



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

## THAT'S NOT CLARK KENT, IT'S SUPERMAN • Rick James

While I'm generally a fan of superheroes, something about Superman has always irritated me. For whatever reason, the idea of a superhero flying around in a cape and tights does not present an intellectual stumbling block for me. I do, however, find it hard to believe that nobody recognizes Clark Kent as Superman merely because he wears reading glasses!

It is my premise that perhaps the greatest power to change our lives exists in the form of trials that God graciously sends to us to bring about character transformation. It is also my contention that most Christians would endure such trials, if they only knew they were in one. The problem is that trials are much like Clark Kent. For some reason, we seem unable to identify when we are in one, and as a result, run from the trial rather than embrace it and the growth it brings. I believe that often trials come into our lives in four thinly veiled disguises that can prevent us from recognizing and embracing their transforming superpower.

### The Disguise of the Non-Spiritual?

If a group of militant atheists were to come into your room and tie you up and threaten you with death if you failed to renounce your faith, I think you would realize that you were in a trial. The problem is that our trials don't usually come in such an obvious spiritual context. Often they are typical day-to-day struggles with circumstances, relationships, ill health, or some area of lacking or inability in our own lives. In 1 Peter 1:6 and James 1:2, both Peter and James mention, "trials of many kinds." Their point is that trials can be long, short, emotional, physical, mental, or circumstantial, and come with varying degrees of difficulty. Our trials come in all shapes and sizes and do not always come in a spiritual "wrapper." If you find yourself in some difficult or constraining circumstances that are a source of struggle for you, consider yourself in a trial; it is therefore not random (it was allowed by God) and can work for good in your spiritual growth.

### The Disguise of an Obstacle

Most trials seem on the surface to present themselves to us as obstacles that prevent us from living a godly life. Trials are not actually obstacles (though they often feel that way), but are the fuel for getting to our goals. Often, as Christians, when we pray for greater holiness, we find the world caving in around us. Our reactions can make us feel more ungodly than ever. It is critical to see that, while these trials might provide momentary set-backs to our visible progress in the faith, they are ultimately providing the fuel we need to get to our destination. They build into our lives passion, perseverance, and deeper character change that go far beyond the surface behavior change we were trying to manifest in our lives. Often God answers our prayer for greater holiness, not by providing better circumstances that help us perform better, but by providing trials.

### The Disguise of Randomness

In 1 Peter 1:6, it says that, "you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." The key phrase, "you may have had to" could be translated "it may have become necessary" for you to suffer trials. The verse discloses that there is design and intent behind the trial. God has looked at your life and decided that it was, in fact, necessary for you to go through a trial for the sake of spiritual growth. Often Christians fail to persevere in trials, because they begin to believe that they are simply random happenstance, and therefore have no point or benefit.



Right now, if you were to go into a hospital and listen in to conversations taking place between friends and family with sick loved ones, you might hear phrases like, “You’ll see, it will all work out” or “Every cloud has a silver lining.” These people need hope, and loved ones reflexively try to provide it by explaining that their pain has purpose. Unfortunately, without God, these can be nothing more than shallow platitudes, because there really is no guarantee that their pain will have a positive purpose. However, the Christian always has hope because there is nothing random, unplanned, or unforeseen in any of the trials that come into their lives. For the Christian, absolutely nothing is random. All their pain and trials can have redemptive purposes, and anything that has come into their lives has been allowed by God.

### The Disguise of God’s Anger

One of the hardest things about trials is that we often think we are experiencing hardship because we have done something wrong, or that God is angry with us. The writer of Hebrews tells us to consider trials as loving discipline from God. He also says that our trials are actually indicators of God’s approval, and the reality of our adoption into God’s family. In other words, trials come from God’s heart—not his fist. They are a sign, in most cases, that we have been doing well spiritually, and not the reverse. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that God disciplines us—not out of anger—but out of love, and “for our good that we might share in His holiness.” Put simply, trials are a sign of God’s approval of us, not his disapproval. They often occur, not because we have done anything wrong, but because we are doing things right—or at least desire to. How often Christians lose heart in their trials, because they feel God is angry with them, when in fact, the opposite is true.

### Consider it joy?

In James 1:2, it says, “to consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of various kinds.” Now we have a platform to see how we can consider these insidious obstacles as “pure joy.” They have been allowed by God. They are not random. They have specific intent to produce maturity in us, and they are a sign of God’s approval and of the legitimacy of our belonging to God’s family. It is also important to note, that while we may consider trials to be a blessing, it doesn’t mean we must always feel emotionally happy as we endure them. Sometimes Christians can be successful in their handling of trials—enduring them—yet feel like a failure because they don’t feel overly happy. Knowing you are blessed can make you feel happy, but not always. Joy is a state of contentment, even freedom, within constraining circumstances. We can experience this within the course of a trial when we see that it has been allowed by God, is for our good, and is a sign of God’s approval of us.

### How do trials actually change me?

I Peter 1:6-7 is one of the most valuable passages on trials, because it describes the dynamics of how God changes us within the context of a trial. Peter describes the gold smelting process where gold is heated up and impurities float to the surface. The next step in the process is to scoop away the dross, or impurities. The result is a purer piece of gold. The result, then, of trials (the heating up of our lives) is to accomplish a purer and stronger character and faith. It is in the “heating up” of our lives that our weaknesses, sin, and character flaws come to the surface, so that they may be transformed.

As the heat brings impurities of character to the surface, it also raises issues of deficiency in our faith. For example, in a trial we might begin to believe that God doesn’t love us, that He is angry with us, or that our suffering has no purpose. As a result, we begin to cling in our hearts to the truth of God’s character presented in Scripture. When we come through the trial, we find that our faith has been stretched to several times its original size, as we own the character of God in a way we never did before. Like the growth of a muscle lifting weights, the resistance of the trial causes the muscle of faith to grow stronger.

It is in the heat of trials where these deficiencies in faith and character surface. It is only when they surface, that God can begin to purify our hearts and motives and actions.



### Why do I need trials?

Trials produce maturity, and this is why they are a blessing to us. James 1:4 describes a progression where trials produce perseverance, and perseverance, maturity. The goal of trials is not to make a person more persevering. That's not a very exciting goal. But the result of persevering under trials is a mature character and faith. This is motivating. All Christians want the fruit of maturity; godly character and faith.

### Summary

The great exhortation of Scripture, related to trials, is to endure them. When we fail to persevere, it is often because we have not recognized that we are actually in a trial. God has allowed the trial, and it is not random; it is a sign of God's approval and not anger, and is not an obstacle to our growth, but ultimately the fuel for it. Trials are Superman wearing glasses.

End 

The Compass is the discipleship curriculum for Campus Crusade for Christ's Campus Ministry. It was created by Centerfield Productions, the field based division of CruPress. We'd love to hear your feedback on this lesson. Please write us at [centerfield@uscm.org](mailto:centerfield@uscm.org)