

Chapter 7

heat 1: God in the real world

When he was summoned to his boss's office that morning, he thought it was for a raise. His plan had worked! He wanted to establish his career, save some money, and then think about getting married and having a family. He had been very successful; in fact, he was the youngest person ever to run a design team. There had been talk of a bonus and even being named director of the design department. He had always had a good relationship with his boss, so he looked forward to talking about his future with the company.

As he entered the office, his boss was more serious than usual. That was odd. His design team had just completed work on a cutting-edge product. It had cost a lot of personnel time and company money, but they were about to roll out the prototype.

They got bad news, and his boss began. The product they thought was unique had just been introduced by another company. They had been so focused on design that they had neglected market research. It was a costly error that threatened the entire company's survival. He heard words he never thought he would hear: "I'm going to have to let you go, and frankly, I don't know if you'd work in this industry again."

His life was over; his carefully laid plans shattered by one conversation. It didn't seem possible, and it surely didn't feel real. But the months to come would demonstrate just how real it was.

The Morphing of Emotions

Very few people wake up one morning and decide to change their theology. Changes in a person's belief system are seldom that self-conscious. The person you just read about had a very painful experience. In ways we don't often recognize, these experiences are hermeneutical; that is, they become lenses we use to interpret life. Unfortunately, we are seldom aware that this is happening.

The emotions we feel as we first go through difficult experiences are not static. They morph into subtle but extremely influential conclusions about God, ourselves, others, and life. Yet these major changes in what we believe have not been well thought out. We have not put ourselves through a careful theological reevaluation. Rather, our unresolved feelings become our interpretations of life. Emotions morph into conclusions, and we end up believing the things we say we believe.

The person you just read about felt discouraged and alone. He wondered why these things had happened to him. He questioned where

God was and why he would allow such devastation. At times, he questioned the value of his faith. Yet he was largely unaware of the spiritual battle going on inside.

Have you ever felt alone, wondering if anybody would understand what you were going through? Have you ever hidden a struggle because you were afraid of what people would think? Have you ever thought a problem was too big to be solved? Has this ever led you to question whether God understood or cared? Think about your own faith. Has it really only been shaped by teaching, preaching, and personal Bible study? Or is there a gap between what you profess to believe and what you actually believe when the rubber meets the road? Perhaps you are close to someone who is going through a hard time and finding it difficult to hold onto her faith. If any of this sounds familiar, this chapter on the Heat of everyday life is for you.

The Heat: God's View of My World

We've seen that the Bible says that we are always living under the scorching Heat of trouble or the cool Rain of blessing. In either case, we are always responding to what is happening to us. The Bible doesn't offer a sanitized version of life or our reactions to it. Dark, shocking, and painful stories abound. Scripture shows us people who think, act, plan, decide, and speak just like we do. If the Bible left out these real-life stories of murder, rape, famine, disease, judgment, depression, war, adultery, theft, corruption, and overwhelming fear, how likely would we be to believe that God's Word could help us?

It is incredibly encouraging to realize that the Bible addresses the world as we know it. God makes it very clear that he understands the Heat we face every day. It isn't always pleasant to read the honest stories of Scripture, but it is comforting. We realize that we will never face an experience, no matter how dark or difficult, that would be a shock to our God. The hope and help God offers his children reflect his knowledge of the full range of human experience.

That's why some of the most comforting passages of Scripture may not even have the word *comfort* in them. They may not be neatly tied together with a happy ending or say much about God's promises, love, and grace. Yet they give hope in their accurate depiction of the things we face. Psalm 88 is one of those passages.

Psalm 88 New International Version (NIV)**Psalm 88**

A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to *mahalath leannoth*. A *maskil* of Heman the Ezrahite.

¹ *LORD, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.*

² *May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.*

[Verses 3—5: You are in deep inner despair.]

³ *I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.*

⁴ *I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.*

⁵ *I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.*

[Verses 6- 7: You feel forsaken by God.]

⁶ *You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.*

⁷ *Your wrath lies heavily on me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.*

[Verse 8a: You have lost your friends.]

⁸ *You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.*

[Verse 8b: You feel trapped and helpless.]

I am confined and cannot escape;

[Verses 9- 12: You feel as if you are dying, crying out for help, but none comes.]

⁹ *my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, LORD, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.*

¹⁰ *Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you?*

¹¹ *Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?*

¹² *Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?*

¹³ *But I cry to you for help, LORD;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

¹⁴ *Why, LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?*

[Verses 15- 17: You feel like bad things always happen and nothing ever changes.]

¹⁵ *From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.*

¹⁶ *Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.*

¹⁷ *All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.*

[Verse 18: You feel like you wake up every morning to a very dark world.]

¹⁸ *You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend.*

Alone in the Darkness?

What did you feel when you read Psalm 88? Read the following verses again and put yourself in the writer's place. [Notes below were inserted in the Psalm above.]

Verses 3—5: You are in deep inner despair.

Verses 6- 7: You feel forsaken by God.

Verse 8a: You have lost your friends.

Verse 8b: You feel trapped and helpless.

Verses 9- 12: You feel as if you are dying, crying out for help, but none comes.

Verses 13- 14: You feel as though God has turned his back on you.

Verses 15- 17: You feel like bad things always happen and nothing ever changes.

Verse 18: You feel like you wake up every morning to a very dark world.

Did it bother you that the psalm did not end on a positive note? Does it unsettle you that this dark psalm is in the Bible? Do you wonder what good we are supposed to get from reading it? Let me suggest some things we can gain from it.

1. God understands the full range of human experience, from supreme joy to crushing sorrow.
2. The promises of the Redeemer come to people who live in a world

3. God's honesty about these experiences invites me to bet about the things I face. Biblical Christianity is never blind or stoic in its reaction to life.
4. Going to God with my despair, doubt, and fear is an act of faith. Psalm 88 reminds me to run to God in desperate moments, not away from him.
5. The Bible is not about an idyllic world full of noble people who always make the right choice. The Bible describes a world we recognize, where very good and very bad things happen, and where people make wonderful and horrible choices. The Bible describes a world that sometimes makes us laugh, but often makes us cry.

As you examine your own life, are you like the psalmist? Can you be honest with God? Are you afraid to face how you are responding to the Heat of your life? Do you wonder if God really welcomes your honesty, so you hesitate to bring the cries of your heart to him? Do you feel like you have to put on a good front of unwavering faith before God and people? Does your faith genuinely impact your daily life?

I had an epiphany one Wednesday evening in the middle of our small group meeting. People were sharing prayer requests, but it was the same old grocery list of situational, self-protective prayer requests masquerading as openness and self-disclosure. I found myself thinking, *Why did we all feel the need to clean up our prayer requests before giving them? Why were we all so skilled at editing ourselves out of our prayer requests? Why were we so good at sharing the difficult circumstances we faced, yet so afraid of talking about our struggles in the middle of them? Did we really care more about what people thought than we did about getting help? Did we really think that God would be repulsed by our sins and weakness?* I wondered who we thought we were fooling. It was as if we had all agreed upon an unspoken set of rules, a conspiracy of silence.

I looked around the room. These were people I thought I knew well. I did know what many of them were facing, yet I knew little of the wars going on inside them.

I brought my thoughts back to the discussion, determined to break the silence. I didn't think I was better than the others. I had been a willing part of the conspiracy too, but I was determined to be so no longer. That night I prayed that God would break down the walls of fear that kept us from sharing our hearts with one another and bringing to God the things that were really going on. I asked God to give us the hope, faith, and courage to put our struggles into words that would reach his ears, **the** ultimate source of compassion, forgiveness, wisdom, and power. To my surprise, others followed with similar prayers, confessing their fears, doubts, and struggles. God began to change our group that night.

Psalm 88 is an invitation to that kind of honesty. It calls us to an open and authentic faith in the face of chronic sickness, the burden of wealth, the rejection of friends, trauma and abuse, the loss of a job, the temptations of success, a child's rebellion, a loved one's death, a church split, perverted justice, the cloud of depression, and a host of other things that are part of life. In Psalm 88, God welcomes us to come out of the shadows, to honestly express our struggles. When we do, we will find that God already knows and understands!

Even More Encouraging

The title to this psalm says it is a song. Why would God ever want his people to sing such a discouraging dirge? What would be the point of putting, "The darkness is my closest friend" to music? This is where the psalm becomes most encouraging!

Psalm 88 is a song of the sons of Korah. The Korahites were the doorkeepers of the tabernacle, those who led Israel in procession to the tent of worship and sacrifice. This mournful song was one of the songs they would sing! Do you see what this means? God intended the darkest human laments to be brought together with the brightest human hopes. Honest expressions of fear, pain, and doubt were welcome in the place of worship, atonement, and forgiveness. The mess of human misery was welcomed into the place of mysterious, glorious grace.

No psalm more powerfully communicates, "Come to me as you are, with all your doubt and fear pain and discouragement. Hold before me your shattered hopes and dreams, and find redemption and rest when **it** seems there is none to be found. Don't hesitate because your heart is weak and your mind confused. Don't hesitate because you have questioned my goodness and love. Come as you are for my sacrifice is for you, just as you are." This kind honesty before God is meant to be part of our worship. What a helpful and hopeful invitation! We do not have to put on spiritual masks to approach God. We can come as we are. His love is sturdy and his grace is sufficient.

Biblical Realism

**Another passage that breathes biblical realism is James 1:1—15.
James 1 New International Version (NIV)**

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

Trials and Temptations

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.

¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

¹³ When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Every passage of Scripture was written in an historical context and this passage, like the others, loses its impact when it is wrenched out of its setting. In fact, it can sound superficial until you understand the writer and his audience. James was a prominent pastor in Jerusalem. His congregation was in the middle of severe persecution that probably took place around the time Stephen was stoned in Acts 7 and 8. That background helps us to see James's words not as the platitudinous preaching of a detached theologian, but as the wise and caring advice of a seasoned and loving pastor. James takes what he knows to be true about God's wisdom and comfort and applies it to friends who are suffering greatly. Let's look at what he shares with them.

In verse 2, James gently reminds his congregation that trials are inevitable. Notice his use of the word “whenever” not “if.” James is saying that trials will come. He knows that difficulties become more difficult when we naively assume that troubles won't come our way. God never promised that his children would escape a fallen world. In his wisdom, he has chosen for us to live in the middle of its brokenness. Whether it is weeds or disease, rejection or corruption, war or pollution, disappointment or danger, we are all somehow touched every day by the fall. We shouldn't be surprised when

How People Change Chapter 7 Heat 1: God in the real world 8
suffering and difficulty come our way; in fact, we should probably be surprised when they don't.

James wants to protect his congregation from the painful shock of surprise. He wants them to live with a healthy biblical realism. Similarly, in Philippians 1:29 and 1 Peter 4:12, Paul and Peter urge us to recognize that we live in a world where trials are a normal part of life. They are not an exception to the order of things; they are the rule.

In verses 2 through 4, James emphasizes the blessings of trials. Does that phrase seem like a contradiction? James has a very strange way of talking about trials- he suggests that they are something we need. Most of us don't say to God, "You know, Lord, my life has been all too easy lately. I would really appreciate it if you could send some suffering my way." Our instincts are exactly the opposite. We see trials as things we should do everything in our power to avoid. But James says that rather than being an interruption to God's work, trials are part of his plan.

Without the trials we so dislike, James says we would remain immature, incomplete, and deficient as Christians. Trials help us! Through them we become more mature and more complete, until finally we lack nothing!

In verses 5 through 8, James assures us that he does not think that this makes the trials easy. He does not endorse a superficial happy face to mask inner struggle or a Christian stoicism. Instead, James urges us to run to God for help and wisdom. When we do, we will find that God gives generously to those who are humble in heart. James's model for responding to trial is not "put it out, but cry out". When we cry out to the all-sufficient God, we will receive all the wisdom we need.

In verses 9 through 12, James continues to surprise us with the way he looks at trials. He reminds us that a trial can come in the form of difficulty or blessing. Riches can be as much a trial as poverty! Losing a job or getting a promotion, being rejected or receiving the praise of others, failure or physical illness or perfect health- each is a form of trial according to James (and the rest of Scripture). Both present opportunities for temptation and sin, as well as testing and growth.

Look at your own life. Have all your trials been times of suffering? What about that raise that made you selfish with your money? What about good health that tempted you to be undisciplined with eating and exercise? What about the pride that accompanied success in ministry? We don't just struggle with want; we struggle with blessing as well. James's warning is wise and timely for us all.

In verses 13- 15, James shifts his focus from trial to temptation. For James (and the rest of Scripture), a trial is an external situation (Heat) that reveals what is happening in the heart (either Thorns or Fruit). A trial can lead to significant personal growth at the heart level or it can lead to

How People Change Chapter 7 Heat 1: God in the real world 9
temptation and sin. In others words, the soil of trial can produce a harvest of either Fruit or Thorns. What makes the difference?

James says that the harvest depends on what is happening inside a person. If the trial leads to temptation and sin, it is because the person has been %dragged away and enticed+by the %evil desires+of his own heart. It is very humbling and important to admit that trials do not cause you to sin. God does not tempt you to sin by sending trials your way. If we respond sinfully to the trials he sends, it is not because we have been forced to sin, but because our hearts have chosen to do so.

Do we really believe what James is saying about trials and how we respond to them? For example, someone might say, %Jim makes me so angry!+In that statement, Jim is responsible for the anger the person is expressing. Or we say, %This traffic makes me nuts!+Does traffic have some moral power that causes us to act contrary to the true character of our hearts? Here is the humbling truth: Trials do not cause us to be what we have not been; rather, they reveal what we have been all along. The harvest the trial produces is the result of the roots already in our hearts.

Finally, in verses 16 through 18, James reminds his congregation of the goodness, grace, love, and mercy of God in times of suffering.

16 don't be deceived, my dear brothers. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. (James 1:16- 18)

God is the giver of good gifts. The greatest blessing of all is Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend. Through him we have been given the one thing every sinner desperately needs- new life!

What sweet, amazing, and comforting advice! James's words are full of grace and truth. He does not flinch at the reality of suffering, but calls us to run in honesty and humility to God. He also warns us of patterns of cynicism and sin that are often excused because of our circumstances. He points us to the God who loves us and came to redeem us. Consider what this passage has to say as you face trials of your own.

1. **The certainty of trials** (2). What trial has caught you by surprise? How did the surprise impact your response?
2. **The benefit of trials** (2- 4). How can you see God using this situation to make you spiritually complete? How would you not have grown without this trial?
3. **The need for wisdom** (5- 8). How has your prayer life changed through this trial? Does knowing that God truly understands your experience change the way you handle the situation?

4. **Two kinds of trials** (9- 12). How has it helped you to see that difficulty and blessing are both forms of trial? Can you identify both in your life?

5. **Temptation and trials** (13- 15). What temptations do you tend to face in the middle of trials? How does this passage, with its focus on the individual and the heart, affect the way you think about your situation (Heat)?

6. **Avoiding cynicism** (16- 18). What has become clearer to you about the goodness and grace of God as you have gone through trials? Has your love for Christ increased or decreased?

Psalm 88 and James 1 remind us that the Bible speaks of a God who comforts people in the middle of genuine difficulties in a sin-stained world. Psalm 88 emphasizes that God understands what we are going through.

James 1 provides an example of a pastor applying this truth to the lives of people he dearly loves. In both passages, the reality of the Heat is acknowledged and responded to in ways that are truly liberating. We are not alone. God does understand!

You, Your Lord, and Trials

Take an opportunity to examine yourself in light of these things. Think first about why suffering tends to surprise us. Ask yourself, *What assumptions do I tend to make about suffering, and how do they increase the pain I experience?* Here are some common false assumptions:

Do you tend to how painful life can be?

Do you expect life to be free of trouble? (This often happens when we think we lead a good life compared to others.)

Do you tend to think of good things and bad things as completely separate experiences? In reality, difficulty is often hidden in blessing, and blessing is found in difficulty.

Do you expect the good things have to be permanent?

Do you live as if you are thinking that you will have the wisdom and strength to avoid or endure suffering? Are you surprised when you don't?

Are you trusting your life to modern technology's apparent ability to protect or rescue us?

Do you place undue confidence in your ability to control your life, mistakenly assuming that you can manage your way out of suffering?

Now take some time to think about your life. Where is the Heat in your current situation? Use the following questions to make your responses concrete and practical.

What pressures do you regularly face?

What are your God-given opportunities?

What are your everyday responsibilities?

Where are you facing difficult circumstances?

What temptations are you facing?

Who are the difficult people in your life?

What unexpected blessings have you received?

In what situations do you feel alone or misunderstood?

What challenges does the value system of modern culture present?

In what areas do you feel overwhelmed by the things ~~assigned~~ assigned to you (blessing or difficulty)? What are the places *you* are tempted to hide from or avoid?

What situations tempt you to say you are okay when you are not?

What is the hardest experience of your past?

What is your greatest fear about the future?

As you answer these questions, remember that you are actively loved by a God who has entered into relationship with you. He understands every pressure you face and he is with you in them all. He invites you to bring your concerns, disappointments, fears, doubts, and regrets to him. When life doesn't seem to be working because the Heat is too great, run to your Lord and not away from him. You will find comfort, wisdom, and strength that cannot be found anywhere else.