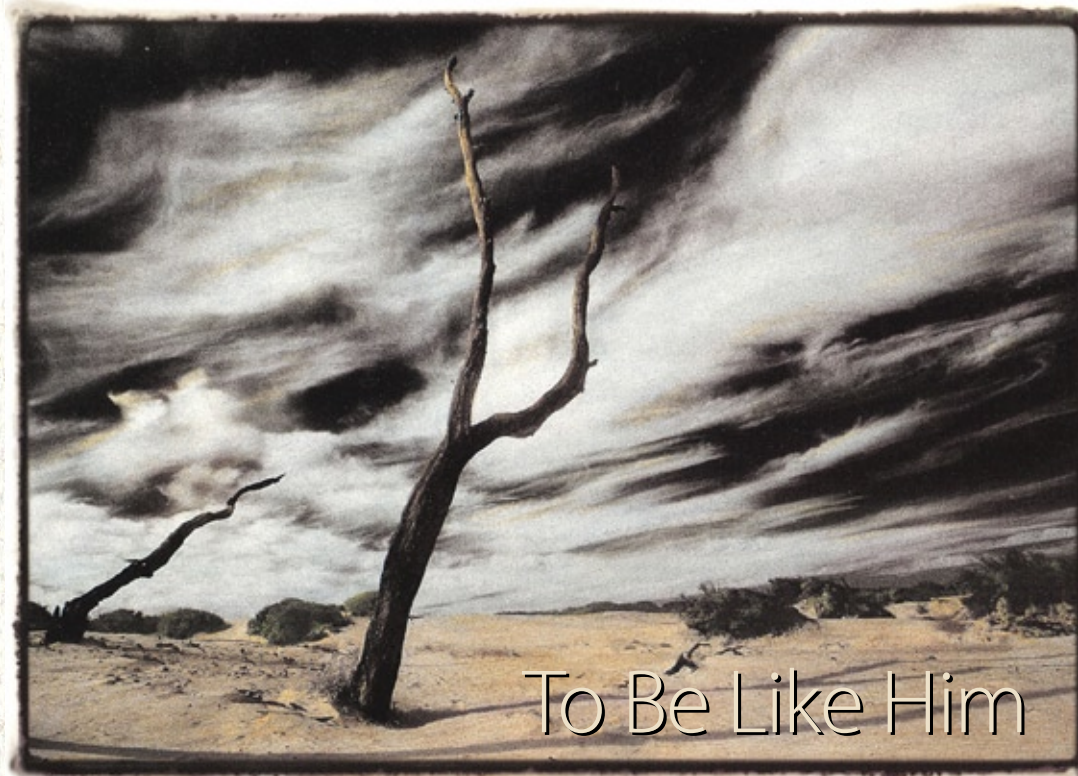


*People think it should require little effort to be like Christ.
But why should it be any easier for us, than it was for Him?*



Practice

TRIALS SEEM TO ARRIVE either in groups—smaller inconveniences clustered sequentially for maximum effect—or as one massive blow that renders us stupefied. Small trials that come by themselves are usually handled with ease, then quickly forgotten. But some, like a string of headaches that never depart, are made more troublesome by their unwieldy number.

Any one of life's smaller trials, taken by itself, can be entirely manageable; life for everyone is filled with such challenges. But the sheer, repetitive magnitude—the unrelenting parade of one small crisis after another—becomes more than a little oppressive. And in our frustration and pain, we begin to wonder if they will ever end.

The brother of Christ states with brave clarity,

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James 1:2-4

I recall vividly the incredulous expression on the face of the man sitting across from me during a study of this passage. He was having a terrible

time understanding this Biblical concept—that we are not only to rejoice *after* our trials, but to consider it joy *during* our trials.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;

Romans 5:3-4

We are given this instruction in several different places in His word because God knows that finding joy in trials and sufferings cuts contrary to our nature. Our first instinct is to rebel against it. It's not in our base nature to actually *enjoy* trials, so quite often we will, instead, short-circuit the recommended process from the outset. God knows that this response does not come naturally, or even easily to us.

It takes practice.

Staying in School

When faced with an extended period of waiting—such as renewing my driver's license, or sitting in the waiting room until 3:00 for a 2:00 doctor appointment—it is my habit to take along something to read. Since my taste

in reading material does not lean toward *People* magazine, but to history, biography, or commentary on Scripture—sometimes using a highlighter to mark key passages—I sometimes draw stares.

More than once I've been approached with a remark such as, "What'ya, some kinda student or something?" as if only someone formally enrolled in school would bother reading anything weightier than *Better Homes and Gardens*, or *Field and Stream*, or the very latest in beach towel paperbacks. And I really draw quizzical stares when I combine the aforementioned reading material with note-taking; this sends them reeling. Some people seem to think it perfectly bizarre that a rotund, middle-aged gentleman with thinning pate would voluntarily be highlighting passages when reading something informative.

I may have been influenced, many years ago, by the lead sax player in our band in Vietnam. Floating around the Gulf of Tonkin on the *U.S.S. Chicago* back in 1970, one of the highlights of this grim existence for him was receiving his weekly issue of *Time* magazine. Naturally, by the time it found its way to the middle of a war it no longer contained breaking news, but until it was read-through, cover to cover, it was his prized possession. At twenty-seven, he was the old man of the band, and, being eight years his junior, I was one of the youngest. At that impressionable age, I found it remarkable that instead of

simply reading the magazine, he would use it as a learning tool by actually marking any words for which he didn't know the meaning. Later, he would look them up in the dictionary, and often work them into his conversation for practice.

Because it will never come naturally to us, as attentive Christians we are to be constantly practicing and learning how to live like Christ. There is no other way we will learn how to find joy in trials. The process is not automatic; it does not progress unattended. And the most critical point in the process is our first response, for from that the rest flows.

If we respond to testing in a negative, rejecting way, we stifle the process James outlines from the outset, and it cannot proceed. If, however, we respond to testing in a positive, more receptive way, the subsequent perseverance—or “steadfastness”—will come automatically. And having come this far, we cannot help but gain maturity—which, of course, prepares us for the next, inevitable round of trials.

Embracing Discomfort

It is, admittedly, a tough concept—one that flies in the face of every human precept from time immemorial. It is actually in our nature to flee uncomfortable things, not embrace them. We seek pleasurable experiences, not painful ones.

But to anyone paying attention, the truth is clear: When times are good, we coast; when times are tough, we are pushing forward. James says that the trials are there to test our faith—to hone and refine it. Without the trials we remain incomplete.

Webster's says that one who is mature is in "a state of full development." It has been quite a few years since I've been in a darkroom, but I think I could still go through the steps in my sleep. I remember the acrid whiff of the developer, stop bath, and fix, and the gentle sting of the chemicals on the skin. I still remember how to pour the chemicals, in order, into the light-tight tank in which the film reels have been stacked, how to agitate in just the right way so as to minimize bubbles on the surface of the film. Inside that tank the film is put through a series of caustic, chemical baths which methodically strip away all the emulsified silver, removing everything but what is needed for the final image.

Gold "develops" in a similar way, by being heated and reheated until

all impurities have been purged. Fine steel is developed from pig iron by burning out the excess carbon and other impurities at temperatures reaching 1700° Fahrenheit. None of these processes are terribly pleasant, but they are necessary for refinement—for mature development.

Not only must our relationship to God be right, but the outward expression of that relationship must also be right. Ultimately, God will allow nothing to escape; every detail of our lives is under His scrutiny. God will bring us back in countless ways to the same point over and over again. And He never tires of bringing us back to that one point until we learn the lesson, because His purpose is to produce the finished product. It may be a problem arising from our impulsive nature, but again and again, with the most persistent patience, God has brought us back to that one particular point. Or the problem may be our idle and wandering thinking, or our independent nature and self-interest. Through this process, God is trying to impress upon us the one thing that is not entirely right in our lives. Whatever it may be, God will point it out with persistence until we become entirely His.

Oswald Chambers

We never graduate from the school of Christ-likeness. Until we meet Him face-to-face, until the moment when we have no more use for this mortal form, we remain in school, learning how to become increasingly like Him.

And the process is not always pleasant; like film in its acid bath, that which is not needed must be cut away to improve that which remains.

There's no getting around it: Trials will come, and it's not that trials aren't painful, but that the pain is good for us.

Through practice we learn that testing is not punishment, but improvement. By learning to not refuse delivery of the trial, we understand that it is not part of God's wrath, but His mercy.

*In the hour of trial,
Jesus plead for me,
Lest, by base denial,
I depart from Thee;
When Thou seest me waver,
With a look recall;
Nor for fear or favor
Suffer me to fall.*

*Should Thy mercy send me
Sorrow, toil, and woe;
Or should pain attend me
On my path below;
Grant that I may never
Fail Thy hand to see;
Grant that I may ever
Cast my care on Thee.*

*When, in dust and ashes,
To the grave I sink,
While heaven's glory flashes
O'er the shelving brink,
On Thy truth relying
Through that mortal strife;
Lord, receive me, dying,
To eternal life.*

James Montgomery