

August 26, 2010

## Our Father's Testing And Pruning

A few days ago I [Mike] was standing outside the Post Office near Peterson Air Force Base with our bicycles as Sue was mailing a present to our niece. As a C-130 aircraft passed overhead on its way in for a landing, a thought passed through my mind. I'd been the Maintenance Officer on a helo detachment in Vietnam and embedded in my training was the knowledge that *every part on each aircraft had been tested to determine how long it would last*. Then the words, "*Everyone must be tested*" kept playing over and over again. This struck a familiar chord as I'd recently read Paul's admonition, "***We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts***" (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

If you think of testing within an academic setting, you probably still experience stomach-tightening at the memory of it. That's because academic tests are generally a pass/fail measurement of what you've retained in your mind or have achieved in a skill. Once the test is over, you can breathe a sigh of relief if you've passed (or groan if you've failed and have to repeat your preparation!). That's NOT what we're talking about here in regard to testing.

Thankfully, when Scripture describes testing, it's far more concerned with ongoing character development and inner motive than an evaluation of knowledge or accomplishment. The concept of our Father *testing* us is threaded throughout the Bible as a means of proving whether or not our hearts, and therefore our faith, are *genuine*. According to the biblical meaning of the word *test*, He's looking for hearts that are worthy through endurance to keep loving and following Jesus in obedient trust. That's a far cry from the shallow parroting of scripted prayers and man-pleasing activities so common in American religious settings today.

Both Testaments abound with references to God's testing His people to prove their perseverance and authentic love for Him:

***"The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart"*** (Proverbs 17:3); ***"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"*** (James 1:12). Even our father, the Hebrew Abraham, was tested (Genesis 22:1 and also Hebrews 11:17). And, testing for irreproachability in their character and in the way they live is commanded by Paul for deacons before they can serve fellow followers of Jesus (1 Timothy 3:10).

So God *testing* us shouldn't be foreign. Yet for many this idea *is* strange if we don't understand from His Word *why* He tests us. Consider the metaphors of a *crucible* and a *furnace*, above, that God uses to compare with the testing He puts us through. A

crucible, like a furnace, is a vessel that uses intense heat to melt something. The goal is to remove worthless dross so that only the refined, purified part remains. This objective is comparable to our Father as the Vinedresser in John 15:1-8. Removal of that which is worthless is essential to our spiritual well-being: **"He cuts off every branch that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful"** (v.2).

Chopping off or burning away whatever is worthless or unfruitful in us is a demonstration of our Father's love for each and every one of His children. As James notes in the verse above (1:12), the *testing* that comes through our trials and suffering reveals the genuineness of our love for God—and results in the wondrous promise of the crown of eternal life. Is whatever you're going through now worth the joy of His love for you and the hope for a heavenly welcome? We know from what He's taken us through in our own lives and from the testimonies of those we've talked with over the years who've gone through severe trials that *agape* love has been the fruit of what we've suffered.

Yet, suffering can produce a tragic alternative to love for those who are not trained by it according to Father's purposes. Instead of seeing His mighty and loving sovereign hand behind all that they've endured, many grow bitter toward God and distrust Him. This is particularly true if the trials they went through occurred before they entered His Covenant through Jesus and became indwelt by His Spirit. As we've talked with other followers of Jesus, we've been convinced that our Father uses events even *before* we become His children to begin the process of Christ-like character development in our mind, will and emotions. To their own ongoing hurt, many miss this important understanding. They're unable to embrace their past emotional hurt as part of our omniscient Father's plan to grow them in the character of His Son. (See Hebrews 5:7-9.)

God's messenger Peter leaves no doubt that our Lord's purposes for the trials we undergo are designed for our good so that our proven trust will reap honor and praise when our Lord returns. Our inheritance when we've *stood the test* is kept for us in heaven — which is why the apostle exhorts us to keep rejoicing in that promise yet to come! **"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your trust—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed"** (1 Peter 1:6,7).

Look at the connection between *trust* and *proved*. When trust is *proven*, it's genuine, the real thing. Our understanding of what genuine is comes from the Latin word *genuinus*, referring to *genu*, or the 'knee'. The Roman custom was for a father to acknowledge a newborn child as his by placing him or her on his knee. Consider this: When our Father's children prove themselves to be genuinely His, we're like His Son, Jesus—Who is the Firstborn of all of us (Romans 8:29). As Paul assures us, we partake of authentic fellowship with Jesus and with all others who share in His sufferings because this is God's instrument by which He transforms our character into that of our Lord: **"I want to**

**know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead"** (Philippians 3:10).

#### Points to keep in mind

Our Father uses suffering and trials in our life in order to:

- help rid us of ALL conformity to the goals and values of the world (see James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17).
- help us trust in Him in each and every area of our life (see Proverbs 29:25; Jeremiah 17:7; Hebrews 11:6).
- help nurture our hearts to deepen our love for Him and for all others we encounter. He fully desires that His children reflect the same sacrificial love as His Son, Jesus (see Luke 10:27; Galatians 5:6; Revelation 12:11).

If you, your family, and those you fellowship with will keep these three goals in mind, you will not only be able to readily cooperate with your Father's motives behind testing your heart, but you'll also be equipped to encourage each other during times of trial and testing. When those close to you are going through the crucible and furnace of God's perfecting of their character, you're needed to encourage them to hang in there until He accomplishes the purifying He requires. *Don't commiserate* with them—you'll only prolong the process! Instead, keep pointing to the faithfulness of our Lord and to the joy that lies ahead in their patient endurance (see Hebrews 12:2).

***"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it"*** (Hebrews 12:11).

This verse summarizes our Father's disciplining of His children that's delineated in Hebrews chapter 12. Discipline is His way to change us from what we were—ruled by our sin nature—so that we might be brought into conformity to His Son, Jesus. Throughout the Book of Hebrews the writer establishes Jesus as "Priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:6; 6:20; 7:17,20). Who is Melchizedek, the king of Salem and priest of God Most High? We're told that ***"his name means king of righteousness"*** and that ***"king of Salem" means king of peace"*** (Hebrews 7:2).

Did you notice that the goal of the trials and testing our Father puts His children through as part of our discipline in Hebrews 12:11, above, is "righteousness" and "peace?" In essence, these are the character indicators that evidence that our trials and testing are enabling us to become more like Jesus.

(For more on the importance of the Melchizedek Priesthood of Jesus, see our March 2001 Newsletter: *Living as the Family of Melchizedek*. The Melchizedek Priesthood through Jesus replaced the Levitical priesthood and ALL of its reliance on religion. Jesus came to establish a Kingdom in which each of His followers has a part to play within His priesthood of believers. Please, read this newsletter.)

Part of the reason for the trials and testing we must go through is that our Father does

not want His children to conform to the sinful, self-seeking values and goals of this world:

***"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will"*** (Romans 12:2).

Can *you* discern what's of God and what's of this world? Really, have you taken the time to make sure you *don't* conform to the goals and motives of this world? Last Saturday we were selling some books at a home school fair on behalf of dear friends. As we talked with various mothers whose children had graduated from home schooling, all they could describe is how successful their children had become in the world—their achievements, their jobs, their homes. Over the years we've rarely heard any Christian parents, home schoolers included, who describe their children's success in Kingdom terms of pleasing our Lord and bringing others into His fold through their life choices.

Out of love for our Lord Jesus and love for the next generations, don't disadvantage your children or grandchildren with the same painful trials and testing that you went through so that the dross of worldly conformity might be burned from your life. We know from experience that there's hardly a parent reading this e-mail who was raised in a home whose chief goal was to train their children to love their Lord wholeheartedly and fulfill their part in the Kingdom of God. So each of us needs to learn how to be Kingdom parents and grandparents as we instill Kingdom values in our young. Please, don't raise your children and grandchildren to have to suffer needless trials and testing because you were reluctant or resistant to role model and instill in them a Kingdom lifestyle and purpose.

On the journey with you,  
*Mike and Sue*