

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 13, March, 2001

“Testing Your Faith - Part 1”

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James 1:2-4 (NIV) - Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

In this scripture, James is instructing believers in Christ to consider it “pure joy” when facing trials. As excellent as this advise is, the words “pure joy” are not typically the first words that pop into the minds of prison inmates who are facing the trials of being a Christian behind bars. All an inmate has to do to put their faith to the test, is to open their Bible and begin reading.

An inmate (I’ll call him Mac), wrote from a crowded US Federal Prison describing an experience he encountered while he was spending a period of time in lock-down. While Mac’s cell mate was talking to the guy in the cell next door, the guy yelled over, “Hey, what’s wrong with Mac? Why has he been so quiet these last few days?”

Mac’s cell mate responded with a cynical remark, “Oh, Mac has been reading the Bible, because all of a sudden he decided to become a Brother of the Church!” The guy next door started laughing and then shouted back, “Yea, that’s how they are when they first come to jail, but when they’re out there on the streets, they don’t even think about picking up a Bible.”

At that moment, Mac wasn’t thinking about the “pure joy” of having his faith tested. He told me the thoughts that were really going through his mind. “Miss Sharon, if you only knew just how much that made me mad! Because, here are these two guys that are talking all this nonsense about me, when they know absolutely nothing about me. They don’t know how much I try to follow Jesus. They don’t know that I did go to church and that I read my Bible while I was on the outside.”

The longer he thought about their words, the more stirred up he felt inside. Satan was using these inmates to try and get under Mac’s skin, to tempt him to do evil, and it appeared to be working. Mac’s

head was spinning. Inside he was thinking, “Just keep it up kid, just keep talking and when I pound your face into the wall, then I want to see how much you talk!”

All of a sudden, before Mac could open his mouth and “go off” at the guy next door, or throw the first punch at his cell mate, he was promptly brought to his senses by the Holy Spirit reminding him who he is – a child of God! God expects His children to have righteous thoughts and to conduct themselves accordingly, by responding in love.

I Corinthians 16:13-14 (NIV) - Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love.

Mac was on the verge of stepping out of faith and love by over-reacting to the mocking words of fellow inmates, who were only being influenced by Satan. Of course, Satan does not want prison inmates to openly read their Bibles, they might find out the truth about who he really is - the father of lies (**John 8:44**). They also might find out that Jesus is the Savior of the world, and that He came to take away their sins. (**I John 3:5-6**)

When we look at every trial we face, through the eyes of God, we get His righteous perspective on what is really going on. The Holy Spirit wanted Mac to see that prison inmates are not his enemy! Satan just uses inmates, whom he deceives, to do his dirty work. The good Spirit lets us know that Satan is the real enemy, and it is God’s desire for every prison inmate to be delivered from the deceptions of Satan.

As Christians, every trial we face, literally becomes a test of our faith in God. God allows these tests, because they are not meant to weaken us, but to strengthen us, so we may develop perseverance. The question is, will our perseverance pay off? Can we totally trust God to deliver us from the pressures of temptation? Yes, we can! The message of James is not one of gloom and doom. James speaks of the possibility of “pure joy” in the midst of the trials!

I Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) - No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And

God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Mac needed a way out. Without a second to spare, Mac was shown the way to escape from his evil thoughts, which absolutely would have brought him down, if acted upon. His own evil thoughts were dangerously leading him into a trap, in enemy territory and away from God. The only way for Mac to escape temptation was to put a stop to his wrongful thinking. With the help of the Holy Spirit, he stood up under the test he was facing. He stopped his evil thoughts by replacing them with righteous thoughts. He got into agreement with the Holy Spirit by telling himself, "Mac, wake up! It's not worth it for me (a child of God) to get into a fight with another prison inmate, because God expects better things of me."

Anyone who wants to live the life of a Christian, will have to face many kinds of trials. One of those trials is persecution.

II Timothy 3:12-13 (NIV) - *In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.*

There is no way to avoid persecution. When we openly pledge our loyalty to Jesus Christ (rather than seeking the praise of men), it will bring persecution from those evil powers who oppose God. I remember a time when Mac tried to avoid persecution, by hiding his Bible inside his shirt when he passed by certain inmates, knowing they would torment him if they knew he was a Christian. He told me how ashamed he felt in those days. I am happy for Mac, because of the progress he is making in his spiritual growth. Mac is learning that true, bona fide Christians are not wimps!

II Timothy 1:7-8 (NIV) - *"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God..."*

God did not give us a weak, wishy-washy spirit, which lacks strength of character or purpose. Mac knows what his purpose is and he knows where his strength comes from. "Miss Sharon, I'm tired of living as a hypocrite, being controlled by people,

and of feeling shame when people mention Christ Jesus, my Lord and Savior. All I want to do now, is to follow Jesus Christ. I am finally ready to go to war against the devil."

James 1:12 (NIV) - *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.*

God has a reward waiting for those who love Him and who "persevere" even under the most difficult trials.

Matthew 5:10-12 (KJV) - *"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven..."*



Questions for personal or group study:

1. Can a person become a mature Christian, without ever having their faith tested? (See James 1:2-4)
2. What did it do to Mac's faith (how did he feel inside) when he hid his Bible inside his shirt?
3. If prisoners are afraid to testify of Jesus Christ while they are in prison, will they lose their reward, "the crown of life"? (See Revelation 2:10)
3. What is the response of Jesus to those who are ashamed of Him? (See Mark 8:35-38, II Timothy 2:11-12)
4. Does it really matter what other prison inmates think of you, if you are truly a disciple of Jesus Christ? (See Galatians 2:20)