Sermon Series: The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity
Sermon Title: You See Your Trials as Opportunities

Text: James 1:2-8 -- Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Introduction: In his book, ***The Eye of the Storm***, **Max Lucado** tells the story of a pet bird that endured a tremendous trial in a matter of just a few moments. He writes: ***Chippie the parakeet*** never saw it coming. One second, he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over. The problems began when its owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "***hello***" when "***ssssopp***!" Chippie got sucked in. The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned. Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that her pet was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do…she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the bird with hot air. Poor Chippie never knew what hit him. A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "***Well***," she replied, "***Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares***." It's not hard to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over…that's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart. If any of you have had an experience like Chippie lately and it has taken the joy out of your life, I want to share with you an encouraging word from the Scriptures that I hope will restore a song to your heart, and make the storms you've endured or are currently enduring a little easier to bear. Just by way of context, this is **the eighth characteristic of a maturing person** from our current series, **The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity**. It goes something like this – ***You know you're growing up in Christ when you see your trials as opportunities.***

Here in this short letter that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote to Christians who were scattered among the nations, the topic of trials doesn't take long to be introduced. Many of those to whom he wrote were living in poverty and oppression, having been taken advantage of by wealthy landowners – **James 5:4-6 – Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you**. **These rich people had withheld wages from their workers and were starving their families. In addition, they had taken them to court to sanction what they had done, and, in the process, had slandered our Lord** – **James 2:6-7 – But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? 7 Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of Him to whom you belong**? ***In short, these impoverished Christians were going through some pretty severe trials and hardships***. **In light of their current state of affairs, James begins his epistle with some encouraging words by presenting the notion that FOR BELIEVERS, TRIALS ARE OPPORTUNITIES**. Let's see what we can learn from this passage about God's plan for trials. WHAT, SPECIFICALLY, CAN THEY DO FOR US?

TRIALS MAKE FOR MORE JOYFUL BELIEVERS (**James 1:2 – Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds**). **JUST AS PAUL AND PETER HAD A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TRIALS** (**Romans 5:3 – We REJOICE in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance; 1 Peter 1:6-7 – In this you REJOICE, though**

now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith…may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ), **SO DID THE HALF-BROTHER OF OUR LORD**. He **reminds Christians that God brings difficulties into our lives for a special purpose, to give us a new attitude in life**. **Trials and hardships are to be seen as occasions for REJOICING rather than DESPAIR. *This is not to say that James is suggesting trials are something to be enjoyed***. In **2 Thessalonians 1:4, he tells us they are something to be endured. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions you are enduring. However, we are to respond as a matter of choice with joy when we encounter them**. In **2 Corinthians 12:10, Paul talks about his 'thorn in the flesh' and says this about it – I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. The word 'boast' means to glory in something. Amazingly, Paul was glorying in his suffering.**

One of the ways we demonstrate a new attitude in life is by a new acceptance of trials. Christians understand that trials are an inevitability of life (**John 16:33 – In the world you have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world**). **In fact, God is the One who brings them to us** (**Philippians 1:29 – For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but to suffer for His sake**)! *The word 'granted'* means to ***'grant as a favor'***. **Coming to terms with this implies that we accept their presence and face them with joy in our hearts, knowing that God wants to use them in our lives for our good and His glory**. (Review: TRIALSMAKE FOR JOYFUL BELIEVERS.)

TRIALS MAKE FOR MORE MATURE BELIEVERS (**James 1:3-4 – for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing**). God brings trials and hardships to our lives for a reason. Not only are they helpful in giving us a new attitude, but they are also necessary to prove the quality of our faith. WHAT DO I MEAN?

- **Faith says we believe God is working THROUGH our trials**. It's one thing to experience hardship without seeing any redeeming value in it, and another completely to understand the importance of it as a tool that God uses to teach us to trust him ALL THE MORE. Someone has said, "**TESTED FAITH IS ENDURING FAITH**." In **Luke 22:31**, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "**Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat**". This would come in the form of a test of his loyalty to Christ, which for all appearances, Peter failed when He denied Him three times. But Jesus wasn't finished, "**Yet I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back strengthen your brothers.**" Our Lord allowed Peter to come under the attack of the enemy because He knew that Peter would eventually become a key leader of the early church. **In that role, it would be incumbent on him to develop a different outlook during trials, which is exactly what happened. Fast forward to Acts 5:25-42, and we see a different Peter. When the Jewish Sanhedrin put the apostles in jail because they were jealous of them, the Lord sent an angel in the middle of the night and they were miraculously set free. They did not run and hide, however, as they had previously when Jesus was arrested. Instead, they went right back into the streets of Jerusalem and proclaimed the gospel. Again, they were called to task for it. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in His name." Afterward, they left and REJOICED because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.** That's a picture of a group of men whose faith was growing!
- **Faith says we believe God will produce a better outcome FROM our trials**. When believers accept their trials as the will of God, respond in joy and determine to endure in their faith, the result is **an undivided heart** that is obedient to Christ and exemplifies His character. ***Many people, including me sometimes, want maturity, but not the trials that God uses to produce it*. Think for a moment about any hardship you might currently be enduring. Can you think of how it could be used to teach you to trust God more completely**? Back in the early 1990's just outside the tiny town of **Oracle, Arizona**, a giant greenhouse went up, covering over three acres. For two years, scientists sequestered themselves in this artificial environment called **Biosphere 2**. Inside their self-sustaining community, the Biospherians created a number of mini-environments, including a desert, rain forest, and savannah. **Nearly every weather**

condition could be simulated except one - wind. Over time, the effects of this windless environment became apparent. Within two years, a number of small trees bent over and even snapped. ***Without the stress of wind to strengthen the wood, the trunks grew weak and could not hold up their own weight***. Did you know that trials play a similar role in our lives? God does not give them to us for punishment, but for improvement. They make us stronger and healthier as we learn to trust Him. (REVIEW: TRIALS MAKE FOR JOYFUL BELIEVERS; THEY MAKE FOR MORE MATURE BELIEVERS.)

TRIALS MAKE FOR WISER BELIEVERS (**James 1:5-8 --5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways**.) THE WISDOM TO GROW THROUGH TRIALS comes to us as we ask God to provide it through CONSISTENT (i.e., the command to ask God is in the present tense -- "*let him keep on asking*") and BELIEVING ("*without any doubting*") PRAYER.

- **This wisdom is what we need**. When James uses the word "**lack**" he is implying that God's wisdom is essential if we are to grow through our trials. To those who have not yet grown to maturity and learned to depend on the wisdom of God, he encourages them to ask for it (**Proverbs 2:6 – For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding**). (*True story*) A man awoke one morning to find a puddle of water in the middle of his king-size water bed. In order to fix the puncture, he rolled the heavy mattress outdoors and filled it with more water so he could locate the leak more easily. **Unfortunately, the enormous bag of water was impossible to control and began rolling on the hilly terrain**. He tried to hold it back, but it headed downhill and landed in a clump of bushes, which poked it full of holes. **Disgusted, the man threw out the water-bed frame and moved a standard bed into his room**. The next morning, he awoke to find another puddle of water in the middle of the new bed. **Upon further inspection, he discovered that the upstairs bathroom had a leaky drain**. Too many people approach life's challenges in the same way. **They quickly assess the situation and determine a course of action without ever consulting the One who is ready and willing to hand out wisdom to those who ask for it while acting in faith**.
- **This wisdom comes in the amount we need** (i.e. **God gives generously to all without reproach**). When we ask God for wisdom to not only endure trials, but to grow through them, He does not rebuke us as if our request is some sort of annoyance to Him, like when a child who just had a drink, continually asks for another. "**Didn't you just have one**?". ***Instead, He gives us EXACTLY what we need and in the AMOUNT we need it***. There is, however, a condition for receiving it … that we exercise faith in our asking. **James is not referring to some sort of emotional feeling here that suppresses doubt, but for action that is in keeping with trust in Him**. ***God gives to those who continue to trust Him sufficient wisdom to face any trial***. Those who doubt, on the other hand, are double-minded and unstable in their Christian walk. ONE MINUTE THEY'RE ON BOARD WITH JESUS AND THE NEXT THEY'RE ACTING AS IF HE DOESN'T EVEN EXIST. **Those who waffle between trust and distrust should not expect anything from God when they seek Him during trials**. One of the reasons that some believers are overcome by their trials, then, is their own immaturity. They simply have not learned to endure in their walk with Christ despite their circumstances. They are infants in the faith and will not grow until they learn to ACCEPT their trials, REJOICE in the trials, ENDURE in their trials and MATURE in their trials.

Let's review: TRIALS MAKE FOR MORE JOYFUL BELIEVERS; THEY MAKE FOR MORE MATURE BELIEVERS, AND THEY MAKE FOR WISER BELIEVERS. So, here's some advice for all of us when it comes to hardship and suffering in life.

- **When it comes to trials, don't avoid them**. You are not ever going to completely escape them anyway. In fact, God intentionally brings them to us. So instead of trying to run from our trials, receive them with joy knowing they are part of God's plan for you.

- **When it comes to trials, don't waste them**. God puts us in these circumstances to teach us to trust Him. We learn through hardship and trouble things we could not possibly learn otherwise.

Conclusion: **Someone has said, "*God is a hard teacher. He gives the test first and then the lesson*."** During **WWII,** a farmer near London wrote to **the Scripture Gift Mission** enclosing a five-shilling ($1.25) offering. In his letter, he requested prayer that no bombs should drop on his small farm. His harvest had not been good, and his farm was very dry, with no water, and he had to buy water. **The secretary of the Mission wrote back and said he could not ask that, but instead would pray that God's will might be done. Soon afterward, Hitler's biggest bomb came down on this man's farm**. It broke all his windows, but no one was hurt. It was so big that it went down very deep and unearthed a spring. The spring not only watered his farm well, but it enabled him to let others have water too. **The next year, he had a very good harvest, and he sent a fifty-pound check as a simple way of giving thanks**. **Imagine that! Giving thanks for a bomb. Of course, it's not that hard to do when, you have THE WISDOM TO SEE the blessings that God brought from it**. ***But here's the other side: Do we, as God's children, possess the faith to rejoice in a trial when the only outcome we can count on is that you will be a more mature believer as a result***? ***That's the mark of a person who is growing up.***