

Study 4. The Refiner's Fire

Becoming a Disciple Series

Warm-up Question: What is the most inspiring or moving song you have ever heard? Have you ever had a song that has helped you difficult times in your life?

God Tests Those That Are His

The next important lesson that we can learn about becoming a disciple is how God molds, shapes and trains us to be all that He wants us to be. To use an illustration of how God refines our character, I would like to use Horatio Spafford as an example. Mr. Spafford was born in 1828, and known as a sincere, devout Christian. He was the father of four daughters, an active member of the Presbyterian Church, and a close friend and supporter of D. L. Moody, the famous evangelist, and other evangelical leaders of his day. On October 8, 1871, the Great Chicago Fire swept through the city. Horatio was a prominent lawyer in Chicago and had invested heavily in the city's real estate, and the fire destroyed almost everything he owned. Two years later in November 1873, Spafford decided to take his entire family to Europe for a vacation, also intending to assist Moody in his evangelistic work once he arrived there. However, Horatio Spafford was unexpectedly detained in Chicago due to urgent business concerns but decided to send his family aboard the S.S. Ville du Harve as scheduled. Midway through the trans-Atlantic voyage, the S.S. Ville du Harve was struck by the English vessel Loch Earn and eventually foundered. Spafford's four daughters—Anna, eleven; Maggie, nine; Bessie, seven; and Tanetta, two—were among the 226 who perished in the aftermath. Mrs. Spafford, one of the few spared, sent her husband the heartbreak telegram: "Saved alone" (Story continued at the end of this message).

It is a clear revelation in the Scripture that God allows and sometimes initiates a test to open our eyes for us to see that our character is not yet at the place where God wants us. Like we said in the last session, God prunes the dead wood of old fleshly habits in our lives, so that fresh life and fruit may come forth (John 15:2). Not all mishaps in our lives are God's doing, however. God often gets the blame for such things as earthquakes, tornados and other difficulties that humankind faces. Some things are just natural tragedies, some things are attacks of Satan, and some things happen to us as a result of personal choices and choices that our nation or our culture has made. We cannot explain all things this side of heaven, but let's look at those things that God allows for our testing:

¹Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. ²Remember how **the LORD your God led you all the way** in the wilderness these forty years, **to humble and test you** in order **to know what was in your heart**, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, **to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD** (Deuteronomy 8:1-3).

Doesn't God know all things? If He already knows what is in the heart of man, what was the purpose of this humbling and testing spoken of in verse 2?

The first thing we see about this passage is that it was God who led the Israelites in the wilderness, the place of barrenness and dryness. Have you been going through a dry season in your life at this moment? Then maybe this is for you! The testing was for the Israelites to realize that even though they were released from the bondage of Egypt, the ways of Egypt was still in their hearts. Slavery's effects still dominated them. It is similar for us; even though we are released from Satan's bondage of sin, sin still rules over us until we come to the place where we realize and see ourselves as God sees us, free from slavery to sin. In our thought life, we still default to sin until we come to a place where we listen to God's Word saying that we don't live on bread alone but that we absolutely need spiritual food, the Word of God, for our spiritual growth and health, just as much as we need physical sustenance for our bodies. The test is to wake us up to see our complete dependence on Jesus. How much do you value the truth of the Word of God at work in your life?

The Test is for a Purpose

¹⁰For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver. ¹¹You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. ¹²You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance (Psalm 66:10-12).

See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48:10).

Do you remember a time in your life when God refined your character through something you experienced? Can you share what you learned?

Sometimes our lives are full of burdens, and it seems as if God is nowhere. It looks as if God is letting men ride over our heads and laying loads on our backs. Why would God allow these things to go on in the lives of His children? God views our testing as the refining of our character. Just as a metal sword made for combat went through the fire, refined and hammered on the anvil, in the same way, God allows for trials and difficulties to come to us so that we may grow spiritually through them. We do not know God's plans and purposes for our lives. Our life experiences would make more sense if we could only look into the future and see the result of our transformation. Often we don't understand God's plan until twenty years later when we are enjoying the fruits that come from the trial. What are the fruits of trials? I would say that it is a greater anointing of the Spirit and a maturing of our character—these are the things that please God. Of course, this can result in other blessings in our lives and in the lives of others too. God has a purpose and a plan for each one of us. How do I know that? The mother of the two disciples, James and John, asked that they would be able to sit in the best positions in the Kingdom of God, on the right hand and the left-hand side of Jesus. Jesus replied saying that those places are for those who will endure the cup of suffering in the same way as Jesus would and did. He said to James and John:

"You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father" (Matthew 20:23).

What can we infer from this passage and several others? God knows what He is doing. John and James wanted the seats of honor on either side of Jesus, but were they ready to take the same cup of suffering that Jesus was to take? To be great in the sight of God is to be a servant of all, and to put self on the altar to serve even through times of suffering. The way up is the way down. Christ must become greater, and we must become less important. God has seen ahead of time those who, in their heart of hearts want to go all the way with Him. In the preparation of His people, God prepares ahead of time opportunities for His servants to exercise in their servanthood. He has seen the end from the beginning. He has a picture of the finished product of your life that He is making you become. You are a product of the choices and responses to different trials that God has prepared in advance for you. When the cup of suffering is handed to you, will you choose to take the way of pain or will you opt for the easy way out of the trial and compromise your faith?

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

What does this Scripture say? First, it says that God Himself is working on you, that you are His workmanship. Secondly, it says that you were created to do specific works that God Himself, outside of time, before the creation of the world, prepared in advance for you to do. □

The Testing is to Build Character

Sometimes the things that God has prepared in advance for us to do can be hindered by a lack of godly character. God has to work on us before He can work through us. The purpose in all of this is not just so that we can perform works. Whatever we accomplish in our lives will be linked to our character, to the people we have become. This in itself is important to the Father; that we become more like Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit is described in Galatians 5:22 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These character qualities will be evident in the way one's life is lived among others. Such an individual is one who has learned to give priority to that which is on God's agenda. It means practically, to exhibit the character of God, which is only possible if the Life of God is dwelling in you. This is why we are dependent upon His Word and the Holy Spirit. Many people have reached out for influence before a true godly character is built into their lives. When this happens, it usually results in moral collapse and the ridicule and accusations of the enemy.

King David is an example of this. When he chose to give in to temptation and had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan confronted and rebuked David. The prophet Nathan told David that he had made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt for the things of God (2 Samuel 12:14). Preparation of our heart and character is critical, for when we are not available to the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and form godly character, we give Satan an opportunity to accuse Christians before the world, especially when we have influence and yet give in to temptation. We make ourselves open candidates for sabotage either from the enemy or ourselves.

There are many examples of those who had acquired greatness before they were ready and had sabotaged their success. Many examples of this are seen throughout history. Our character must be more prominent than our influence.

Can you think of individuals who experienced a fall from greatness, or failure after a period of great achievement due to a flaw in their character, not being equal to the responsibility or influence they had?

God's work must be done by those who are prepared ahead of time, by those whose character has been shaped by trials in the furnace of suffering and difficulty. Moses thought he was ready to be used by God, so he took the initiative to help the Jewish people in their distress by killing an Egyptian soldier who was beating an Israelite slave in Egypt (Acts 7:25). He hoped that the people of Israel would respond to his leadership and that he would be able to rally them together to leave Egypt's bondage. The timing was wrong, and Moses needed 40 years in the quiet of the desert as a shepherd. There in the desert, God worked on his character slowly reducing his tendency to rely on leadership lessons of Egypt's "Madison Avenue techniques." Think about how different his life became under God's training and character building there in the desert of Midian. He didn't even own his sheep; the sheep he pastored belonged to his father in law (Exodus 3:1). Everything that he had in Egypt was taken from him; only his faith in God remained. It took 40 years of training in listening and obedience before he was ready to be used (Acts 7:30). The greater the job, the greater the training! Only when his confidence in his abilities was at an end did God step in and begin to use him (Exodus 3:11). Our responses and attitude determine how long the trial will last and what kind of trial God has fashioned for us. Some of us have to go around the mountain again. If we don't learn the lesson the first time the test comes around, He will bring the same test in perhaps a different way. God uses all things for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Whatever you are going through, learn to trust God's humbling and testing and submit to His character building in your life.

Can you identify a test, which you have experienced repeatedly? Is there a lesson you have yet to learn through a similar trial that keeps occurring in your life? How can you speed up this process?

Let's cast our hook out in that stream for a minute:

Let's say that you are a person who has a love for Christ, but when the going gets tough, and the fire gets hot in the midst of the refinery, you default to a lifestyle of denying that you know Christ by the way you live your life. It becomes easier to default to sin and disobedience when one is going through the fire of testing. You cease being an overcomer and go to default mode, allowing life to do to you whatever it will. What kind of test does God put you in? We need to overcome the everyday challenges of our lives to be prepared to face direct challenges to our faith that may come to us one day. It is easy to go through life not thinking about such things, but the truth is that the choices that you make daily are what will prepare you for whatever tests will come in the future. Perhaps a test will come to you at some point in your life when you are asked; "Are you a follower of Jesus the Christ?" Do you think that it would ever be possible that even here in America, you could be hauled off to a prison camp for being a terrorist by replying

“yes” to such a question? If you think that is a fantastic or ridiculous notion, consider this; such persecution for faith has happened in other parts of the world in the past, and it is happening in some countries today. Whenever a regime comes to power that is in extreme opposition to the message of Christ or makes Christians appear as a subversive group, working against the common good of the people, it is possible that taking a stand for your faith could mean intense persecution, loss of material goods, or loss of life. The early Christians experienced such things. Isn’t that the kind of test that Peter the apostle faced? Jesus told him ahead of time,

³¹"Simon, Simon, **Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.** ³²But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).

What was Satan asking God for and why did he have to ask?

Satan wanted to shake Simon Peter’s faith, but because Peter was a believer, he had to ask for permission from God to sift and shake the apostle’s life. God allowed the test to come to Simon Peter because he would be a stronger disciple when his heart was broken because of failing the test. What was the test? Three times he was asked if he had been with Jesus. Three times Peter responded that he didn’t know Him. His heart was broken with remorse and repentance when the cock crowed, and he remembered Jesus’ words that before the cock crowed, he would deny three times that he even knew Christ. Peter was much too self-confident, and God had to allow him to be humbled and broken before He could use him to preach the gospel in power on the Day of Pentecost. He was brought to a place of abundance, in spiritual terms, after the trial of his faith. God knew Peter’s heart. He knew that he would deny Him, but He also knew that Peter would return and that his faith would be restored.

Another thought related to the passage above is that whatever trial we are going through, the Lord is praying for us as He was for Peter, that our faith would not fail. The Word of God says that “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25). This is encouraging because we know that God always hears His Son’s intercessory prayers for us.

The Testing of Joseph

Let’s look at the life of Joseph, who became the vice-regent of all of Egypt. As a boy of seventeen, he had a dream that his brothers would bow down to him as servants. Let’s read the passage:□

²Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. ⁴When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. ⁵Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. ⁶He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: ⁷We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood

upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." ⁸His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. ⁹Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" ¹¹His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind (Genesis 37:2-11).

In His grace, God gave Joseph a dream concerning his future, but the problem was that Joseph did not have the character base to accomplish the dream. His character needed to be refined to stand up under the pressures and responsibilities that the Egyptian pharaoh would place on him. When he came through the test, he was exalted to second in command of all Egypt.

What's your dream? What do you want to accomplish with your life? You are becoming today what you will be tomorrow. I like to think that every one of us wants to impact the world in some way, for the world to be a little bit better because you were here, at least for the people around you. Put your life into His hands and see what He will make of it! A character is much better than success. If you have godly character and make yourself available to God, you will experience both. Aim to *be* someone more than to *do* something.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones, pastor, and writer used to say that the worst thing that can happen to a person is for him to be successful before he's ready. We only have to look at our sports heroes to see how fame and recognition can destroy life if one does not have the character base to go with the level of notoriety that a person is given. The more fame a person has, the broader must be the character base to support such a life. Without character, a person cannot support such heady fame, and many often fall and fail. We can talk about Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, Bernie Madoff and others. What kind of task, or what measure of success will God be able to trust you with?

The great disciple, Martin Luther, was entrusted with the task of bringing the church back to the Bible. When the most powerful men in all of Europe wanted him to abandon his faith in Christ and the Scriptures, he would not recant. When he set out on his journey to Worms to face the questions and the controversies his teaching of the Bible had created, he said, "You can expect from me everything except fear or recantation. I shall not flee, much less recant." His friends warned him of the dangers; some begged him not to go. But Luther would not hear of it. "Not go to Worms!" he said. "I shall go to Worms though there were as many demons as tiles on the roofs."

When Luther appeared there before the court of Emperor Charles V, he was shown a stack of his writings and was called upon to recant or retract his beliefs. Luther replied, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning, then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

Then he likely added: “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen.” A few days later, before his death, Luther recalled that day. “I was afraid of nothing; God can make one so desperately bold.”¹

A godly character such as that which Martin Luther displayed only comes about through long preparation in the furnace of suffering. What about the training of Joseph, the son of Israel? God had to work on Joseph if he was going to be able to accomplish all that God had planned for him—to save his family from the famine and ruin that God knew was several years ahead. First of all, Joseph was arrogantly parading himself in the coat his father had made for him. When his father sent him to Dothan, to check on his brothers, he went wearing the robe. Don't you think that was a bit foolish? The mantle distinguished him as the heir of Jacob's dynasty. Then to top it off, he was boasting to his brothers that they would be bowing down before him, a little skinny kid of seventeen. God's way of preparing him for the throne of Egypt was for him to be rejected by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold as a slave, charged unjustly with attempted rape and finally ending up in a dungeon. Perhaps you too have wondered why you are going through various trials. I can't say I know what God is doing in your life, just as I don't always understand all that He is doing in my own life, but I do know that we can trust Him.

The Tests of God Creates Character

¹⁶He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food; ¹⁷and he sent a man before them—Joseph, sold as a slave. ¹⁸They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, ¹⁹till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true. ²⁰The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free. ²¹He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed (Psalm 105:16-21).

God planned to raise up a man, Joseph, to a high level of prominence in the government of Egypt to save his family, but for that to happen, the way up was the way down. Don't you think that by the time Joseph was unjustly thrown into prison for an alleged rape that he began to wonder where God was? He could not see what was ahead and perhaps could not see that his stewardship in the house of Potiphar, his master, and also his stewardship inside the jail, was just the preparation of God to teach him to manage all of Egypt during the upcoming famine. After becoming the second in command of the whole nation of Egypt, his brothers came down to Egypt to buy food. It was when they bowed before Joseph that he remembered his dream. □

What's your dream? Do you have the character base to support your vision? How fruitful do you want to be? Do you wish to be a tool in the hand of God? Is God speaking to you right now through these words? Then cling to Christ and beg Him to transform you into His image. Humble yourself and submit your will to His, and see what He will make you become. No matter what, just as Joseph did, hold on to your integrity and run the other way when sin comes around wanting to play (Genesis 39:12). Let there be a hatred of sin in your life. Remember, you are created for eternity. Life is not just about what happens in this world. God is preparing you for eternity. Godly character is the stuff of eternity. Don't go home devoid of the inner transformation of your soul. Let Him mold and shape you into His likeness. No matter what trials you have to endure, whatever your lot in life, may it be well with your soul. □

¹ J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Leadership, Moody Bible Institute. Page 60.

Horatio Spafford, after receiving the telegram saying, “saved alone,” immediately sailed for England to rejoin Anna, his grief-stricken wife. As his ship passed the approximate location where his daughters had drowned, his deep sorrow mingled with his unwavering faith in God's goodness caused him to write down words that became the following hymn:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul!”

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought—
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to His Cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend –
“Even so, it is well with my soul.”

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live;
If dark hours about me shall roll
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3hBsuzX884&feature=related>

Horatio and Anna Spafford, after these painful trials, went on to found the American Colony in Jerusalem, Israel. Some Americans and Swedish people joined them and gave of their resources by caring for Muslim, Jews, and Christians living in the Holy Land. They helped many returning Jews by housing, feeding and helping them to get on their feet and support themselves. God had allowed Horatio and Anna to go through terrible trials. They went through fire and water. God tested them and refined in the fire, but they were both brought to a place of abundance (Psalm 66:10-12), and heaven alone knows how close to the throne with Christ they are and what rewards they are enjoying right now. May you too experience His abundance!

Prayer: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24). Lord, I do want to be a disciple of Jesus and fruitful for you. I give myself afresh to you, Holy Refiner.

Keith Thomas

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com