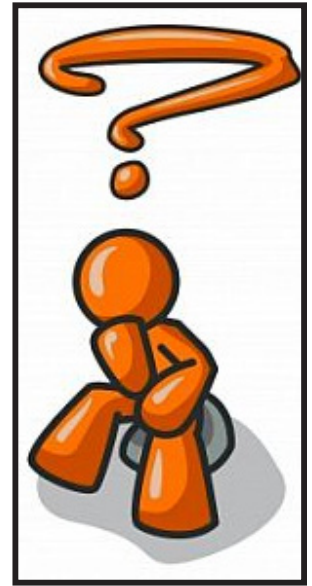


→ **What About ...** the Idea, “What Does Not Kill Us Makes Us Stronger”?

BY DR. DAVID A. DEWITT

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) famously said: **“That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”** Nietzsche’s ideas include the “death of God” and existentialism. His “makes-us-stronger” idea has been popularized in movies and songs (like that of Kelley Clarkson, October 2011). Understand that Nietzsche meant the suffering events we encounter in life make us more able to withstand other events of this life. However, in spite of the popularity of the idea, **Nietzsche was wrong.** There is no evidence that adversity makes us stronger. Quite the opposite! Consider:



1. There is no scientific evidence that suffering hardship makes people stronger. Noam Shpancer, Ph.D. reported the following in “Psychology Today,” August 21, 2010:

The bulk of psychological research on the topic shows that, as a rule, if you are stronger after hardship, it is probably despite, not because of the hardship. The school of hard knocks does little more than knock you down, hard. Nietzschean—and country

song—wisdom notwithstanding, we are not stronger in the broken places. What doesn’t kill us, in fact, makes us weaker... Developmental research has shown convincingly that traumatized children are more, not less, likely to be traumatized again. Kids who grow up in a tough neighborhood become weaker, not stronger. They are more, not less, likely to struggle in the world... Mayhem and chaos don’t toughen you up, and they don’t prepare you well to deal with the terror of this world [psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy].

So, it’s not, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” but more likely, **if you were not killed, you were already stronger.**

2. There is no evidence that suffering hardship evolves anyone into something stronger.

The most common examples of Nietzsche’s idea are found in adaptation (what evolutionists call micro-evolution). For example, cancer cells treated with chemotherapy may respond with more resilient cells. Bacteria cells, which are not killed by an antibiotic, are more resistant to it. But these are just more perverted cancer and bacterial cells (actually, the stronger bacteria cells are already present and survive the antibiotic). Adaptation is not an example of humans (or animals) evolving into stronger/better creatures. In what sense does a stronger cancer or more resistant bacteria make us stronger or evolve us into a stronger creature? It’s like

a kid in the ghetto adapting by becoming a better drive-by shooter. These are natural adaptations, but they do not make us more highly evolved people. **Adaptation never leads to evolution.**

3. Those who survive difficulties are not more prepared for surviving other sudden, unrelated, or catastrophic difficulties, which are the ones that usually shape the course of our lives.

We become physically stronger with exercise (to a point), but planned organized physical training is not a traumatic event. [Vaccinations against, say, small pox are the same as exercise, they strengthen our natural resistance (to a point).] Exercise is not actually even a time of suffering. Atrophy is abnormal, something less than our capability. Normal life is a struggle and exercising our minds and bodies is part of a healthy life. Exercise brings us back up to our natural capacity, but never beyond it. You will never be able to “leap tall buildings in a single bound.”

Suffering adversity is quite something different. Suffering is when those normal struggles are interrupted with damaging, painful difficulties. If you pamper your children their whole lives, rather than make them work, they will be like a flabby body without exercise. But that does not mean unplanned suffering (like disease, divorce, or abuse) strengthens your children. All the physical and mental exercise we do will not equip us to survive a heart attack, cancer, Alzheimer’s, lawsuits, or an airplane, car, or stock

market crash. If we are “out of shape,” we may be less likely to survive than if we are “in shape,” but we cannot get beyond being “in shape.” There is no evidence that physical or mental exercise makes us into some super-human, better able to withstand life’s sudden, unrelated or catastrophic, difficulties. Consider those who live in war zones, tough neighborhoods and ghettos. Do we have more, say, doctors, engineers, scientists, business entrepreneurs, and teachers coming out of those places, or do they yield more chaos, prison inmates, addicts, and socially dependent people? Their survival habits (something like the adaptive cancer cells, resistant bacteria, and drive-by shooters) may help them survive their environment, only to make them more destructive, not more developed. **Adversity does not develop physically or psychologically stronger people.**

So, How Do We Become Better People?

The reality (which the progressives and evolutionists refuse to face) is that none of life’s suffering events, which do not kill us, make us stronger, more highly evolved, beings. Not even our technology has evolved us into better people. For example, the 20th century saw the greatest technological advance, and greatest moral decay, of any century so far. We developed automobiles, airplanes, and antibiotics. And we destroyed the home, took God out of education, and slaughtered more people in wars, genocides, and abortions than in any previous century. So suffering does not make us stronger, but does anything make people **better**? I suggest the answer is in James 1:2-4.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (see also 1 Peter 1:7).

Testing a believer’s faith leads to *endurance* (the capacity to continue to bear up under difficult circumstances). Endurance leads to being *perfect*. This word *perfect* is translated *mature* in Hebrews 5:14 (*But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil*). So, endurance and maturity depend on a faith that endures various trials. The trials make us weaker, the faith makes us better, but not stronger. For example, *Jesus learned obedience*

from the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). The things He suffered didn’t make Him stronger (in the Nietzsche sense), they perfected His obedience to God. But He also told us to pray, lead us not into temptation (the same word as trials—Matthew 6:13). When Paul encountered a thorn in the flesh and his request to remove it was denied, he did not conclude that he was (in the Nietzsche sense) stronger, but weaker. He said, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Corinthians 12:9). The suffering God imposed at various times in history, was not to make people stronger (more proud) but to make them weaker (more humble), so that His strength might be revealed.

Also notice, James does **not** say trials that test your faith give you more or better faith, or increase your faith. That’s sort of a Christian Nietzscheism. It assumes “That which does not kill my faith makes my faith stronger.” But nothing in the Scripture (or life) confirms that. Trials **test** our faith, they do not increase our faith. To put it in those terms, James is saying, **“If your faith has not been killed, it was already stronger.”** Strong faith, which has been tested by encountering *various trials*, increases our *endurance*, and our *maturity*, but not our faith. Trials produce maturity only in believers who already have true faith. James, not Nietzsche, is telling us how we can actually become better people. Trials make us better, if, and only if, we already have better faith.

How, then, is faith improved, made strong, or increased? The biblical answer is clear—Faith comes from revelation. What created faith in Noah, Abraham, Moses, the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles was revelation from God. For us, faith comes from reading their revelation in the Word of God. *Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).* To the extent that our faith is strengthened by the revelation of the Word of God, we will not just endure various trials but those trials will also have their *perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*. So, it’s **True Faith, which encounters various trials, that produces endurance.**

**Not,
trials produce endurance.**