

Today, I am sharing with you the last message on the series “Control: Cans and Cant’s.” The title of today’s message is “Responding to Challenges with Grace and Strength.”

But before I start, I need to ensure you know what I am talking about. Have you experienced challenges in your life? Do you know how it feels when the rug is pulled out from under your feet? Silly questions, we all have the answer.

As your pastor, I know we have people here at church who are going through different “storms” in their lives right now. Many of you have been hit hard with illness, deaths in families, and family crises. I understand you and am with you. I have had my share of battles in life, some of which I have shared with you in my sermons before. Even now, my current battle with neck and shoulder pain that some of you know well. Many of you would say, “Count me in that number; I am going through the fire right now, too!”

So, what is a Christian to do when faced with illness, disappointment, disaster, or despair? How we respond to those challenges is what makes all the difference.

To talk about this, we find an insightful word in the Letter of James 1: 2-4. It reads,

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance complete its work, so that you may be complete and whole, lacking in nothing.”

This letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus and a leader in the early Christian community, to Jewish Christians who were dispersed outside Israel. In this passage, he urges believers to adopt a rather unconventional approach to hardships. He encourages them to “consider it pure joy” when encountering various trials. This statement is thought-provoking because it calls for a joyful attitude in situations that would typically provoke despair or complaint. James’s rationale behind this advice is that these trials serve as a test of faith, leading to the development of perseverance or endurance. He explains that the process of enduring hardships isn’t merely about withstanding them but about letting these experiences contribute to our spiritual growth.

Basically, James is saying that trials are not an “if” but a “when” and that our Christian journey is not just about enduring them but about growing and maturing in faith through these experiences.

This reality check is vital right here. We often fall into the trap of seeking a life free of difficulties, but this is not the promise of the Gospel. Strikingly, Paul and Peter said basically the same thing,

And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” Romans 5: 3-4

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though

perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” 1 Peter 1: 6-7

Peter and Paul collectively convey the same message that trials and afflictions are bound to happen at some point in our lives more than once and should come as no surprise.

Yet, they do, don't they? “You had a trial? What a shocker! Of course, you did! That is what happens in this world!” It would be like a young man playing football for the first time, going to the field for his initial practice, and getting knocked down by one of the other players. What if he came running back to you on the sideline, crying, “He knocked me down!”? What would you say? Son, that is what happens out there!

If getting hit is going to happen in this life, where is the joy in it? Consider this: When suffering stems from our own poor choices or sin, it can destroy us and those close to us. There is no joy there. But, if it presents itself as a harsh teacher, leading us through a path of humility, introspection, repentance, and confession, it opens the door to God's grace, offering us forgiveness and the strength to correct our course and find reconciliation with others. The joy here is a life that is transformed and reconciled.

What about when the suffering is due to something beyond our control, like natural disasters, illnesses, or the loss of loved ones? These do not reflect our failings, nor are God's punishments, but are part of living in a fallen world. Our response here shifts from confession and repentance to one of faith and trust in God's sovereignty. We don't dismiss our grief or pain but choose to find comfort and strength in God. The joy here is experienced in the community's support when we are aching and in need and through the trust and hope that God will make everything right in the end.

But what about the type of trial that comes from God or allows it to happen? Are those real? Yes, they are. Sometimes, God allows specific challenges for our spiritual growth. These challenges are not meant to punish but to refine us, build our endurance, and deepen our dependence on God. Perhaps these are the ones James had more in mind. They may serve to develop our resilience, patience, or compassion. In these moments, we are called to embrace our trials with a joy that stems from understanding God's purpose: molding us into Christ's likeness.

Whatever the case, the underlying fact is that when we respond to life's challenges with faith, we will get the grace and strength that will bring joy into our lives regardless of the trials we endure. When we do this, trials become a catalyst to handle future difficulties with greater ease and confidence and to prepare us for a higher purpose “so that you may be complete and whole, lacking in nothing.”

But this can't happen without the right mindset. If we think we are entitled to blessings and a trial-free life, we are going to fail; if we think all our suffering is due to our sin or someone else's sin, we are going to fail; if we think God causes all of our suffering to teach a lesson, we are going to fail. By the same token, if we think there is only suffering for us in this life and no blessings, we are not going to end well; if we think our sin and poor choices have no consequences, we are not going to make it; if we reject the idea that God does not test our

character and that there is no purpose in trials, we are not going to learn and grow in our faith but will remain weak and feeble Christians.

What's the meaning of all this, then? We are not called to endure passively but to engage with these trials actively with a faith perspective. A faith perspective is what transforms our understanding of suffering. It does not diminish the pain or the difficulty, but it gives us a framework to find comfort, meaning, and perseverance in our struggles.

This reminds me of the story of the butterfly in the cocoon. Do you know it?

“A man found a cocoon of a butterfly. One day, a small opening appeared; he sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then, it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and could go no farther. Then the man decided to help the butterfly, so he took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon.

The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to support the body, which would contract in time. Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.”

What the man, in his kindness and haste, did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were God's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

The lesson in this story is that the struggle to emerge was necessary for the butterfly to develop the strength to fly. Likewise, our struggles are instrumental in developing our spiritual strength and maturity.

In my own life, I have learned this lesson of faith perspective. There are lessons I would never have learned had I not suffered. There are prayers I would never have prayed had I not suffered. There are confessions I would never have made had I not suffered. There are sermons I would never have preached had I not suffered. There are ministries I would never have had had I not suffered. There are people whom my witness would have never blessed had I not suffered. There is a maturity that I would never have experienced had I not suffered. There is praise that would have never been given to God had I not suffered. And I am certain the same thing will be true for you, too.

My friends, God can use your suffering and trials to grow you, mature you, make you more like Jesus, and for you to witness God's grace and strength to others—whether the suffering or trial is self-inflicted, beyond our control, or divinely ordained.

Here is the good news: Our struggles, whether self-inflicted, beyond our control, or even divinely ordained, are not in vain. They serve a higher purpose in shaping us into the likeness of Christ, strengthening our faith, and preparing us for greater things. Just like the struggle of the

butterfly in the cocoon is necessary for it to fly, our trials are essential for our spiritual growth and maturity.

So, I invite you to view your challenges through the lens of faith so you can have the right mindset. And let us not be discouraged or overwhelmed by the trials we face but embrace them with grace and strength. Let us trust in God's sovereignty and purpose in our lives, knowing he is with us, refining us, and using our experiences for our good and his glory.

As we step forward, let us carry this message in our hearts, responding to every challenge with the confidence that in Christ, we can and will overcome.