They can't discern what sounds like the Bible. And they can't discern righteousness from unrighteousness.

Spiritual babies are shocked when they are told you can't sleep with your girlfriend anymore. They say 'I didn't know that was a part of Christianity.' It is. I didn't know that two people who aren't married can't live together. I didn't know that Christians aren't supposed to be divorced. I didn't know that. Spiritual infants are undiscerning about doctrine and about righteousness.

And spiritual babies are unreconciled with other Christians, unstable, undiscerning... unreconciled. Paul speaks about all of the divisions in the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3 and there he calls the people babies. You're not mature. You're not mature if you can't reconcile, you're a baby.

One of the truly marvelous things that I've watched over the summer, is people in this church, out of much pain, out of much difficulty, in humility and in truth telling, reconcile-get restored, not run away. But babies can't reconcile. Babies run away. I've talked with folks who have been in eight churches in seven years. Every church they go to there are problems. I say, "eight churches in seven years!" I understand why people leave a church. They're not getting fed there, they want more of God for themselves, they want a richer worship experience, and they're not connected. They've been hurt or abused by someone in the church. I understand that. But eight churches in seven years! That's spiritual infancy, friends.

Or the person who is constantly living in a hornet nest. All of their relationships are constantly in disrepair; they're like destructive twister that creates havoc in small groups and families. Spiritual infancy.

Some of you might say, "Rich, I see myself in some of this and I really don't like this. I see myself as the unstable, hot and cold, up and down Christian or the undiscerning Christian. I have been in this or that."

Or as the unreconciled Christian. But I want to become mature. I don't want to remain a baby forever. How do I become mature? Understand that pain doesn't automatically create maturity. There is a process that James describes.

He says, "Count it joy when you face trials of many kinds." Why? Because you know it is the testing of your faith. Let me give you some images to think about what is happening in a trial. There is a test happening. It is God's pop quiz. I am not saying that God sends everything our way, but God is in control of the process. And I believe that difficult circumstances are like one of God's pop quizzes. When I taught at OSU, every once in a while to keep the students sharp, I would say to them, "okay, put away your books, we are going to take a little pop quiz. Take out a pencil. I'm going to write a couple of questions and I would like you to answer them very briefly."

You know, we may feel really well prepared in the Christian life. We may feel that we have really arrived somewhere in terms of our relationship with God. And God gives us a little pop quiz and says, "Well, let's see how you are doing." Sometimes you do real well. You pass the quiz. You pass the test. Temptation comes your way and you push it aside. But sometimes you fail miserably. You start grumbling, you complain, you freak out. God knows what we are about. He is not quizzing us to find out new information about us. He is never shocked by how we do on the quizzes. But we need to see ourselves. We need to know how well we are doing in an area. We need to see it. And we need to be shown over and over our need for God and our need for improvement in an area. Pop quiz time.

Or let me give you a different picture. One of the Greek words for trials in the Bible literally means, "squeezing." Squeezing or being pressured. I think of the testing like squeezing of a tube of toothpaste. You squeeze the tube and what is inside comes shooting out.

And I believe that trials and negative circumstances, difficulties, are designed to put the squeeze on you to show you what is in you. Have you been squeezed recently? I don't mean hugged. I mean pressed. Has someone put the press on you? You got into a misunderstanding with another person; they misread you and misread your motives? Have you been squeezed by financial difficulties, by illness, by family conflict, by pressure at work? What is coming out of the tube?

See, it is difficulty that reveals what is inside. It is easy to maintain our social coolness, our patience, and our love when everything is going nice and we are sailing along a clear lake. But when we are taking on water, what comes out?

You know the testing, the squeezes, the pop quizzes are designed to really ask the question: What do you want out of life? Do you want to be

mature? If so, then embrace what is happening as part of God's process. If your goal is to have it go easy and to have a minimum amount of conflict, to keep your head down, to let the bullets fly overhead and just hunker down and wait out the storm, friends, you will never become mature. The Lord tests us.

And he goes on to say that we have to let this testing develop perseverance. For most of us when the fire gets turned up, we want to leap out of the pan or get off of the stove already. We want to say to the Lord, "Lord, I am done simmering. It's soup now." But sometimes God keeps us simmering. And keeps pressing in the question, "Do you want to become mature?" Perseverance means the ability to continue for a long time. It means stick-a-ability. You can hang in there and crash through the quitting points. It means that you don't bolt and run. You don't drop out of sight. Perseverance.

Trials produce in a person the ability to not give up in the face of problems. To keep trusting. To keep praying. To keep believing. To keep obeying. Ultimately, we become mature.

See, God is in control of the whole process. And I know that God sees my weaknesses. God knows my rough edges and knows what needs to be knocked off. God is like a potter. Have you ever watched a potter forming a clay pot? You know sometimes the clay has to be slapped around quite a bit. The potter gets pretty rough with the clay from time to time. It looks like the clay is being beaten and thrown all over the wheel. But in the end, it becomes a beautiful vessel.

Some of our difficulties, some of our stresses, some of our relational problems, can be looked at as, "Well, the potter has me on the wheel and I am being whacked around. I didn't invite it. And I don't enjoy it. But I know that a process is going on and in that I rejoice. God's got me on the wheel again."

I can tell you, and I say this without a hint of spiritual boasting, that from time to time, I have really been able to rejoice in difficulties. Not always. I don't know if it is even often. Lots of times I turn to self-pity, envy and anger and all the rest. But from time to time, I really feel God cornering me. God pressuring me and leaving me no option other than to cry out to him. And sometimes I realize that is really what I need. I need to be pressed against the wall. It is good for me, God, to be so dependent on you. It is good for me, Lord, now that I see that my only hope is in you and that if you don't deliver me, nothing good will ever happen. Then I feel like this is okay and that I am depending on God. That I am a Christian. And I can rejoice in my difficulties. Let's pray.