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James 1:12–15, ESV.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Empowered.

One of the most common arguments used against the existence of God is that any true God would not allow so many horrific things to happen. God wouldn't allow wars, disease, natural disasters, poverty, or economic collapse, at least not if this is a loving God. I want to look at this issue from the perspective of an ancient believer – and then see what it means for us today. Remember that these early followers of Christ, perhaps from about the year 50 to the year 200, just to give us some context, lived in a far more volatile world – in terms of survival – than us. They had no modern medicine. If a person became sick, they likely died. Many children died in infancy. They lived off the land and were dependent year to year on the availability of water and on beneficial weather to provide food for themselves. When there were no crops, there was famine. They did not have

satellites or long-range military intelligence gathering capabilities, and so there was no telling when some empire might come flying in, destroy their cities and kill them. They lived every day knowing that this could be their last – and unlike us, they thought about it. So, consider what the early Christians had to lean on: God. Some of them came from previously Jewish families, but as time went on, more and more of them came from pagan cultures. They had very little in terms of religious writings from which to draw courage. What they did have was the writings of Paul. There was no official Christian canon yet, no Bible, just documents that were in circulation. There was no Christian TV, and only a fledgling clergy. Imagine how much they savored the letters of Paul. If they could read, they read them. If they could not read Greek – and most could not – the letters were read to them during small church services.

Consider this from Paul's extremely beloved letter to the church in Rome. It is from the first chapter: *¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For*

although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. They knew, and they accepted far more readily than we do, that it was more than foolish to worship images and idols made by humans. It was dangerous. They knew that God's wrath would shine down on the world when people turned away from God and instead lived solely for their own creations.

*They would read this passage from Paul - and they would know precisely why at least some bad things in the world happened. In fact, they knew that when people abandon God, they are capable of great evil. In fact, evil is the direct response to people rebelling against God. The following comes a little after our previous passage from Romans: *And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.**

²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil,

disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

So far, we can see how people might find themselves victimized, if not a result of their own ungodly behavior, but by the actions of their neighbors. Yet don't get the idea they saw themselves as the ultimate exposed, vulnerable victims. In Chapter 8 of Romans, Paul told them this: ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* Then, a bit later in this chapter, we read: ³⁸ *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,* ³⁹ *nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* These early Christians knew that there was one thing they could count on: God, their Lord, Jesus. They knew that all they needed to do was keep their faith – and no matter what happened, they would still be blessed by the presence and grace of God. In the end, whatever God determined to have happen – it would be for the best. This wasn't just something they heard in church, like modern people do. To them, this was extremely real. God was an amazing asset to them. And they could trust God.

The early Christians relied on more than just the documents that would one day form the New Testament. Early Christians adopted the documents of their spiritual ancestors, the Jews. This was despite the fact that most of them were

not ethnically Jewish. They adopted a Greek version of the Jewish scriptures that had been prepared for non-Hebrew speaking Jews who lived in Egypt and other nations where Greek was spoken or was used as a written language. This ancient collection of scripture was solidified around 300 B.C. Over time, the collection was expanded beyond the Torah, in Greek, we call it the Septuagint, the first five Books that would one day make up the modern Bible. They also studied the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles 1–2, and eventually other Jewish books. By the year 400, Christians were, in a formal sense, reading what would become the heart of our Old Testament. So, the early Christians had a lot more to support them spiritually when things went wrong than just the eventual New Testament documents that were being passed around individually. Consider this from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3: ⁹ *What gain has the worker from his toil?* ¹⁰ *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.* ¹¹ *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.* ¹² *I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;* ¹³ *also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.* They knew that would never fully

understand what God allowed to have happen in the world. But they knew that if they simply lived their lives, worked hard, and if they did good things, they could live in joy. They lived simpler, more honest lives than we do – and lives that were much closer to God.

Let me step back for a moment. We get information from many, many sources. Television, the Internet, books, news, our watches and phones: we are saturated with information. But the ancients had only a couple sources of information: books and letters and visiting teachers, for the most part. Books were scrolls, and much shorter than what we would call a book today. While we are overwhelmed with massive amounts of conflicting material, they relied heavily on their spiritual writings. They depended upon Scripture to guide them through a violent, chaotic, and unpredictable world. Here is something else they knew, from Proverbs, what we now call verse 5 of Chapter 16: *Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished.*

There was more than knowing that whatever God allowed to happen would always be best, that God would punish evil people, that we should trust God and live happily, and that people are the source of evil in the world. They had a clean optimism that we don't have in our culture. Consider 1st Peter, Chapter 1: *6 In this*

you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. They knew that suffering tests our faith; suffering solidifies it, hones it. An easy life is not an easy path to true faith.

Consider something that is happening in our world today, something caused by humans, something that we all know is evil: the war in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin was born in 1952. He served as a Russian intelligence officer with the KGB. After the disruption of the Soviet Union, he became a politician. He rose to power, leading Russia. In 2014, he conquered the Republic of Crimea, largely because it was the home of the Black Sea Fleet. To legitimize his taking over land that was not part of Russia, he invoked Christianity. He has continued to do this with his invasion of Ukraine, referring to “Holy Russia”, that somehow is supposed to be engineered to be the antithesis of the immoral, overly liberal west, in particular the U.S. and western Europe. But, as it turns out, many Orthodox priests, not all, but some, in Russia have had the courage to deny Putin this excuse for bloodshed and have called for the retreat of Russia from Ukraine. These priests are risking their lives. So are thousands of Russians who are fighting

on the side of Ukraine. 70% of Russians are relatively active Christians. There is now a Free Russia Legion, made up of Russian citizens in Ukraine. Some of them were already living in Ukraine, given the close connections that have existed between the two countries. Others have left Russia, out of a moral conviction that Putin, along with his supporters in Russia's ruling regime, are performing a great evil. They are literally dying because unlike Putin, their faith is genuine and not just something to be perverted for selfish gains.

Let's look at something from James, the letter written by the leader of the Jerusalem Church and the younger brother of Jesus. Imagine how impactful this letter must have been, how much early believers must have treasured having a copy of it, or having it read to them. This is from the first chapter: ¹² *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.* ¹³ *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.* ¹⁴ *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* ¹⁵ *Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

James is saying that God plays a major role in our struggles in life. He told early believers that God is not responsible for evil. Evil happens when people are lured

by their own personal, selfish desires. Desire leads to sin, and sin leads to spiritual death. But the person who can withstand moral trial, or spiritually withstand whatever harm comes to them in life, and remain steadfast in their love of God - that person will receive the crown of eternal life.

The point, of course, is that we are empowered by trials. How often have we confronted something in life, and rather than be desperately worried, merely reflect that it is no worse than something else we have already survived? Trials also give us empathy for others and lift our own self-image because we know that it's a blessed thing to feel for others. When there are natural disasters, people suddenly go into action. They devote their time, their money, their energy to helping. How many stories have we read of someone filling a truck with necessities, and then driving it across the country to help the victims of a flood or tornado or fire? We are truly empowered when we survive.

I recently read an article about a Russian woman who went to fight for Ukraine. Her journey began when Putin invaded Crimea in 2014. She was outraged by the immorality of his actions. She left Russia on a one-way ticket to Ukraine. Her name was Olga Simonova - and she died at the age of 34. She served first as a volunteer fighter, then as a paramedic, and finally as an enlisted member of the Armed Forces. She was serving as a sergeant in the 24th

Mechanized Brigade of the Ukrainian Army. She apparently died when her vehicle hit a land mine. She had seen something that was very evil. In the end, it killed her. But rather than let it break her, rather than being drawn into that evil, it empowered her. She became deeply good.

There have been changes among some believers in Ukraine. In parts of eastern Ukraine where traditionally only Russian was spoken, people are now asking to be given prayer books written in Ukrainian. Rather than having ethnically Russian people in Ukraine turn against their neighbors, they are suddenly identifying with people of a somewhat different ethnic group. They are living in an area that has been absolutely devastated by war – and the result is that they have turned toward God and turned away from evil. All of us can become better people, more faithful people, by letting what happens to us in life empower us. Please pray with me.

God, let us never forget that if we coast through life with no disruptions, with no pain or shock or desperation, we will never gain empathy, never see you avenge evil, never have our faith tested, never grow closer to you, and never be empowered to truly live in joy and faith. Amen.