

3. The Character of a Disciple

Becoming a Disciple Series

God Tests Those Who Belong to Him

Another important lesson we can learn about becoming a disciple is how God molds, shapes, and trains us to be all He wants us to be. To illustrate how God refines our character, I would like to use Horatio Spafford as an example. Mr. Spafford was born in 1828 and was a sincere, devout Christian. He was father to 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 took his entire family to Europe for a vacation, 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 English vessel Loch Earn struck the S.S. Ville du Harve, causing it to sink. 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 heartbreaking telegram: “Saved alone.” (The story continues at the end of this message). What a tremendous trial of their faith that must have been! We may wonder why God would allow anyone to go through such heartache. In times such as this, our faith is tested.

It is a clear revelation in the Scriptures that God allows and sometimes initiates testing in our lives. During trial and testing, it isn't easy to trust. We want to understand it all as we go through it, but at times, we only see the hurt, pain, and loss. God may allow testing for reasons not always apparent to us at the time. He sometimes allows trials to open our eyes and reveal that our inner man, our character, still needs refinement. As we have seen in our previous study, God prunes the dead wood of old fleshly habits in our lives so that new life and fruit may come forth (John 15:2). Not all mishaps in our lives are God's doing, however. God often gets blamed for such things as earthquakes, tornados, and other difficulties humankind faces. Some events are due to natural tragedies, some trials that come to us are attacks of Satan, and some things that happen to us are due to 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, Emphasis mine).

Doesn't God know all things? If He already knows what is in a man's heart, why did God lead the Israelites into the wilderness to humble and test them in verses 2 and 3?

The first thing we see about this passage is that God led the Israelites into the wilderness, a place of barrenness and dryness. Have you been going through a dry season in your life at this moment? Then maybe this study is for you! The testing was for the Israelites to realize that even though God brought them out of the bondage of Egypt, the ways of Egypt were still dominant in the core of their lives. God led them into the barren desert **“to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart.”** God knows what's in our hearts; our problem is that we are often unaware of what is in our hearts and blind to the deceitfulness of sin. As a disciple of Christ, we can only deal with the slavery of sin's effects when we can clearly see them. Egypt's slavery of sin still dominated them. It is similar for us; even though Christ has set us free from Satan's bondage of sin, sin still rules over us until we come to the place where we see ourselves as God sees us, free from slavery to sin, enabling us to live differently. 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 need spiritual food, the Word of God, for our spiritual growth and health, just as much as we require physical sustenance for our bodies. The test helps us grow in our discipleship to see our complete dependence on Jesus. A mature disciple has learned to value the truth of the Word of God at work in our lives, not living by the food in his body (not living on bread alone), but by the active Word of God at work in his life.

The more you depend on the Word of God for your sustenance, the more your mind will default to His Word and His ways. God, who made us, is at work in us. Did you know that scientists have discovered that our brains can be programmed and re-wired, so to speak, to different neural pathways to think in a certain way? It is called neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity, also known as brain plasticity, is the ability of neural networks in the brain to change through growth and reorganization. It is when the brain is re-wired to function in a way that differs from how it previously operated. Repeatedly performing an action strengthens the associated neural pathways. This change in how the brain works can be applied to many things in life, and it has been discovered that certain activities, such as meditation, can improve neural plasticity. Imagine the changes going on in our minds and brains as we feed ourselves on the Word of God. God, who has designed us, knows how to “renew” and transform our minds for abundant life. But not our minds only; our hearts, our true spiritual selves, are changed from the inside out. This is the power of the Word of God, for His word is living: **“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword...”** (Hebrews 4:12). Have you ever noticed that when you read the Scriptures, it causes you to hunger for spiritual things more? Christ is working in you, imparting His character and life, for we do not live by bread alone; we are nourished and changed by the Life-giving Word, Christ Himself. To accomplish character change, God sometimes allows testing to come to us, but it's always for a purpose:

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).

We can't always see the purpose of the test. Sometimes, our lives are full of burdens, and it seems that God is nowhere. As we read in Psalm 66 above, it can seem 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? Just as a metal sword made for combat went through the fire, refined, and hammered on the anvil, in the same way, God allows trials and difficulties to come to us so that we may grow spiritually through them. Our life experiences would make more sense if we could only look into the future and see the result of our transformation. We often don't understand God's plan until twenty years later when we enjoy the trial's fruits. What are the fruits of God's tests? It is a greater anointing of the Spirit and the maturing of our character—these things please God. Of course, this can result in other blessings in our lives, as well as the lives of others, too.

Can you think of an aspect of your life or character that has improved due to something you have suffered or endured? Can you share (briefly) what you learned? It can be something big or small!

God has a purpose and a plan for each 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 that those places are for those who will endure and respond correctly to the cup of suffering as their Master did. He said to them:

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, Emphasis mine).

What is the Lord implying from this passage and several others? I believe the Lord says that God is at work preparing His people for what they will accomplish for His Kingdom's purposes. He is preparing specific rewards according to His people's Christlike living. John and James wanted the seats of honor on either side of Jesus, but were they ready to take the 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 oneself on the altar to serve, even amid times of suffering. The way of discipleship is the way down. Christ must become greater, and we must become less important, which was the statement John the Baptist said: "**He must become greater; I must become less**" (John 3:30). God has seen ahead of time those who, in their heart of hearts, want to go all the way with Him. God prepares ahead of time opportunities for His servants to exercise 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. Your character, the inner man, is 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 go the way of a disciple of Christ, or will you choose 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 the above Scripture teach? First, it says that God Himself is molding, shaping, and working on you, that you are His workmanship. Secondly, it says that each of us is called to do specific works that God prepared in advance for us to do before the creation of the world.

Someone has once described the work of the Spirit as though God is weaving a tapestry, which is your life. Every stitch is divinely placed, but we can only see the back of this tapestry, which looks like a jumbled mass of threads. Only when we see the finished tapestry from the other side can we behold the beautiful picture God has made crafting our lives, preparing works for us to do.

Do you think it is possible to quicken the process of becoming mature in Christ? Can we slow down the work of God in our lives? How do our choices matter? Try and think of examples from your life or in Scripture.

The Testing is to Build Character

Sometimes, the things 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. We must preach Christ crucified for sinners, but at the same time, God wants to show forth His Son through the character that He has made you to be. Jesus said, **“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”** (Matthew 7:16). I learned long ago that leadership is influence, and we can only reproduce what we are. We must first take the beam out of our eye to take the sliver out of someone else's eye (Matthew 7:3-5). Whatever we accomplish in our lives will be linked to our character and the person we have become—shaping our character is essential to the Father so 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 how one lives among others. Such an individual has learned to prioritize what is in God's plan. God's plan is for His people to show Christ's character and life; this will draw many to Christ. Some have reached out to be societal influencers before a godly character is formed. 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 gave in to temptation and had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan confronted and rebuked David, saying 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 allow Satan 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 acquired greatness before they were ready and sabotaged their success. A disciple's character must be more prominent than their influence. Godly character must always come first.

God's work must be done 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 Israelites in their distress by killing an Egyptian soldier beating an Israelite in Egypt (Acts 7:25). Moses 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, though;

Moses needed 40 years in the quiet of the desert as a shepherd. God worked on his character in the desert, 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). God stripped him of everything he leaned on in Egypt; 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 more significant the job, the greater the training! God stepped in and began using him only when his confidence in his abilities ended (Exodus 3:11). Our responses and attitude determine how long the trial will last and what kind of trial God has fashioned for us. If we don't learn the lesson the first time the test comes around, God allows us to go around the mountain again, taking the same test differently. God uses all things for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). The small trials you experience today, and the seemingly small daily choices will prepare you to face more critical tasks.

Let's say that you are a person who loves Christ, but when the going gets tough, you default to a lifestyle of compromising your values and denying that you know Christ by the way you live your life. In the middle of a test, the tempter pressures you to default mode to lean on this world's wisdom. We must overcome the everyday challenges to be prepared to face direct obstacles to our faith that may come to us one day. It is easy to go through life without thinking about such things, but the truth is that your daily choices will prepare you to overcome whatever tests come your way. Suppose you think it is fantastic or far-fetched to imagine that you may be asked to deny Christ or suffer persecution for your faith. In that case, I ask you to consider this: Our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world have already suffered this way. It has happened in other parts of the world in the past, and it is happening in some countries as we speak. Whenever a regime comes to power 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, and he got the other side of the trial. What was the test? He was asked three times if he had been with Jesus. Peter responded three times that he didn't know Jesus. 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 allowed 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 be restored.

Whatever trial we go 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 Scripture 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 in the Book of Genesis. As a seventeen-year-old, he dreamed his brothers would bow down to him as servants (Genesis 37:9). God gave Joseph a dream showing him that he would be a leader, but the problem was that Joseph did not have the character base to accomplish the vision or dream. His character needed to be refined to stand up to the pressures and responsibilities that the Egyptian pharaoh would place on him. The Psalmist wrote about what God did in Joseph's life:

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 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 when Joseph was unjustly imprisoned for alleged rape, he wondered 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 his stewardship inside the jail were 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 to Egypt to buy food. It was when they bowed before Joseph that he remembered his dream. He was exalted to second in command of all Egypt when he passed the test.

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 everyone 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! An inner godly 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, said that the worst thing that can happen to a person is 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. 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 discuss Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, and Bernie Madoff. What kind of task or measure of success can God put into your hands and still keep you humble?

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? Cling to Christ and beg Him to transform you into His image. Humble yourself, 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. Let Him mold and shape you into His likeness. No matter what trials you must endure and whatever your lot in life, may it be well with your soul.

After receiving the telegram saying, "saved alone," Horatio Spafford 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.

After these painful trials, Horatio and Anna Spafford went on to build the American Colony in Jerusalem, Israel. They helped many returning Jews by housing, feeding, and helping them to get on their feet and support themselves. God allowed Horatio and Anna to go through terrible trials through fire and water. God tested them and refined them 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. God has comforted and uplifted

perhaps hundreds of thousands of His people just through the inspiration of the song Horatio composed. May you, too, experience His abundance!

Thank God, he does not give us on us! Paul the apostle, no stranger to suffering, tells us in his letter to the Romans:

“...we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4).

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 want to be a disciple of Jesus and be fruitful for you. I give myself anew to you, Holy Refiner.

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