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Santos, Narry F. *How God Works When We Are Tried and Tempted*. Quezon City, Philippines: Life-Change Publishing, Inc., 2003.

L I F E C H A N G E S E R I E S

HOW GOD WORKS

When We Are Tried & Tempted
(Lessons on Overcoming Life's Overwhelming Struggles)

Narry F. Santos

LIFECHANGE
Publishing, Inc.

How God Works

When We Are Tried & Tempted

(Lessons on Overcoming Life's Overwhelming Struggles)

Published by LifeChange Publishing, Inc.
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Narry F. Santos, Ph D

International Standard Book Number:
971-92796-6-4 (Hard Cover)
971-92796-5-6 (Soft Cover)

Cover Design and Book Layout: Arnaldo G. Santos

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Printed in the Philippines

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The National Library of the Philippines CIP Data

Recommended entry:

Santos, Narry F..

How God works : when we are tried & tempted :
lesson on overcoming life's overwhelming struggles
/ by Narry F. Santos. – Quezon City : Lifechange Pub.
c2003.

1 v

1. Temptation – Religious aspects.
Immanence of God. I. Title

BT725 241.3 2003 P034000026

ISBN 971-92796-5-6 (pbk.)

ISBN 971-92796-6-4 (pbd.)



To Hazel, my precious wife,
best friend, and faithful partner
in life and ministry

and

To our two lovely daughters,
Eirene and Kaira,
who are God's blessings to us
in the midst of all
trials and temptations
in our life and ministry.





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PREFACE

This small book is the second in a short series on the big topic, **How God Works**. The first book is titled, **How God Works When We are Worried and Weary** (*Lessons on Restoring Rest to a Troubled Soul*). While this second installment is called, **How God Works When We are Tried and Tempted** (*Lessons on Overcoming Life's Overwhelming Struggles*).

As I mentioned in the preface of the first book, the topic, **How God Works**, fascinates me because I like to watch and learn how God works in and among us.

But given the finiteness of my mind, I realize that I can't capture all the ways in which God works. In fact, the little that I can see may not even accurately describe how God really works.

Moreover, I cannot put God and his ways in a box because just as he is infinitely wise and creative, so he has countless ways of dealing with us and of making us discover him and his manifold ways. Yet, no matter what way he chooses to deal with us, his ways are always good, because he is always good.

As a pastor and Bible teacher for ten years now, I've seen the hand of God at work many times. These include those days when we feel worried and weary which I covered in the first book. The other times are when we go through various trials and temptations, which is the main topic of this volume.

God works when we come to the highest moments in our life. He works when we feel

emotionally up or spiritually encouraged. He works when we see many things work in us and for us. He works when all things around us are under control. In fact, it requires another volume in this series to catalog how God works along these lines.

However, there's something undeniably life-changing, when we see and sense God works in our lowest moments. And so I offer to you the second book in our **How God Works** series.

In this volume, I expanded four basic messages from four biblical passages. Particularly, I have gained valuable insights on how we can handle trials from James 1:1-4 and 5-8 and our temptations from James 1:13-15 and Matthew 4:1-11.

As we explore these short biblical passages in this small book, may we readily see how God works in our lives. May he enable us to know and love him more as we face our trials and flee from our temptations.

*“The sufficiency of God’s grace is
at times best experienced in the
crucibles of life.”*

- N.M. Sosmeña



“Trials and temptations are an explosive combination that can overwhelm us if we do not discern how God works through them.”

INTRODUCTION

The question, “How does God work?,” never ceases to amaze me. The more I think of it, the more I am convinced that we can never really exhaust all the ways in which God works. He acts in more ways than we can imagine – far more numerous than the stars in the universe or the people on earth.

At the same time, the question never ceases to affirm me because the more I reflect on it, the more I am convinced that God has revealed himself in the Bible for us to see how he works. And when we see, we learn that his purpose in doing so seems always related to who he is. He works to make us know

him, to help us discover more and more what he is like, and to assist us to grow in him and his ways.

In the introduction of the first book in the “How God Works” series, I included one of my journal entries that reflects on how God works in our lives. I included a prayer in that journal entry; a prayer that still expresses my heart’s desire in this second small book.

“Father, you work the way you do to help us learn that everything in life is not about us, but that it’s really all about you. That we discover who we really are if we discover who you really are.

That we are able to do what we need to do if we learn to draw our strength from you. That we can face life – its ups and downs, successes and failures, wins and losses, joys and sorrows – if we have you with us.

That our life can be full and meaningful because you’re the one who makes it overflow with meaning. That we can be ourselves because you know who we

are and you totally accept us. That we can live for you because you give us life and the abundance of it.

O Father, when will we realize that it's all about you, that it's really not about us? For only when we take to heart that our life on earth is really about you can we be ready to see how you work in us and around us. Only then can we be ready to seek how you work in others and in the world. Only then can we be ready to sense that all that you give and take away truly reflect how you graciously work for our good.

This second volume is our ongoing search to learn how God works and how he shows his goodness to us. So, I invite you to explore with me the two major topics of trials and temptations.

Trials and temptations are an explosive combination that can overwhelm us if we do not discern how God works through them. They can render us immobilized or stuck in our spiritual lives if we do not determine what purposes they seek to fulfill in us.

Trials and temptations can ensnare our mind and heart with relentless frustration and fear if we are ignorant of the way they operate. They can endanger our soul if we are unmindful of the strain and stress they bring to our spirit.

Thus, I wrote this small volume so that we may see how God works when we encounter trials and temptations. This volume seeks to help us learn lessons on overcoming life's overwhelming struggles. Part 1 deals with the times when we go through trials, while Part 2 discusses the times when we experience temptations.

Part 1, which is titled **“How God Works When We Face Trials”** has two chapters (and four sub-chapters) that cover reflections on James 1:1-4 and James 1:5-8.

Chapter 1 is called **“What Trials Can Do for Us”** (James 1:1-4), while Chapter 2 is labeled, **“What We Can Do to Trials”** (James 1:5-8).

Part 2, which is titled **“How God Works When Temptations Face Us,”** has two chapters (and five sub-chapters) on James 1:13-15 and Matthew 4:1-11.

James 1:13-15 tells us what we need to be watchful for in order not to be deceived by temptations (Chapter 3, **“What to Do When We Are Tempted.”**)

To supplement our vigilance toward temptations, I included Matthew 4:1-11, which is Jesus’ model for handling more temptations. Chapter 4 is called **“What to Do When We are Tempted Again.”**

All the four brief chapters (and nine sub-chapters) of this volume are designed to help us make practical steps for application. These applications are meant to help us respond to God when he chooses to work in us during our times of trials and temptations.

Before we go to Part 1, I'd like us to be forewarned. Learning about how God works in the midst of our trials and temptations is serious business. In fact, the more serious we become in handling them the way God wants us to, the more intense and more frequent trials and temptations may come our way.

Here's a word to the wise: the more we seek to overcome our trials, the more these trials may appear overwhelming. In addition, the more we commit to live holy and godly lives, the more trials may show up, and the more our sinful desires may surface. Let us not be surprised when and if these happen.

But what's encouraging is this: the more intense and more frequent trials and temptations come our way, the more potential we have in experiencing God's presence and power. The more overwhelming these trials and temptations seem to us, the more available God's grace and goodness are. So let's not lose heart. In the midst

of troubles and hardships, we can feel God's heart for us and experience his abounding favor.

*“Consider it pure joy when you
encounter various trials. They
are meant to make you strong.”*



Part 1

HOW GOD WORKS

When We Face Trials

"¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. ²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

-James 1:1-4

CHAPTER 1

What Trials Can Do For Us

(James 1:1-4)

A religious teacher was instructing a student about the truths of Deuteronomy 6:6 when the pupil asked his teacher, “Sir, why does this verse tell us to put God’s commandments upon our hearts, and not in our hearts?”

The teacher wisely answered, “Son, it is not within our human power to place divine teachings directly in our heart. All we can do is to place them on the surface of our heart, so that when the heart breaks, they will drop in.”

Trials break our hearts so that divine teachings can drop in. They come our way to make life’s lessons sink in our minds and settle in our souls.

Yet, as humans, it is our nature to not welcome trials. We resist them like a plague because we think that they are there to hurt and harm us. We overlook the fact that when trials break our hearts, they intend to make us better, not bitter. They mend our broken lives in ways that no physician or medicine can ever mend.

Vance Havner speaks of the value of being broken. He says, "God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. . . it is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever."

So given the value of brokenness in trials, we ask, "What do trials really achieve for us? Why do they come our way? What do they seek to accomplish in our lives?"

James 1:1-4 talks about the two important purposes of trials in our lives to make us mature (1:1-3) and complete (1:4).

CHAPTER 1.1

Trials Make Us Mature

(James 1:1-3)

Trials make us mature. This is the first major role of trials in our lives.

We can appreciate the maturing role of trials in our lives when we first inspect the actual trials of the people that James addresses in his letter. James calls these people the “twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1).

Context of Pressing Pressures

The scattered twelve tribes had their share of pressing pressures. These tribes were James’ fellow-Jews who were forced to leave the Promised Land for various reasons.

It may be due to persecution by the Jews against the Christians or the pursuit of commerce in other lands.

But whatever the reason may be, we can imagine the immensity of their trials – similar to the way any stranger to a new place personally encounters. Do you remember the last time you visited a new place totally different from your own? Or the time when you were lost in a strange town all alone? Can you remember how scared you were, or how unusually sensitive you might have been to anyone or anything that came along?

This experience is probably what our Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) feel while working in a foreign land. Physically, they may feel unsafe. Economically, they may feel insecure. Mentally, they may feel insignificant. Socially, they may feel unstable. Spiritually, they may feel unsettled.

Are you going through these similar feelings right now? We may not be physically away in a

foreign land or literally lost in a strange place. But we probably may have been placed in a situation that makes us feel unsafe, insecure, insignificant, unstable, or unsettled.

If we can identify with the twelve tribes or the OFWs, we would appreciate the appeal of James in the next verse.

Appeal for Joy Amid Trials

James urges his audience, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (1:2). Wow! James wastes no time hitting the mark of their real need: that is, to know how to handle their trials.

But his proposal seems perplexing. Consider it pure joy when we face trials? “How can we derive pure joy when trials are painful? Are

“But let us not miss the point: we can find pure joy in the midst of our trials because they can enable us to experience inner peace – despite the presence of outward pressure.”

we going to smile when we feel sad or sorrowful? Are we going to deny the pain in our problems? Must we ignore the reality of trials?"

These questions reveal our shock at how strange this teaching is. But let us not miss the point: we can find pure joy in the midst of our trials because they can enable us to experience inner peace – despite the presence of outward pressure.

In other words, trials fulfill God's purposes for us in ways that no other self-help program can accomplish. Trials bring to the surface God's transforming lessons in ways that no other institution of learning can teach. Trials make us realize God's potential for us in ways that no other successful job or business can compensate.

A family from Manila went to Mindanao to climb Mount Apo. It was the first time for the ten-year-old son to trek with the parents. As he panted on the way up, the son complained to his father, "Dad, this is not the path. It has many rocks and

bumps.” But the father simply smiled and said, “Son, the bumps are what we climb on.”

Trials are the bumps that we climb on to for our spiritual growth. They are the stepping stones that make us go higher, not the rocky obstacles that obscure our path. So let’s remember: trials are stepping stones, not hindrances; they bring us hope, not harm.

Trials are the bumps that we climb on to for our spiritual growth. They are the stepping stones that make us go higher, not the rocky obstacles that obscure our path.

Let’s welcome the rocks and bumps in our journey of life. Through them, we can experience inner peace and joy, gain peace of mind, and find deep joy so that we can face our problems head-on.

Why is it possible to have joy and peace amid our trials? It’s because our trials play a major role to make us mature. When our troubles become bigger, we deepen our character and make us discover bigger breakthroughs in our broken

lives. As Lord Kelvin says, “When you are face to face with a difficulty, you are up against a discovery.”

Discovery of Four Truths about Trials

Let’s now discover four truths about the nature of trials. James 1:2-3 forms the basis for these: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

First, **trials are wide-ranging**. We see this truth in the words, “trials of many kinds.” Trials are varied in the sense that they are both outward and inward. By “outward,” I mean that they can come in the form of external tests of stamina. By “inward,” I mean that trials can come in the form of internal temptations to do wrong as a result of the external tests.

Second, **trials come our way**. We see this truth in the words, “whenever you face trials.” Trials exempt no one. Just as they come in a shape or

size that fits the situations of one individual, so they come to us in the shape or size that fits our own set of circumstances.

Trials came to us before; they continue to come to us now; they are committed to come to us tomorrow. There is no way out or around this truth. We have to face them, not run away from them.

Third, **trials test our faith**. We see this truth in the words, “the testing of your faith.” Trials come to us to strengthen us. They develop our faith in the same way as we develop our muscles. When we lift weights, we strengthen our biceps. When we face trials, we strengthen our spiritual biceps.

Lastly, **trials extend our endurance** as seen in the words, “your faith develops perseverance.” To endure means to remain under a load full of burdens, to have staying power, to hold fast. Perseverance refers to the steadfastness in the face of difficulties.

Pulse of our “Trials-Mix”

In light of these four truths about the nature of trials, let us get a pulse reading of our own “trials mix” – given the current set of circumstances we are in. Please do not ignore these questions. Remember: “An unexamined life is not worth living.”

First, think through this set of questions: What are the various trials that we are facing nowadays? Are they external in nature? If they are, can we find these external tests in the physical, emotional, financial, relational, or spiritual area of our lives? Or are they a combination of these external areas?

Are our struggles internal? Do they entice us to give in or give up, tempt us to compromise or complain, and lure us to criticize or concede? Or if they are not purely external or internal, can our trials be described as a mix of external troubles and internal temptations?

Second, reflect on this next set of questions: Do we already accept the reality that troubles are regular visitors in our lives? Or do we still deny or resist this humbling truth? Do we treat them as a friend or as an enemy? The earlier we realize that trials always come our way, the more we can be ready to face them and even realistically welcome them.

The earlier we realize that trials always come our way, the more we can be ready to face them and even realistically welcome them.

Third, reflect on this set of questions: Do we allow our trials to strengthen our faith by spiritual exercise? Or do we weaken our faith by spiritual neglect? Do we let our trials help us become more spiritually skilled and seasoned? Or do we get more spiritually unskilled and less tempered amid our trials?

Fourth, work through this last set of questions: Do we move toward more endurance despite all our trials? Or are we less motivated to persevere now, in light of the heaviness of our hardships? Would we rather go on with life? Or would we rather stay stuck

where we are now? Do we make things difficult for others because our life is full of difficulties?

All our answers to these questions assess the amount of growth that we are willing to have. They determine the level of maturity that we want trials to add into our lives.

Call for Perseverance

Whatever our struggles are, we should commit to persevere. A poem about a persevering frog shows the true value of never giving up – no matter what. Here's the poem:

*Two frogs fell into a can of cream,
Or so I've heard it told.
The sides of the can were shiny and steep,
The cream was deep and cold.
"Oh, what's the use?" croaked number one.
"Tis fate, no help's around.
Good-bye, my friend!
Good-bye, sad world!"
And weeping still, he drowned.*

*But number two, of sterner stuff,
Dog-paddled in surprise.
Then while he wiped his creamy face,
And dried his creamy eyes.
"I'll swim awhile at least," he said,
Or so I've heard he said;
"It really wouldn't help the world,
If one more frog were dead."
An hour or two he kicked and swam,
Not once he stopped to mutter,
But kicked and kicked and swam and kicked,
Then hopped out, via butter!"*

*Perseverance
does not thrive
in passivity
or pessimism,
inactivity or
hopelessness. It
seeks to bring
out the best
in us.*

Perseverance — the way the frog showed it — always works wonders. It involves active pursuits of paddling, kicking, and swimming until we get out of trouble. Perseverance does not thrive in passivity or pessimism, inactivity or hopelessness. It seeks to bring out the best in us.

There may be times when we wonder, "Would my perseverance really work? Would my best perseverance be good enough?" When these times and questions come, just remember the snail. It is by perseverance that a pair of snail reached Noah's ark!

*"⁴Perseverance must finish
its work so that you may be
mature and complete, not lacking
anything."*

-James 1:4 (NIV)

CHAPTER 1.2

Trials Perfect Us

(James 1:4)

Trials do not only make us mature, they also perfect us. As a Chinese proverb says, *“A gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials.”* Indeed, trials possess a polishing, perfecting, and maximizing effect.

Perseverance to the End

In practical terms, how do we maximize our lives? James shows us how. He appeals to his audience, *“Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”* (James 1:4).

We are called to persevere until the end. We are called to persevere, even when the load does not get lighter. We are called to persevere, even when people do not cheer us along the way.

An emperor in China was once asked what six things are important to have in life. He replied, “Patience, patience, patience; endurance, endurance, endurance.” We need patience, endurance, and perseverance until the end because of the three results that our non-quitting attitude brings us.

Rewarding Results of Perseverance

First, trials make us “perfect.” To be perfect does not mean to be sinless, but to be mature. It means being fully grown, as opposed to a spiritual babe, who is unskilled in the world of righteousness. In other words, to be perfect means to be mature in one area of our lives.

Second, trials make us “complete.” To be complete literally means to be “entire or thorough in all parts.” In our case, it means that the entirety of the Christian virtues is constantly being added to our personal spiritual account. To be complete means to be mature in a growing number of areas in our lives.

The words “perfect” and “complete” are set in the context of Grecian athletic games. When an athlete joins one of the Olympic games and then wins, he is said to be “perfect.” When the same athlete joins five Olympic games (or the pentathlon) and then wins in all five, he is said to be “complete.”

Similarly, when God gives us an area of life to work on, he wants us to mature (i.e., to be “perfect”) in that area. Later on, when he adds other areas of life to work on, he wants us to also mature (i.e., to be “complete”).

Simply put, when God opens up those areas, it means that we are ready to mature in facing them.

We are required to see those areas worked on until the end – knowing that God will be with us.

Third, aside from the results of maturity and completeness, trials make us lack in nothing. The last part of verse 2 states, “not lacking anything.” In other words, we are ably, aptly, and amply supplied with all our needs for growth and maturity.

*“If we persevere
until the end,
we reap the
rewarding
harvest of
perseverance.
We mature. We
grow in all areas
of our lives.”*

If we persevere until the end, we reap the rewarding harvest of perseverance. We mature. We grow in all areas of our lives. We have all our needs provided. We experience a maximized life. But again, all these come with endurance that lasts.

In the succeeding context, James again picks up the value of persevering until the end. He said, “Blessed is the man 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” (1:12).

A Persian legend tells of a certain king who needed a persevering servant in his royal court. He had two candidates for the needed position. So he put them to a test. With the same wages, the applicants were to fill a basket with water from a nearby well.

The king said, “Your job is to drain the water from the well using a basket with little holes on the sides of the basket.” Then the king left the two applicants, saying that he would come in the evening to inspect their work.

After dumping three buckets of water into the basket, the first applicant said, “What is the point of doing this useless work? As soon as we get water from the well, the water runs out from the holes in the basket. This is foolish!”

The second applicant said, “We have our wages, haven’t we? The point in our job is the king’s business, not ours.” But the complainer replied, “I’m not going to do this crazy job.” Angrily, he threw his bucket and went away.

The other applicant stayed on until he finished draining the water from the well. When he looked at the bottom of the well, he saw something shining brightly. It was a diamond ring.

When trials come our way, God gives us the job to drain the water from the well until we discover the diamond ring in our trials.

The persevering applicant said to himself, "Now I see the point of pouring the water into the basket with holes. If the bucket had brought up the diamond ring before the well was dry, it would have been found in the basket. Our work is not useless."

When the king returned, the second applicant gave the diamond ring and was hired for the important position. The servant's perseverance truly paid off.

When trials come our way, God gives us the job to drain the water from the well until we discover the diamond ring in our trials. But before we discover the precious gem, we need

to persevere until the end. That's where maturity and a maximized life are unearthed and come out shining like diamond.

Welcome Trials

To apply these two lessons on trials, let's do two things. First, let's welcome trials. We need to be ready for them and not resist them. We can welcome trials by thanking God and trusting him.

Think of a current trial or a set of trials that has come your way. Maybe it came recently or has been with us for quite a long time. Yet, up until now, we have not been welcoming this trial as a friend. Instead, we have been resisting it. So today, can we decide to welcome it once and for all with a prayer of thanks and trust to God?

We can express to him our prayer of thanks and trust, like this: *“Father, thank you that this trial is for my good. It is meant to make me mature. I*

welcome this trial as your means of maximizing me. I trust that you know what you're doing. I entrust this area of my life to you. I entrust to you everything and everyone related to this trial. Amen."

Don't Give Up

Second, let's not give up in any area that God gives us to work on. Though our trials may discourage or disappoint us greatly, and though these same trials may disturb or even depress us deeply, let's continue to persevere. "In trying times, don't quit trying."

"The best way out of our discouragement is to encourage someone else who is going through a big trial in his or her life."

The best way out of our discouragement is to encourage someone else who is going through a big trial in his or her life. Find a way today to help someone who feels helpless. Give hope to someone who feels hopeless. Motivate someone not to quit. Share this poem with him or her:

DON'T QUIT

*When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And when you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit –
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.*

*Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As everyone of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When we might have won, had we stuck it out.
Don't give up, though the pace seems slow –
You may succeed with another blow.*

*Often the goal is nearer than
It seems to a faint and faltering man,
Often the struggler has given up
When he might have captured the victor's cup.
And he learned too late, when the night came down,
How close he was to the golden crown.*

*Success is failure turned inside out
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt
And you never can tell how close you are,*

*It may be near when it seems afar;
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit
It's when things seem worst that you mustn't quit.*

Let's remember to encourage one another not to quit. Let's also remember the insight of Ian MacLaren, who said, "The highest joy to the Christian almost always comes through suffering. No flower can bloom in paradise, which is not transplanted from Gethsemane."

Our trials are like flowers transplanted from Gethsemane. Let us make them bloom amid our suffering so we can grow toward a mature and maximized life.

*We rejoice when we passed
life's simple tests. But we must
realize further that God in His
unfathomable wisdom allows
life's little struggles to prepare
us for the worse yet to come.*

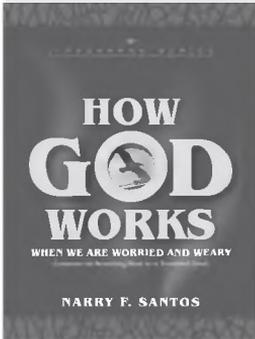
*And yet still, it is our total
dependence on Him that carries
us to victory.*

- N.M. Sosmeña

“⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

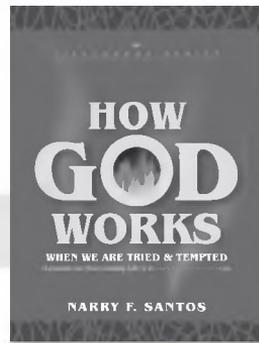
-James 1:5-8 (NIV)

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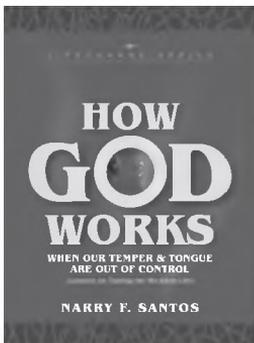
ISBN 971-92796-2-1 (pbk..)

ISBN 971-92796-3-X (pbd..)



ISBN 971-92796-5-6 (pbk..)

ISBN 971-92796-6-4 (pbd..)



ISBN 971-92796-8-0 (pbk..)

ISBN 971-92796-7-2 (pbd..)

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ISBN 971-92796-1-3 (pbd.)

ISBN 971-92796-0-5 (pbk.)



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PLEASE CONTACT US AT:



96-B Panay Avenue, Brgy. South Triangle
Quezon City 1103, Philippines
Telephone: (632) 374-5996 • Fax: (632) 374-5997
E-mail: lifecchange@i-manila.com.ph