

## **“God Makes Good from Bad”**

James 1, Selected Verses

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*Consider it pure joy, my brothers [and sisters], whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, she should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to her.*

*Blessed is the [one] who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

On Mother's Day, we're supposed to think about our mothers, and if we can, we are supposed to do something nice for them. Since my mom is now deceased, I'm off the hook. I can even talk about her in a sermon without getting her permission. Mom did get to hear me preach several times before she died. She would sit way in the back of the church. A couple of times I caught her snoozing back there. After church, I called her on it, and she said, "I was resting my eyes! I was thinking! I was thinking!" And we would laugh.

I was raised in very modest circumstances. My parents struggled financially. At one point they declared bankruptcy, which wasn't all that common back in the 1960s. My parents carried a lot of shame over that. My mother had to take a job outside the home to keep food on the table. Their finances eventually turned around, due in no small part to my mother's ingenuity and good business sense.

Only one of my friends' moms worked outside the home. It wasn't nearly as common as it is today. Sometimes, I felt like the 'odd one' out. From an early age, Mom drilled into me that I must have a career to "fall back on". Then she would go on to name the three Ds that could happen to me, the three

reasons I needed a “career to fall back on” once I got married. Note that the three D’s made the assumption that someone would want to marry me.

You may not be able to depend upon your husband. #1: He could become disabled. #2: He could divorce you. #3: He could die early. Disability, divorce, death. When other moms were giving their daughters Barbies™, my mom was giving me serious life lessons!

The three Ds were eminently practical, like my mom. Mom’s philosophy stemmed from her own Depression-era childhood and my father’s erratic earning history. Eventually, she lived through two of the big D’s. Dad was disabled when Mom was 56. He died when she was only 58.

The three Ds sound negative, patriarchal, and completely out of date now. But I have to admit they taught me a big lesson. They forced me to grow up. They even gave me a bit of wisdom.

I’m thankful for all the lessons my mother and father taught me. Not least among them were lessons of faith and perseverance.

Scripture tells us when our faith is tested, it leads to perseverance. Perseverance leads to maturity, and maturity leads to wisdom. Scripture tells us that trials can strengthen us. Scripture tells us God can use a difficult situation to make something good.

God makes good from bad. Not always, but God can and God does. Sometimes we simply have to open our eyes to it. Sometimes, we must persevere and wait in faith. Sometimes we have to take action.

The epistle of James was known for its emphasis upon action. ‘Don’t talk to me, show me,’ James would have said. ‘Faith without works is dead’, James *did* say.

As people of faith, we actively look for signs of God in tough times. During these times of great deprivation for some and great uncertainty for all, faith is tested. Faith is tested, but good things can and do result from such testing.

Alicia tells how she and her husband made active choices to value relationship over material things. Their first decision was for her to stay at home with their young children. When they began their journey, they did not know

where it would lead. They knew there would be sacrifices and challenges. They knew it wouldn't be easy.<sup>1</sup>

To live more simply (whether by choice or necessity) requires stepping out in faith, not knowing how things will end, but knowing that God will carry us along the way.

Alicia and her husband have discovered the joy of relationship by living simply. This joy extends to many outside their family circle, as they invite friends to a simple home cooked meal and conversation, as they sit on their front porch and greet neighbors passing by, as they limit their children's extracurricular activities to one thing at a time. Imagine that, one thing at a time! Once a week for dinner they eat homemade bread and fruit. Living more simply, they have more time to deepen relationships with others. Living more simply, they have more to give.

God makes good from what the world calls bad. God creates time and space for renewed and deepened relationships. God opens our eyes to the abundance that is right in front of us.

God even uses unlikely people, like rich rock and roll musicians. Like Bono.

Bono is a singer-songwriter and main vocalist for the enormously successful Irish rock band U2. He is in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He's been nominated for the Academy Award, the Golden Globe, the Grammy. But there's something else. He's also been nominated for the Nobel Peace prize. Bono is a big philanthropist and a vocal advocate for social justice. He is a Christian. He has been committed 27 years to the same person, which is an accomplishment even for us ordinary people.

Bono talks about his faith: "I check my emotional life with music, my intellectual life with writing, but religion is where I soul-search. I come to lowly church halls and lofty cathedrals for what purpose? I search the Scriptures to what end? To check my head? My heart? No, my soul. For me these meditations are like a plumb line dropped by a master builder. . ."2

A rock and roll star turns to scripture as a corrective, as a guide, as a plumb line! Bono speaks up about the current economy. He touches on debt cancellation, government policy, aid cuts. He comments on the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Dale Parks quoted by Alicia Shussett in "Living Simply: One Woman's Witness on How to Treasure Relationships", in HungryHearts, volume 28, 4, 2004-2005.

<sup>2</sup> NYT, "It's 2009. Do you know where your soul is?" Bono, April 19, 2009.

Americans are taking up public service in greater numbers because they are short on money to give.

God makes good from bad. Even during times of less money, people are giving. Even during tough times, we can be generous. Anyone can volunteer.

Doug Nickols lost his job as a plant manager last summer. While he has been job hunting, he decided to turn his attention to others who are worse off than he. He began volunteering for his favorite charities.

During the past ten months he has been a camp counselor for underprivileged children, worked at a shelter for hurricane victims, and lately, delivered beds to needy families.

“When I worked, I never had time to do anything else,” he said. “But the past year has allowed me to fill a hole in my life and restore some balance to it.”<sup>3</sup>

Nickols intends to keep volunteering even after he finds a job. He says, “This recession has changed attitudes. People are looking for ways to become better connected to their communities. Greed brought this country to the brink of disaster. Maybe we’ve all learned a lesson.”

Nickols sounds a little bit like my mom!

What are the lessons to be learned? Not the three Ds, but rather what I am going to call the three Rs. These tough times give us opportunities, if we will just take them. Opportunities to:

1. Renew relationships
2. Revive volunteering
3. Rely on God’s provision

Three Rs: Renew. Revive. Rely.

*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change. . .*

Renew. Revive. Rely. God makes good from bad, you can count on it.

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<sup>3</sup> DMN, April 13, 2009, “Jobless find benefits in volunteering” by Bob Moos.