

WILL YOU
BE TRUE
TO
JESUS?

Ten divine tests
and how to pass them

No one intends to
fail, but it happens
to the unprepared.

Craig
Brian
Larson

GOD TESTS ALL HIS PEOPLE, LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS, BOTH THE FITTEST AND THE FAILURE-PRONE. He tests us for a host of good, important reasons. Tests are bridges and ladders to our destiny in God. Tests prove our genuineness. Tests prepare us for the highest good God has prepared for us. Tests define us.

But make no mistake, tests test us. They are a trial by fire. They are not fun, and they have real consequences. They do chart our course. Depending on how we respond, whether we pass or fail—or pass here and fail there—we do open and close spiritual doors in our lives and please God more or less. Therefore, we must learn to pass them.

To do so, it's vital to see that God tests in many ways, at least ten different ways revealed in Scripture. A test is not defined merely as a hard time. Rather, there is the test of lack, the test of waiting, the test of suffering, and more. What the test requires of you differs in some ways, but also remains the same in other ways. This book describes the various tests and how uniquely to pass each one.

The hopeful news for fearful, broken humans is, when you have failed, and seek never to fail again, and as you face tests to come, his grace is sufficient for you, sufficient to overcome the past and sufficient to succeed in the future. The Savior you sometimes fail is the

Savior who still will keep you through every test, every stumble, and equip you for every triumph.

Will you, like the apostle Peter, be a sincere follower who keeps faith even after bitter failures and even through the longest, hardest, most painful tests? Will you be true to Jesus?

Will You Be True to Jesus?

Ten divine tests
and how to pass them

CRAIG BRIAN LARSON

Copyright 2019 Craig Brian Larson. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Contents

Chapter 1

Don't Fail Jesus in the Time of Testing

Chapter 2

Hard but Good

Ten Tests

Chapter 3

Lack

Chapter 4

God's Commands

Chapter 5

Are You Facing a Recurring Problem?

Chapter 6

God's Self-disclosure

Chapter 7

Idols

Chapter 8

The Promised Land

Chapter 9

Enemies

Chapter 10

False Teaching

Chapter 11

Waiting

Chapter 12

Surrender

Chapter 13

Suffering and Loss

Conclusion

Chapter 1

Don't Fail Jesus in the Time of Testing

A few years ago one of my adult children told me that as a boy and teen he went through several years feeling painful loneliness. During those years he felt I let him down by not spending enough time with him. I apologized, he forgave, but I still feel bad about it.

No one sets out to fail others. In particular no one wants to fail the people most dear. But it happens, and depending on how seriously we let someone down, we can be undone. After denying the Lord three times, the bold and burly fisherman Peter wept bitterly.

He had failed the one he least wanted to fail. Like Peter, the person we least want to fail is Jesus. No one has done more good for us. No one is more worthy of sacrifice and devotion. No one else has felt the tearing snap of the whip and given himself to the nails and the cross to shed his blood for our sins, and interceded on

our behalf before the holy God so we might be saved from evil bondage and have eternal paradise with him. No, when thinking clearly, no believer sets out to fail the Son of God.

But tests inevitably come

But life happens. Tests happen—divine tests. By “divine” I mean God allows the tests, that ultimately he is the one testing us through what he brings or allows. That may be a foreign idea to you, but stick with me; throughout this book I’ll show how the Bible irrefutably teaches it. For now, we will note just two verses:

Psalm 11:4–5 says, “The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD’s throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The LORD tests the righteous.”

Notice it is not just the unrighteous who are tested, but the righteous, the people whom God loves and in whom he delights, people like his beloved Son, whom he led into the desert to be tested for 40 days: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1).

Difficult tests

So, divine tests happen. God is perfectly good, so they have a good purpose (which I’ll show throughout the book), but they are still difficult.

In school, we had some teachers whose tests were easy. We didn't have to study rigorously, reading and memorizing content for days before final exams. The teachers didn't demand much, and we probably didn't learn much.

But we also had tough teachers whom students feared and avoided if possible because they demanded so much. You had to spend many more hours with homework. You had to write quality papers, not just amass a minimum number of words. You had to write clearly, think logically, and support your arguments. These teachers gave essay exams rather than multiple-choice tests. They worked hard; you worked hard; and in the end you learned much more and grew as a person.

God resembles those tough teachers. Again and again Scripture shows that he gives hard, sometimes excruciating tests. These tests show who and what we truly are—but mercifully also mold us into what the Lord wants us to be, if we are sincere followers of Jesus. Even when we fail, God's grace is always available, as it was for Peter after he failed his Lord. Through it all, God's purpose is not to flunk us, but to advance us as we learn to rely on him, not ourselves.

Ten different tests

He tests us in many ways. I came to this understanding as I endured one trial that got me thinking so much about divine testing I decided to study everything Scripture said about it. For more than a year I researched the different words the Bible uses for testing and meditated on stories of testing, such as, of course, the two most extreme examples: when Job suffered loss and affliction, and God told Abraham to sacrifice his miracle son Isaac.

But those are not the only stories of testing. Scripture overflows with narratives and teaching on this theme. Some of the most important are the tests Israel faced in the desert after God delivered them from Egypt and later as they battled to possess the Promised Land. God calls Israel his son, and we too are his sons and daughters, so there are parallels between how he dealt with national Israel and how he deals with us.

God tested for different reasons and used an assortment of methods. In the end, I identified ten kinds of tests, actually eleven if I include retests following a failure (which may explain frustrating patterns in your life. More on that later).

Here are the ten tests:

1. Lack
2. God's commands
3. God's self-disclosure

4. Idols
5. The Promised Land
6. Enemies
7. False teaching
8. Waiting
9. Surrender
10. Suffering and loss

The moment of truth

These ten tests are all-important for those who yearn to be true to Jesus because these times of testing are when we are most tempted to fail him. A test is the moment of truth.

For example, in the parable of the seeds and soils, Jesus said the people who resembled the rocky soil “are the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (Mark 4:16–17).

The tests revealed the truth about these people. Although they had shown an interest in Jesus, they were not real followers. They were committed instead to their comfort and feelings. What exposed that was the test. Tests always reveal the truth.

Therefore, people like you who yearn to be true to their Lord, who never want to fail their Savior, will be

forewarned and prepared. Any of these ten tests might happen to you. Don't be uninformed and caught off guard. Don't be surprised or disillusioned and then fall into unbelief. Instead, if you are prepared for testing and it reveals negative truths about your soul, you can address the problem and grow.

This doesn't mean each of the ten tests inevitably will come. Thankfully we're not all going to be like Job, but if similar suffering comes your way, you won't be disillusioned by it. And I'm not going to expect a test like lack, for God gives many assurances to the contrary, but if God tests me and the anomaly temporarily comes, I won't be surprised, confused, or tempted to distrust God.

Though I may not experience all ten tests, I still want to be aware of them because I don't want to pass one kind of test but fail another. I want to be wholly true to Jesus and please him in every respect.

True and faithful

In Jesus' final hours, a few followers proved true. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Mary the mother of Jesus followed him to Golgotha and watched him die. On Resurrection morning, several of them brought spices to anoint his body.

They showed what it means to be true. They were loyal to Jesus and believed in him though they didn't

understand what was happening. They kept following when it was perilous and difficult. They did what they could, staying as close to him as possible. They would not allow fear or danger, soldiers or terrible surprises, questions or confusion drive them away.

As their lives took a bewildering turn, only one thing mattered: stay true to Jesus. He has answers when we don't. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the light of the world; whoever follows him will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. He is Master, Teacher, Lord, Bread of Life, Living Water, Great I Am.

So stay true to Jesus, tenaciously, humbly trusting and obeying him through all life's tests. If you fail, sincerely repent, learn from it, and by his grace become what you're supposed to be. Become true. Peter did, and so can you. That is how you prove faithful and true.

Chapter 2

Hard but Good

On a trip years ago, shortly after airlines began charging fees for luggage, I wanted to avoid paying the fee and so brought only a carry-on bag to the airport. At check-in, the clerk told me to slide my bag into a box near the counter to test whether it met the airline's size-limits. To my surprise the bag showed above the top by an inch. The clerk said I had to check it in, which meant paying an extra \$30 going and coming. I briefly pleaded my case, noting that the bag barely peeked above the top of the testing box, but she was not persuaded and I paid the fee.

I felt as though someone had just picked my pocket. My carry-on was smaller than a normal piece of luggage. It irked me that airlines now charged fees for checking in bags, and it seemed this airline had set an unreasonable size-limit for carry-ons. I walked away from the clerk feeling less trust for that company.

As we explore why God tests us, we need to beware of similar distrust toward him. If we suspect we cannot trust God's motives, that he is setting unreasonable standards or charging high fees, that he is toying with us for amusement or in spite, then we obviously will not walk through tests in a way that draws us closer to God. The test will poison our relationship.

In a test we must believe God's Word through Paul, who suffered many trials but still wrote: "For those who love God all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). "All things" includes testing. We must believe David, who was sorely tested for many years but still wrote, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psa. 23:6). That includes the hour, day, month, year, decade, or lifetime of testing. When God tests, he pursues our highest good. He tests because he loves us more than we love ourselves. He is not unfair or hostile. In all things—and certainly in trials because in compassion he knows how stressful they are—he intends our perfect welfare.

Deuteronomy 8 explicitly connects testing with God's goodness. It is a crucial chapter for understanding tests. Moses explains to Israel why the Lord worked as he did: he "fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you *and test you, to do you good in the end*" (v. 16, italics added). His ultimate purpose was to do them "good in

the end.” That is what we would expect from one who is love, who is good, who is our Father, who causes everything to work together for good for those who love him. In the end he brought Israel into the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, where they would have farms, homes, food, safety, health—if they walked with God. That was the goal of training in the desert. If Israel disobeyed the Lord, they could not remain peacefully in the Promised Land, so he was training them for the good life.

In the same way, God will in the end bring his children into the new heavens and earth where he will bless us forever. We cannot conceive what lavish goodness God plans for us in that age, after he raises us from the dead with eternal bodies and recreates earth as our paradise home. He promised Israel,

I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.... I will give [Israel] one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that *I will not turn away from doing good to them*. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. *I will rejoice in doing them good*, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all

my heart and all my soul (Jer. 29:11; 32:39–41, italics added).

This is God's heart. Bringing goodness to us is his idea of a perfect forever. He will resemble the parents of a young child who enjoy nothing more than making their son or daughter happy. He will spend eternity blessing his people, showering us with kindness. Everything he does will be for our delight. The New Testament stresses the ultimate role Christ plays in God's boundless generosity: "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6–7). Forever God intends to show us the riches of his grace and kindness in Christ. That will be his purpose. We will spend eternity enjoying God's unceasing blessings.

Training the heart

Beginning in May last year our church's offerings decreased to where I could not receive my salary as pastor. Throughout my life God has provided faithfully and I have avoided debt like a disease, but I have faced long lean seasons and have not usually gone through them brimming with confidence. In fact, for most of my adult life I have felt insecure about finances. Sometimes I have even expected the worst.

But last year was different. I had been writing this book for months, so the principle of testing was stamped on my soul. I soon concluded that God was indeed testing not only me with regard to trust, but our church collectively with regard to faithful giving, and that understanding galvanized my faith. Rather than fearing what could happen or expecting the worst, I was determined not just to endure, but to pass with confident faith and to lead everyone in our church to a new level of financial faith.

In October I informed our church of the situation. I talked about God's promises and said, "This situation is a test, and we are going to pass." I set a goal: "Over the last two months of the year we need to receive at least \$45,000 in order to pay current bills and catch up on my salary." That amount was more than double what we normally receive in two months and almost triple the rate of giving during the recent deficit months. Never in my 20 years as pastor of the church had we come close to receiving that much in two months.

During November and December I prayed, fasted several times, and said to others, "The Lord will provide. We will pass this test." I informed the church we would receive a special Christmas offering in mid-December. That offering turned out to be a wonderful experience for several people who gave in new ways. At year end the total giving for November and December

was \$47,147.45. We paid every bill, including my salary in arrears, and finished the year in the black. By God's grace we all passed the trial of our faith.

This was the biggest financial victory we have ever known, and my outlook will never be the same. God used it for good; it shaped me and our church members; our trust in him has increased. All this happened because we were true to Jesus.

In a test the condition of your heart is particularly at stake. Tests are the most stressful seasons in your life. They are painful and demanding. They might end in failure, spoiling your childlike trust in God. Your future is on the line. So you must understand testing both in head and heart, in order that as a result of a test you trust the Lord more, not less. You must guard your heart. You must pass in a way that draws you nearer to him in humility. For that to happen, you need to believe with every fiber of your soul that God does not charge unnecessary fees, that in the end he gives tests always for your good.

As I studied the subject of testing in the Bible, I noticed certain tests happened in common to Abraham, Israel, whom God refers to corporately as his son,¹ and Jesus, God's unique Son (Jesus either experienced or taught about the test). That suggests these tests could come to any believer, for human nature and God's ul-

1. Hosea 11:1

timate purposes have not changed. We will look at ten such tests in the lives of Abraham, Israel, and Jesus, and learn from their successes and failures (of course, Jesus never failed) about how to pass each trial and be true to Jesus.

First up is the test of lack.

Chapter 3

Tested by Lack

I recently spoke with a Christian who had been unemployed for a while but now was working again. He was in his twenties, married, with a child under age one. He lost his job one month before his child's birth and had been unemployed for eight months, sometimes using a credit card to get by. But for several months now he had been working at a good job. I asked, "How are the finances doing?"

He replied, "If my wife was working, we would be okay." In other words, they were not earning enough to pay off debt and break even. Although they were not starving, naked, or homeless, and they still enjoyed the minimal creature comforts enjoyed by most Americans, they still fell short.

That raises a question. Why would a Christian lack money? Psalm 23:1 says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." What does that mean? What does it promise? The apostle Paul told Christians who had recently sent money to support his missionary work,

“My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). But a few verses earlier in that letter he wrote, “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (Phil. 4:11–12). Apparently in the work of the Lord even Paul had seasons of lack. How do we make sense of that?

One explanation is, a lean season may be a test. As a trial God suspends his normal way of blessing his children with material provision. In a sense he temporarily changes the rules of the game. Normally he supplies all our needs and more, with time to spare. In a trial, we lack what we want—even what we feel we need—when we want it. We lack the security of having surplus. If God were not in the picture, we would have reason to worry about tomorrow.

The test of lack happened to Israel.

Millions of thirsty people in a wilderness

The onset of the test was sudden and severe. One day Israel crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, Egypt’s soldiers pursued and drowned attempting the same crossing, and Miriam led the nation in a victory song. The next day “Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no wa-

ter” (Exo. 15:22). Millions of people, no water—time to panic, right?

No, because the lack of water did not surprise God. Sovereign and knowing all, he planned this trip including the geography of this wilderness with meticulous detail in eternity past. All-powerful, he is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). He would soon prove this by bringing water from rock. So if he had wanted, God could have placed pools of water and shade trees ready and waiting for Israel at regular resting places along their journey.

But in his fatherly wisdom he did not. God had determined that the good, pleasing, and perfect plan for Israel was to test them immediately after their miraculous deliverance by leading them into a hot wilderness where they found no water. For three days. Most of them on foot, old and young, babies in parents’ arms and the elderly leaning on canes. Presumably they had brought along full leather canteens, so they had water to survive those three days, but they quickly felt thirst and the need to refill their canteens. The test came to a climax when Israel finally found water but discovered it was bitter and undrinkable. What a crushing disappointment. What a devastating confirmation of their fears. What a perfect desert storm. What a test.

In that desperate moment they had a choice. They had just seen firsthand God’s unlimited power as he

judged the oppressive, idolatrous Egyptians with ten supernatural plagues. He had parted the Red Sea before their eyes and closed it on their enemies. God was clearly on their side. So they could trust him and ask him for water. Or they could doubt him. They could become frustrated with him, be suspicious of his purposes, question his goodness, and forget his power. Instead of humbly praying, they could try to provoke God into helping them by grumbling. A test brings a moment of truth.

Israel chose wrong. “The people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’” (Exo. 15:24). They failed the test of lack.

Nevertheless their Father had mercy on them. Moses did what they should have done: “He cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the [bitter] water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them” (Exo. 15:25). God quickly met their need when Moses prayed. The log not only removed the water’s bitterness but even made it sweet.

After this difficult test God immediately reaffirmed his love and intention to provide by leading them to a place also prepared long before: “Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water” (Exo. 15:27). This oasis was not there by chance

but rather by the providence of God. They went from thirst and bitter water to bubbling springs and shade-giving trees. This reveals something crucial about God. His tests can be hard, but he still is good. At times we may wonder what we can expect from him. What we should expect ultimately is full provision, comforting provision. The God of our trials is also God of beautiful oases.

In this test, the Father was treating Israel as his son. Hosea 11:1 says, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” God did what loving fathers do: he began training. The goal was maturity. The test of lack required faith. The test for obedience was yet to come, but first came faith, which is significant. In our relationship with God faith comes first. We are saved through faith in Christ, faith in the gospel, faith in his Word. From faith flows obedience. The first and most important thing God wants to test is the condition of your faith.

He tested Israel by letting them face a severe need that got their full attention for three days. Perhaps it could have been just two days, or one day, if they had passed the test by praying when they first felt their need. But the point is, God tested for faith by allowing Israel to lack what they needed in order to see whether they would respond with trust, prayer, and patience, or doubt, fear, mistrust, and grumbling.

Israel is not the only one dearly loved by the Father who encountered a temporary season of lack.

Abraham finds famine in the Promised Land

Abraham faced a similar test early in his journey of faith with God. That is relevant for us because Romans 4:16 says Abraham, the man of faith, is “the father of us all,” that is, all who have a relationship with God through faith in his Son. Therefore, as we study tests common to Christians, we will turn regularly to Abraham, for we can expect God to work with the children as he worked with their father. When Abraham first entered the Promised Land, “there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe” (Gen. 12:10). That brief report on travel and weather stops me in my tracks. Was this severe famine just unfortunate timing?

Of course, the famine resulted from lack of rain. If your worldview has weather under the control of something other than God—the laws of nature, impersonal fate, or mere chance—then Abraham’s obedient move from the security of his homeland into the Promised Land, only to face severe famine, was just bad luck. But if you believe God controls weather, then the famine

speaks volumes about how God tests his beloved, especially since Israel faced a similar lack of water immediately after the Exodus. Psalm 147:8 says, “He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.” Jesus said, “Your Father...causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mat. 5:45). Many more Scriptures confirm that God controls the weather.² And so when Abraham, one of the most important people in the Bible, journeys hundreds of miles to where God sends him—where God sends him—and there finds famine, in fact severe famine, that tells us something. The famine was not an accident. It was a test.

What should Abraham do? How would he pass or fail the test? The narrative gives two clues. First, God had told him to come here, not Egypt, where he soon decided to go. Second, when Abraham first arrived in Canaan, God promised to give the land to his offspring as their possession. Genesis 12:6 says, “Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’” Therefore Abraham should have concluded that God wanted him

2. See Leviticus 26:4; Psalm 104, especially verses 10–16; 1 Kings 17:1; 18:1–2, 41–46; Job 5:10; Isaiah 5:6; Ezekiel 14:13; Amos 4:7; Zechariah 10:1; 14:17–18; Psalm 107:33–38.

to remain in Canaan. He knew God had the power to provide, or he never would have begun this journey. So he needed to take a stand and trust God to feed him and his large household. The narrative does not report that he and God interacted over what to do next, where to stay or go, how to survive the famine. That is the nature of most tests: we have far less information than we want. We have to trust God to guide and provide one day at a time as we follow our best understanding of his will.

Abraham failed. Genesis 12:10 says, “Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.” The detour led to trouble and went nowhere. It resulted in significant compromise for Abraham and insufferable vulnerability for Sarah:

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.” When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. (Gen. 12:11–15)

Since God's plan was to give Abraham a miracle child through Sarah, the last thing he wanted was for her to be one of Pharaoh's wives. This imperiled her sexually, so it imperiled everything God had planned to bring blessing first to Abraham and then to the world through his descendent Jesus Christ.

Therefore God intervened. "The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (Gen. 12:17). Somehow Pharaoh figured out what had happened and confronted Abraham concerning his deception. He returned Sarah and expelled him from Egypt. Consequently Abraham returned to Canaan, to "Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 13:3-4). Abraham's trouble in Egypt is another clue that the famine in the Promised Land had been a test of faith, that God had wanted Abraham to stay in Canaan and trust him through a season of lack.

Abraham returned to Bethel probably because he realized that is where he had taken a wrong turn. That is where he had decided not to trust God for provision in the Promised Land but rather to go to Egypt. Now

he wanted to get back on course. He was repenting of not trusting God; he was seeking the Lord in order to resume a life of faith. He had failed one test of lack, but failure taught him an invaluable lesson: from now on he would stay in the Promised Land.

God's chosen ones Abraham and Israel both faced the test of lack early in their walk with God. Jesus encountered the trial at the onset of his public ministry.

Jesus on the edge

Immediately after the baptism of Jesus God tested him as he had tested Israel: He sent him into the wilderness. Unlike Israel, Jesus was called to fast for 40 days. That is the ultimate lack. He did not eat food, but he probably drank water, and for that he had to depend daily on God to provide.³ At the end of the fast, Jesus depended on the Father for food, and God provided through angels.⁴ Therefore Jesus endured a test of bare subsistence for 40 days; that is, he had no supplies in store but rather depended on God to provide minute by minute. God provided exactly what he needed, nothing more. And for what God wanted him to be without, God provided moment by moment the ability to fast. Again, this test came at the start of Jesus' minis-

3. When Moses stayed 40 days on top of Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments, God miraculously enabled him to survive the entire time even without water. See Exo. 34:28.

4. Mat. 4:11

try, just as it came early for the Israelites and Abraham, adding weight to the idea that it is foundational.

Another way Jesus was tested by lack was the homelessness he faced when ministering on the road. As he told one scribe who offered to join his disciples, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mat. 8:20). When traveling Jesus depended on others to give his group a place to sleep, or they slept in the open.

Moreover Jesus and his disciples had to find food or depend on others for food or money. For example, Luke 6:1–3 says, “One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels.” For that meal they lived off the land hand to mouth. God gave what they needed day by day, but they lacked reserves. Similarly Luke 8:1–3 says, “Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases....*These women were helping to support them out of their own means*” (italics added). For that season Jesus depended on the women he had healed to pay their food bills.⁵

5. Another revealing situation shows that Jesus and the twelve disciples had only seven loaves of bread and a few small fish in store, enough to satisfy each man for one or two meals. See Mark 8:1–7.

Jesus actually codified this lifestyle for one mission. He sent the 12 disciples in pairs saying, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for the laborer deserves his food. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart” (Mat. 10:8–11). By forbidding reserves and insisting they live with receptive people, Jesus required them to live by faith. If someone did not help, they were one meal away from hunger and hours away from homelessness. Jesus was testing their faith through the lack of surplus.

How to pass the test of lack

And now what does this mean for you? How should you pass the stiff trial of shortage if it comes?

We saw earlier that Israel’s answer for passing this test was simply to pray and follow Moses. They did not have because they did not ask God.⁶ If you are not praying about your need and trusting the Lord, that is where to begin.

To pass their tests, Jesus and the disciples had to do more than trust and pray; they needed to fulfill their calling. They had to work. That meant proclaiming the

6. James 4:2

gospel, healing the sick, driving out demons. Then the people benefitting from their ministry would provide food and shelter. Likewise God will provide for your needs as you fulfill your vocation (whatever your job is) and do his work. Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Mat. 6:33). He does not promise provision to those who are negligent, disobedient, or lazy.

The answer for Abraham was to stay and persevere. God had called him to a certain place, and he was able to provide there even in famine. Psalm 33:18–19 speaks directly to that situation: “Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death *and keep them alive in famine*” (italics added).⁷ Isaiah 64:4 says God “acts for those who wait for him.” Hebrews 10:36 says, “You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.” The Lord may have called you to a particular place, job, relationship, or situation. When you experience lack, it seems logical to move, but he can provide as you show your commitment to obey him.

The apostle Paul taught that during lean seasons God can provide for both our material and spiritual

7. Psalm 37:18–19 says, “The LORD knows the days of the blameless... in the days of famine they have abundance.” See also Gen. 45:5–11 for how God provided for Jacob and his family during a famine.

needs. Like Jesus, Paul was a traveling preacher who sometimes relied on others for support. In a letter he wrote to a church that had sent money, he revealed his secret to passing the test of lack:

I am not [rejoicing over your gift to me] because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything *through him* who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:11–13, NIV, italics added)

Paul had spiritual resources within that sustained him with strength through temporary seasons of lack. Those resources came from his relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus satisfied Paul with his love, comforted him with his presence, enthralled him with his glory, guided him with his wisdom, and filled him with his Spirit. When daily provision was barely enough, Jesus was more than enough.

When you pass the test of lack in this way, your life conforms to the patterns of the gospel. The gospel says Jesus suffered and died on the cross, and we must likewise deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow

Jesus. Lack is a form of suffering and death to this world. In a season of lack we unite with Christ in his suffering and death. But the gospel also says Jesus overcame suffering and death by rising to life. Likewise we unite with Christ in his resurrection as we depend on his power within and live victoriously in faith, hope, and love. Even in lack—especially then—we experience the powerful life of God’s Son. The gospel says Jesus also ascended to God’s right hand. Likewise through our union with Christ we share in his ascension to the Father’s right hand where we enjoy every spiritual blessing in a position of divine favor and victory. Although for a season the world may think us poor, we actually are reigning in life with Christ.⁸

So do not be surprised if you face the test of lack. Do not distrust God’s intentions. Guard against grumbling even in your heart. Do not feel sorry for yourself, for that assumes your Father is not working for your highest good. Do not resent his actions, for that is a form of distrust and even arrogance—as though you know better than he how to run your life. Depend on God daily in prayer and trust him to provide the amount he wants you to have and eventually to restore full provision. Ask him both for daily bread and spiritual bread. Unless you are in an extraordinary situation, if

8. For the principles in this paragraph see Matthew 16:24; Ephesians 1:3; 2:5–6; Romans 5:17; 8:35–39; and 2 Corinthians 4:7–14; 6:3–10; 12:10.

you keep your heart pure, you will pass the test, be true to Jesus, experience spiritual promotion, and return to the normal way God provides for his children.

The purpose of temporary lack is to lead you to enduring abundance. When Israel's three-day test ended, they came to an oasis of palm trees and springs. When Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness ended, "angels came and attended him" (Mat. 4:11). After Paul wrote about being content whether in plenty or in need, he ended his letter with confident words about abundance: "My God will meet all your needs *according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 4:19, NIV, italics added). In his perfect time and unpredictable way, your divine Father, who tests you because he loves you, will delight to bless you because he loves you.

Chapter 4

Tested by God's Commands

I was catching up with someone recently and asked, “How is your son doing?”

“He’s been trying to sell his house for several months,” she replied. “One person told him the house smells like his dogs. We knew that, but we know better than to tell him what to do.”

Telling others what to do often stirs resentment, and not just grown children. Several days ago I handed a booklet of Luke’s Gospel to a young man strumming his guitar outside the Art Institute. He was friendly, and we had a long conversation. Eventually he said, “Thank you for the booklet, but I have to admit I don’t know if I’ll ever read it. Something in me really resists reading this.” He explained that he has his own mind about things. His resistance to reading the Bible seemed to boil down to this: he did not want to read what God says because he knew he had no intention of obeying. This young man is honest enough to admit what all

people feel more or less: something in us avoids God's commands.

The Bible explains this resistance. We are not born with a soul that is a blank sheet ready to be written on. From our earliest days, we are not morally neutral. Nor are we born morally good, as pure as snowflakes on mountaintops of paradise. As every parent learns, babies are born weak, except in willpower. That will, when selfishly defiant, is what the New Testament calls the flesh. Theologians also call it the sinful nature and say it results from original sin. Original sin is the idea that all descendants of Adam and Eve are born with a nature that resists God. This characteristic passes from generation to generation like a bad gene. Kids are cute, but they are rebellious. That rebellion is not learned; it is inborn. So we all have disobedience in our nature that causes us to resist not only parents and teachers but even God himself.

Moreover, we may resist God's commands because of bad experiences with people in authority. Even the finest people are flawed, so when fallen people exercise authority they make mistakes, sometimes even do great evils. They may be harsh or selfish. They may be dictatorial, arrogant, perfectionistic, critical, stupid. They may exploit us. If you had a parent, teacher, boss, or religious leader like that, you will have extra obstacles to overcome in trusting God's loving commands.

Your heavenly Father knows that, and he is patient with you, but because he loves you and because he is holy he keeps pursuing your highest good and holiness, which includes your obeying his good, pleasing, and perfect will. God is too good to leave you in the dark, which life is without his commands—pitch dark.

So in nearly every way, the test described in this chapter cuts against the grain of our hearts because the test is simply this: God gives a command to see whether we will obey. We need to have a positive attitude about this, or we will resent God, and that will corrode our relationship. A healthy walk with God depends on childlike trust. We must be convinced that every command comes from his loving goodwill. If we doubt that, we will lean away from God rather than toward him.

Valuable commands

Three illustrations help us see God's love in his commands. First, God is like a doctor who hands pills to a patient with a fatal disease and says, "You must take these." His prescription includes more commands: Take two a day for ten days; drink a glass of water before each dose; take all the pills. The doctor gives these orders with authority and goodwill. He is saving the patient's life. If the patient objects, saying he avoids pills because of their side effects, the doctor sternly

warns, “Take these pills, or you will die.” So a doctor’s commands heal and save.

Second, God is like a lifetime resident of a city who meets a lost traveler (without a smart phone). She gives directions in the form of commands: “Go five blocks, turn left, go two miles, stay in the right lane, and turn right at the park.” She concludes with a warning: “Be careful that you do not turn a block too early at the corner by the hardware store, because you will get into a confusing and dangerous area of the city.” She guides the lost traveler with authority and goodwill. She knows the city and wants to help. So a knowledgeable guide shows the way.

Finally, God is like a judge whose son is a drug addict and thief. After years in prison, the son stands before his father in a courtroom seeking parole (ignore for the sake of illustration that a judge could not rule in a case involving a family member). The judge gives conditions for parole: “You may not leave your home for six months except to do 40 hours of community service a week. You may not communicate with members of your street gang. You may not buy or sell drugs.” The judge concludes with a warning: “Obey the law, or I will return you to jail for ten years.” The judge leaves the courtroom and walks with tears in his eyes to his office. He gave these commands to his son with authority and goodwill. He is trying to help. But he is also in

the right, and his son is in the wrong. He is sworn to uphold law and protect all citizens, while his son has pursued selfish pleasures. Good judges uphold justice for all.

If we see God's commands in this light, we will feel like the writer of Psalm 119:

I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes....I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold. Therefore I consider all your precepts to be right; I hate every false way. Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments. (vv. 47–48, 127–131)

God tested Israel to see if they would respond to his commands like this. The test was a mouthful.

Would Israel eat as God commanded?

This was Israel's second test after their exodus from Egypt, following immediately after their comforting time at the oasis of Elim. They broke camp, left behind the palm trees and springs, and marched into the next wilderness on their way to Mt. Sinai. In that wilderness they did not find food. In their hunger they again

failed to trust God. Again they grumbled against Moses instead of praying directly to the Lord. Clearly they had not learned from their first trial.

God continued to act like a father training his son. He actually expanded the test: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, *that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not*” (Exo. 16:4, italics added). So he identified the purpose: testing their obedience. And he identified the method: giving laws for consuming the miraculous bread to test their obedience.

The test was ingenious. God would daily feed Israel by causing a sweet wafer to settle like dew on the ground and solidify overnight. The wafer, which Israel called manna, would be edible for one day, then spoil. This happened six days a week, but not on the seventh day, the Sabbath, when God wanted Israel to rest and worship. On the day before the Sabbath, God would send extra bread, enough to eat for two days, and the manna would remain edible for two days instead of one. The guarantee for the daily and weekly cycle was God’s faithfulness.

Based on this cycle, God gave four commands. First, on five days of the week they were to gather a one-day supply for each person living in their tents. Second, they must not save any manna for the next

day. If they did, the manna would breed worms and stink. Third, on the day before the Sabbath they were to gather a two-day supply, so they could rest on the Sabbath. For that special day the manna would have different storage properties, remaining fresh and edible for two days. Fourth, they were not to gather manna on the Sabbath. God designed this regimen to establish a habit of obedience, to teach about his faithfulness, and to develop a spirit of trust.

This test addressed matters of gut-level importance to his people. Our lives revolve around food, and so around food God conducted this test. God works at the center. He tests areas where we have strong commitments, preferences, and desires. At times he commands us to change in ways we dearly do not want. Today God's commands come in the Scriptures. The New Testament does not give food laws, but it presents many other commands that test our obedience in important issues like money, sexuality, and relationships. Some are difficult to swallow, but that is what makes it a trial.

Just as God did with Israel, so he tested Abraham at the core of his soul.

Would Abraham obey three daunting commands?

Over a period of 40 years the Lord tested Abraham with three crucial, disruptive commands. His first recorded words to Abraham were a command. He appeared to him and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). Then God linked Abraham’s obedience to a breathtaking promise: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (vv. 2–3). Huge test, huge reward.

Even when God does not spell out promises, his commands always contain inherent blessing. They always bring life, hope, and a future, even if they involve present sacrifice. God never tests without planning to bless. Because God is good, his trials are inherently good.

Even so, God’s command to Abraham involved difficulty and sacrifice. While moving is hard today, it was much harder then, without smart phones, Google maps, banks, restaurants, or trucks. So Abraham travelled for months rather than days. Far more difficult, God’s command required Abraham to leave behind his home and people, without the technology for commu-

nicating with loved ones that we have today. So this one command required of Abraham revolutionary change.

Likewise God's commands in Scripture sometimes test us by requiring work, hardship, sacrifice, and change. Obedience is not easy. God's command to Abraham demanded a major step of obedience up front followed by ongoing decisions to persevere for decades. He always had the option to quit and return to his homeland. Likewise for us, God's commands sometimes require a radical change of direction followed by a lifetime of perseverance.

God tested Abraham with a second disruptive command that required an act of obedience threatening in many ways. The command threatened Abraham's central hope—that he would have a son by Sarah and eventually heirs as numerous as the stars in the sky—because it involved his ability to procreate. Twenty-four years after God's first disruptive command came to Abraham at age 75, God appeared to him at age 99 and said:

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. (Gen. 17:9–14)

Although obeying this command was not difficult with newborns, it was with Abraham and the other adults. Circumcision was minor surgery without anesthesia or pain-killers. It was awkward. In circumcision God exerted his control over an important area of a man's life: his ability to build a large household by fathering many sons. Abraham did not know whether circumcision would make him and his heirs more or less potent in siring children. So this was a test he could not obey without trust in God.

The third command testing Abraham came 10–15 years later, after God fulfilled his promise by giving Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age, whom they named Isaac. The difficulty of this command far eclipsed the others. Again the command zeroed in on Abraham's deepest hopes, including the very promises God had given him. It was nothing less than unthinkable:

God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gen. 22:1–2)

This command takes your breath away. Imagine what it did to Abraham. We will explore this test in depth in chapter 12, but for now note that this com-

mand is explicitly called a test. This confirms that one way the Lord tests us is with commands—sometimes extremely difficult ones that make no sense and even counter everything we expect.

Today we have God's commands written objectively in Scripture. They carry no less authority and pose no less a trial. Some disrupt us totally, even requiring suffering and loss: "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Mat. 10:38). Some are sweeter than honey: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). All the commands are entailed in two that are boundless: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31). However, as challenging as they are, "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). With God's empowering grace these commands form a path we certainly can walk and are expected to walk. So God watches how we respond to commands written in Scripture, just as surely as he watched how Abraham responded to three verbal commands.

Finally, Jesus, too, was tested by his Father's commands.

Would Jesus obey?

If Jesus viewed commands as trials, his 40 days of testing in the wilderness would show it. Scripture does not say whether the Father gave commands for that time, but Jesus' words and actions imply it.

First, Jesus knew he was supposed to fast, not live off the land or use his creative power to make food. When Satan tempted him in this regard—"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mat. 4:3)—Jesus turned him down cold: "*It is written*, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Mat. 4:4, italics added). By beginning his response with the words, "It is written," Jesus showed he was obeying a command.

Likewise with the second temptation. Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and told him to jump, trusting angels to be his parachute. Again Jesus began his response with, "It is written." Then, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test," quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. By saying, "It is written," Jesus again showed he understood this situation as a test of his obedience to God's command. He saw every situation in the framework of God's commands. What each temptation had in common was whether Jesus would transgress the boundaries of what God had written.

Similarly with the third temptation. When Satan took Jesus to a mountaintop, offered him all the kingdoms of the world, and bid him, “Worship me,” Jesus responded, “Be gone, Satan! *For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’*” (Mat. 4:10, italics added). Jesus rightly understood this entire showdown with Satan as a test of whether he would obey God’s commands. This was how he began his ministry.

Three years later, his final hours on earth brought the ultimate test. Jesus knew what awaited him, that the suffering he would undergo infinitely exceeded any pain experienced by anyone. He would suffer severe physical torture, but far worse would be the spiritual agony. In a punishment we cannot comprehend he would bear the weight of the guilt of human evil and receive the just and infinite wrath of God, the holy judge. He would somehow experience hell. And he would know a bereavement he had never known before, that of separation from his beloved Father. He would thus be cut off from his chief joy. When it actually happened, he cried in utter desolation, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus could have ended his suffering at any moment. When arrested, he told his disciples, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”

(Mat. 26:53). But that would have meant missing his Father's will, something he had already shown in the Garden of Gethsemane he was unwilling to do. When pleading there with the Father to withdraw the cup of suffering and crucifixion, he concluded three separate times: Not my will but yours be done.

He completed the test of submission in the Garden and commenced the test of actual suffering. Hours later, after sacrificing himself on the cross, he said, "It is finished." His work—his time of testing—was finally finished. He had obeyed his Father in everything.

The glory of Jesus in his life on earth was to obey the Father perfectly, so he could become the head, the second Adam, of humanity. He did what Adam failed to do, for Adam had plunged himself and all his descendants—that is, every human except Jesus—into the fallen condition of sin through his one act of disobedience. Jesus began the new humanity of people who obey the Father. His entire life on earth was a test to see whether he was qualified for this role. He was acutely aware of the importance of his obedience. He said, "The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me" (John 14:31). All descendants of Adam disobey the Father regularly, but when God recreates heaven and earth and begins the age to come, all who follow Jesus

will, as Jesus did, obey the Father perfectly. Because Jesus passed the test, he can give us the same ability.

How are we tested by God's commands?

Jesus was tested by God's commands. Israel, Abraham, Adam, and Eve were tested by God's command. We too will be tested by his commands. Obedience to commands written in Scripture is a fundamental test, and we face it daily. Because it is continual, we may not regard it as a test.

Persistent disobedience brings God's good purposes in testing to a screeching halt. Progress and promotion in the things of God end. Growth is stunted. We plateau or decline. We do not feel the Lord's presence as in the past. Prayers linger unanswered. The sense of God's blessing disappears. Many Christians in this condition question God or his Word. They do not see the connection between disobedience and spiritual malaise. The train has left the tracks. They have failed the test of obedience.

Our attitude toward obedience is as important as our obedience. How we view this test determines whether we fall into the cold grip of legalism and burdensome religion or enjoy the gift of God's love. Because God is love, his commands are all about love—joyous, delightful love. If we lose sight of that, we shrivel inside and join the Pharisees in the gray world of the religious

dead. If obeying God is not bringing us joy, we have something wrong.

Jesus said every command of Scripture should be understood ultimately in terms of love for God and neighbor:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Mat. 22:37–40)

Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:8–10)

All God’s commands begin and end in love, coming from the God who is love, and obeyed because of love for him. Because we love him, we want to be true to him. Therefore his commands bring life, blessing, and joy. God’s purpose in testing our obedience is always

good. The commands we embrace are a doorway to increasing happiness. God tests us like a loving Father bringing his son into maturity, not like a cold IRS auditor combing a taxpayer's return for errors. As a caring Father, he is patient as he wisely teaches us to obey his life-giving commands.

Our grasp of the gospel will also determine how we see this test. The gospel is not a message we believe only at the beginning of our relationship with God and then leave behind. Rather we rely on gospel truths every day. Through faith in Christ—not perfect obedience—we continue daily to be forgiven, accepted, and blameless in God's sight despite sins. We do not perform obedience in order to make the grade or earn God's love. Rather we obey his commands because we love him and his ways.

This is how Jesus understood his obedience to his Father's commands. He said, "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31). Jesus called us to walk in his footsteps: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Nothing creates love for God like belief in the gospel.

Gospel-generated love transforms the test of God's commands into an opportunity to express love. My relationship with my wife helps me understand this. She makes requests. Yesterday she asked me to pound nails

into the kitchen wall to hang three decorative trivets. She also wants me to share our living space in certain ways. For example, she does not like bits of food left in the kitchen sink after a meal. When I have things other than our relationship on my mind, I may resent her requests. But when I focus on our relationship, her requests present an opportunity to express my love concretely. When you feel love, you want to demonstrate it. My wife's requests are an opportunity to show my regard. Love-generated service brings joy.

God's commands begin and end with love, and so they begin and end with joy. This was true even for the worst test Jesus faced, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2). When God tests our obedience to his commands, he cuts against the grain of our fallen nature, but this lifelong trial is always meant to promote greater joy.

Chapter 5

Are You Facing a Recurring Problem?

When I was 25, I moved to Evanston, Illinois, a Chicago suburb, with my pregnant wife and 2-year-old son to plant a church from scratch. Another couple also moved to partner in the work. I had no training or experience in church planting, and no mentor. I did have some financial support and a plan. I would canvas neighborhoods door-to-door leaving literature on doorknobs. That night, using a special phone book organized by addresses, I would follow up with a call to homes canvassed that day. After collecting enough interested people, we would begin holding worship services and hope people would keep attending.

What an adventure. I could count on financial support for one year. We had a setback when the couple starting the church with us had to pull out. We added one new member when my wife delivered our second

child, but with that blessing came the pressures of parenting a newborn. Then we endured one of the longest, coldest, snowiest winters in Chicago history. Mountains of snow and subzero temperatures hammered the city week after week with no thaw for months. Although I was raised in Chicago, this winter was unbearable and made it difficult to canvas neighborhoods. Nevertheless I had a few interesting phone conversations and meetings. That spring we held a worship service with a dozen people in a hotel. But the core did not coalesce, and our meetings did not continue. As the year drew to an end and funding ran out, I decided to close the work and move on.

I prayed about what to do next. I could try to become a staff pastor in an established church or solo pastor of a small church, but one role I ruled out was to attempt to plant another church. After one failure I was in no mood to repeat that trial. (I ended up becoming pastor of a small church in Chicago. I will say more about this later in the chapter). Who does not avoid retaking a test? No one wants to repeat fourth grade or redo a driver's license exam. If you failed once, you can fail again. If you are exhausted by the first test, you lack energy to prepare again. Taking a retest sounds like having your dentist repair the same tooth twice.

This chapter explores how God tests people by sooner or later retesting in areas of failure. That is what

he did with Israel and Abraham, and it makes sense he will do it with us because he only tests what is important. Failure does not make something less important. If anything, it becomes more important, because failure is a red flag signaling harmful weakness. God seeks our full restoration and strength.

How did God retest Israel and Abraham, and what does this say about retests today?

Again Israel cannot find water

Israel's first trial addressed the issue of trust, which is fundamental to any relationship. God led Israel through an area lacking water to see if they would trust him and depend on him through prayer (see Exo. 15:22–27). Israel failed that test. Instead of trusting the Lord, who had already demonstrated his ability to deliver them through many astounding miracles in Egypt, they ignored him and grumbled to Moses. Nevertheless, after Moses prayed, God provided water and then led them to an oasis, demonstrating again his good intentions. If Israel was a wise son, they would learn from this experience that their Father was a faithful provider whom they could trust in any need. All they had to do was ask. God was patient with Israel's failure in the first test, but as a wise Father he did not forget. Their failure was a red flag.

Because trust is foundational to a healthy relationship between children and Father, the Lord persisted in training on this issue. In the second test he allowed Israel to face another need, this time for food rather than water, but the issue at stake—that of trust—was the same. This was a retest, and again they failed. They had not learned their lesson; if anything, their distrust toward the Father had increased. They complained to Moses, but their complaint was really against God, and it was more bitter than before. Instead of asking, “What shall we drink,” as they had in the first test, in the second test

the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died *by the hand of the LORD* in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exo. 16:2–3, italics added)

They said they wish they had died in Egypt, and notice whose hand they would have blamed. Deep cynicism drives that complaint. They have chosen to believe that God’s motive in delivering them from Egypt was to kill them. So again the Father must press the foundational issue of trust with his son and teach Israel

through a third test, which is the subject of this chapter. Because Israel failed the second test so miserably, God repeats the first test:

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” (Exo. 17:1–3)

That Israel could not find water is no accident. In a few verses God will show he can put water anywhere, anytime, and he certainly knew ahead of time Israel would need it. The God who knows all things past, present, and future, who told Abraham 400 years earlier that he would deliver his descendants from Egypt, who designed the earth’s surface like a landscape architect and knows every square inch of this wilderness, does not lead several million people into a desert and suddenly realize, Oops, I forgot, these humans need water. No, this is a test allowed by a loving, faithful,

and good Father. This third test is nearly identical to the first. It is clearly a retest.

In school, retests happen because advanced ideas rest on foundational ideas. Math students cannot learn algebra until they can add, subtract, multiply, and divide. If they fail a foundational test, it is a red flag; they have to review the lessons and take a retest. A good teacher requires this as many times as necessary so students can succeed in the future.

The foundational attitudes that God's children should have toward him are trust, obedience, dependence, and reverential fear—all grounded in love. The perfect way to test all these attitudes at once is to allow a temporary need. If we do not know that God uses temporary need as a test, we may read this story and arrive at the same wrong conclusions as Israel did. If we do not know that he tests—and retests—his people, then we may completely misinterpret this story and our circumstances. We may begin to wonder whether we can trust and depend on God, for there it is in black and white on the pages of the Bible: he led his people into a wilderness, and he let them hunger and thirst. Will he do something similar to us? The Lord appears to be tardy, negligent, or haphazard with his provision. He appears to be the opposite of what he actually is: perfectly faithful and astoundingly meticulous in supplying what we need. Only when we understand that

God was testing and retesting Israel for their growth as healthy children do we conclude from these episodes that we can trust him completely and depend on him always.

In dramatic fashion God showed Israel how true this is:

Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Exo. 17:4–6)

Water from a rock! God taught Israel in an unforgettable way that he can do anything. He can create something from nothing. He can bring refreshing water from hard rock in a baking wilderness. And after a test, when he provides, he is especially present: “I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb.”

Again Moses set an example of how to relate to God when tested by need. He trusted and depended on him through prayer. Then he did what God led him to do. As a result, God provided. This is what he wanted Israel to learn from this retest.

He also gave this as an example for us. The faith lesson is clear, and so is the warning. If, like Israel, we are proud and unbelieving, retests only confirm what our doubting hearts believe. If we did not learn our lesson from the first trial, we may get more frustrated and even bitter when the retest comes. We may harden instead of soften our hearts. This is the great danger to avoid.

Would Abraham fare any better when God retested him?

Again Abraham meets a king who wants his wife

Although Abraham passed many tests of faith and obedience, he struggled with one stumbling block throughout his life in the Promised Land. He feared local kings.

In the natural Abraham had good reason to be afraid. He was a sojourner in a land controlled by local kingdoms. For about 50 years he did not own one square foot of the Promised Land, until he bought a field in which to bury Sarah at her death. He could not move into an area unnoticed. He had hundreds of people in his household, as well as great herds of sheep and goats. Genesis 14:14 says he had 318 men trained for battle. Add non-warriors, women, teens, and children,

and you realize Abraham posed a significant threat to any local king.

This meant he could settle only where they permitted. Some kings were willing to ally with Abraham because they saw he was blessed and calculated that he could benefit them. But others did not hold him in favor and if able would not hesitate to kill him to take what was his.

Especially his wife. Sarah was beautiful despite her years. Abraham knew local kings would want to add her to their harems, and the easiest way to take a man's wife was to kill him. So Abraham devised a plan. He asked Sarah when necessary to tell people where they traveled that she was his sister, not his wife. This was a half-truth, for she was indeed daughter of his father, but not his mother.

The ruse put Sarah at great risk. If a king took her, she would lose her husband and household, be forced to marry a man she did not want, and be sexually violated. By failing to protect Sarah and honor their marriage covenant, Abraham would sin against her. His plan revealed fear, which is the absence of faith, and "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Abraham had enough faith to move to the Promised Land, but he did not always trust God to protect him from local kings.

Abraham's fear led to trouble when famine in the Promised Land prompted his move to Egypt, home of a powerful Pharaoh. Abraham and Sarah employed their ruse, and soon Pharaoh took Sarah. Even so, God had mercy on Abraham and Sarah and protected them:

The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. (Gen. 12:17–20)

Abraham should have learned two lessons from this. First, the ruse was a bad idea. Pharaoh's rebuke likely was the Lord's rebuke. Second, God was willing and able to protect him from even the most powerful kings.

Sometime later Abraham's trust in God's protection was again tested. An alliance of four kings attacked the city where Abraham's nephew Lot had settled. They defeated the city and its alliance of five kings, took the residents, including Lot, and their property as spoil, and headed north. When Abraham heard of it, he showed great courage. This was not just one king and

his army holding his nephew Lot, but four, who had just shown their mettle by defeating an alliance of five kings. Nonetheless Abraham gathered his men and called on his alliance of strong friends with their men. They pursued the kings, defeated them, and rescued Lot with the daring of a special operations force. If this was a retest from God, Abraham earned an A+ on the exam.

That experience should have boosted his faith, but it may have had the opposite effect, increasing his insecurity. For, the narrative continues: “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield’” (Gen. 15:1). The first thing God did was reassure him that he need not fear human kings, which suggests fear still gripped his heart. This means that God probably intended that this new promise be a focus for Abraham’s life of faith. In other words, overcoming his fear of human kings was a crucial part of his relationship with God, almost as important to Abraham as God’s promise to give him the Promised Land and the miraculous birth of a son through Sarah.

It would not be surprising, therefore, if God retested him on this. Abraham had passed the test of having faith to enter direct combat with hostile kings, but could he pass a retest of the identical situation he had

failed in Egypt? Could he trust the Lord to protect him from a king who wanted his wife?

At least 13 years passed. Abraham was now 99-years-old. He and Sarah were within one year of the fulfillment of their hopes: the miraculous conception and birth of their son. Abraham knew this because God had recently appeared and assured him that in approximately one year he would have a child by Sarah (see Gen. 17:15–21). So this was it! But on the verge of conceiving the child of promise, through whose line God would build the nation of Israel and eventually bless all peoples through his descendant Jesus, on the verge of the most important event of Abraham's life, God allowed a retest.

Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. (Gen. 20:1–2)

Abraham, what are you doing? Again you are sinning against Sarah. Again you are sinning against God by fearing a human king rather than trusting the Lord. And now God's purpose is at risk, for if Abimelech goes into Sarah, then no one would know whether her child was the son of Abraham or Abimelech. And even if Sarah knew she was already in the first weeks of pregnancy by Abraham, she would still give birth to

her son while living in Abimelech's household. Abraham's retest had come at the most critical time—that is important to remember—and Abraham had utterly failed.

That God allowed this temptation to come at this crucial time is revealing. He forgives but wisely does not forget our failures in essential aspects of our relationship with him. The red flag had not disappeared. He keeps training us for our highest good and his highest glory. He keeps testing to establish us in obedience and trust.

God could allow a retest at this moment because he knew he could save Abraham and Sarah from the consequences of failure. Although he does not always save people from such consequences, he did so in this case for the sake of his own purposes.

God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife." Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was

I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all who are yours." (Gen. 20:3-7)

It says God kept Abimelech from sinning and from touching her. Such is the greatness of his sovereignty. He could have come to Abimelech in a dream before Abimelech took Sarah and warned him not to take her. That God did not do this supports the idea that this was a retest. Abimelech returned Sarah and vindicated her publicly. Abraham had failed, but God still could work with and through him. In this case, failure of a retest was not final.

We learn two important lessons from Abraham's retest. First, God remembers crucial failures. Sooner or later, sometimes years later, he allows a retest. Second, God is patient and forgiving with a person of sincere faith.

Abraham's story of retesting feels much different from Israel's. Israel's unbelief, stubbornness, bitterness, and grumbling in the wilderness quickly spoiled their relationship with God. Abraham's story is different because despite his failures he had true faith and love for God; whereas Israel, apart from a handful of people, collectively showed they lacked faith and love.

Eventually their failures undid them. Abraham's story corresponds to what true disciples of Jesus experience. They cling to him in love and faith no matter what, sincerely repent of failures, and therefore receive grace. Although Abraham failed a test and then the retest, by grace he remained God's man.

Finally, what can we learn about retests from the life of Jesus?

Jesus retests a failure-prone disciple

Jesus never failed a trial and so never was retested for a fault, but we can learn from the way he retested his failure-prone disciple. Peter's greatest failure was his threefold denial of Jesus. He tearfully repented for it and continued with the disciples after the crucifixion. So Peter got back on track, but how did the Lord retest him?

John 21 says that after his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples as they were fishing. They quickly came ashore and found Jesus had prepared a meal. As they ate, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" and three times Peter affirmed his love. Reflecting later on that conversation, Peter could not have missed its parallels with his failure. He had denied the Lord three times while gathered at a fireside; Jesus retested him three times, sitting at a fireside, with the question, "Do you love me?" The retest differed from his failure, but

in some important sense it mirrored it. Jesus brought closure to that failure by confirming Peter's restoration and recommissioning him for his work.

But it was only the beginning of Peter's retest. For there at the lake shore each time Peter affirmed his love for Jesus, Jesus gave an assignment: "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep," "Feed my sheep." If Peter truly loved Jesus, if his threefold denial was an anomaly, he would show it by spending the rest of his life caring for Jesus' sheep. The retest differed from the original test, but it corresponded in a way important to God.

Moreover, the Book of Acts shows that Peter soon faced situations similar to his original test that required him to declare his allegiance to Jesus despite possible persecution. In Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit came on the church at Pentecost, the spectacle gathered a crowd of thousands, and it was Peter who stood front and center and preached a message calling them to repentance.

In Acts 3, when God used Peter and John to heal a lame man at the temple, again a large crowd gathered, and it was Peter who preached the gospel. For this the religious leaders imprisoned Peter and John. The next day the leaders examined them in court, and again Peter boldly proclaimed the gospel. The leaders then charged them to stop preaching in the name of

Jesus. Peter replied, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20). Peter could not have passed a retest any better.

Likewise in Acts 5, the religious authorities jailed Peter and the apostles for proclaiming the gospel. They examined and threatened them. Peter replied, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Under repeated retesting, Peter is fearless.

Retests vary. They may be singular events or may repeat as an ongoing part of what God has called you to be and do. Retests may copy the original test or may have a different shape. I opened this chapter narrating my experience with attempting to plant a church, eventually calling it quits, and deciding that church planting was not for me. Nevertheless, every new pastoral assignment I have received since then, and there have been three, has been to pastor a church of less than 30 people. That is better than starting from scratch, but it still resembles church planting. It seems that God is retesting me for some purpose, and I have not yet fully learned what I need to learn. I am working on it, and I am determined to pass this test sooner or later. If you wonder how God may be retesting you, inquire of him patiently and persistently⁹ and examine your life

9. James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who

for areas of habitual distrust, disobedience, difficulty, or defeat. God may open your eyes to see your circumstances in a way you have never considered.

Knowing that God retests you in areas of failure is one of the most important truths in this book. For if you respond poorly to a retest, it can have the opposite of its intended effect. It can decrease rather than increase your trust in God, your dependence on him, and your obedience to him. If you keep failing, you will wonder why you are stuck in sixth grade year after year. You will unnecessarily repeat hard exams. You will become disillusioned. How much better it is to decide you will trust and obey the Lord. So, lean into retests until you pass. Draw near to Christ in deep humility, sincere repentance, childlike trust, and wholehearted obedience. He will never turn you away, and his blood atones for all your failures.

In fact, through the struggle of a retest, you can know Christ in a special way if you seek him. When God retested Israel with lack of water, and they repeated their failure, God not only took care of the people but also drew near. Moses prayed about their need, and God said, “*I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink*” (Exo. 17:6,

gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

italics added). God mercifully gave his presence, standing by them on the rock despite their failure.

In the New Testament, Paul draws further encouragement from this story. He writes, “They drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). Ultimately it was not a natural rock that yielded water for Israel, but the spiritual Rock, Jesus Christ. Moses struck the rock with his staff, symbolizing Christ’s being struck for our sins at the cross, and water gushed from the Rock for a nation that had already failed several times. They drank Living Water that quenched their thirst. There is abundant grace in Christ and through him a refreshing provision of the Holy Spirit for life’s many retests. Every failure meets its match at the Cross.

Because of the Cross, we can be true to Jesus.

Chapter 6

Tested by God's Self-disclosure

As my wife and I walked on a recent autumn Sunday afternoon, we met an interesting stranger on a bicycle. We were both waiting to cross the street near several new high-rises that were going up, and we started talking about Chicago architecture. He quickly rattled off names of several architects and distinctive buildings. Although traffic stopped several times and we could have crossed the street, we stayed put and continued talking about the downtown cityscape. He smiled often and had a twinkle in his eye. We were hitting it off so well that I did not want to miss what seemed to be an open door. I said, "I'm pastor of a church that meets nearby, and we would love to have you visit sometime."

"Cool," he said, and grinned without pursuing the new subject further. A few moments later he turned to check traffic and started crossing the street. We kept talking and crossed with him. Soon after we reached the other side he mounted his bicycle, said a friend-

ly goodbye, and pedaled away. As talkative as he had been, I am sure we could have stood chatting for an hour had I not invited him to church. At that point his interest in talking further ended.

In the growth of every relationship, there are moments of risk. They come when we venture to reveal information about ourselves: our background, interests, beliefs, loyalties, feelings. We might disclose whether we follow the Cubs or the White Sox, whether we usually vote Republican, Democrat, or Independent, where we attended school, whether we are Christians, to what church we belong, or what we believe about certain doctrinal or ethical questions. That self-revelation becomes either a place of common ground that broadens the relationship, a point of difference that strains it, or something that does not matter. Revealing more about ourselves can be a crossroads because people might dislike what they learn.

This happens in our relationship with God. Of course we cannot reveal anything to him, for he knows us completely, far better than we know ourselves. Conversely, we know nothing about God unless he reveals it, but he has chosen to reveal much. The Bible says he is perfect and absolutely good, faultless in nature, words, and works. He is the most wonderful, interesting, pleasurable, joyful, pure, blessed, and loving being in the universe. He is infinitely superior to us in every

way, and infinitely desirable. He is the ultimate person, and knowing him affords the ultimate relationship.

Therefore nothing better can happen to us than for God to reveal himself. It makes our relationship with him possible. It deepens that relationship. But astonishingly, that is not so with all people. In fact, God's revelation of himself repels many. How can this be? The apostle John explains: "Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:20). God and people resemble magnets. Turned one way we are attracted to God; turned the other way we are repelled. So the same dynamic that occurs between people as they reveal information about themselves occurs between God and people. Indeed this is especially true for God as he reveals himself because he is holy, and we are not. He is light, and sinners avoid light.

Therefore when God reveals himself, he is testing us. He wants to see whether we will draw nearer, stay put, or mount our bicycles and pedal away. And thus God tested Israel.

The crossroads at Mt. Sinai

Here is how it happened. Approximately seven weeks after the Exodus, the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai, their main stop between Egypt and the Promised Land. God told them to prepare for a meeting. For three

days they washed clothes and purified themselves. The big day arrived and with it an awesome experience.

There were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. (Exo. 19:16–20)

The first order of business was for Israel to understand the boundaries of their relationship with God. For this he gave Ten Commandments. These commandments revealed more of his glory than the smoke, lightning flashes, thunder, trembling earth, and blaring trumpet, for the Law displayed his character. God audibly spoke these commands to the entire nation; they literally heard his voice.

They did not like it. They did not joyously sing, “Our God is an awesome God” or feel the wonder of those drawn to stand outside in a thunderstorm. Rather, “they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to

us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exo. 20:18–19). God had revealed himself in three monumental ways—in the fireworks of a stunning sensory display, in his commandments, and in his audible voice—and the Israelites responded by mounting their bicycles and pedaling away.

God knew of course his purpose in this overwhelming encounter. “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come *to test you*, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin” (Exo. 20:20, italics added). That sounds like a contradiction. Moses said, “Do not fear,” and then he said God’s purpose in this encounter was to instill “the fear of him.”

When Scripture seems to contradict itself, often it is because a word is used in two different senses, and that is the case here. When Moses said, “Do not fear,” he meant, Do not be terrified by thinking God intends to hurt you. But when Moses said, “God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you,” he meant, God has come to reveal his holiness to you, so you will respond with reverence and abhor the thought of sinning against such majesty. Moses modeled this reverence. He did not respond to this awesome display of God’s glory by fleeing in terror; rather, he ascended the mountain and entered the fiery cloud of glory. That encounter whetted his appetite for more, for even after experiencing all this he later prayed, “Please show me

your glory” (Exo. 33:18). Proper reverence strengthens a relationship.

That is why this test was a loving act from a loving God. He was putting their relationship on the only foundation on which it could flourish, a foundation of respect and truth. Israel had to relate to God as he is. That knowledge would keep them from sins that would break the relationship and sever them from the source of life.

This trial resembles the way a football coach tests a player who breaks team rules. The coach realizes the player does not respect him. The coach knows he must show the disruptive player what kind of person he is, that he is not one to be trifled with, that he is a strong leader who upholds his rules because they are right and good for the team. He will meet face-to-face with the player. His voice and demeanor will convey that he means business. He knows this encounter will test the player. The player will either open his eyes and realize this coach is a leader to be reckoned with, or he will feel sorry for himself, despise the coach, and quit the team. This face-to-face meeting will build or break the relationship.

When God tests us today by revealing himself, it is not normally a Mount Sinai experience. But he somehow makes us more aware of his holiness and greatness and becomes more real and awesome to us. Those

encounters typically happen as we read the Bible or hear biblical preaching. So God primarily reveals himself today through his Word, and his Word tests us. We either avoid the Bible, preoccupying ourselves instead with more comfortable things, or thirst for it as for living water.

God especially reveals himself in the gospel, the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing reveals God's love more than this gospel, and to know God's love is to "be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). Nothing more fully reveals God's heart: His goodness in the original creation. His Fatherhood in making mankind in his own image. His patience, after the fall, in not condemning mankind. His wrath against rebellion and unbelief. His justice in judging sin. His mercy on helpless sinners. His love in giving his only Son to be the substitute who suffers to atone for human sins. His glory in not allowing people to boast before him of meriting the kingdom through their own righteousness. His grace in saving and justifying sinners through no merit of their own but solely by the merits of Jesus Christ. This message is the highest revelation of God. It is unfathomably wonderful.

But it tests us. It is indeed the ultimate test. It divides humanity into two groups: those who in repentance believe the message, and those who in pride reject it.

God also reveals himself today in his church, “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). Scripture calls the church his temple, where the Holy Spirit dwells in fullness (1 Cor. 3:16). Scripture makes these remarkable claims about God’s fullness in the church for many more reasons. When the church gathers, we proclaim his Word. We worship him for who he is, singing of his beauty and majesty, love and forgiveness, power in creation and wisdom in redemption. We give pictures of the gospel in water baptism and Communion. We fellowship in the Holy Spirit and experience God’s love. We receive his grace through others with their various gifts of the Holy Spirit. In these ways and more, God reveals himself in his church, and that tests us. Either we embrace him in the life of the organized church or spurn him by shunning it.

God also reveals himself in nature. In the order of the starry heavens, in the super complex design of the human body, in the miracle of life and reproduction, in the unfathomable genius of cells, molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles, and in our unimaginably big universe, God reveals his divine self-existence. In their spirit everyone knows he is there, whether they acknowledge it or not.¹⁰ That revelation tests people. Either they respond with worship and thanks or they

10. See Romans 1:18–23.

suppress what they know and adore what God created rather than him.

Finally, preeminently, God reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 says, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” Because God’s revelation of himself in Christ blazes like the sun, it tests people to the maximum. More on this later in the chapter.

God’s purpose in revealing himself in these ways and more is to invite us into a deep relationship. We must respond by accepting him as he is and drawing near on his terms, because he is God and we are not, because he alone is perfectly good and we in ourselves are not, because he in perfection does not change and we in our imperfection must. Those who respond to God’s self-revelation with reverent, obedient trust will find he fulfills the heart’s deepest longings.

And so we have seen that when God revealed himself to Israel, they stepped back and failed the trial. They did not learn from Moses’ example. Next we see what they also could have learned from their forefather Abraham.

The crossroads under a starry sky

One striking feature of Abraham’s life was the ten encounters he had with God and the magnitude of

what God revealed in those meetings.¹¹ Each revelation tested him.

For example, several years after their first encounter, God appeared to Abraham and revealed something so important that it tested not only him, but also tests us. As he sat in his tent on one clear night, the black sky jeweled with innumerable stars, the word of the Lord came in a vision promising, “Your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1). Abraham was painfully aware of the one reward he and Sarah wanted most, still unfulfilled despite an earlier promise from God. He could not pass up this opportunity. “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring.’” (Gen. 15:2–3). That was a pointed reminder and a correct identification of who was responsible for their barrenness.

God did not blink. “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” It was time for an object lesson. The Lord brought Abraham outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Abraham lifted his gaze to a sky that urban dwellers can scarcely imagine. He saw the inky black universe sparkling with more stars than he could ever count. Perhaps God paused

11. Genesis records nine of them, and Stephen’s summary of Abraham’s life in Acts 7 adds one more, for a total of ten.

to allow Abraham to begin counting. Ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred. Suddenly God interrupted with words of promise: “So shall your offspring be.”

Abraham did not blink. Somehow he wrapped his faith around that galactic promise: “He believed the Lord” (v. 6). He took God at his word. God had revealed himself in these words and countless stars, and Abraham moved toward him in deeper faith. He believed because he knew God before this encounter and knew him even better now that God had revealed more about himself.

Through that belief in God’s promise and revelation Abraham passed a test and proved true. The Lord perceived Abraham’s faith and proceeded to give something far more valuable than a billion children. The Lord “counted it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). That is, the Lord regarded Abraham’s faith as righteousness, as something that gave him right standing before him. Though Abraham was guilty of sin like every person, and one sin is enough to separate a person from God forever, God forgave his sins, regarded him as perfectly righteous, and accepted him, all because of his faith in the promise.

In this encounter God revealed to sinners something all-important: he counts faith as righteousness.¹² Two thousand years later when he revealed himself

12. See Romans 3:20–26.

most fully by sending Jesus Christ to earth, God disclosed something further: this faith that brings righteousness must be faith in Jesus. When the apostle Paul wrote about this, he quoted from Abraham's story:

No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Rom. 4:20–25)

So we walk in the same pattern as Abraham. God reveals himself by promising salvation in Jesus Christ, and if we believe in him, God counts that faith as righteousness and accepts us as though we had never sinned. That is our most important faith, by which we begin our relationship with God.

As we walk with Jesus, we learn that God keeps following this pattern. He reveals himself by promising something based on his identity, and that promise tests us by requiring faith in response. Normally we do not

receive these promises in the sort of visionary encounters Abraham had. But in the Bible God reveals himself as he who saves, helps, leads, provides, strengthens, hears, cares, shields, teaches, heals, and more. As we in our need read these and other promise-principles—these revelations of the Lord’s nature—we either believe and take hold of him as revealed, or we doubt and fail the test. From Abraham we learn that God is the God of promise who calls us into the life of faith.¹³ That is the test. That is how we prove to be true.

Last we turn to Jesus. How do we see in him the idea that God tests people by revealing himself?

The crossroads of Jesus Christ

Is it possible that Jesus, from boyhood to adulthood, responded with anything but immediate delight as the Father progressively revealed himself? After all, his heart perfectly reflected the Father’s.

Even so, at some of what the Father revealed, Jesus had reason to balk. Jesus grew up meditating on his Bible. At some point the Father revealed that Jesus was the subject of Isaiah 53, the prophecy that describes the messiah as the lamb of God who saves his people by atoning for their sins. It includes these familiar lines: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.... He was pierced

13. Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (Crossway, 2001)

for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.... We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (vv. 3, 5, 6). As Jesus meditated on this chapter year after year, one less-familiar line surely caught his attention: “It was the will of the LORD to crush him” (v. 10). It had to be difficult to contemplate that his beloved Father planned to “crush him.” How did Jesus process that? The Father revealed himself in this troubling verse, and Jesus could respond either by trusting the Father or by mounting his bicycle and pedaling away.

This line in Isaiah 53 was a crossroads, one of many crossroads associated with Jesus’ suffering culminating at the Cross. They reached their peak in his cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” At each revelation, Jesus accepted the Father as he is. He loved and glorified the Father for who he is. He trusted the Father’s goodness. He knew that after the hard words of Isaiah 53:10 came these promises about the messiah: “He shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied” (vv. 10–11). This, too, revealed the heart of his Father, a heart of infinite goodness that willed not only to crush Jesus but also to raise him from the dead and exalt him to his right hand as the eternal king of God’s people.

Jesus resembled Moses at Mt. Sinai. As the mountain trembled and lightning flashed and thunder rolled and trumpet blared, Moses chose to climb the mountain and at the summit enter the cloud glowing with fire. Likewise Jesus always moved in love toward the Father.

We learn crucial things about passing the test described in this chapter not only from how Jesus responded to the Father, but also from how people responded to Jesus. For Jesus is God's ultimate self-revelation. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:9–10). Jesus is not only the ultimate revelation of God; he is the perfect revelation. In Jesus we see not merely the best picture of God we can find; rather, we see God himself.

That being so, we would expect Jesus to be a polarizing figure, since many do not want God. We would expect that those who want the true God will respond to Jesus with complete devotion, for in him they find the ultimate revelation of God as he truly is. And those who do not want God as he truly is will reject Jesus for the same reason.

This is what both the New Testament and the last 2,000 years of history confirm. Just two verses after the familiar, encouraging summary of the good news in John 3:16–17, which says,

God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him;

Verse 19 records this surprising response:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.

As the revelation of God at Mount Sinai tested Israel, so the revelation of God in Jesus tests people. Although the religious leaders appeared to be devoted to God, when he actually came near in Christ, they showed their true hearts. In the same way, the revelation of God in Jesus tests people today. As people read the Bible, everyone can find something in Jesus that they admire, but many also find things to which they object. Those are a trial. Will those objectionable things turn a person away from Jesus as revealed in Scripture and thus away from God? Will a person identify as a Christian but become a selective believer, a buffet believer, picking and choosing from what the Bible reveals about God, turning away from some aspects of him as he truly is, especially his holiness and wrath against sin?

God himself calls Jesus the stumbling stone. “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame,” (Rom. 9:33). Recognizing this, Jesus said, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me,” (Luke 7:23). Jesus knew he offended nearly everyone at some point. God knows that sin has twisted our desires and understanding of what is good, and as a result we do not like everything about a righteous, just, and pure God. Unholy people do not take naturally to a holy God, even though he alone is perfectly good. The crucial question is, when those feelings arise, what will you do?

One incident shows people at the crossroads. While ministering to the crowds one day, Jesus shocked everyone by announcing, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). It is easy to see how that statement could be offensive. At these words “Many of his *disciples* turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66, italics added). Those who turned back were not the hypocritical religious leaders; rather, they were “disciples.” Even to those who had been his admirers Jesus was a stumbling block.

But not everyone turned away. The Twelve stayed. Jesus asked them, “Do you want to go away as well?”

Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:67–69). Peter had come close enough to Jesus to know that Jesus truly revealed God and that he is good. As David wrote, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psa. 34:8). Peter had tasted and knew there was no one else to whom he could turn for life, the life of heaven and the age to come, the blessed and holy life. He recognized the perfect holiness of God in Jesus, a holiness good and desirable. “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He heard from Jesus the most hopeful words ever spoken, words of mercy, joy, peace, and forgiveness. Forgiveness was what Peter knew he needed.

The people most aware of their need were the ones who responded properly to God’s revelation of himself in Jesus. Jesus described them as the poor in spirit,¹⁴ who knew their neediness and thus perceived the riches in Christ. They were too humbled by their painful circumstances to be offended. They were people like Mary Magdalene, “from whom seven demons had gone out” (Luke 8:2). After this exorcism she followed Jesus to the end. Even the horror of the crucifixion could not drive her away. She stood with other women at Golgotha and watched him die, and then she sat down opposite his

14. Matthew 5:3

tomb fiercely unwilling to leave the Holy One of God, who made her holy. People like Mary Magdalene pass this test at the head of the class.

They are people like the woman identified not by her name but by her notorious guilt. She “was a sinner,” writes Luke (7:37). Luke does not tell how she learned of the mercy found in Jesus, but she believed to the core of her wicked soul. When she heard he had come to the house of a prominent Pharisee for a meal, she went there with her most valuable possession, a jar of expensive ointment. Somehow she gained access to the dining room, where Jesus reclined on a couch with his head nearest the table and his feet away, as was the custom. With the boldness that comes from sold-out devotion she came and stood behind Jesus at his feet, weeping. Weeping because she felt his mercy. Weeping because she trusted and loved him. Tears spilled down her cheeks and dripped on his feet. She kneeled and with her hair wiped his feet. She kissed his feet and spread the fragrant ointment on them. Seven-hundred years earlier Isaiah described what this woman knew well: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet

of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation” (Isa. 52:7). The woman experienced this in Jesus, and at the crossroads of choosing between him and her sin she had chosen Jesus. When we perceive our need, we love God as he is. Jesus turned to her and said, “Your sins are forgiven.... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Luke 7:48, 50).

You too stand at a crossroad. On one road you make yourself the standard of what is good and right and require that God be who you want him to be. If he reveals himself in Jesus to be otherwise, you turn away, or call yourself a Christian but reject some of what Jesus taught and disobey some of what he commanded.¹⁵ You follow a false, sub-Christian God made in your image.

On the other road you recognize your brokenness, and recognize Jesus as the flawless reflection of the perfect God. You are humbled enough to know you must follow him as he is and conform to him. You need Jesus at all costs.

15. Consider, for example, Thomas Jefferson, who used a selective approach to the Bible when he literally used a razor to cut out only the portions of the four Gospels with which he agreed and glued them together into his own version of the Gospels. He called it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. He excluded the miracles of Jesus and his resurrection, as well as verses about his deity, for he felt they did not meet the standard of reason.

Are you needy enough to receive God as he reveals himself to be? Will you be offended by the Rock or stand gratefully on the Rock? Will you climb Mt. Sinai as it trembles beneath your feet and at the summit enter the cloud of glory? Will you keep moving toward this awesome God as he progressively reveals more of himself to you? Will you be true to Jesus? It is the test that lasts a lifetime.

Chapter 7

Tested by Idols

I never knew my grandfathers. My paternal grandfather died before I was born, and my maternal grandfather was a mystery figure. He was alive, but we never saw him, never conversed on the phone, never talked about him, never hung photos of him on the wall. He did not reside with my grandmother, who lived an hour away. My parents did not divulge where he lived or why he did not live with my grandmother, and I did not ask. At some point I learned my grandparents had been divorced.

Actually I did see my grandfather once when I was around 10. He came to our home along with others from my mother's family. I watched him with curiosity but did not speak with him. He was there with a woman who was not identified. I did not learn why my grandparents divorced until I was around 30. My grandfather did well enough in business that he and my grandmother employed a housekeeper. She was the unidentified woman at the family get-together when I

was 10. My grandparents divorced because—well, you guessed it.

A husband and wife forbear many things in each other: irritating habits, stubborn flaws, and countless offenses. In love they overlook them. Their marriage vows require that they forbear all wrongs. All wrongs except one. What marriage should not abide is adultery. Romance and marriage are exclusive. Sexual relations are exclusive. If not, the end is near.

What sexual relations are to marriage, worship is to our relationship with God. He requires that we reserve worship exclusively for him, and he is right in doing so, for he alone is worthy. He tests whether we will faithfully honor him above everything he created. Israel, Abraham, and Jesus faced this trial, but in different ways.

Israel wasted no time in finding another lover

In the last chapter we left Israel standing before God at Mount Sinai. God had revealed his glory and spoken the Ten Commandments. The first two commands put first things first:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water un-

der the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God. (Exo. 20:3–5)

The message was blunt. Worship me exclusively. Do not even think about betraying me.

We saw that after God spoke the ten commands, the people were terrified and said they could not bear to hear more. So Moses climbed the mountain again to meet further with the Lord. The first thing God said to Moses again concerned idolatry: “You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold” (Exo. 20:22–24). Just in case someone had missed the point, God repeated what was most important to him.

Worship took center stage in what followed. After God elaborated on the Ten Commandments (Exo. 21–23), he called Israel’s elders to worship him in a covenant-making meal (24:1). After that, Moses again ascended the mountain for his famous 40-day meeting with the Lord, which focused on God’s instructions for Israel’s worship, which involved detailed plans to create a tabernacle and to consecrate a priesthood qualified to mediate for the people (Exo. 25–31). Worship was the pure consummation of marriage between God and Israel.

Meanwhile at the foot of Mount Sinai Israel was making eyes at another god. Impatient with Moses, the leaders beckoned Aaron, “Come, make us gods who will go before us” (Exo. 32:1), and he complied. From their jewelry he molded a golden calf. Aroused, the leaders proclaimed, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” They offered sacrifices to the calf and celebrated an idolatrous festival. God’s betrothed people were in bed with another god. Their betrayal could not be more appalling. This was Israel’s defining moment, and it was a disaster. They had bombed the test of exclusive worship.

At the top of the mountain, God reported the adultery to Moses. With the fury of a husband betrayed on his wedding night, God announced, “I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (Exo. 32:9–10). God was ready to start over. Although he would fulfill his promise to Abraham by using his descendant Moses to begin a new Israel, he had lost patience with that faithless generation.

This was so because in the context of worship a different metaphor describes the relationship. In the context of worship, God was not like a father training his young son; rather, on the basis of the covenant just sealed in the covenant meal, this was a marriage. Idola-

try is not merely the stumbling of an immature son; it is the betrayal of a spouse. Idolatry is adultery, the one thing a marriage should not abide. What sex is to marriage, worship is to a relationship with God. Therefore idolatry can break the covenant.

In the crisis at the foot of Mount Sinai, what saved people was a mediator. Instead of jumping at the privilege of having God's nation descend from his line, Moses interceded for the guilty, and God mercifully relented. Today what saves us from God's wrath against those who love false gods is another mediator who is infinitely greater, the one and only mediator between God and mankind, Jesus Christ. He alone can be our mediator, for he alone died on the cross for our failure to worship God exclusively.

We all need Jesus to mediate our relationship with God, for all are guilty of idolatry in one form or another. In some cultures, idolatry involves blatantly honoring statues bearing names of false gods. It is obvious and deliberate. But in other cultures, idolatry is subtle, a matter of the heart, committed without statues but fundamentally the same. Colossians 3:5 teaches that idolatry is essentially about love: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity,

passion, evil desire, *and covetousness, which is idolatry*. On account of these the wrath of God is coming” (italics added). This verse equates covetousness or greed—a matter of the heart and its loves—with idolatry.

Elsewhere the New Testament likewise speaks of betraying God in a way that involves the heart and our excessive love of what God has created, admonishing Christians, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jam. 4:4).

In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller defines idolatry as anyone or anything that becomes our ultimate concern, ultimate love, instead of God. If our highest love centers not on God but on something he created, we commit idolatry. We do not worship him exclusively.

Over your lifetime, what have been your ultimate concerns in place of God? Is something or someone presently pushing him from his rightful place as your chief love? Because Jesus is your mediator, you have forgiveness through faith in him. Because Jesus is your mediator, he calls you to repent of betraying God. God’s command to worship him exclusively is a critical test.

Israel failed it. Abraham passed.

Abraham grew up in idolatry

Abraham faced two great tests regarding exclusive worship.

The first test came early. Scripture says that before God intervened in Abraham's life, Abraham, his father Terah, and his brother Nahor served other gods.¹⁶ Fathers teach their children to worship their idols. Scripture says Terah raised his family in Ur, a large, prosperous city on the banks of the Euphrates that archaeologists have found had a temple to the moon god. So Abraham grew up in an idolatrous environment, with statues of idols enshrined in his home, with regular visits with his father to the temples of false gods, eating meals and performing sacrifices in home and temple dedicated to these gods. This was his life from the cradle and through his formative years as a toddler, boy, and teen. Abraham grew up worshiping idols.

But God had designs on him. Sometime after Abraham reached manhood, God first revealed himself to him when he lived in Ur, before he and his family moved to Haran and Abraham later moved to Canaan. In Acts 7:2–4 the martyr Stephen says of this event:

The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before

16. Joshua 24:2 says, "Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and *they* served other gods"' (italics added).

he lived in Haran. “Leave your country and your people,” God said, “and go to the land I will show you.” So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran.

This meeting in Ur must have turned Abraham from idols to the one true God.

But as Israel showed above, even after extraordinary encounters with God, turning from idols to God is not automatic, as we might suppose. Millions of Israelites saw how God judged the Egyptians and their idols with ten plagues, saw the Red Sea part and walked through it on dry ground, saw the pillar of cloud and fire leading in their journey, saw how God provided water and manna in the wilderness, saw God’s stormy glory on Mount Sinai, and heard God’s voice announcing the Ten Commandments. Yet after a lull in the action they quickly made a golden calf and held an idolatrous party. Just because people receive objective evidence of the one true God does not mean they follow him.

In fact, the Bible teaches precisely the opposite happens. Apart from God’s intervention the fallen human heart recoils from the one true God. Rather than worship God as he is and change as he requires, fallen people create substitute gods that suit their desires. The apostle Paul said that people

by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹
For what can be known about God is plain to

them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Rom. 1:18–23)

Notice three key truths about the turn from God to idolatry. First, verses 19–20 say all people know from objective evidence that the one true God who created all things exists. Second, verse 18 says they respond by “suppressing” the truth. They do not want to deal with God as he truly is, so they push reality about God from their consciousness. Third, verse 23 says they exchange what they know to be true about God for idols. They create gods to substitute for the true God they spurn. This is what Israel did with the golden calf. This is what Abraham did until God appeared to him in Ur.

And this encounter brought Abraham’s first great test. Would he now give exclusive worship and devotion to the one true God? Abraham’s actions show he

passed the test. He obeyed God by leaving Ur. When he came to the Promised Land, he built altars of worship and called on the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:4, 18). In the remainder of his story, there is no hint of idolatry.

If you are not yet a Christian, you face the same test Abraham did. In your heart of hearts, even if you have never encountered God in an extraordinary way, you know he exists. You have been guilty of suppressing what you know of him and exchanging devotion to him for devotion to other things you have made ultimate instead, such as money, sex, music, career, family, friends, romance, movies, sports, food, hobbies, education, the beauty or build or health of your body, and so on. The question is, when you encounter the truths about Jesus Christ, will you surrender your idols? Will you make him most important? God calls you to worship and serve him exclusively.

Abraham's second great test for idolatry came when God commanded him to do the unimaginable. Genesis says, "After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you'" (22:1–2). This is now decades after Abraham's

first encounter with God, and God has given him the desire of his heart by making possible the miraculous birth of a son through his wife Sarah. The Lord gives; sometimes he takes away.

The Lord knew how Abraham felt about Isaac. God called him “your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.” He knew Abraham had for decades focused his hope on having a son, and once Isaac was born Abraham loved him above all. God also knew that his blessings can replace him in people’s hearts. Consequently one of the most harmful things that can happen to us is to get what we want. We can only find true life in our loving Creator. Because of his jealous love for Abraham God had to test to see if Isaac had become his god.

The test was stark: him or me? Obey me and sacrifice Isaac. Protect Isaac and disobey me. Which will it be?

The subject of testing teaches much about God. He tests for exclusive worship because of what he said in the Ten Commandments: “I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exo. 20:5). He forbids idols because he is jealous, not in the insecure and fallen way that humans are jealous, but rather in the strong and righteous way of guarding a romantic relationship from what it should not abide. Even heathens call adultery cheating.

God knows if we are in a true love relationship with him we should not cheat on him. Your heart can have only one God.

So the test of exclusive worship includes the command to surrender whatever holds the place in your heart that belongs only to God. However, notice that after Abraham surrendered Isaac, the Lord allowed him to keep Isaac. God's purpose was not to take what Abraham loved, but to ensure his heart was properly ordered. Abraham showed that no one could take God's place in his heart.¹⁷ You likewise must not only surrender competing loves, but also wholeheartedly embrace God, for your heart abhors a vacuum. It will have a first love.

Even Jesus faced a real test regarding exclusive worship

Finally, turning to how this trial shows up in the life of Jesus, how could it be that the Son of God could be tempted to worship anyone but God? After all, he is divine himself and has lived for all eternity in the Father's presence. But he did face a real temptation in this regard.

It happened in his 40-day wilderness trial. After two unsuccessful temptations, Satan took Jesus "to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of

17. Chapter 12 will look in depth at this perplexing story.

the world and their glory.” Then he brazenly offered: “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and *worship me*” (Mat. 4:8–9, italics added). So Jesus faced an undisguised test regarding exclusive worship.

It raises many questions. How could this offer tempt Jesus? How are we similarly tempted? What does this teach about the nature of God, and mankind? What does this teach about God’s command to worship him exclusively?

Regarding the first question: Was Satan’s offer a ridiculous miscalculation, a gambit that had no chance of appealing to Jesus? No, Satan knows much about human nature. This was his ultimate chance to advance his rebellion against God, so he was surely exercising all his cunning powers. The key to understanding this temptation is to remember that Jesus was both fully God and fully man, which meant his human nature was susceptible to every temptation common to man.¹⁸ Nothing about Satan’s offer could appeal to Jesus in his divine nature, for “God cannot be tempted with evil” (Jam. 1:13). And even as Satan appealed to Jesus’ human nature, he did not offer himself as the bait, as though anything about him could inspire Jesus to worship. No, the key word in understanding this temptation is glory.

18. Hebrews 4:15 says, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

The narrative reads, “The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world *and their glory*. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’” (Mat. 4:8–9, italics added). What Satan knew could appeal to Jesus’ humanity was glory. This is what mankind wants.

Glory drives sports. When men and women train for the Olympics, for example, they push their limits in work and pain, and their reason for doing so is not merely to stand on a platform and have precious metal hung around their neck and hear their national anthem. There are easier ways to hear anthems and quicker ways to get gold. What athletes want is glory. Not just the glory of applause, but the glory of greatness, of being the best, of displaying their talent for all to see and extol. They want the glory of competition, the glory of courage and sacrifice, the glory of passion and ultimate effort, the glory of teamwork and sharing arenas with other great athletes. They want the glory of being watched by millions on television, the glory of their names inscribed in Olympic history. They want the glory of winning, setting records, nearing perfection. They want the glory of making family, friends, and hometown proud. People will do almost anything for glory.

Glory takes many forms. Proverbs 29:21 says, “The glory of young men is their strength,” and that explains why some spend agonizing hours in the gym pumping iron. Strength is glory. But there are other ways of finding glory. The glory of working for a company is to be promoted, to become a department head, vice president, or CEO, because authority is glory. In various instances, wisdom is glory, riches are glory, talent is glory, education is glory, achievement is glory.

Glory is whatever makes us special, however we excel. The glory of a zebra is its stripes. The glory of a company is its brand. The glory of the sky is its sunset. Even if no one sees our glory, we enjoy it.

We enjoy it because glory is good. It is good because it came from God, whose glory is infinite: “Great is the glory of the Lord” (Psalm 138:5). “From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom. 11:36). “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor. 12:4–6). “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). In the famil-

iar verse that describes mankind's brokenness, notice what quality we lack: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). At creation God infused his glory into mankind and afterward pronounced us "very good," but sin marred that glory. We fall short of our glorious purpose of reflecting God's likeness. Nevertheless God originally created humanity for glory, and that glory is good.

We are not the only ones who express our glory for the sake of our own joy and others' admiration. God supremely delights to express his glory for his own joy and the admiration and pleasure of his creation. In the book *The End for Which God Created the World*, theologian Jonathan Edwards argues that God's ultimate purpose in all his works is to display his infinite glory—preeminently his redeeming love and grace in Jesus Christ—and receive the worship this glory deserves. Glory is divine.

Glory is the hinge of God's purposes in creation. It is the hub of the wheel, the fulcrum of the lever, the axis of the globe, the prize of the race. Glory is why Satan was playing his best card when he offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world. It is why Satan, who lost more

glory through his fall than anyone ever has, craved worship.

And it was Jesus' glory flatly to refuse him. "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (Mat. 4:10). The glory of Jesus Christ is he did not fall as Adam and Israel fell. Jesus—the Second Adam and the true Israel—believed and obeyed his Father's words. This was his glory. In both his divinity and humanity he "loved righteousness and hated wickedness" (Heb. 1:9). He would not give God's glory to another.¹⁹ This was his great glory. He proved to be true. He is worthy to be God's unique Son and our only Savior, for above all else he sought the glory of his Father.²⁰

David prophesied about the glory of Jesus, and that glory includes his victory in battle against God's enemies:

Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, *mighty in battle*! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient

19. God told Israel, "My glory I will not give to another" (Isa. 48:11).

20. As Jesus wrestled with the thought of suffering for our sins, he said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27–28). What happened next is important. "Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'" (John 12:28).

doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! (Psa. 24:7–10, italics added)

When Jesus overcame Satan's temptations, he showed himself mighty in battle. The ancient doors were lifted for the King of glory.

Glory is divine, and someday it will also be fully human. Jesus, the unique Son, has unimaginable glory, and he is the firstfruit of glorified humanity. God the Father has unimaginable glory, as does the Holy Spirit. Glory sums up God's nature, and therefore it will similarly sum up our redeemed nature. At creation God gave humanity the priceless gift of bearing his image and displaying his glory. God plans to restore the glory lost in the Fall and to add more for good measure. Jesus said, "The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mat. 13:43). John said, "When he appears we will be like him" (1 John 3:3). Paul said there will be "glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good" (Rom. 2:10).²¹ In God's plans, glory is not incidental, not a side benefit of salvation, not a secondary goal. It is ultimate.

Therefore when God established his covenant with Israel, he began the Ten Commandments by stressing

21. The apostle Paul also writes, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). The NIV, similar to the KJV, translates the end of that verse, "the glory that will be revealed in us."

exclusive worship. Centuries later he rebuked Israel for breaking these commands by their stubborn idolatry and said, “My glory I will not give to another” (Isa. 48:11). In this matter of exclusive worship, God means business.

When you understand the importance the Lord places on glory, you will not be surprised when tested concerning this. You will see it as the context for Jesus’ demanding teachings that test the ultimate devotion of your heart: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Mat. 10:37). “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Mat. 6:24). It is the rightful glory of God that people love, prize, and delight in him above all; therefore he will not abide your giving this glory instead to his creation.²²

The test of exclusive worship may be the fundamental test. It is continual, for as one theologian said, the human heart is an idol factory. But it is a trial you can pass, because the Lord enables willing souls to do what he commands: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Nothing will bring you greater fulfillment, because for

22. See John Piper’s writing for full elaboration on this subject at DesiringGod.org. In particular see his book *Desiring God*.

this you were designed. This is both God's glory and your glory. This is a marriage made in heaven. This is how you prove true.

Chapter 8

Tested by the Promised Land

Last summer the employer of a woman in our church gave her two tickets to a Cubs game. A schedule conflict would not allow her to go, so after church on Sunday she handed me the tickets. I thanked her sincerely and pocketed them.

In Chicago the opportunity to go to Wrigley Field is golden. The historic park nestled in an old neighborhood, the ivy-covered brick walls, the classic outfield bleachers, the old scoreboard—for Cubs fans on a warm summer day this is paradise; this is the Promised Land.

But I was not brought up a Cubs fan, though I grew up in the Chicago suburbs. My dad rooted for the White Sox, the crosstown rival, and he raised me to follow his team. We went to games together at old Comiskey Park. So going to a Cubs game is not what I want to do.

But the woman in church was so happy about blessing me with the tickets that I did not want to disappoint her. Eventually I decided she would also be happy if Jose, a man in our church who enjoys professional sports, was able to take his young son to the game. I told her I wanted to give him the tickets, and she liked the idea. I called Jose, and he was excited about going. It turned out the weather was perfect for the game, the seats were close to the action, and the Cubs won. I talked to Jose afterward, and he said he and his son had a fabulous time. They had been to the Promised Land.

Depending on your perspective, Wrigley Field is either the Promised Land or the Badlands. A similar difference of perspective occurred among the Israelites. When God called them to enter the Promised Land, he gave soaring promises of a land of milk and honey, a golden opportunity; but for those who did not believe God, going to the Land was a terrifying leap into the unknown, a path to certain death. In the moment of decision, only three people considered it a good idea, while millions voted to return to Egypt.

Because the Promised Land offers both hardship and blessing, God's call into the Land is a test. The challenges are not incidental. God could have made it easy for Israel to inherit the Land. He could have put plagues on the evil residents of Canaan just as he did on the Egyptians and destroyed all enemies before his

people arrived in order to spare them from hand-to-hand combat. He could have given the Land to Israel like a beautifully wrapped birthday present.

But God did not make it easy to enter the Promised Land; he made it hard for both Israel and Abraham. It required faith, obedience, sacrifice, work, and courage. They faced superior enemies, even giants. They had to move, leave the familiar, and enter the uncertainties of the unknown. Inheriting the Promised Land was traumatic.

But God designed those difficulties to lift his people to a richer relationship with him and an exalted purpose. God offered the Promised Land as a glorious promotion. God destined Abraham to be the patriarch of God's people, and Israel to display his glory to all nations so they too would know the Lord. The test of entering the Promised Land was the bridge to those destinies.

Testing is the bridge to your destiny. God has called you into a Promised Land.²³ Your Promised Land includes ultimately the glorious age to come when God restores all things, and also the individual destiny God has for you in this age. But he will not hand it to you without requiring something from you. To possess this Land you must learn from Israel, Abraham, and Jesus.

23. Actually it is plural "Lands," because God has more than one purpose for us.

These crucial lessons will require three large sections in this chapter for us to explore. In the first section we see how to avoid failing as Israel failed.

Section One: Israel shows the sure way to miss the Promised Land

After the events at Mount Sinai, Israel's next test began when God commanded them to enter Canaan and told Moses to send 12 spies to explore it.²⁴ The spies were God's idea, and apparently this was part of how God made this situation a test. Up to this point Moses and Israel had taken their cues not from spies but from the pillar of cloud and fire. They moved when the pillar moved, went where the pillar went, and stopped when the pillar stopped, so they did not need spies. But now God told Moses, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them" (Num. 13:2). What the 12 spies would learn would test them because it revealed their hearts.

Moses told them:

See what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they

24. See Numbers 13.

dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land. (Num. 13:18–20)

The spies would learn whether Israel, from a human perspective, could realistically expect to conquer the Land's inhabitants (who were extraordinarily wicked people about to suffer God's judgment after hundreds of years of his patience). The spies would discover that the inhabitants were strong, numerous, and living in well-defended cities, and that some were actual giants. Therefore without figuring God into the equation, Israel would have no chance of capturing this Land. That must be what God wanted them to know—in order to test them.

In addition, the spies would learn firsthand of the Land's goodness. It was well-watered, agriculturally rich, pastured, forested, and fruitful. When God promised Israel a Land flowing with milk and honey (Exo. 3:8), he meant it. The spies would return with a cluster of grapes so big it required two men to carry. So the Lord would motivate Israel's leaders by letting them see and taste Canaan's sweetness. He was giving them promise and hope. It is God's way not only to give commands and require obedience, but also to promise blessings. He links commands and promises.

The leaders would be tested by what they knew, which must be what God wanted. After Israel's horrendous failure with the golden calf and God's merciful choice not to destroy them, it appears that God was giving them one more chance to show whether they would believe and obey. Would they acknowledge God's goodness and trust him? God tested them so they could advance to first grade and become his faithful covenant people.

But the majority of the leaders balked. In their report to Moses and the people, ten of the spies showed a stubborn unwillingness to trust God and obey his commands. Their biased, doubt-filled description of Canaan began by granting in one short sentence the goodness of the Land, but it then detailed insurmountable obstacles:

We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan." But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are

well able to overcome it.” Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Num. 13:27–33)

The majority report did not say one word about God. As their report concluded, their fearful imagination ran wild. Their conclusion—“we are not able”—took into account only their natural abilities, and therefore was driven by unbelief. They utterly failed another test because they refused to trust God.

In the same way, unbelief is the certain way to fail the tests God gives you today. Doubting his Word is the sure way to miss the Promised Land of his good purposes.

Does God deal with true Christians as he did with Israel?

Tragically, at that point God judged Israel. He sent them back into the wilderness to wander for forty years until every unbelieving man of that generation died.

Comparing how God treated them to how he treats true believers in Jesus Christ today (which of course includes Jewish people), we need to understand a crucial fact about nearly every person in Israel at that time. They had shown repeatedly and conclusively they were not truly God's people. Although they had descended from Abraham physically, spiritually they resembled the Egyptians and stood under the same judgment. With evil hearts they persistently questioned God's goodness, rejected him, and preferred idols. As the apostle Paul writes, "God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert" (1 Cor. 10:5, NIV). And again, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring" (Rom. 9:6-7). God deals sternly with stubborn evil.

God deals differently with true believers in Jesus Christ. That is because Jesus himself is the Promised Land. This is the crucial difference between us now and Israel then. When we sincerely believe in Jesus, we enter the Land of milk and honey. The kingdom of God is the Promised Land; and when we believe in

Jesus, we enter the kingdom. We pass the fundamental test that makes all other tests secondary—important but secondary. Although unbelief and disobedience are never excusable and even God’s children reap what they sow, still, true Christians are his beloved despite their failure to enter a secondary Land. Jesus showed this loving patience with his 12 disciples. The difference between an unbeliever and a believer is great. The tests God gives to bring us into our highest purposes are on a different level than the fundamental test to follow Christ. True believers are God’s precious children, and whatever we do to grow by passing trials builds on that secure foundation.

So in some ways our Christian experience does not compare with Israel’s experience regarding the Promised Land, but in other important ways our experience does compare, and we must learn from them. Israel’s failure under Moses shows that unbelief hinders us from fulfilling God’s loving purposes. Unbelief causes disobedience. Unbelief offends our Father. Because of unbelief we live below the standard and purposes of God, and that is significant. So as we encounter the Word of God, faith and obedience always matter; but if we fail, our Father will not reject us as long as we hold firmly to Jesus.

Israel's example was not all negative, though. There was a tiny remnant of true believers whose lead we can follow.

Two eventually inherit the Promised Land

Happily for us, two leaders who explored the Land with the other ten spies returned with God in the picture. As we read above, Caleb stood courageously to oppose the majority report of the spies and declare his belief that Israel could take the Land. Then as the fearful unbelief of the ten spies spread and the people began to call for new leaders to take them back to Egypt, both Caleb and Joshua stood and again called for action based on faith in God:

The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them. (Num. 14:7–9)

God rewarded their faith and obedience. Joshua and Caleb survived the 40 years of wilderness wandering that followed. They alone of that generation of fighting men entered the Promised Land. Joshua succeeded

Moses and led Israel in the conquest of the Land. During that conquest, Caleb, at age 85, still had the strength to capture the stronghold of cities that were walled, in perfect defensive position atop hills, and possessed by the Anakites.²⁵ The Anakites were the very giants who had terrified the ten doubting spies. The lesson is clear. Because Joshua and Caleb passed the test, they eventually advanced into the greater and higher destiny God had planned for them: authority, inheritance, and blessing. They exemplify the good that sooner or later comes to those who believe and obey God when called into the Promised Land. When he tests us, his purpose surely is to promote us in his kingdom.

Today in the church era, our Promised Land differs from ancient Israel's. Jesus has commissioned the church to a different mission. God called Israel to use military force to establish a nation-state whose success would be the envy of and model for the world. Now Jesus calls his people to spread the gospel peacefully in all nations, make disciples, build churches of people, care for the needy and oppressed, and hope in his return. That requires sacrifice and may incur persecution and loss. This world is not yet our true home. Even so, the principle stands that passing tests leads to growth and promotion in the things of God. And in the age

25. See Joshua 14–15.

to come, he promises those who pass ordained tests a Land that is a promotion beyond our dreams.

In section one we learned from Israel's call into the Promised Land. In the next section we learn from Abraham more principles about successfully inheriting the Land. Although he errs at times, in general he models how to enter one's God-ordained destiny.

Section Two: The Promised Land: For Abraham

The difficulties Abraham had in finding a secure home in Canaan tested his faith. If you ever struggle to find or fulfill God's purpose—to enter your Promised Land—you will probably identify with much in Abraham's journey. He faced 14 decisive moments in inheriting the Land. Roughly half of those decisions he got right; the rest he fumbled more or less. From each decision we learn something important.

1. Go all the way to the Promised Land.

Abraham moved to the Promised Land in two stages. God first called him there when he lived in Ur, the city of his birth. Stephen narrates the story in Acts 7: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' So he left the land

of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living” (vv. 2–4). So the first stage was from Ur to Haran, and years later the second stage was from Haran to Canaan.

Genesis 11:31 provides information about what may have caused Abraham to stop when he was only halfway to his destination. In Ur Abraham’s father Terah played an important role in the family’s move: “*Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot...and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there*” (italics added). What explains Terah’s lead role in the move? My guess is Abraham told his father that God had appeared to him and called him to Canaan, and Terah responded by including himself in Abraham’s call.

In any case, Terah and his household misled Abraham. They started the trip planning to go to Canaan, but after journeying several hundred miles they stopped halfway there and settled in Haran. They knew God wanted Abraham in Canaan, but they did not want to go all the way. That is not surprising because they were not called by God; Abraham was. Still, Abraham went along with their decision. He obeyed the Lord halfway.

As you seek to inherit your Promised Land, you may lose momentum and be tempted to stop halfway there, to settle down too soon, perhaps because of pressure from people closest to you. The apostle Paul had a colleague guilty of that and charged him, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord” (Col. 4:17). Elsewhere he wrote, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9). You must ride your camel all the way to Canaan. Partial obedience is disobedience. In Haran the promise is powerless.

2. If you have gone only halfway to Canaan, pay the price to finish the journey.

Abraham’s second decisive moment regarding the Promised Land came when Terah died (Gen. 11:32). God appeared to him again. Genesis 12:1 says, “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” Acts 7:4 says, “After his father died, *God removed him* from there into this land in which you are now living” (italics added). And so, God gave Abraham a second chance, and he seized the opportunity. Genesis 12:4–5 says, “So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took

his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.” This time he went all the way.

The journey had many hardships. It covered roughly 400 miles through lawless regions, on camels, wagons, and foot. Abraham was 75-years-old and had a household of hundreds of people. He left behind family and an established life. All this required courage, forcefulness, and effort, driven by obedience and faith. Abraham wanted God’s Promised Land enough to pay the high price of finishing what he had started years before.

But all that would amount to nothing if the Lord had not graciously given him a second chance. If you have gone only halfway to the Promised Land, God may allow you another chance. Our merciful Father regularly shows a willingness to let his children try again. The only way to know is to seek him and discern his guidance. Why did he grant Abraham a second opportunity but shut the door on Israel after they initially balked at entering the Promised Land but then had a change of heart?²⁶ One difference may explain this: though Abraham had come only halfway, he had shown enough faith and obedience to prove he truly followed God.

26. See Numbers 14:39–45.

By contrast, almost everyone in Israel had repeatedly shown they were not truly God's people.

3. Be ready to keep expanding your faith.

Abraham's next decisive moment came as he arrived in Canaan, for God then appeared to him a third time. The Lord enlarged his promise, saying for the first time, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7). In the two previous encounters he had not explicitly said he was giving him the land as an inheritance, only that Abraham was to go to the Land and there God would make him into a great nation (which implied that the Land would become his).²⁷ Actually at this point he did not promise the land to Abraham himself but rather to his offspring. This would not be the last time God expanded his promises. Abraham would experience more encounters, receive additional promises and direction, and establish a formal covenant with him. To stay in step, Abraham had to keep expanding his faith, his understanding of the Lord's ways, and his obedience.

Likewise your relationship with God and the Promised Land will need to keep growing. When you first arrive in the Land, you have just begun the journey of walking with God and inheriting spiritual real estate. At the onset of his call he typically gives few details.

27. See Genesis 12:1–2.

He tells you enough to begin the journey, and then as you walk with him he enlarges and clarifies the call. He first tests whether you will believe and obey; and then when you pass, over time he enlarges on the call and promises.

When Jesus called his disciples, he simply said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mat. 4:19), but many more promises and lessons were to come. He continually stretched his followers. Hebrews 12:2 calls Jesus “the founder *and perfecter* of our faith” (italics added), so be ready to keep expanding your faith toward perfection.

4. If the Promised Land has a famine, do not leave.

Abraham’s fourth decisive moment also happened when he arrived in Canaan because the land was gripped by severe famine (Gen. 12:10). What should he do? Hundreds of people and thousands of animals depended on him for food and water. Should he stay at all costs and trust the Lord to provide? Or should he move around until he found plentiful food and water, even beyond the borders of Canaan? Abraham chose to move, which led him farther south to Egypt. In this choice he likely failed a test, because God had sent him to Canaan, not Egypt; God had given a confirming vi-

sion when he arrived in Canaan; and moving to Egypt led to putting Sarah in a compromised situation.²⁸ Even in a severe famine, fleeing the Promised Land invites worse problems.

This principle still holds. Your Promised Land can sometimes be a hostile environment. The place where you inherit God's destiny for your life may have severe famine and feel far from blessed. If God calls you in unmistakable ways to your Promised Land, you might expect that everything you do to obey the call will be like riding a bicycle downhill with the wind at your back. But if things go wrong, if you have to pedal uphill into the wind, you might think you misheard the Lord. However, testing does not end when you arrive in Canaan. Hebrews 10:36 says, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (NIV). You need to keep believing, obeying, and enduring. Egypt is not the Promised Land.

5. If you have fled the Promised Land, return to where you last had it right.

The fifth decisive moment in Abraham's inheritance of the Promised Land came when Pharaoh learned Sarah was Abraham's wife and expelled them from Egypt. Where should they go next? They had faced famine,

28. This point was made in chapter 3 regarding the test of lack.

danger, and almost the end of their marriage since leaving Haran to come to Canaan, so the thought probably crossed Abraham's mind, and some in his household may have suggested, that they could find security in his homeland. He did not have to return to Canaan. But return to Canaan he did. Abraham had no reason to do that apart from God, so his choice was an act of faith. But where should he go in Canaan? He decided to return to the very place where on first entering the Land he built an altar. There he called on the name of the Lord.²⁹ I think he returned there because this was the crossroads where he now realized he made the wrong decision to flee the Promised Land.

Like Abraham, if you have fled your calling, God may want you to return. This principle would not apply when it is impossible or unwise to return, such as when a husband and wife divorce and remarry others and then realize they should not have divorced. In that case, there is no going back, and it would be wrong to try. But this principle could apply, for example, if you feel called to serve the church with an ability such as leadership but stop because of its hardships. Romans 11:29 says, "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable."³⁰ You could resume serving with your gift

29. See Genesis 13:1–4 and compare with Genesis 12:8. The mention of the altar and the repetition of the phrase "called upon the name of the Lord" suggests that Abraham viewed this place as a crossroad.

30. Romans 11:29 is speaking about the gifts and calling that God

but not necessarily in the same position. If you think this principle applies to you, before acting pray for guidance and seek counsel from wise shepherds who know you well. Woodenly applied, this principle could cause much trouble; wisely applied, it can get one's life back on track.

6. Repent of disobedience regarding the Promised Land.

Abraham's sixth decisive moment came soon after he and his nephew Lot returned to Canaan.³¹ Each owned large herds and flocks, and the land could not support them all. They had to part ways. Who would go where, and who would decide?

As senior family member, Abraham had the right and responsibility to choose. He knew God had given this land to his descendants, not to Lot and his family. In fact, Abraham most likely had compromised in the first place when he brought Lot along to the Promised Land from Haran, because God told him to "go forth from your country, *and from your relatives*, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1, NAU, italics added). Lot was his relative, his nephew, so Abraham should not have let him come along when he first moved to Canaan. Lot and his de-

made to Israel, but the principle in this verse aligns with the principle of returning if possible to the Promised Land.

31. See Genesis 13:5–12.

scendants represented competition for the Land, not just in the immediate dispute over grazing land, but—as this situation symbolized—in the long run over whose line of descendants would inherit the Land for generations to come.

Given what was at stake, Abraham's next actions were probably deferential to a fault. "Then Abram said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left'" (Gen. 13:8–9). We could view Abraham's offer in a positive light. He showed commendable unselfishness, the heart of a peacemaker, godly meekness, and a regard for relationships over property. We could also view this as confidence in God's ability to give him the land, thus a belief that he did not need to be grasping and territorial.

But everything about the life trajectories of Abraham and Lot suggests otherwise. Abraham abdicated the choice of who got what to the man whom God had not called and did not want there. Abraham's desire for and commitment to the Promised Land appears soft. He seems more concerned about pleasing Lot than the Lord. Therefore Lot represented Abraham's disobedi-

ence. For every reason, Abraham needed to separate from him.

Disobedience regarding our Promised Land can take many forms, but a common fault is partial obedience. We want what God promises and obey in one way. In other ways, though, we compromise, follow directions poorly, and hope obedience to one command will cover ongoing disobedience to another. Walking with God does not work that way. When King Saul disobeyed orders yet offered animal sacrifices to God, Samuel rebuked him: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). God is never satisfied with partial obedience, especially if we are satisfied with it.

As you consider how to apply this principle, heed the cautions in the previous section. Pray for God’s guidance and seek counsel from wise shepherds who know you well.

Fortunately for Abraham, Lot chose to move east to the Jordan valley. What happens next suggests that God approved of Abraham’s decision to part ways with Lot. In fact, this appears to be a breakthrough, as though God had been waiting for Abraham to remedy the situation with Lot before blessing him further.

7. See the Land.

Immediately after Lot left, God spoke to Abraham: “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give *to you* and to your offspring forever” (Gen. 13:14–15, italics added). This is the seventh decisive moment in Abraham’s inheriting the Promised Land. God expanded the promise. Earlier he had explicitly promised the Land only to Abraham’s offspring;³² now he also promised it to him.

Moreover the Lord told him to experience the Land, in two ways. First, God wanted him to experience it visually. He was to look north, south, east, and west. All he saw he would own. Faith and hope see. They have vision. This would strengthen his desire for the Land as well as his commitment and sense of ownership.

Second, God wanted him to explore the land up close with his feet on the ground. “Arise,” God said, “walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you” (Gen. 13:17). He was to smell the grass, trees, and flowers of the entire Land, drink water from its rivers, taste honey from its combs, hear songs from its birds, and enjoy fruit from its trees. Walking the length and breadth of the Land would also bond him to it. Walking would use actions to proclaim

32. Gen. 12:7.

God's intentions. He would possess the Land by faith through a prophetic action, though it was not yet time to possess it literally. God wanted Abraham to hope.

But for reasons unknown, Abraham stayed in the vicinity. "So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD" (Gen. 13:18). God did not tell him just to move his tent a few miles; he told him to explore the whole land, to walk and walk. He did not tell him to build an altar; he told him to walk. His walking would be his worship because obedience glorifies God. Paul wrote, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Walking in the Promised Land is spiritually powerful, as Joshua learned at Jericho.

Why did Abraham stay in his locale? What does this reveal about his feelings toward the Land? Perhaps he feared harm, for in the natural there was much to fear from wild animals and other inhabitants. Perhaps he was tired, for he was over 75 and God had told him to walk, not ride a donkey, for hundreds of miles. This would be hard. Perhaps he felt overwhelmed by relentless change, dramatic visions, and ongoing uncertainty. Perhaps he missed Lot and felt vulnerable without him. Whatever the cause, Abraham was not brimming with confidence and curiosity about the Promised Land. In-

stead he was hunkering down. God wanted to expand his vision, but Abraham was not emotionally ready to go there.

God wants you to hope in the Promised Land, and that happens when you see it. You need to see what you can of God's purpose. That includes the unique callings he has for you as well as the destiny he has for all believers. Let these capture your dreams. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for" (*italics added*). Christians who go through life with nothing to look forward to, bored, anticipating only another daily dose of entertainment, fall sadly short of what God intends. He wants you to have vision for what he plans to do and pursue it with hope, prayer, and faith.

8. Wait for God's appointed time for the Promised Land to become yours.

The eighth decisive moment in Abraham's inheritance of the Promised Land occurred when God came in another vision (Gen. 15). At this time God made a formal covenant with Abraham (verses 7–21) that focused on his promises regarding the Land. As he announced the covenant, he again expanded on the promise. He specified boundaries for the Land and the nations Abraham's descendants would displace. So the pattern continued that God would enlarge on his promise each time he appeared to him.

The Lord revealed three new things. First, Abraham's descendants would become sojourners in a foreign land and be oppressed. Second, they would sojourn there 400 years before inheriting Canaan. Third, Abraham himself would not possess the Land but would die in peace at an old age before all this happened to his descendants. So Abraham had to own the Promised Land by faith as a sojourner but never in current reality. Four centuries had to pass before the fulfillment of the promise.

Accepting a delay, sometimes a long delay, is often necessary if you want to inherit the Promised Land. We can hardly repeat Hebrews 10:36 too often: "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (NIV). It is even possible that a promise will not be fulfilled in this life but only in the next. Abraham did not receive all that God intended the Promised Land to be when Israel finally inhabited it. The ultimate fulfillment will be the new heavens and earth. Hebrews 11:13 says, "These [men and women of faith] all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." God's time may be later than you hope, but his promises include more than you imagine.

9. Live blamelessly before God.

Abraham's ninth decisive moment with the Promised Land occurred when God appeared to him at age 99, one year before the birth of his miracle child (see Gen. 17). The Lord repeated his promise about the Land (v. 8) and required something of Abraham. He said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly" (vv. 1–2). Be blameless—that is a tall order.

However, blameless did not mean perfect. In Psalm 19:7–14 David reveals four requirements of the blameless. First, the blameless must fear God by loving his commands. David rhapsodizes about them in verses 7–10:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Next, the blameless must address both hidden faults and willful sins. David writes, "Who can discern his er-

rors? Forgive my *hidden faults*. Keep your servant also from *willful sins*; may they not rule over me. *Then will I be blameless*, innocent of great transgression” (vv. 12–13, italics added). To be blameless means to ask God to forgive “hidden faults,” all the ways you fall short of living perfectly before him and do not even know it. To be blameless also means you are not “ruled” by willful, deliberate sins, that is, when you know something is wrong but do it anyway. Deliberate sins do not rule you if you confess and repent of them sincerely and promptly and request forgiveness. In these verses David shows that when he thought about being blameless, he did not mean being perfect.

Third, David showed by example that the blameless seek to think and speak in a way that pleases God. He concluded the Psalm by praying, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (v. 14). Blamelessness begins in heart and words.

Fourth, in those two final words in verse 14 David shows that the blameless trust God to save them from their sins, rather than trusting themselves to be righteous. He calls God “my redeemer.” He knows he cannot save himself, that he needs to be redeemed, to be saved from his hidden and willful sins. He knows God alone is the redeemer he needs. He is not righteous on his own, and neither are we.

No one can be perfect, but we can be blameless. God expected this of Abraham, and he expects it of us if we would enter our Promised Land. It is possible when we walk closely with God as true disciples of the only Savior Jesus Christ. First John 1:5–9 says, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” As we walk in the light, our Promised Land is secure.

10. Dwell in the Land.

Abraham’s tenth decisive action to inherit the Promised Land lasted for decades. When Abraham was 100-years-old, God fulfilled one of his promises by enabling Sarah to conceive and bear Isaac. To receive more of what God promised, Abraham knew he had to do one thing: stay in the Land for the rest of his life.

But how he would do that was not clear. He needed water and land. For that he needed peace with the people who had lived there before he came. Dwelling in the Land as a sojourner rather than a property owner

had been a test for 25 years, and the trial would continue for 75 more years until his death at age 175.

The next test regarding water and land occurred when the king of the nearest city came calling with his military commander (see Gen. 21:22–34). The presence of the military man conveyed a message without saying a word. The king, Abimelech, asked Abraham to make a covenant of peace. This covenant would be permanent, enabling Abraham to live there in peace for the remainder of his or Abimelech's life. This was just what Abraham needed.

But he also needed water, and that posed a problem. Abraham had dug a well and found water, but the king's servants had taken it. In this arid region wells were scarce and precious. Abraham told Abimelech he would agree to a covenant of peace but then raised the issue of the well. Abimelech pleaded ignorance, and they went on to enact a covenant of peace with the understanding that the well belonged to Abraham. So for the foreseeable future Abraham could count on peace with his neighbor in a lifelong covenant, which afforded him land, pastures, and a well of life-giving water for his household and animals.

This episode concludes with three details that say much about how you dwell in the Promised Land. "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting

God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines” (Gen. 21:33–34). First, the tamarisk tree beautifully symbolized that Abraham believed he had a future there. Planting the tree was a statement of hope. You must have living hope in what God will create. “I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11). If you lack hope, pray and read Scripture until it comes.

Second, Abraham worshiped, which showed he trusted not in a human covenant but in the Lord. He gave God the glory for enabling him to settle in this place. He worshiped him as “the Everlasting God,” the one who could take care of him for a lifetime and fulfill his promises hundreds and thousands of years after Abraham died. You too must worship the God who is infinitely greater than you, greater than time, greater than human kingdoms and rulers, great enough to finish what he has begun in you. Worship with confidence that “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Phil. 1:6). The God almighty and everlasting is the one who guarantees your hope.

Third, Abraham “sojourned many days” there. He simply dwelled. He walked before God and lived blamelessly, with hope, faith, and worship. He could not rush God’s timetable. The Everlasting God would do his part in his time. To possess the Promised Land

of God's purposes, you too should simply dwell in the situation he has given. Maintain a life of worship, faith in the promises, blameless living, and hope in the future that God will create. He will do the rest in his time. King David perfectly expresses this attitude: "I trust in you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand" (Psa. 31:14–15).

The final four decisive moments in Abraham's inheritance of the Promised Land have one thing in common. He shows complete commitment to the Land. Earlier his attachment to the Land had been tenuous. Finding famine, Abraham had moved south to Egypt. Separating from Lot, he let Lot choose who lived where. Commanded by God to walk the length and breadth of the Land, he moved his tent a few miles and stayed home. But in the final four events he binds his heritage to Canaan.

11. Commit to finish in the Promised Land.

Abraham's eleventh decisive moment came at age 137 when Sarah died (see Gen. 23). Where should he bury her? Since he expected eventually to be buried beside her, he was choosing his own burial ground. Should he take her body back to their homeland and lay her to rest securely in the family's graveyard, or bury her in the Promised Land where he owned no property and therefore had no secure family burial place, among

foreigners who someday could do anything to the graves? This was a momentous, revealing decision. After sojourning in Canaan for 62 years without owning one square inch of land, and begetting through Sarah just one son, did Abraham really believe God would multiply his descendants enough to take control of this entire land from the Nile to the Euphrates, displacing all its residents?

Emphatically yes. So he negotiated with his neighbors to buy a field with an area suitable for a family graveyard. The price was steep, but he was committed. He now owned his first piece of the Promised Land. There he buried his wife. There his body would be buried. Many years later, there also would be buried his son Isaac and wife Rebekah, as well as his grandson Jacob and wife Leah. Abraham's commitment had a lasting effect on his family.

Some actions involve more commitment than others. You say yes to this and no to that when you choose a major in college, take a student loan, select a career, move to a different city, buy a house, marry a spouse, have a child, join the military, take a job, or join a church. You limit your options and determine your future. Usually people like to keep a back door ready to exit a situation, but the kingdom of God requires commitments. Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God"

(Luke 9:62). Abraham committed not only to the future but to the finish. When you commit to finish with the future you believe God will give, you show your faith and pass a test.

12. Prepare your heritage in the Promised Land.

Abraham's twelfth decisive moment in inheriting the Promised Land came when he arranged the marriage of his son Isaac. Abraham's choice of Isaac's bride was crucial, for she would bear the child through whom God would multiply his descendants to occupy the Land. She must be fruitful. She must be God's choice.

Abraham decided to seek a bride for Isaac from his family line in Haran. There he sent his most trusted servant. Before departing on the five-hundred mile journey, the servant asked a crucial question. "What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?"

Abraham's reply was immediate and emphatic: "Make sure that you do not take my son back there" (Gen. 24:6). Make sure! One thing you absolutely must not do is take my son back there! Abraham had charted his course to follow God's command to inherit this Land, and he was determined not to jeopardize it. He was committed to God's promise and this place, and

he was setting everything on trajectory to fulfill God's purpose for his line. Abraham was shaping his lasting influence.

We leave a legacy when we depart a church or organization, move from a neighborhood, conclude a ministry, and ultimately of course die. Before that happens, we chart a course not only for ourselves, but intentionally or unintentionally for others. We influence others by what we leave behind: our example, advice, money, property, children, teams, ministries, churches, institutions, companies, vision, plans, hopes, dreams, rules, laws, constitutions, art, songs, inspiration, books, designs. The apostle Paul showed he understood such influence when he wrote to one church, "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2). We need to prepare a heritage in keeping with our commitment to God's promises.

13. Rely completely on God's chosen way of possessing the Promised Land.

Abraham's thirteenth decisive moment in inheriting the Promised Land came as he considered who would inherit his possessions. Sometime after Sarah's death Abraham had taken a concubine as a wife, and she had given him six more sons (see Gen. 25:1–6). Although he must have loved these sons, they represented a threat

to his line of descendants through his promised son Isaac and to their claim on the Promised Land. God's promise was with the line of Isaac, the miracle child, not with the sons of Abraham's concubines. He needed to protect the inheritance of Isaac's line.

So in the sunset of his life, he acted decisively to prevent competition. "Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east" (Gen. 25:5-6). Abraham's action required faith, for by human reckoning a man's sons were his strength and security. Through them he could build a multiplying people after him, as happened with Jacob and his 12 sons, so the more sons the better. If Isaac died without leaving sons, the six sons of Abraham's concubine would be Abraham's backup plan for possessing the land and building a nation. By sending these sons away with minor gifts, Abraham continued to put full confidence not in human power but in the Lord.

This action contrasted starkly with how he dealt with Lot decades earlier. He allowed Lot to choose what land he wanted. But now with long-range vision Abraham moved proactively to prevent the concubine's sons from getting a foothold in the Land. He was committed to possessing the Land through the line of descendants whom the Lord had chosen.

There are human ways of doing things, and there is God's chosen way, which might contradict human reasoning. God's logic says when you give you receive, when you humble yourself you will be exalted, when you are weak you are strong, when you lay down your life you keep it for eternal life. The apostle Paul said, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:27–29). Therefore your trust must be wholly in the Lord.

14. Have faith larger than this lifetime.

Abraham's fourteenth decisive moment with the Promised Land was his death and burial there—a final act of commitment. He died at age 175 having lived in the Land by faith for 100 years (Gen. 25:7–10). After one full century in the Land that God the Faithful One had promised, he owned—by human reckoning—only his burial ground, but by spiritual reckoning he owned all. He finished his life of faith inheriting Canaan only by faith. His burial plot was his foretaste of promise fulfilled. His faith transcended his lifetime and what he could do in this world. Abraham believed God would do centuries later what Abraham could not do in his

lifetime. And so, he passed the test of the Promised Land.

Faith and destiny are larger than your life in this age. God weaves your purpose into a much larger cloth than you can know and fulfills it in ways and times you cannot imagine. Abraham is the pattern for all who receive the Promised Land by faith alone. Others might say your faith was misplaced, but you know God will fulfill his promise in ways greater than you dream.

Abraham's experience is not unique. The Bible's faith chapter says, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (Heb. 11:13). By doing so they passed their tests and proved true to the Lord, and likewise you pass and prove true.

God tested both Abraham and Israel by sending them into Canaan. The next section shows that God sent even Jesus into the Promised Land.

Section Three: The Promised Land: For Jesus

The previous two sections have explored the test of being called into the Promised Land, as experienced by Israel and Abraham. This section will show that God called even Jesus into the Promised Land, and what that means for us. When he obeyed his Father and

went to the Land, he passed a test, proved true, and as a result entered the glory planned for him.

Although Abraham faced extreme change when God called him from an established life in Haran into the Promised Land, and so did Israel when God took them from Egypt and sent them into Canaan, no one faced greater change when sent into the Land than the Son of God. For him, the Promised Land was not tiny Canaan, but rather the planet and the universe. Before creating all things, the Son of God eternally dwelled with his Father in glorious, peaceful communion. But somehow, in the counsels of God, it was determined that through the Son the Father would create angels, the material universe, and human beings in God's image. Moreover, the Father would send the Son from his eternal home in heaven into his creation to become part of it and live in it. The Son would become a man.

At least 12 times in the Gospel of John, Jesus said the Father sent me. He said in John 8:42, "I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me." This verse emphasizes a change in place: Jesus "came" from God in heaven, and he was now "here" on earth. Jesus emphasizes this was not his idea; he did not come on his own, but rather the Father "sent" him. He left heaven and entered the Promised Land—the created universe—because of his obedience to and trust in the Father.

The Son's time on earth was a test that prepared him for a glorious destiny the Father had chosen. He dwelled in his Promised Land for 33 years, but when he died for our sins and rose from the dead, the Father's plans for the Son in the earth did not end. That was just the beginning. The Father will give a recreated earth and universe to him as his inheritance forever. After his resurrection the Son ascended to the seat of honor at God's right hand where he now rules the universe as his possession. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he announced to his disciples after the resurrection (Mat. 28:18). Paul wrote, "He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" (Eph. 4:10, NIV). Paul also wrote, "All things were created through him and for him" (Col. 1:16). The Father gave Jesus everything as his inheritance.

And the greatest treasure in that inheritance is the people he redeemed. Over the church he will rule in love forevermore as Lord and Savior. He will restore heaven and earth to perfection and live there with his people in eternal joy, peace, and love. This is the Promised Land of Jesus Christ. This is the Father's destiny for his Son, which he inherited by obeying the call to go from heaven to earth, where he was tested to the utmost, passed every trial, and proved true.

Jesus called his disciples into their Promised Land

Jesus demonstrated in other ways the principle that God tests people by calling them into the Promised Land. Jesus followed the same pattern of testing his followers during his life on earth, and uses it with us today. This pattern is similar in four ways.

First, Jesus required his disciples to be radically willing to leave behind the old life. Luke 9:59–62 says,

To another [Jesus] said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

You must be prepared to leave anything no matter how dear to follow him.

Second, Jesus called his followers into an unknown future. Luke 9:57–58 says, “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’” When God called Abraham, it was to the vagueness of “the land that I will show

you.” When God sent Moses to deliver Israel out of Egypt, he promised simply “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” When Jesus calls you, he gives little information about what you are signing on for. He calls you to himself.

Third, Jesus promised lavish rewards to his followers. He said their “reward is great in heaven” (Mat. 5:12), and “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 5:3). “They shall inherit the earth” (Mat. 5:5). “They shall see God” (Mat. 5:8). “They shall be called sons of God” (Mat. 5:9). They shall “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mat. 13:43). And he promises such rewards to you. In the end, you will never feel you have given more to God than he to you. On the contrary, for eternity he will lavish rewards on you for whatever you have sacrificed for him.

And finally, to follow Jesus, people had to trust and obey him without qualification. He said, “Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1). “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31). “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat. 5:48). “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Just as God called

Abraham to walk blamelessly before him, and Israel to obey all his commands at Mount Sinai, and just as Jesus had to obey his Father's commands, so he calls for your complete, not partial, obedience. He does not call you just to sacrifice a few things and then go on with your agenda. He calls you to give up self-will; he calls you to radical obedience to his life-giving commands.

The promised Person is better than the Promised Land

There is one, all-important difference in the pattern, however, with Jesus. Jesus called his followers not to a place but to a person—to himself. He is the Promised Land. He is the ultimate reward. The Land of milk and honey is a deep relationship with the Savior who is perfect and infinitely superior to you in love. Perfect and infinitely superior to you in goodness. Perfect and infinitely superior to you in faithfulness, in wisdom and joy, in purity, power, and knowledge, in justice, righteousness, and creativity, and every excellence of God's infinite glory. "To live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). God created you for relationship, and the ultimate relationship is in Christ.

That relationship is with the good King, who has a good kingdom. His beneficence makes his realm flour-

ish like the gardens of paradise. Jesus brings God's kingdom as the Promised Land to his people, the realm of beauty, peace, and joy. So when you obey the King, you have both the ultimate person and realm.

Jesus said those who truly believe in him will gladly exchange their lives for this:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Mat. 13:44–46)

Jesus calls you into this infinitely valuable kingdom. Only by faith will you see the surpassing value of the Land of promise over the land of Egypt. Only by faith can you pass the test of leaving all to follow Jesus. God tested Abraham through a radical call to the Promised Land. He made the same radical call to Israel. He makes the same radical call to you to leave your idea of the good life and follow good king Jesus. It is the greatest and only lasting opportunity of your eternal lifetime. It is life's most important test. Will you be true to Jesus?

Chapter 9

Tested by Enemies

Tests also arise from enemies. Enemies come in many forms.

We might perceive someone who persistently opposes us to be our enemy. There are the husband and wife who each feel the other is their biggest problem. They read books on marriage and try to talk it out, but sometimes argue for hours over how to earn and spend money. They see counselors. Each feels the other is sabotaging the relationship, and though they try for years to love one another despite differences, in the end they divorce. So when we think of enemies, people might come to mind.

But enemies can also live within. One's foe may be an addiction. There is the young woman who struggles against anorexia. Food and fat have become her enemies, her body her nemesis. The problem rules her life. Other people are addicted to alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling, shopping. Their own desires are the foes that test them.

The enemy within can be a lie. Someone believes an idea contrary to Scripture that creates a stronghold for many self-defeating emotions, behaviors, attitudes, habits, sins, and false beliefs. A young woman keeps making bad decisions that ruin her life and alienate her from others. At the core of her misery is the lie that she is inferior, and she is obsessed with it. That falsehood fuels bitter envy toward others, self-loathing, depression, anger, unbelief toward Scripture, and distrust toward God. With all that going on, she likely has made way for the devil to salt and stir this poison stew.³³ The core falsehood of inferiority is her great enemy. Few people realize how great an enemy to their soul an unbiblical idea can be.

Another enemy is the fallen world that opposes God. The Bible clearly teaches that God-ignoring, God-rejecting, human aspects of our world are in one sense God's enemy and therefore in one sense a Christian's enemy. James 4:4 says, "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." What is sometimes difficult to determine, though, is what to regard as worldly and how to separate from it. But figuring that out is essential,³⁴ because the God-rejecting world

33. Ephesians 4:26–27

34. A good place to begin is to meditate on 1 John 2:15–17 together with 1 Timothy 4:1–5, Romans 1:18–32, Ephesians 5:1–18.

is an enemy that has power to shipwreck any Christian. The world tests us.

A besetting sin is an enemy. It is one cherished sin we stubbornly refuse to reject, forestalling God's blessings. It is one idol we refuse to smash, one guilty pleasure we will not deny, one evil we rationalize. It is often a sin of the tongue, such as when a Christian talking to others in an organization regularly calls its leaders idiots. It is often rebellion against authority, such as when a man who outwardly appears compliant to supervisors at work nevertheless expresses subtle disobedience. It is sometimes a blatant choice to overlook the Bible's clear teaching, such as when a Christian woman abandons her husband a month after their wedding though she was not abused. Or when two unmarried people who claim to be Christians move in together and have sexual relations. Besetting sins have dire consequences.³⁵ They are spiritual enemies that "wage war against your soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). They test us.

The Bible says Satan and demons are real spiritual beings active in our world, and therefore they too are enemies we must take seriously. First Peter 5:8 says, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Paul wrote, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers

35. See Galatians 5:16–24; 6:7–8.

over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). And, “Give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph. 4:27). The Gospels show that Jesus regularly drove out demons, the spiritual enemies who come to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). They test us probably more than we realize.

So many enemies! And yet God rules the world with sovereign authority. How can this be?

If God is for us, how can enemies rise against us?

It must be that God permits enemies to oppose us. But he does not intend that they remain or defeat us. God tests by allowing enemies to test. That idea is difficult to swallow. Even though as we will soon see, the Bible clearly teaches this, the idea is hard to accept for several reasons.

First, the Bible says things that might give the impression God does not intend to let enemies attack us. God told Abraham, “I am your shield” (Gen. 15:1). King David wrote, “You have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy” (Psa. 61:3). The apostle John wrote, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). And, “He who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18). So if God intends to shield us from ene-

mies, why would he at the same time permit enemies to test us?

Second, God is our Father, and parents do not deliberately allow enemies to attack their children. Having raised four sons, I remember how I felt when I heard that a bully at school was intimidating one of them, or that a friend had turned against one of them and was turning other friends against him. My instinct was to want to step in and protect my sons. Surely our sovereign, loving heavenly Father would not deliberately allow evil people or unclean spirits to attack us.

Yet dozens of biblical examples show our loving Father does permit enemies to attack his people, and several times it is clear he was deliberately testing them. Three examples are familiar stories: Our loving Creator allowed the serpent to tempt Adam and Eve. Our loving Lord granted permission to Satan to test Job. And our loving God himself led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Mat. 4:1). These and other biblical stories are perplexing.

So we need to make sense of this. In particular we need to see how this aligns with God's love and goodness. Otherwise we could lose our childlike trust in our Father. When tested, we might even feel, as Job did, that God is part of our problem, that he too is against us, not for us, that he is not our helper and advocate. We may feel alone without a friend in the universe. So

we must know that even when God allows an enemy to test us, his purpose is our highest good and his highest glory, that in this situation he is loving us in a way too wonderful to grasp. We must know that even in this he is for us, not against us.

Here is why we can believe that.

God is good

We can be sure God pursues our highest good even when enemies attack because Jesus affirmed, “No one is good except God alone” (Luke 18:19). Though we think we know what is good for us, God knows infinitely better because he alone is good and we are not. Everything he does is good. He has a perfect understanding of goodness because Jesus also affirmed, “Your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat. 5:48). Jesus affirmed what Scripture declares many times elsewhere. David wrote, “The Lord is good to all” (Psa. 145:9), and “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (Psa. 23:6). The apostle John wrote, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5), and, “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Paul wrote, “God is for us” (Rom. 8:31), and “For those who love God *all things* work together for good” (Rom. 8:28, italics added). “All things” includes testing by enemies.

“All things” includes worst-case scenarios. When God allowed Satan to test Job, God was pursuing Job’s

highest good. When God allowed Satan to test Jesus, God was pursuing Jesus' highest good. God was pursuing even Adam's highest good when he allowed him to be tempted, as hard as that is to imagine, if he loved God, was called according to his purpose, and is now in heaven, which I think he is. It is true even in your worst-case scenario with enemies.

In fact, the greatest affirmation of God's faithful love for his people comes in the context of their struggle with enemies:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35–39, NIV)

When interpreting the Bible, we use what is clear to understand what is unclear. The clear truth of God's perfect goodness is the starting point for how we interpret ambiguous Scriptures and circumstances in our

lives, not the other way around. When God tests us by allowing enemies to test, it is because he is good.

God knows how to bring ultimate good to his people even through their enemies

We turn now to a crucial statement, which came from the lips of Joseph, one of the 12 sons of Jacob. He lives in Egypt, having been sold by his 11 jealous brothers into slavery many years before. God had since made him ruler of Egypt, and now his 11 brothers—his enemies—stand before him fearing his revenge. Joseph chose instead to show mercy and explained why: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20).

Joseph’s enemies sold him into slavery with an evil purpose, but God had a good purpose in allowing it to happen. God has the wisdom to bring good out of bad. God has the ability to outwit evil, transform evil, and use even evil to produce good. God used Joseph in Egypt to save millions of lives during a seven-year famine. God always has a good purpose when he allows enemies to oppose us.

The preeminent example is the Cross. Jesus’ enemies—Satan, Judas, religious leaders, Pilate, Herod,

soldiers, and the crowd that demanded his crucifixion—acted with evil intent. Their evil brought agony and harm to Jesus. Yet God worked through their evil and Christ's suffering to bring the greatest good in human history: salvation.

When God allows enemies to attack us, he intends a magnitude of good that is gigantic. God does not merely transform one pound of evil into one pound of good, or one minute of evil into one minute of good. He transforms one pound of evil into a million tons of good, or one minute of evil into an eternity of good. The apostle Paul, who suffered beatings, stonings, imprisonment, and other persecution for his ministry, wrote, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). God never delivered Joseph from Egypt during his lifetime, but there he ruled like royalty. The human experience of death has been dreadful, but our resurrection bodies will be more glorious than Adam's and Eve's original bodies; our new bodies will be like Christ's glorified body.

God works like a great inventor-designer whose enemy sneaks into his shop and vandalizes his newest creation. God does not just remake his original invention from scratch; rather, he displays his genius by transforming what the enemy did to upgrade his creation even more. So great are God's goodness, love,

wisdom, and power that when he uses your enemies for your good he brings quantum, exponential good.

God never gives enemies unlimited power over us

God never abandons us to our enemies and never leaves the scene. Otherwise, the prospect that God would test us through our enemies would be terrifying indeed. But the opposite happens: God maintains control of every situation.

Three examples confirm this. God allowed Satan to test Job in two phases, and for each phase God set a limit on what Satan could do. In phase one “The LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand’” (Job 1:12). In phase two “The LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life’” (Job 2:6). In each case, Satan could do no more than what God permitted.

Paul wrote, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and *he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability*, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13, italics added). In your time of testing, God knows your ability and limits and does not allow you to be tempted be-

yond them. He limits your enemies because he wants you victorious.

The third example is a line in the Lord's prayer. Jesus tells us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" (Mat. 6:13). In this statement, Jesus assumes that our heavenly Father ultimately controls whether we face temptation from an enemy. Jesus assumes there are times when the Father actively leads a person into a situation of temptation; God does not merely allow it to happen passively. God never tempts us,³⁶ but he may lead us into a situation where temptation occurs. Jesus knew this from firsthand experience: Matthew 4:1 says, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Moreover, if we are in a situation in which we are already suffering from an enemy, then God has full ability to deliver us from it. God can do anything he wants.

This should comfort us. If we believed in a God who was struggling to the best of his limited ability against a foe of approximately equal power to see who could get his way, we would have reason to fear a test. But the Bible teaches that Satan is a created, finite being of limited power, knowledge, and location, who can do no more than what is allowed by the Creator who has infinite power, knows everything, and is present every-

36. James 1:13 says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God;' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."

where. At any moment, God could do what he says he will do in the future:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. (Rev. 20:1–3)

Rest assured, your enemies are restricted.

God enables us to overcome our enemies

While God restricts our enemies, he sets us free. Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). So we are free to overcome enemies. According to 1 John 3:8, Jesus came “to destroy the devil’s works”; therefore if we cooperate with Jesus, we will defeat our enemies and escape unnecessary tests.

When we consider spiritual enemies, we may focus on devil and demons, but there are actually three enemies that test us—the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world is not nature—the earth, trees, rivers, and so on of our environment created by God—but rather the corrupt aspects of human life that are in rebellion

against his commands, that tempt us to disobey him, and that lure us away from him. The fallen world offers countless opportunities to indulge in greed for money and possessions, vain pride and selfish ambition, churning envy and hatred, lust and pornography and sexual relations outside marriage, idolatrous devotion to things that are not God, gossip and slander, lying and stealing. People who would not follow the devil himself will blindly follow the world that is his puppet. Satan truly is pulling the strings of this world, for the apostle John said, “The whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Therefore the fallen world is your enemy, and God commands, “Do not love the world” (1 John 2:15).

Our other enemy, the flesh, is not the good material aspect of the human body that God created in unimaginable wisdom, but rather the fallen aspect of our human nature that resists God and loves sin. While the world is the evil outside, the flesh is the evil inside—the enemy within. The flesh is our evil impulses and desires. The flesh bring us temptation just as surely as the devil does: “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin” (Jam. 1:14–15). It is our flesh that loves evil in the world. The world and the flesh are so interconnected they can feel like two sides of one coin. Therefore the flesh is our enemy: “The de-

sires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17).

God enables believers in Jesus Christ to defeat all three enemies. First, Satan. James 4:7 says if you resist the devil, he will flee. Second, the world. Paul shows we can die to the allures of the world by taking up our cross (Gal. 6:14). John says sincere faith in Jesus and our choice to love God’s will give us victory over the world (1 John 2:15–17; 5:4–5). Third, the flesh. Paul says, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24). In other words, we can overcome our three enemies through deep repentance, dying to self-will and sinful passions, and learning to love God as our chief joy.

Our willingness to thoroughly defeat these enemies determines how much they can test us. Israel learned this the hard way (which is how they learned most things). After they had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God sent them as agents of his judgment into the Promised Land with clear instructions to eradicate all its residents, who had forfeited their right to the land and the privilege to live because of gross wickedness for centuries. Israel partially obeyed. They conquered most nations but left pockets of stubborn resistance,

the enemies more difficult to vanquish. Israel should have persistently focused all its military resources to root them out, but war is hard and Israel already had enough land in which to settle. It was easier to let these enemies stay.

Allowing enemies in their land was easier in the short term, but Israel was disobeying God's instructions. God knew what would happen in coming generations. Those enemies would tempt them to abandon the Lord and serve idols. Israel would break the covenant and again incur judgment. To prevent that, God in covenant love had insisted they defeat their enemies completely, to the last man, to the last inch of ground, to the last idol toppled and burned. This was the only way to lay a foundation for lasting blessedness.

Neglect of God's instructions always has consequences. He came on the scene and announced, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, *in order to test Israel by them*, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD" (Jdg. 2:20–22, italics added). God gave Israel what they preferred. They chose to allow enemies to remain as neighbors, so God let them have it their way. God said these enemies would "test Israel." These were tests Israel could have avoided. God had

empowered Israel—and God empowers us—to defeat enemies. When they attack, we can vanquish them or compromise with them. If we allow enemies to remain, we will face many more tests and likely have many defeats.

Here is what that could look like in people's lives today. A man could have a problem with occasionally losing his temper and verbally abusing his wife. The root problem, however, is chronic anger that he feels toward his father for childhood abuse and his refusal to forgive. Such anger is a stronghold of his sinful nature. The man has compromised with an enemy. As long as he harbors unforgiving thoughts toward his father, anger will test him.

Or a woman could have a spending problem. Many factors energize her compulsion to shop, but the root is her love of the world, to use the biblical phrase (see 1 John 2:15–17). As long as she idolatrously loves clothes, shoes, and jewelry—and the attention they bring—more than God, money problems will test her.

Or a family could attend church but continue family practices passed from generation to generation of fortune telling. They suffer chronic illnesses, disturbing dreams, weird accidents, tragedies, and fear. These troubles likely persist because the family has opened the door to demons and will be tested by them until they stop fortune telling.

God wants Christians to experience far less testing from enemies.

God sympathizes with our desire to avoid tests from enemies

Regarding tests that enemies bring, Scripture reveals two aspects of God's heart toward you. First, ultimately he wills that you undergo such trials; that is, he either causes or allows them. He has good purposes, as chapter two shows, and they outweigh the distress you suffer. It is his perfect goodness that moves him to allow this difficult good. Second, he sympathizes with your desire not to be tested by enemies. Although on one hand he wants these trials to occur, on the other hand he knows your suffering, cares about you, has compassion for you, and wants to deliver you from enemies when his perfect good has been accomplished.

We know God sympathizes with us because Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Mat. 6:13). The last phrase could be translated "deliver us from the evil one";³⁷ that is, from Satan, our worst enemy. This shows God's revealed will, which expresses his heart. Every other request in the Lord's Prayer is God's revealed will. He wants his name hallowed. He wants his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. He wants us

37. It is so in the NIV.

to have our daily bread. He wants to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. So, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,” also shows his heart.

We know God sympathizes with us by what we read in Psalms. Many were written when the psalmist was attacked by enemies. The psalmist always prayed for deliverance, and usually he expressed trust that the Lord would indeed rescue him. The psalmists understood God to be on their side even if they realized he had allowed enemies to oppose them as discipline for sins. Even then they knew he cared, had compassion, and would sooner or later rescue them.

First Peter 5:7 says God “cares for you.” Even so, the next verses talk about suffering at the hands of the enemy:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (vv. 8–10)

So God's revealed will is his sympathetic desire to deliver us from enemies, but his hidden will may be to allow an enemy to test us for a while. God wants us to know his heart from his revealed will and trust him with childlike humility in the circumstances he allows in his hidden will. History shows that Christians sometimes endure long periods of testing at the hands of enemies. Persecution, for example, can be long term. Physical illnesses sometimes withstand our earnest prayers and strong faith. These situations represent the mystery of God's hidden will. But they do not negate his revealed will: he sympathizes with us and intends to deliver us from enemies sooner or later, in this age or the age to come. Because deliverance is God's revealed will, he is glorified when we pray for it, believe for it, and expect it sooner rather than later.

God brings good even through our failures

We saw above that when Israel failed to destroy all enemies in the Promised Land they disobeyed God (Jdg. 2:20–23), and as a result he disciplined them by leaving these enemies in the land as thorns in their side. Even so, God reveals his goodness, for the following verses explain, “Now these are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. *It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel*

might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before” (Jdg. 3:1–2, italics added). God used Israel’s failure for the good purpose of teaching inexperienced men to fight.

We all fail, but this Scripture affirms what the Bible repeatedly shows, that failure in battle with enemies need not disqualify us from God’s goodness (for another example, recall Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus). Succumbing to the world, the flesh, and the devil is not the end. It does have consequences, and it does mean we have sinned against a holy God, which is no small thing, so we would be fools to choose failure that good might result. But if we have fallen, we should not despair. God’s wisdom, grace, and love are so great that he can still work for good if we sincerely love him, repent, and trust in Jesus to redeem us.

The specific good that God worked through this failure was not random. He trained men for war and thereby equipped them to defeat enemies in the future. He let them fail so they could learn not to fail. God’s ultimate purpose is that we learn to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil.

God brings his highest glory and our highest good when we overcome enemies

Our model to follow is not Israel in their compromise, but Jesus in his victory. He was “tempted in every

way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus defeated the devil. He defeated the world. Though fully human, he never sinned. Therefore he can bring us victoriously through any test from enemies. Even though he never fell in defeat, he knows how it feels to struggle against enemies, and so he can sympathize fully and help in powerful ways. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb. 2:18). With Jesus we defeat foes we could not beat on our own.

There must be an important reason why God allows conflict to dominate this age. Although he loves peace and is bringing us to a paradise of perfect peace, the struggle between enemies and God’s people fills the Bible. Cain against Abel. Philistines against Israel. Saul against David. Kings against prophets. Satan against Jesus. False teachers against Paul. The conflict is not restricted to earth. “There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back” (Rev. 12:7) If we cannot fight enemies, we cannot handle current reality.

And God is the one who allowed, even planned, this current reality. Which tells us that despite the miseries of battling enemies, there is great, infinite good coming from these tests that outweighs the hardship. We

should not pursue conflict for its own sake, but when it comes of necessity, we must embrace the fight with the heart of a warrior. In many ways war is terrible, yet in other ways it is glorious. There is the glory of courage. The glory of strength. The glory of struggle. The glory of sacrifice. The glory of devotion and loyalty to country and kingdom. The glory of triumph. Such glory, captured in phrases like “duty, honor, country,” compels men and women to march into battle, cherishing in their pockets the pictures and letters of loved ones and proudly wearing their country’s uniform and flag.

If God allows enemies to try us, he intends great glory. In Jesus the weak become strong, the fearful courageous. The test from world, flesh, and devil is hard, but the good and glory are eternal. The final victory is worth the struggle.

The Christian life is not for the fainthearted, nor for cowards. Overcomers fix their eyes on Jesus and find strength, courage, and determination. For he is both the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah, both the Crucified One and the Conquering One. Through him and his grace, you can be true to Jesus.

Chapter 10

Tested by False Teaching

I know how it feels to be unsure about what to believe. Shortly after I surrendered to Christ as a college sophomore, I was briefly unsettled by a cult that was aggressively proselytizing on campus. One of their key teachings denied that Jesus Christ is God and thus denied the Trinity. I read one of their booklets, and the argument seemed persuasive. If you do not know the Bible well, if you have not studied all pertinent Scriptures and considered how they fit together, most false teachings appear to have biblical support.

I wondered, *Is this group right? Has the church been deceived about this for centuries?* As a young Christian it is scary to have the tables turned and read that you are the ones being deceived. When you are just beginning to learn the doctrines of the Bible, you lack the knowledge and interpretive skills to cross swords with a false teacher. I felt like a ten-year-old whose father expected him to refute a college professor. Why does

God not make it easier for sincere Christians to distinguish truth from error?

Because it is a test.

Section one³⁸

What good purpose could a false teacher serve?

False teachers serve the same function as Satan, demons, temptation, the fallen world, and any opportunity to sin. They reveal who someone is in the secret place of the heart. God must know the heart because he is a perfectly fair and righteous judge. He is a moral being who created mankind in his image as moral beings. A moral being can distinguish between right and wrong and is responsible to do what is right. Because God is a good moral being and the sole creator and ruler of the universe, he must hold moral beings accountable for their choices. God resembles a human judge who must uncover the truth about a defendant in order to render fair judgment. Good judges want to know everything they can in order to do what is right: to exonerate the innocent or condemn the guilty. In order to judge us fairly, and in order for all moral beings—mankind, good angels, and fallen angels—to witness the judgment and realize that God’s decision

38. This chapter needed to be longer than most, so I urge you to read its two sections in two sittings.

about each person is fair, what people truly are must be shown indisputably. What is beyond dispute are a person's deeds.

Therefore the Bible says this about the Final Judgment:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, *according to what they had done*. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, *according to what they had done*. (Rev. 20:11–13, italics added)

Twice this says God will judge people according to their deeds. He does that because deeds display the truth. He allows false teachers to test us because how we respond to false teachers is a deed that reveals the truth about us. How we respond to lies reveals whether we love truth, and whether we love truth reveals whether we love the God of all truth.

Those who truly love God need not fear the test from false teaching. No one who sincerely loves God

and humbly seeks truth from him will be deceived. Jesus said, “False christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, *if possible*, even the elect” (Mat. 24:24, italics added). The words, “if possible,” mean it is not possible for false teachers to deceive the elect, who truly love and believe God.

This agrees with Deuteronomy 13:1–4:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, *to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul*. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. (Italics added)

Here Moses identified the purpose of this trial: false prophets test whether people love the Lord with all their heart and soul. In the sphere of medical care, every test monitors certain things. A thermometer measures body temperature. An electrocardiogram reveals electrical activity in the heart. A sphygmomanom-

eter tests blood pressure. In the spiritual sphere, false prophets test a person's love for God. People who truly love God will not be deceived—or at least not permanently deceived—and will certainly pass the test.

God promises this. The New Testament Book of Jude, which warns about the test from false teachers, assures us that God “is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (1:24). We must trust God to keep us in the truth. Jesus assures us, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand” (John 10:27–29). Paul assures us, “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). And, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). You can be completely confident that God has the ability to bring you successfully through a test from false teaching and that he does not leave you to find truth on your own.

So who does fail this test?

The desire for deception

Lies can be useful. For example, if an unmarried man is having sexual relations with his girlfriend, and he believes they are doing wrong before a holy God, he will suffer guilt and the fear of divine punishment. If he is determined to keep having sex with her, sooner or later he will probably choose to be deceived on this issue in order to quiet his conscience. He does not acknowledge to himself that he is deceiving himself; he just does it, and that change in belief in violation of his conscience and Scripture is an evil act for which he is responsible. He believes what he wants.

And to be consistent he must shift other beliefs accordingly. If he once regarded the Bible as completely true, he now will doubt the divine inspiration of at least some of it, because Scripture plainly says sexual relations outside of marriage are sinful. If he once regarded God as a consuming fire who judges sin, he now will need to believe God does not judge people, or he will question whether God even exists. He must rid his mind of troubling truths.

So his choice to deceive himself with one lie inevitably leads to many more self-deceptions. The process resembles a walk from the bright light of day into a cave of deeper and deeper moral darkness, where he now believes falsehoods he never could have imagined believing before his sexual sin began. If his girlfriend

becomes pregnant, he now believes in the need for abortion, even a ghastly late-term abortion. To quiet his conscience, he must find ways to construe abortion as a virtue. Thus he and his girlfriend are, in their eyes, rescuing the unborn child from a life of poverty or from being unwanted. They are courageously defending rights his girlfriend supposedly has over her body. They are making a prudent decision in the best interests of their entire family. He wants to believe this abortion is moral, and therefore he believes whatever he must to make it so.

To be consistent, he must also find ways to frame opposing ideas as immoral. Those who oppose abortions are now regarded as evil because they are intolerant and judgmental. They are trying to empower government to meddle in a woman's right to control her body. Churches and preachers are the country's real problem because they impose their morality on others. In this young man's mind, the moral universe has turned upside down.

Belief is a choice. What we believe is as much a moral act as choices in sexuality or finances. Belief is a moral act for which we are accountable because we choose our beliefs about life's ultimate issues to suit our desires. Either we want God and his truth at any cost, or we want to satisfy our corrupt desires. Satan could deceive Eve because she wanted what he offered. If we

choose to be deceived, we rebel against God, and the consequences are far-reaching.

Our responsibility to love truth

The Bible says much about the culpability of the deceived mind. Paul writes, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness *suppress the truth*. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:18–19, italics added). Ungodly people willfully suppress truth and therefore are not innocent victims.

John describes this culpability in terms of light and darkness. Three verses after the well-known verse, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16), John explains why people do not believe in Jesus, and it is not because they lack information: “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people *loved the darkness* rather than the light *because their deeds were evil*. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (John 3:19–20, italics added). People deliberately choose the light of Jesus or the darkness of sin. They are not innocent victims.

In Jesus' day, the religious leaders knew the most biblical information and therefore should have been best prepared to recognize Jesus as Messiah, yet they did not believe in him. Jesus explained why and pulled no punches:

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because *you cannot bear to hear my word*. You are of your father the devil, and *your will* is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? *Whoever is of God hears the words of God*. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God. (John 8:43–47, italics added)

Those who deliberately choose lies have chosen their father, and he is the devil. They are not innocent victims.

In Ephesians 4:17–19 Paul said the fallen person's mind is characterized by futility. He laid the blame for that futile thinking squarely on each person's shoulders, highlighting eight culpable traits. Paul wrote, "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, *in the futility of their*

minds. They are [1] darkened in their understanding, [2] alienated from the life of God [3] because of the ignorance that is in them, [4] *due to their hardness of heart*. They have become [5] callous and [6] have given themselves up to sensuality, [7] greedy to practice every kind of [8] impurity” (italics and numerals added). At the core of this futile mind Paul blamed “hardness of heart,” which led directly to ignorance of God, alienation from God, darkened understanding, callousness, sensuality, greed, and impurity. This person is not an innocent victim.

Shockingly, Paul wrote elsewhere, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times [which began then and continue now] some will depart from the faith *by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons*, through the insincerity of liars whose *consciences are seared*” (1 Tim. 4:1–2, italics added). According to this verse, false teachers and prophets have demons working in and around them. The people they deceive “devote themselves” primarily to that spirit and secondarily to the false teacher led by that spirit. These teachers who use lies actually sear their consciences, deadening their soul’s moral decision-making ability to avoid feeling guilt or shame. No one in this verse is an innocent victim.

Elsewhere Paul described the deceptive powers of the antichrist and why he will someday be able to de-

ceive most people in the world. “The coming of the lawless one [the antichrist] is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, *because they refused to love the truth* and so be saved” (2 Thess. 2:9–10, italics added). They made a moral choice; they deliberately “refused to love the truth,” which made them easy marks for the deceiver. Paul underlines the moral issue for which sinners are responsible: do they love truth or lies? A person who dislikes truth is not an innocent victim.

Paul told Timothy, “Evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, *deceiving and being deceived*” (2 Tim. 3:13, italics added). Deception cuts both ways. Those who choose to use lies enter the realm and power of lies and thus themselves are easily deceived. Those who choose the covering of darkness lose the ability to see. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. They are not innocent victims.

Blame also sits on people who do not value ultimate truth enough to seek it. Instead they occupy themselves with the cares, pursuits, pleasures, and entertainment of this world. They do not make it a priority

to study the Bible on their own and with the church to know it well. Their indifference is a choice. Our choices show what we value, and we are morally responsible for what we value. If we are not interested in the truth God has graciously given in Scripture, if we are unwilling to learn from mature teachers, we are responsible for the consequences. God has given his truth and put the ball in our courts; now we are responsible to make every effort—every effort—to learn it. A good person treasures truth. If we treasure other priorities, we are not innocent victims if deceived. A man who boards an airplane to fly over the ocean and chooses to watch a movie while the attendant explains what to do during an emergency landing, and who ignores the emergency instructions in the seat pocket in front of him, has no one to blame but himself if he drowns. Solomon would probably say, he was a fool.

Speaking of Solomon, he deserves the final word:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?

If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.” (Pro. 1:20–33)

We are morally responsible to love God’s truth enough to pursue it. Therefore the test for loving, pursuing, and believing his truth is as necessary as the test for faith itself. It reveals whether we will be true to Jesus.

That brings us to a crucial question. How do we recognize false teaching? How does God equip even the youngest believer to distinguish truth from error?

Section two

How to pass the test from deception

Those who love and trust the true God will not ultimately be deceived and lost due to false teaching—guaranteed—but that does not mean their salvation is automatic. We are responsible to follow the guides God has given to keep us from error. When you are unsure what is true, you can trust him to lead you to truth as you prayerfully find harmony between three guides: (1) the objective truth found in God’s inerrant³⁹ Word (the Bible), (2) the subjective truth given by the abiding internal witness of the Holy Spirit, and (3) the objective teaching of the broader church on essential doctrines. All three must agree.

1. *Scripture*. The foundation of all true teaching about God is the Bible. The apostle Paul counseled his assistant Timothy, “Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been

39. We cannot trust a Bible teacher who does not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible to teach sound doctrine because he or she has assumed the role of determining what in the Bible is inspired by God. In other words, that teacher presumes to be the final authority of what God says. But God’s written Word alone has final authority for what God says. This is precisely why God has given us the written Scriptures.

acquainted with *the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching*” (2 Tim. 3:14–16, italics added). Paul was an authoritative apostle commissioned directly by Jesus Christ, and we see in this verse that he had complete confidence in Scripture as the inerrant guide to the truth that brings salvation, just as Jesus had absolute confidence in Scripture and his own teaching as inerrant guides.⁴⁰

2. *The Holy Spirit.* The third person of the Trinity has divine ability to lead us into truth. Jesus told his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). Notice that Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth.” We lack the ability to know the truth of the gospel apart from the Spirit of truth.⁴¹ His mission is to reveal truth within the human soul, like a lamp within your spirit, not merely a teacher outside talking to you. The apostle John wrote, “His anointing [the Holy Spirit] teaches you about everything—and is true and is no lie” (1 John 2:27). Even though our inner world of thoughts and feelings is subjective and prone to error, John had supreme confidence in the believer’s ability to find truth with help from the Holy Spirit in tandem with the Old

40. “Scripture cannot be broken,” said Jesus (John 10:35).

41. See 1 Corinthians 2:11–14.

Testament and his teaching (and by implication the teaching of the other apostles),⁴² which became New Testament Scripture. Paul showed similar confidence when he instructed Timothy, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit [the true gospel] entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:14). The Holy Spirit lives within every true believer in Jesus Christ,⁴³ and he is the Spirit of truth who leads us in truth through the Scriptures, which he wrote (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). The Holy Spirit guides us into truth by illumining our minds to understand Scripture and by giving an abiding internal witness to truth.

3. *The church.* The apostle Paul described the church as “a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Jesus commissioned his apostles, taught them the truth, and assured them that the Holy Spirit would further lead them into all truth.⁴⁴ Then the apostles taught the church the essential doctrines of salvation and God’s nature.

These core teachings from the apostles became the cardinal doctrines summarized in the church’s early creeds.⁴⁵ With regard to God, he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the mystery of the Trinity: one God, three persons. Jesus Christ is God’s eternal Son, uncre-

42. See 1 John 4:6

43. See Romans 8:1–16.

44. John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13

45. The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed.

ated, fully God, who became fully man. With regard to mankind, all people have sinned and stand under the just wrath of God, but can be saved from eternal condemnation because of the atoning, substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We are saved not by relying on the merit of our own righteousness but rather through faith in Jesus Christ, relying exclusively on the righteousness he credits to us as a gift. The church that the apostles of Jesus founded, that is now worldwide, and that is two-thousand years old agrees on these essential truths of salvation as the teaching of the Bible and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Together the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and the church lead us into the truth that assures eternal life. But if we rely exclusively on one of these guides in contradiction with the others, we can stray into error.

For example, although objective Scripture is free of error, we often err when we interpret and apply it. False teachers often appeal to the same Bible as orthodox Christians, but they misinterpret it. This is why we need the wider, historic church and the fruits of its two-thousand year history of interpreting the Bible together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Over that period the church has thoroughly wrestled through disagreements about the key doctrines necessary for salvation, corrected the errors of particular eras, groups, leaders,

and locales, and long ago reached general consensus on the essentials.

Similarly, with regard to the Holy Spirit leading us into all truth through the Scriptures, we may have subjective thoughts and feelings that are not from the Holy Spirit. They may come from personal convictions shaped by our upbringing, for example. This is why we need the objective correction that comes from both Scripture and historic church doctrine. For example, some people have grown up in heretical religions such as the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses that do not believe Jesus Christ is the eternal, uncreated, divine Son of God. As a result, their consciences may affirm that what they learned in "church" and from parents is true, even though objective Scripture and the wider, historic church emphatically deny this false teaching.

And finally, we need agreement between all three guides because our church may be orthodox in its beliefs about essential doctrines but be seriously unsound in other important beliefs. God is faithful to lead us out of an unhealthy church if we commit ourselves to follow the truth even if it contradicts our traditions. Psalm 25:5 gives an essential Scriptural prayer that God will surely answer: "Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation." The Holy Spirit will answer that prayer over time by illumining Scripture as we read. If we are in an unsound group, over

time we will see how the Bible contradicts their teaching in significant ways. The Holy Spirit will disturb our conscience over what we hear. We can trust God to lead us into truth and a church marked by sound teaching.

Through agreement between the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the true church, God reliably guides everyone who is committed to the truth at all costs and seeks it with prayer, trust, and persistence. What is unreliable is not the three guides God has given but rather the condition of one's heart.

The heart that resists error

What can make you susceptible to error is the state of your soul. You become immune to false teaching when your heart has eight qualities.

1. *Devotion to the true God.* The most important quality of the heart immune to false teaching is sincere love for God as he reveals himself to be in the Bible, not who you think he should be. The last half of that sentence is crucial. Most people want God to conform to the values they or their cultures espouse. If God reveals himself in the Bible to be different than they want, many people ignore or reject those disagreeable parts of Scripture to maintain their false beliefs. False ideas of God make us susceptible to false teaching.

The list of God's qualities that people in Western cultures reject is growing longer. Westerners increas-

ingly balk at the Bible's clear teaching about God's holiness, hatred of sin, wrath and judgment, sovereignty, authority to determine how we express our sexuality and order our marriages and families, and his choice to save lost souls exclusively through belief in his Son Jesus Christ, whom he loves. For many people, these truths are deal-breakers. They reject the God revealed in the Bible and gladly fall into the arms of the false teachers, whether they be religious leaders, journalists, scientists, Hollywood celebrities, self-help authors, or motivational speakers. They may believe in a God, but he is not the God revealed in the Bible.

That God is a lie. That God is a false God, a deception. That God is an idol, just as surely as if it were a statue of Baal. Those who choose to believe in a false God will not be saved by the true God. It is not enough to believe in a God; we must believe in the true God as he reveals himself to be in Jesus Christ and in the Bible, which Jesus affirmed as God's eternal words.

We must love God as he is. If we do not, we must realize our hearts are twisted by sin and this corrupt world. It is we who have it wrong, not God. He is absolutely righteous and perfect, and so he will not change. It is we who must change. God deserves adoration not just in spite of the qualities that trouble us but because of these qualities. His holiness is as adorable as his

love. His justice is as adorable as his mercy. His wrath is as adorable as his tolerance. His consuming fire as his compassion. His law as his grace. I love this God. I worship everything about him.

And so, first, to have a heart immune to false teaching, you must heed Moses when he warned about the test from false prophets. “You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him” (Deu. 13:3–4). Such devotion keeps you in the truth.

2. *Purity*. Discerning truth and error could appear to be the domain of rational thinking alone, but the mind usually follows the heart. As shown above, desire steers belief. Evil desires lead into darkness, and darkness makes reason unreliable. Therefore to recognize error, guard the purity of your heart.

A pure heart depends especially on the illumination of love. John wrote, “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there

is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:9–11). John wrote these important words about love in a letter devoted to the subject of distinguishing truth from error, confirming again the connection between mind and heart. Clearly, if lights are out in the heart, lights are out in the mind. “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Pro. 4:23). Guard your mind by regularly examining your heart, confessing sin, and sincerely repenting.

3. *Familiarity with Scripture.* Last night I was in a prayer meeting for which someone arrived late. I did not open my eyes to see who it was, but in a moment I knew. When he walked by, I smelled the after-shave he often uses, and when he began to pray, I of course recognized his voice. We gain a similar discernment when we saturate ourselves with Scripture. As we prayerfully read the Bible day after day, we become familiar with the sound and feel of truth. We come to know intuitively in our spirit the One who is truth.

Jesus compared this experience to that of sheep with their shepherd. He said, “The sheep hear [their shepherd’s] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him,

for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers” (John 10:3–5). The more you read the whole Bible, the sharper will be your instinctive sense of what is true and false in the world. Falsehood will sound off-key, even if you are not immediately sure why it is false.

To know truth we must pay a price. Instead of spending discretionary time on myriad things of little lasting value, read, study, memorize, and meditate on God’s Word.

4. *Humility*. The true, saving gospel both exalts and humbles believers. It exalts by revealing that God created us in his image with dignity and purpose, that he loved us enough to give his beloved Son to die on the cross for us, that we will reign with Jesus Christ in the coming age over a recreated earth-paradise. The gospel says we are headed for nothing short of eternal glory, shining like the sun in our Father’s kingdom.

But the gospel also humbles completely. You cannot be saved without first believing humbling things. According to the gospel, before you come to faith in Christ Jesus you are an evil being deserving nothing from God but eternal condemnation. You cannot justify yourself before God on the basis of your good deeds, niceness, and religious involvement. You cannot save yourself. On your own you cannot even decide to seek

the Lord; he must draw you to himself and convict of sin. You cannot believe in Jesus or repent of sin unless God gives the ability. From beginning to end you are completely dependent on him for salvation.⁴⁶

On these points, false teaching often leaves the tracks. False teaching twists the gospel to appeal to our proud desire to justify ourselves, to earn God's acceptance. When advertisements tell consumers they deserve a luxury item, sales improve. In pride we want to deserve what we have; we resist grace. But Ephesians 2:8–9 says, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." No one will be able to boast before God. No man will be able to credit himself for his salvation. It takes humility to accept the truth of the gospel.

Vast Bible knowledge will not keep you in the truth. Religious leaders of Jesus' day knew much about Scripture, but they rejected him. Proud people misread and misuse God's Word. They make it a tool in the pursuit of proud purposes. Therefore it is unsafe to follow a proud Bible teacher or be a proud Bible student. We find safety only in humility, for God "leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" (Psa. 25:9). With humility, the greater our Bible knowledge

46. See Romans 3:9–28.

the more we give glory to God and depend entirely on him for understanding.

5. *The love of truth.* Sinful choices can give a foothold to the devil.⁴⁷ If we are liars, we give a foothold to the father of lies.⁴⁸ If we want to deceive ourselves and others, we can unwittingly welcome deceiving spirits.⁴⁹ Lies are dangerous things that lead to more than we bargain for.

In the end times, for example, the people who will be susceptible to the outrageous deceptions of the Antichrist will be those who have previously refused to love the truth, in particular the truth of the gospel, when they had opportunity. Second Thessalonians 2:9–12 says:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and *with all wicked deception* for those who are perishing, *because they refused to love the truth* and so be saved. *Therefore God sends them a strong delusion*, so that they may believe what is false, *in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth* but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (italics added)

This is a troubling text. It shows that those who do not love truth are responsible for the consequences.

47. Ephesians 4:26–27

48. John 8:37–59

49. 1 Kings 22:1–38

They are tested and judged through falsehood. In perfect justice God judges those who choose not to believe the truth by letting those who live by lies die by lies. Truth matters; believing God's truth is a moral obligation; preferring lies is evil. That is why Revelation 21:8 includes liars in bad company in a bad place: "As for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and *all liars*, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (*italics added*). Lies are more evil than most people realize.

Conversely, the love of truth gives us the ability to recognize truth. Fiction writer J.R.R. Tolkien illustrates this in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. One leader of Rohan says of his people, "The Men of the Mark do not lie, and therefore they are not easily deceived." Those who love truth enough to be honest even when it hurts, who are unwilling to lie for gain, who are vigilant about the truthfulness of their words, heighten their ability to recognize truth or falsehood in others' words. An honest person has a nose for truth.

The love of truth gives courage to those who have come to the Lord after being in a Christian group beset with serious doctrinal mistakes, or in a cult. When they see the light, instead of staying in their group because they want to remain with friends and family, they are

committed to God's truth even when it means leaving everything they have known behind. They follow truth at all costs.

6. *Vigilance*. Jesus taught his disciples to watch out for error. They must not be naïve about the dangers of false teachers. On one occasion Jesus warned of an especially dangerous group:

Jesus said to them, “*Watch and beware* of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”...Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Mat. 16:6, 12, italics added)

So we avoid deception by vigilance. This warning shows we should be vigilant not only regarding individuals but also groups that have a pervasive culture of error.⁵⁰

Such groups are deceptive because they are humanly impressive. Leaven creates air bubbles in dough, making it swell. The Lord's analogy suggests the false teachers were pretentious. Although impressive, they and their teaching were nothing but air.

Leaven is plentiful in our culture today. We need vigilance not only concerning the religious world but also concerning all we encounter in the evening news,

50. See Jesus' detailed evaluation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23.

at the movies, on iTunes and YouTube. Beware the leaven in the *New York Times*. Beware the leaven in best-selling books and songs. The same goes for sermons, Christian books, and music. As you read, watch, and listen, evaluate whether the content agrees with God's revealed truth. Do not be a naïve sponge.

Jesus says false religious teachers can superficially be difficult to recognize because they wear the sheep's clothing of religion, not secularism and unbelief. Nonetheless Jesus has complete confidence that one principle will safely guide us:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (Mat. 7:15–20)

In the mind of Jesus, discernment is a black-and-white matter; look at their fruit. But to what kind of fruit is he referring? First, Jesus must mean the fruit of the teachers' words.⁵¹ Does their teaching line up with

51. Proverbs 18:20 speaks of "the fruit of a man's mouth."

Scripture and the orthodox teaching of the church, as discussed earlier in the chapter? Moreover, are their words in all situations, both in teaching and conversation, marked by godliness and the fruit of the Spirit?⁵² Second, Jesus must mean the fruit of their deeds. Bad deeds do not always show up immediately, but when they do they tell much.⁵³ Third, Jesus cannot mean the fruit of success because the Bible and church history show that genuine, godly ministries sometimes have little to show for their work while false ministries can attract great followings. So the fruit of words and deeds tells all.

Vigilance is essential, then, but we must balance it with trust. Watchful people can take vigilance to an extreme that harms themselves and others. They can become suspicious toward everyone. That is unloving and off-putting, for relationships are built on trust.⁵⁴ Suspicious, paranoid people cannot trust any church or pastor and cannot learn from others. They develop an independent spirit and may isolate themselves. This too is spiritually dangerous, for we need others to speak into our lives and correct blind spots. God created us for community and trustful relationships. So we need a wise combination of vigilance and trust.

52. See Matthew 12:34; Galatians 5:22–23.

53. See 1 John 3:6–10; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; 5:24–25; James 3:13–18.

54. See 1 Corinthians 13:7. First Timothy 6:4 speaks of “evil suspicions.”

7. *Trust in the Lord.* We must have faith in God's ability to keep us. The one who doubts can become fearful and susceptible to manipulation by strong personalities. Paul talked about the instability of those who are "children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph. 4:14). James warned that "the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.... He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (Jam. 1:6, 8). Therefore, though vigilant, we must not fear deception.

Instead we must trust in Jesus' promises to keep us, not in our ability to keep ourselves, as we fulfill our responsibility to pursue truth diligently. The Lord's promises to keep his children bear repeating because they are the foundation of trust. "[God] is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy" (Jude 1:24). "Our Lord Jesus Christ...will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:7-9). "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and

no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:27–29). Therefore we can rest assured that God will lead as we sincerely seek the truth.

8. *Church membership.* Church is the safe place. Jesus says you are a sheep who needs the protection of shepherds. If enfolded in the flock, you benefit from the spiritual covering of your church⁵⁵ and from human shepherds who watch over your soul.⁵⁶ Wolves eat stray sheep.

Membership is a matter of the heart, not a formality. A member's attitude is, "I belong; I am involved; I am submitted; I contribute." It is the opposite of independence. The church keeps you safe when you engage in meetings, build relationships, and submit to shepherds. Your attitude toward the church determines how well it can protect you.

The church protects because it is the body of Jesus Christ. He is its head, the one who ultimately cares for the members of his body through his body.

Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep, the chief Shepherd over the under-shepherds. It is he who ultimately keeps you from falling prey to wolves.

55. 1 Corinthians 5

56. Hebrews 13:17

Jesus is the truth. It is he who ultimately enables you to pass the test of error by giving a love and ear for truth.

Jesus is the Word. It is he who gives the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and promises, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33).

And so it is Jesus Christ who faithfully helps you pass the test from false teaching and prove true to him. As you navigate through a world of errors, rest assured you are safe in the arms of Jesus.

Chapter 11

Tested by Waiting

For years I commuted to work by train, and given that I live in Chicago, several difficult trips will not be forgotten. During one blizzard I had to take a late-evening train. I parked my car at the station 10 minutes before the scheduled arrival. With the wind blowing hard, my walk from car to station was bitterly cold, so with relief I reached out my hand to the door of the station and pulled. The door was locked.

I walked over to a brick wall that broke the wind and huddled there shaking and counting the minutes. I was wearing a decent winter coat, but dress slacks and dress shoes. The arrival time came and went without a train, and my heart sank. What should I do? I could not wait in my car because the train could arrive and leave before I could run to catch it. Driving home in the blizzard would be hazardous and long. So I kept

waiting, not knowing how long that wait might last. I was alone except for one couple on the other side of the building. The wind howled, the snow fell thickly, my hands and feet and face were numb.

After about 10 minutes an automated announcement came over the station's loudspeakers, and what a relief it was to get information. The news, however, was mixed. The train was rolling but had been delayed by mechanical problems and would arrive in approximately twenty-five minutes. Twenty-five minutes sounded like forever, but at least I knew I was not waiting in vain.

I was now in survival mode. My nose was running, and I was out of tissue. I still did not want to chance waiting in my car because I was not sure I could trust the time given on the announcement. I walked up and down the stairs of the station to generate heat. I moaned. I wondered what homeless people do in times like these. I peered down the tracks again and again looking for a glow in the distance.

After about 30 minutes the automated voice began another announcement: "Attention Metra customers, a train will soon be arriving in your station." Oh, thank you, Lord! Three more frigid minutes passed. Finally a growing light appeared in the west. The locomotive's horn blared, and its warning bell clanged louder and

louder as the train pushed through the accumulated snow and crept into the station. It stopped, the doors opened, and the conductor jumped out. I mounted the stairs and walked numbly into another world of light and warmth, where a few commuters were calmly reading their cell phones. I walked the aisle and found a seat, doing my best to act similarly calm, though I felt the raw emotion of someone just rescued from near death. My wait was over. My train had come.

Many people are waiting for trains. They long for financial relief. Or they pray daily that God will give a spouse, child, or new job. Some hope finally to succeed in business or ministry. Others need healing. Some intercede for loved ones in trouble. What they have in common is the waiting, longing, hope, and need. How long until the Lord acts?

One frustrating thing about waiting is, it seems pointless. We see every good reason for God to fulfill our desires immediately. Pain or hardship could end. Happiness could begin. Many could praise God as his glory is displayed. The Bible says many things to affirm such hopes, yet despite our efforts nothing happens. Why the wait?

This again is a situation where at least part of the answer is that God is testing us. The trial has a pat-

tern. It begins with our desire. Then the Lord awakens faith through his Word that he can fulfill that desire. Then he waits, and we must keep believing the promise, sometimes despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, perhaps for an unbearably long while. Then God acts. The test ends in joy, in gratitude to God, in a life transformed by the process. Indeed, the test is a defining experience.

The test of waiting is a spiritual passage. Although it feels as though little is happening, in reality huge spiritual things are occurring. We are crossing a long bridge to a wonderful place. We are moving into God's highest purposes, which are always bigger than we imagine. We are in the process of promotion. Equally important, God is working through our wait for the good of others, and most important, he is working for his kingdom purposes. He is doing something much bigger than you.

Two people in the Bible illustrate this trial and its rewards especially well: Joseph, the favorite son of the patriarch Jacob, and Abraham. Both lives teach principles that help us pass our own test of waiting on God and show us how to be true to the Lord.

The Word of the Lord tests Joseph

Psalm 105:19 says of Joseph, "Until what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD tested him."

“What he had said” refers to what Joseph told his family: his two prophetic dreams that foretold his rise to power in Egypt.⁵⁷ Psalm 105:19 calls these dreams “the word of the LORD” because they were a prophetic revelation from God. Joseph told the first dream to his eleven brothers: “Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.”⁵⁸ His brothers interpreted the dream correctly: “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?”

He told the second dream to his brothers and father: “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”⁵⁹ Jacob likewise interpreted the dream correctly: “Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?”⁶⁰ Through these two dreams from God Joseph prophesied about the future, and as he waited for them to be fulfilled, the dreams tested him.

The dreams tested Joseph by the stark contrast between what they foretold and what he experienced for 13 years. They said he would rule; meanwhile, his brothers sold him into slavery, and he lived first as a

57. See Genesis 37

58. Genesis 37:7

59. Genesis 37:9

60. Genesis 37:10

slave in Potiphar's house and then as a prisoner in a dungeon after being falsely accused of rape. Once he had his prophetic dreams at age 17 his situation turned for the worse and then worse and worse. He suffered severe hardship and pain. He was in a low position. And he was far from the family members who the dreams said would bow before him. *What is going on?* he must have thought. *The dreams I thought were from God promised me a position of authority. They promised me honor from the brothers who hate me and even from my father and mother. How can that possibly happen now? They don't even know where I am. I'm a slave in a foreign land.* Such thoughts tested his faith. They tested his confidence that he could interpret God's communication. At times he did not know what to think. The stark contrast between the dreams and his situation, mixed with pain and disappointment, tested his beliefs like fire.

In fact the Hebrew word for "tested" in Psalm 105:19, *tsaraph*, is the word for refining metal in fire. Waiting for the word of the Lord to be fulfilled tested Joseph like a furnace refining gold. But Joseph passed this trial. He did not lose faith or turn against God in bitterness after life had not gone as hoped. When Potiphar's wife tempted him to commit adultery, he said, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). He feared the Lord, kept a

good conscience, and would not sin against him. In all his work for Potiphar and then the ruler of the dungeon, he performed well.⁶¹ Joseph had a heart of gold.

As Joseph waited in Egypt, God did not reveal anything further to reassure him the dreams would be fulfilled. God did not give an annual dream saying, “Everything is okay, Joseph; just hang in there, and eventually you will see that my word will prove true.” Joseph had his initial dreams, and that was it. The Lord’s silence did not mean the promises expired, nor did the 13-year string of woes. Joseph held those prophetic dreams. We know he did not forget them, for Psalm 105:19 says they continued to test him. All he could do was clutch them in faith and wait for God.

But when the test ended, Joseph’s life changed suddenly, dramatically. “God acts on behalf of those who wait for him,”⁶² Isaiah wrote, and Joseph’s life shows how true that is. God acts. Joseph awoke one morning as a prisoner in a dungeon and went to bed that night as the second most powerful man in Egypt.⁶³ As God says, “I am the LORD; *in its time* I will hasten it” (Isa. 60:22, italics added). The God who works as slowly as glaciers move, for whom a thousand years are like a day, can also act quickly. God acts.

61. See Genesis 39 and 40.

62. Isaiah 64:4

63. See Genesis 40–41.

But he has a time for your train to pull into the station, and a wise reason for the schedule. He knows what the test of waiting—with its refining fires—must accomplish. As you read Scripture, he might cause certain words to come alive, breathing hope and faith into your spirit. He might fulfill those words one week later, and each day leading up to it he might reassure you the answer is coming. Or he might not fulfill those words for 50 years, and you might not receive another extraordinary reassurance that the promise still stands, but then the answer dawns as quickly as the morning sun. God has a unique time and way for each person, but there is a pattern. There is longing and promise, hope and faith, waiting on God, and finally fulfillment. The test requires that you persevere with trust in whatever way he works in you.

Joseph and his great-grandfather Abraham had to wait on God following that pattern, but their paths also differed. Abraham has much more to teach us about waiting through frustrating, unfulfilled desire.

Barrenness tests Abraham and Sarah

In Western culture we value the ability to make things happen. We say things like, “I’ll find a way or make a way.” “He’s a mover and shaker.” “They’ll run through brick walls if necessary.” “She stirs the pot.” “Manage by objectives.” “Just do it.” But often God does

not cooperate. In fact you can count on it that he will allow something in your life that no amount of will power and effort can change, something that requires you to wait on him.

He does this because waiting develops spiritual muscle, in particular muscles of faith and hope, in which he delights. Scripture says, “Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Rom. 8:24–25, NIV). And, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for” (Heb. 11:1–2, NIV). Faith and hope thrive when we must wait.

The benefit of waiting does not end there. Scripture says, “The testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jam. 1:2–4, NIV). Situations that require steadfastness work like the barbells and machines of a fitness center to develop all aspects of godliness. So if we could fulfill every desire instantly, we would be spiritual weaklings.

Abraham and Sarah could not fulfill their desire. They wanted a child but for about 50 years remained barren. By human standards they were a power couple: Abraham was wealthy, and Sarah beautiful. But no matter how much they yearned for a child, they could not conceive. In the culture of that time, children signi-

fied the favor of God, and barrenness brought shame. So Abraham and Sarah endured the daily frustration of unfulfilled desire.

When Abraham was 75 and Sarah 65, however, their prospects suddenly improved. God appeared to Abraham and promised, “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). Surely that meant they would soon conceive a child. But for the next 24 years they waited, without knowing how long the wait would last. Since God knows the future he could have told them how long their wait would last, but he did not because being in the dark intensified their test, requiring more trust.

Not knowing how long a wait will last makes waiting much harder. When, for example, you wait on the phone to talk with a customer-service agent, patience comes easier when you are told approximately how long until an agent takes the call, even if that will be 45 minutes. But when you do not know what to expect, even a 5-minute wait is frustrating.

Scripture tells how Abraham was able to pass the test of waiting in the dark for almost 25 years:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s

womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Rom. 4:18–21, NIV)

Notice five things. First, he could wait because “against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.” He had hope, not despair. If you have hope, you can wait not only for 25 years, but for 250 years. If you despair, you cannot wait 25 minutes. Hope and despair have enormous power for good or harm. One or the other decides your future. Even though Abraham’s circumstances argued for despair, he had hope.

Hope drove his belief: “Abraham in hope believed.” We cannot believe in God’s promise when our hearts are governed by despair. Bring the candle of God’s promise into a room dark with despair, and despair blows out the flame. Light the candle again, and again despair blows out the flame. Light the candle of God’s promise as many times as you want, and despair will blow it out again and again. Despair cannot believe because despair does not want to believe. The despairing heart wants to believe untrue thoughts about God because it resents the circumstances God has allowed.

The hope that enabled Abraham to believe God’s promise came from somewhere. He was not hopeful because of a sunny personality. He was hopeful be-

cause he had true thoughts about God. Abraham was “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” He did not bitterly lower his view of God and resentfully withdraw from him because of Sarah’s barrenness. Rather he chose to believe truth about God, and because he believed truth about him he was able to believe his promises. Anyone who believes the truth about God’s nature always has cause for hope. For not only does God have power to do what he promises, he also has the grace and love to do wonderful things for those who believe him. The better you know God, the more you have hope; and the more you have hope, the more logical it is to believe even his most amazing promises. With hope and faith established in your heart, you can wait for God as long as necessary.

Second, Romans 4 says about Abraham that “without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.” Abraham was able to wait because he faced the facts about his current reality. He was not living in false denial, but rather was living by the truth, which is the only place of strength. He knew that in the natural

he and Sarah were too old to conceive a child, but he faced that fact in a way that did not weaken his faith. He faced the facts without letting them change his understanding of God. He knew the rules of the natural world do not have the final say. He was “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” God created the world, and he upholds the rules of the natural world and can override them at will. The sovereign God can recreate as easily as he can create. This too is the truth and therefore the only place of strength. Without strength that comes from the complete truth, you cannot wait on the Lord as long as necessary.

Third, Abraham could wait because “he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God.” Abraham’s faith rested specifically on God’s promise, not only on general truths about his nature. God’s word has unique, spiritual power to create and sustain hope and faith. “Faith comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17). God’s promise is not just an idea, a string of words, a natural tool of communication. Rather his promises have a spiritual nature. Jesus said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). The Holy Spirit uses God’s words to create hope and faith. His promises feed faith as food feeds the body.

But for that to happen we must not quench the Spirit’s work by responding to God’s promise with unbelief.

In that case we would “waver through unbelief” and find it even harder to wait for the Lord. Abraham did not allow thoughts of unbelief to linger in his mind. He rejected such thoughts when they came.

Fourth, Abraham could wait for the Lord because he “was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.” Abraham was strengthened in his faith by filling his mind with believing thoughts. He chose to believe what God called him to believe. But we cannot choose that in our own power; rather, we must cooperate with God’s grace. For the verse says he “was strengthened,” which is a passive verb. Something outside of Abraham helped him believe, and that of course was God’s Spirit and promise. Still, the passive verb, “was strengthened,” does not mean it happened automatically without Abraham’s cooperation. We respond to God’s grace by deciding to believe his word. Abraham chose the life of faith. He did it deliberately. He was strengthened in his faith.

With this choice “he gave glory to God.” This too is how Abraham was able to wait on the Lord and maintain hope and faith. God always works in us to show his glory, and he calls us always to have the same purpose: “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). When God’s glory becomes our goal in believing the promise and waiting on him, we align ourselves with his purposes, and he helps us see as he

sees, think as he thinks, feel as he feels. Instead of our struggling to move the hand of God, perhaps even feeling as though we are struggling against him because he does not seem to want to do what we want, we trust God's ways because we love his glory. He is unsearchably great, has thoughts infinitely above our thoughts, and walks in ways inscrutable.

Our faith has its source, continuity, and purpose in God's glory. Faith resembles a massive river whose fountainhead, length, and ocean destination is the glory of the Lord. A life of faith is from, through, and to his glory. He reveals his glory in our spirit, and we respond with faith. We worship God day by day, and as a result we know him more deeply, and faith increases. As faith increases, our sense of his reality, presence, and glory increases. Ultimately he rewards our faith by giving Isaac, and people, angels, and demons see how worthy God is of trust. A life like Abraham's, tested by time, displaying God's faithfulness, uniquely reveals divine glory.

Fifth, Abraham could wait for the Lord because he was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." God's power is persuasive. There is no promise he cannot keep.

Is the test of waiting wearing on you, wearing you out, wearing you down? Meditate on God's power, his power in creating the universe with its 100 billion gal-

axies, each one averaging some 100 billion stars, each star named by God. Meditate on God's power in creating and controlling each molecular, atomic, and subatomic particle. Meditate on God's power in judging Egypt and its idols with ten plagues, parting the Red Sea for Israel's escape, and closing the Sea on cue to destroy Egypt's army. Meditate on God's power revealed atop Mount Sinai in a consuming fire and mighty voice, accompanied by trumpet blast, earthquakes, thunder, and lightning.

Meditate on God's power working through Jesus to give sight to blind eyes, strength to lame legs, flesh to withered arms, hearing to deaf ears, life to dead bodies, hope to broken hearts, cleansing to lepers, beauty for ashes, joy for sorrow. Meditate on God's power in raising Jesus from the grave and seating him at his right hand with all creation, people, angels, and demons under his feet. Meditate on the power of Jesus, who by his Word upholds all. When you are fully persuaded of God's power, you will know he can do whatever he promises, and when you know that, you can wait patiently, because the passing of time is no threat.

But Abraham was not always so fully persuaded.

Faith that flickered, and reignited

Although Abraham did not waver through unbelief as the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise,⁶⁴ what was the state of his and Sarah's faith 15 years earlier? When he was 85 and Sarah 75, Sarah grew impatient with waiting to become pregnant. This was 10 years after God initially promised Abraham that he would be father of nations. Genesis 16:2 says, "Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.'" By Sarah's calculations, she and Abraham could not wait any longer.

In their culture it was acceptable for barren couples to get a child by the wife's giving her servant to her husband as a surrogate mother. So what should the man of faith make of his wife's idea? The situation was not clear, for the promises God had given Abraham never specifically said Sarah would birth his child. God had simply promised, "I will make of you a great nation" (Gen. 12:2) and "Your very own son shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4). So Abraham had leeway to lower his expectations and think the Lord would fulfill the promise, sort of, through Hagar.

64. The passage we explored above, Romans 4:18–21, describes the state of Abraham's faith as he neared the end of the journey with the time for Isaac to be conceived drawing near. We know this because Romans 4 describes his faith at "about a hundred years old" (Rom. 4:19). At this point he did not waver through unbelief.

But until this moment, that had not been his hope. He and Sarah had assumed that God would give Sarah a child, and with good reason. For Abraham to have the child of promise by another woman was not the ideal revealed in creation, that a man have one wife. It is clear that Sarah came to this decision reluctantly. Having a child by Hagar was not worthy of the man who had received exalted promises from God, for it did not require God's special blessing. Everything about this seemed wrong.

Nevertheless they did it. They did it because they were confused; they were frustrated; they were leaning on their own understanding. It was easier than waiting on God. And the results were not good.

But that misstep did not extinguish God's promises. Their failure did not snuff out the promise because it did not snuff out their faith. Years ago for a birthday celebration my wife bought novelty candles that could not be blown out, at least not for long. When the candle was puffed out, the wick glowed for a moment and then popped into flame again. In a similar way, faith eventually reignited in Abraham as well as Sarah.

For Abraham did not receive the miraculous birth of Isaac by his faith alone. Sarah's faith also played a key role. Her faith returned as great faith. She even makes it into the faith chapter, Hebrews 11, which says, "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive,

even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised” (v. 11). Sarah’s faith enabled her to conceive. Abraham did not have Isaac apart from Sarah’s body or Sarah’s faith.

This verse describes the content of her faith. “She considered him faithful who had promised.” After Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Sarah waited about 14 more years in barrenness, but those years did not diminish her belief in God’s faithfulness; rather, her faith increased. This is the delicious fruit of waiting on the Lord. After faltering at age 75, with each passing year her confidence grew that God’s nature is to be faithful to his promises, faithful to his covenants, faithful to his word, faithful to his nature, faithful to his people. He does not change; he does not fail. No one is as faithful as God. His faithfulness is holy, beyond our comprehension. Nonetheless Sarah comprehended it enough to receive power to conceive and deliver a child at age 90.

Even if you who have faltered in faith, the test of waiting on the Lord can galvanize a deeper conviction that God is perfectly faithful. This must be one reason he has you wait, and you are not alone.

A book full of people in waiting

From beginning to end the Bible tells of people who had to wait on the Lord. Noah and his family waited in

the ark for about 370 days for the flood to come and go. Isaac and Rebekah waited about 20 years for the Lord to open Rebekah's womb. Jacob and Rachel waited at least 10 years for the Lord to open Rachel's womb. That means each of the patriarchs of Israel waited long for the child they wanted.

Israel waited 400 years in Egypt until God sent Moses to deliver them from cruel bondage. Moses waited as God sent plague after plague on Egypt before bringing Israel out with the Egyptian's gold and silver in their hands. Israel's youngest generation walked in the wilderness for 40 years before God allowed them to enter the Promised Land.

Hannah waited in barrenness for years, all the while with her rival Peninnah belittling her for it, before she gave birth to Samuel, one of Israel's greatest prophets. Samson's mother waited first in barrenness. Elizabeth and Zechariah could not have a child until old age, when they became parents of John the Baptist. From the time God spoke through the last Old Testament prophet until he sent John the Baptist to prepare for Jesus, Israel waited in silence for 400 years.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the church waited together in prayer for 10 days until Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Jesus had commanded them, "Wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4).

Paul waited in jail for at least two years before going to Rome for trial, and waited there under house arrest for two more years. Jesus hung on the cross for about 360 minutes, every minute was agonizing, and many were hell. The church has waited 2,000 years for his Second Coming, but he will most certainly come.

Over and over God has tested his chosen ones by calling them to wait on him. A delay, even when extremely long, is not a sign of God's rejection, but of his favor. If by patiently waiting you prove true to him, someday you will see a light in the distance and hear the clanging of a bell, and your train will pull into the station.

Chapter 12

Tested by God's Call for Surrender

Looking on the world from a great height does wonders for your soul. Living for years on the 20th floor of a Chicago high-rise, I get to watch massive cloud formations come and go, to marvel at pulsing bolts of lightning and fierce storms near and far, to gaze thirty miles on a sunny day, to enjoy colorful sunsets of endless variety. To see far and wide even on a normal day feels epic.

In these final chapters we will see far and wide, for we come now to the summit of the mountain of testing. The summit has two peaks, two stories we can climb a hundred times but never really conquer. In the first, God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. We explore the story in this chapter in two sections. In the second story, God allows Satan to afflict Job with excruciating pain and loss. We climb the heights of this famous narrative in the final chapter. If we hope to be true to the Lord in our trials, we must understand these two events well,

so well that we find in them not consternation but inspiration. Indeed those who ascend these two mountains with faith find the glory of God.

Section one

What Abraham hears

The writer of Genesis leaves no doubt about God's purpose in the first event, beginning the narrative, "After these things God tested Abraham" (22:1). The test begins with one short command. Abraham suddenly, unmistakably, hears God call his name and say, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (v. 2).

The Lord does not tell Abraham why to do this or much about how. Instead he makes clear he knows how precious Isaac is to Abraham, tenderly describing Isaac as "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love." God knows what he is asking of Abraham. He understands emotion, relationship, love. He is not an impersonal force making heartless demands. He understands the bond between father and son, for God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is love, and as we will see, because he is love he gives this command.

Abraham responds promptly. He awakes early the next morning to do what God said. He does not delay a few days to think over whether he will obey.

Abraham is hands-on. Instead of delegating preparations to servants, the old man (approximately age 110–115) does them himself. He saddles the donkey. He cuts wood for the sacrifice, for this is not ordinary wood but sacred wood on which he will offer to God his precious son. Five times this short narrative calls attention to the wood.

Abraham acts decisively. Five times the narrative uses some form of the word *take* to describe his actions.⁶⁵ He is not suffering from shock at God's request, not bewildered or immobilized. He knows and trusts the Lord and thus acts with forceful resolution. He takes the wood, two servants, fire, knife, and Isaac—the son whom God promised to him, whom God called Abraham's "only son" (v. 2)—and they depart.

What Abraham knows

All the while Abraham is thinking. As he rides his donkey for three days to the mount in Moriah, as he lay each night under the stars—reminding him, no doubt, of God's promise to give him offspring as countless as the stars—he tries to understand what is happening. He pieces together clues from what God has revealed

65. Verses 3, 6, 10, 13

about himself. Abraham knows that the Lord wants committed relationships, for God had made a covenant with him. That means he is a faithful God who would not revoke his promises. Abraham never forgot his vision in which God appeared in the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch and followed the human practice of covenant-making by passing between the sundered halves of slaughtered animals. By this God said that if he breaks the covenant, let the same happen to him that happened to the slaughtered animals.⁶⁶ Abraham knows beyond doubt that the Lord is not betraying him.

He also knows that his other son Ishmael, who is the offspring of his union with Sarah's servant Hagar, is not the son through whom the chosen people would come. God told him years before, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (Gen. 21:12). So Abraham knew God had chosen Isaac alone as the line of descent through which he would fulfill his promises to Abraham. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he even called attention to Isaac's crucial role by calling him "your son, *your only son* Isaac" (Gen. 22:2, italics added), although Abraham also had Ishmael. This was God's subtle reminder that he had not forgotten what he said about Isaac. As Abraham rode his donkey for three days to the mountain in Moriah, per-

66. Genesis 15:17

haps God's words repeated in his mind, like a clue to a puzzle, "your only son Isaac...your only son Isaac... your only son Isaac." By these words Abraham knows that somehow, despite this sacrifice, Isaac must live.

He knows more. He knows nothing is impossible for the one who enabled him and Sarah to have a child in old age. God told him that when he appeared to Abraham one year before Isaac's birth and announced that the promised child was soon to come. Sarah overheard the announcement and laughed, and the Lord took issue with her. "The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' *Is anything too hard for the LORD?*" (Gen. 18:13–14, italics added). Abraham now reasons that the one who can do anything can raise the dead. The New Testament actually provides an inspired glimpse into Abraham's mind during this test:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." *He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.* (Heb. 11:17–19, italics added)

He knows more. He knows the Judge of all the earth does only what is right. Abraham himself had said that

to God many years earlier when the Angel of the Lord came to him and revealed his intention to investigate the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham interceded for the cities in order that his nephew Lot and his family would not perish with them. He asked God to spare the cities if 50 righteous people could be found in them and appealed to God's nature: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"⁶⁷

Knowing that God only does right, Abraham knows that in this current test God is doing right. Abraham is not suspicious of his purposes. He does not entertain the preposterous notion that maybe God is not entirely good, for that would mean we humans are the standard of goodness, knowing better than God what is moral. No, the fallen creature of Adam's race is not morally superior to the perfect and unchanging Creator. There is much Abraham does not know in this test, but what he does know with certainty is he does not need to question the goodness of God.

Abraham knows one more crucial thing that enables him to navigate this situation. Knowing all the above, he had to realize this is a test. He knew God had tested him before. If we know God is testing us, then

67. Genesis 18:25

we understand why the situation is upside down, and we do not lose our bearings. In a test, the Lord's normal ways with us are temporarily suspended in some way, though not in every way. Instead of peace, there is trouble. Instead of full provision, there is lack. Instead of health, there is sickness. What the Bible says is the normal portion of God's people suddenly departs. Though God does not change, his way of working in us might change for a season.

In Abraham's current test, God certainly suspended what was normal. With God, normal is not death, but life, not taking, but giving, not losing what God has promised, but keeping what God has promised. Above all, normal is not sacrificing one's beloved son. So Abraham knew this was a test, and he was determined not to fail. To pass, he knew he had to trust God with childlike simplicity and do precisely as commanded. Obedience and trust are always the keys to passing a test, especially the daunting, once-in-a-lifetime sort of trial Abraham was navigating.

All things considered, Abraham reaches a conclusion. If God wants him to go through with the slaughter and fiery offering of Isaac, God will raise him from the dead, even raise him from ashes. God the Creator will resurrect the one and only son.

But by faith Abraham also foresees another way, for he knows something else about God. Abraham

knows God accepts a substitute. Abraham had offered animal sacrifices before, and he knows what they represent. The lamb was a substitute for the one making the offering. Burning a lamb on an altar was a way of saying, Lord, I give my life to you. Abraham reasoned that God could give a substitute for Isaac that made his death unnecessary. God could provide a lamb for the offering.

What Abraham does

By the time they reach the mountain in Moriah, Abraham has concluded this indeed is what God will do. He stops short of the site for sacrifice and leaves there his two servants and donkey. He puts the wood on Isaac's back and takes the fire and knife. As they walk to the site, Isaac recognizes the obvious and says, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

From the overflow of his heart, Abraham's mouth speaks. "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." The Lord had not told Abraham that explicitly, but Abraham knew God, and based on everything he knew about him and what God had told him he concluded this was what God would do. He set his faith on it. All his life, including decades as a sojourner in the Promised Land, he had seen God provide everything he needed, and what he needed now

more than anything was a lamb as a substitute for his son Isaac. Whatever he truly needed, he believed God would provide.

Meanwhile what he needed was to obey the Lord's command, and that he does. Father and son arrive at the site for sacrifice. With solemn confidence Abraham builds an altar. On it he carefully arranges the wood. He turns to his son, his only son Isaac, and without delay proceeds to bind his hands and feet. His heart is settled; he will not withhold his beloved son from the Lord. He has already given him to God in his heart, and now he will give him as a sacrifice. He wraps his arms around his beloved son, trusting this will not be the last time he holds him close, lifts him, and lays him on the wood of the altar. God gives the old man physical strength to lift his son's weight, some 50–100 pounds, and God gives him emotional strength to take knife in hand.

Isaac is surprisingly passive. He did not resist as Abraham bound his hands and feet. He did not object. He did not struggle to make it impossible for Abraham to place him on the altar. He does not twist and kick to roll off the altar, as he certainly could have. Why not? Did he have the same confidence as his father? Did he believe what his father had assured him, that God would provide a lamb? Had he surrendered himself to God in the same trusting way his father had surren-

dered him? Did he trust Abraham the way Abraham trusted God? The story repeats an important sentence two times: in verse 6 it says, “So they went both of them together.” Again in verse 8 the identical words: “So they went both of them together.” This repetition is wrapped around the crucial interchange in verses 7–8, where Isaac said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” and Abraham replied, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Father and son are in this “together.” They both choose to trust and obey God.

Now that the knife is in Abraham’s hand, God has seen enough. He knows everything he wanted to know from this test. The Angel of the Lord cries out, “Abraham, Abraham!”—a twofold repetition, which conveyed intimacy.

This interruption Abraham was expecting. Slowly, firmly, with reverence for the God he loves more than Isaac, Abraham replies. “Here am I.” This is the third time in the narrative that Abraham says, “Here am I.” The first was when the test began. God broke the silence by calling his name, and Abraham replied, “Here am I.” The second time Abraham said this was at the pivotal moment when he and Isaac were climb-

ing the mountain. Isaac broke the silence: “My father.” And Abraham replied, “Here am I, my son.” And Isaac asked the million-dollar question: “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” The third time Abraham said these words is now, at the moment of salvation as God intervenes to answer Abraham’s faith and spare Isaac. “Here am I” reveals Abraham’s heart, that he is available to God his Father and Isaac his son, responsive not withdrawing, near not far, open not closed, listening not ignoring. Through the threefold repetition of “Here am I” the author of this narrative calls quiet attention to Abraham’s intimacy with God and Isaac, a closeness that withstood the sternest trial.

In the midst of this test Abraham could have closed his heart toward either God or Isaac in an attempt to maintain emotional consistency. One might think Abraham had to choose between them. But in his holy heart that was not so. Abraham did not close his heart toward either. His wholehearted love for and trust in God were so great that he was able to maintain wholehearted love toward Isaac even as he surrendered him. In relation to God, perfect love, trust, and surrender integrate one’s heart.

What God does

And suddenly everything returns to normal. The Angel of the Lord tells Abraham, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Notice what God commends in Abraham: “Now I know that you fear God.” Abraham’s reverence for God’s holiness results in obedience without reservation. This is true love for the Lord. If we fear him, we withhold nothing.

Abraham looks around “and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns” (v. 13). The narrator used “behold” twice in this story. *Behold* adds emphasis. The narrator first used *behold* when Isaac was carrying the wood up the mountain and said to his father, “*Behold*, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (v. 7, italics added). Isaac’s question is ultimately answered in verse 13 with the matching “*Behold*, behind him was a ram” (italics added). In this way the narrator highlights these two sentences in yellow and draws a line between them. Abraham takes the ram and offers it in Isaac’s place.

However, an important shift has occurred. Ascending the mountain, Isaac had asked about the lamb for sacrifice, and Abraham had spoken in faith that God would provide the lamb (vv. 7–8). A lamb is a young sheep, but what Abraham found caught in the thicket

was a ram, a mature male sheep with horns. This shift is not accidental. The two *beholds* mentioned above focus attention. From our perspective having both the Old and New Testaments in our hands, we know there is more to this story than the testing of Abraham. This event foreshadows Jesus. It ultimately pictures the Lamb who is a Ram. He is both. He is the sacrificial Lamb killed as a substitute, but he is the powerful Ram with horns of royal authority. He is the Lord. Yet, as Abraham said, this is the Lamb God would provide. Just as Isaac was bound and silently, willingly let himself be placed on the wood, so our Lord and Messiah let himself be arrested, was silent before his shearers, and willingly died on the wood he had carried. Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice.

After Abraham sacrifices the ram on the altar in Isaac's place, the Angel of the Lord calls to him a second time from heaven:

By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the

nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. (vv. 16–18)

Once again a test functions as a bridge to a glorious future, as a stairway to a higher calling. Notice the repetition of “surely”: “I will *surely* bless you, and I will *surely* multiply your offspring.” The repetition reinforces the certainty intended by the opening words, “By myself I have sworn.” By passing this test, Abraham made something certain that apparently would have been uncertain had he withheld Isaac. God would not bless what Abraham withheld to the degree he would bless what he surrendered. The Lord reaffirmed three previous promises—(1) blessing,⁶⁸ (2) numerous offspring,⁶⁹ (3) and being a blessing to the nations⁷⁰—and added a new promise: Abraham’s offspring will possess the gate of his enemies.

This added promise is significant. The offspring to whom it refers is Jesus Christ, and his enemies are the demons of this world and their ruler, the archenemy of God, Satan himself. God is promising Abraham that Jesus will completely defeat Satan and his kingdom of darkness. As Jesus promised Peter, “I will build my church, and the *gates of hell* shall not prevail against it” (Mat. 16:18, italics added). In other words, through

68. Genesis 12:2.

69. Genesis 15:5. This is the first time that God says Abraham will have offspring as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

70. Genesis 12:3.

Abraham's offspring Jesus Christ, God will remedy the problem of evil. It is evil that has brought pain and sorrow to humanity throughout history, and it is Jesus who will conquer it.

God links that reversal in the world's fallen condition to Abraham's obedience. Abraham could not save the world, for he too is marked by sin, but because of Abraham's obedience God made the sinless Savior his offspring. Because Abraham passed the test, Jesus the Redeemer would be his descendant.

In this narrative God commends Abraham for three things. "You fear God" (v. 12). "You have not withheld your son" (v. 12). "You have obeyed my voice" (v. 18). God tested Abraham for these qualities and likewise tests us. Do we fear God, revering him as holy and trembling at his words? Will we withhold anything from him, in particular what we love most? Will we obey his voice, taking all his words seriously? If we pass the test, God's heart is to reward us extravagantly.

In some way God always increases what we surrender to him. Sooner or later he rewards sacrifice in larger, lasting ways, in this age or the age to come, in physical or spiritual blessings. One Isaac surrendered to God became offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand by the seashore. One difficult act of obedience led to the descendent whose perfect obedience leads all God's people to obedience and salvation. Jesus

said, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Mat. 19:29). And, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). By surrendering Isaac, Abraham kept him for the rest of his life and forevermore. God is infinitely good to those who pass the trial of surrender.

What faith receives

This test shows the pivotal role of faith, particularly faith to believe in God’s provision.

During the trial Abraham declared his faith in two ways, and in both cases his faith was answered. First, when he and Isaac and the two servants arrived at the mountain for sacrifice and he prepared to depart from the two servants to ascend the mountain with Isaac, he told them, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you” (v. 5). Abraham’s words show that he expected Isaac to return with him after the sacrifice. The New International Version makes it explicit: “*We will worship and then we will come back to you*” (italics added). “We” will come back to you. As he believed, so he received. Second, as he and Isaac climbed the mountain and

Isaac asked about the lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham declared, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son,” (v. 8). As he believed, so he received. Somehow, sooner or later, in one way or another, faith receives answers.

This event was so important for Abraham and his descendants it inspired two lasting reminders: a name and a proverb. “Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The LORD will provide’;⁷¹ as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided’” (v. 14). What impressed Abraham most in this experience was, “The Lord will provide,” so it became Abraham’s name for that mountain in Moriah. He now knew this truth in every fiber of his soul. As surely as he knew his own name, he knew “The LORD will provide.” The Lord will provide a Lamb. Eventually this truth found ultimate fulfillment in the Lord’s provision of a Savior who supplied our greatest need: the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We need to believe “The LORD will provide” in every dimension of life, from food and housing to health and salvation. If we doubt that, we will suffer from fear and worry. We will ultimately trust ourselves, our works, other people, money, technology, techniques, government, employers, or knowledge more than we trust what Scripture reaffirms: “My God will supply

71. In Hebrew the name is *Yahweh Yireh*.

every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

The proverb based on this event adds something important to the name. The saying “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided” tells where God provides. Would Abraham have found the ram if he had gone to a mountain of his choosing? He likely had other favorites. But when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, he said, “Go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering *on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you*” (v. 2, italics added). God chose the mountain for the sacrifice, and only there would Abraham find the ram from God. We have a similar proverb today: Where God guides he provides. We can count on God’s provision when we obey him.

After we pass a test and prove true to the Lord, we know him better. This is the ultimate reward of a test, for knowing God is better than life. We will trust in God’s love, faithfulness, and goodness more. We will love him more. After this severe test, what Abraham knew more profoundly was, The Lord Will Provide.

Section two

During the 2016 spring training of one Chicago baseball team, the big news was the sudden retirement of a veteran player. He said he was retiring because the team's executive vice president had reneged on a promise given him when he signed with the club the previous year. He must have been popular in the clubhouse because his teammates did not just say goodbye and return to baseball. They met to discuss the situation, and the team's star pitcher speaking with reporters afterward accused the team's executive of lying. Finally the owner stepped in and prohibited everyone on the team from speaking further on the matter with the press, and the story eventually left the public eye. Most likely it did not quickly leave the players' memories.

For, in any organization, members watch how management treats other members. Based on that, members trust management more or less. People do likewise with God. What happens to other people affects whether we think we can trust him. In particular we notice how God treats people in the Bible.

For that reason this chapter will not yet leave behind the story of God's command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. One aim in this book is to know God better, and Abraham's story raises three troubling questions. First,

since the Lord only does what is righteous, how can it be morally right for him to command Abraham to kill Isaac? Next, how is this trial similar to and different from the way God tests us today? Finally, knowing that God tested his friend this way, how can we trust him enough to walk with him as Abraham did?

The answers presented in this chapter should not surprise you, for in this story God does not change from what he shows himself to be in Jesus Christ or in the rest of the Bible. The answers should enlarge you, though, for there is more to God than you realize. He is not just an extraordinarily improved version of you. He is not a creature. He is another order of being. He is God.

How is it moral for God to command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Notice the subhead does not ask, “Is it moral for God to command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?” It is a given that God only does what is right. “His works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deu. 32:4, NIV). In fact it is evil to suggest otherwise: “Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing” (Job 1:22).

God himself is the standard of what is right, not some standard above him.

Therefore, as we seek to understand how God could command Abraham to offer Isaac, we must do so with reverence, remembering that God does not answer to us; rather, we answer to him. God does not have to explain himself, and in this story he does not. He is perfectly righteous, while we have been corrupted in our thinking and cannot reason rightly unless God renews our minds. Therefore, we must beware of asking and answering questions accusingly as though we might be morally superior to God. That is laughable arrogance and total delusion. On our own morally, we do not know our left hand from our right.⁷² Morally, God is perfect and has always been perfect; he never had to learn morality, either on his own or from someone else. On the contrary, everything we know about morality came from God.

Anything our secular culture correctly understands about morality also came from God. Over many centuries God has deposited moral truths in secular cultures through Scripture, through the conscience he gives everyone, and through wisdom he has given his church, which is the preserving salt of the earth. In his mercy God can even refine moral understanding in a culture through wise people who do not acknowledge him. But

72. Jonah 4:11

even they have had their consciences trained directly and indirectly by these godly influences. Standing on the shoulders of all this good moral influence from God, limited still by our brief lifespans and miniscule knowledge of reality, and morally crippled by a sinful nature, no one should presume to evaluate God's actions with the attitude that he knows better than God what is right, or what God should or should not do.

We find answers to questions raised by this test elsewhere in Scripture. God does not change or evolve; but, like raising the curtain on a stage, what he reveals about himself and his will in Scripture does increase over time until it reaches highest clarity in Jesus and the New Testament. When all is said and done, this test does not contradict anything God reveals about himself in Scripture. On the contrary, this test foreshadows the glory of God revealed in the New Testament.

Even so, this story shocks us—and it should. It is disturbing because the Lord has trained our moral sensibilities after his own. He does not enjoy death and does not want people to die. Ezekiel prophesied, “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”⁷³ Life is God's idea. It was he who “breathed into [Adam's]

73. Ezekiel 33:11

nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”⁷⁴ It was God who warned Adam, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”⁷⁵ God created life and loves life. His Ten Commandments say, “You shall not murder,”⁷⁶ and elsewhere in the Old Covenant he commanded the Israelites to protect and nurture others.⁷⁷ Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”⁷⁸ God created mankind to live forever, not to die.

In keeping with his love for human life, God also loves peace and abhors violence. “His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.”⁷⁹ In Noah’s time it was in particular the violence of mankind that grieved God’s heart and provoked him to do what he later told Noah he would never repeat: to destroy nearly all mankind with a flood. “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.... And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them.’”⁸⁰ At the end of King David’s life, when he wanted to build a temple for God, God refused him

74. Genesis 2:7

75. Genesis 2:17

76. Exodus 20:13

77. For example, Deuteronomy 22:8 and Leviticus 23:22

78. John 14:6

79. Psalm 11:5

80. Genesis 6:11–13

because, “You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth.”⁸¹ He hates violence because he is “the God of peace.”⁸² Although the evil in our world sometimes demands the violence of divine judgment, God does not enjoy such violence but judges people reluctantly.

Therefore, knowing that the Lord loves life and abhors violence, we are rightly confused when he commands Abraham to slay Isaac.

Our confusion confirms another crucial point. God will not command anyone now to do what he commanded Abraham then. Although God was righteous in this command, he himself has changed the human situation irrevocably since Abraham’s time by giving written laws through Moses and other writers of the Bible. Abraham lived before the Bible. Today God will not command anyone to do what his Word prohibits. God commanded Israel, “There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering” (Deu. 18:10). So Abraham’s experience will never be repeated. God will never again command someone to sacrifice a child. In fact, he has forbidden it.

81. 1 Chronicles 22:8

82. Philippians 4:9

This prohibition perfectly reflects God's heart. In the end, God did not let Abraham slay Isaac. What looks like a turnaround was not a change of heart. God never intended for Abraham to slay Isaac.⁸³ His intention was only to test Abraham. By stopping the sacrifice God shows how he actually felt about it, and therefore when God later in Deuteronomy 18 prohibits parents from sacrificing their children he is entirely consistent. It was his command to slay Isaac that conflicted with the highest purposes of his heart. Although God's command to Abraham reflected his divine prerogatives—the potter can do what he wants with the clay—it did not reflect his heart. This is God's glory. He has the Creator's right to command as he did, and he has the Father's heart to rescind the command. Jesus said, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."⁸⁴ In the Old Covenant God required sacrifices, yet he also said he desired mercy more than sacrifice. Therefore sacrifice is good, but mercy better. You can be sure of this: God is infinitely more merciful, compassionate, and concerned about human life and justice than you.

But we should honor him no less for his divine prerogatives. To do that we need a clear understanding of

83. ESV Study Bible notes, on Genesis 22.

84. Matthew 9:13. Jesus refers here to the Old Testament, Hosea 6:6. This reminds us that God does not change from Old Testament to New Testament. God was merciful and compassionate in the Old Testament, and he was the same in Jesus.

God's righteousness in testing Abraham with this command. Proud people focus on their supposed rights and ignore God's legitimate rights as Creator and Sustainer, Sovereign and Judge. Although God did not have the heart to let Abraham slay Isaac, he did have the right. His command was righteous, and consequently Abraham would have been righteous in obeying it. James 1:13 says, "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." If God's command had been unrighteous, and if Abraham's obedience to it had been unrighteous, then God would have been tempting Abraham to do evil. According to James 1:13, God does not do that. Moreover, if God's command had been evil, he would not have conceived it, because according to James 1:13 he cannot be tempted with evil.

Therefore, what is it about being God that makes it right, even glorious, for him to give such a command? The answer is, everything. His love makes it right because perfect love jealously desires wholehearted love in return. His goodness makes it right because Abraham's highest good comes only by loving God above all, not Isaac. His justice makes it right because it is appointed to each fallen descendent of Adam eventually to die. His mercy makes it right because Isaac at death would depart this evil world and go to heavenly paradise. His wisdom makes it right because he alone knows everything from beginning to end and balanc-

ing innumerable factors knows how to work all things for Abraham's and Isaac's highest good and his highest glory. His sovereignty makes it right because he cannot stop being sovereign any more than he can stop existing, and therefore he alone determines when and how a person's death serves the best purposes.⁸⁵ His role as Creator makes it right because he owns and uses what he creates as a potter does clay. His infinite worth makes it right because anything devoted to him serves a great, eternal purpose. Therefore God's command to sacrifice Isaac does not hint at some sinister side to God; rather, it was gloriously right in every way.

But he was more right to revoke the command. He was more true to everything that makes him God to cry out, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him." This more fully expressed God's compassion, purposes, promises, love, goodness, joy, blessedness, and more. The pitch-perfect revelation of God was to spare Isaac, just as it was to raise Jesus from the grave. From the beginning God intended for Isaac to live.

How does Abraham's test compare with how God tests us?

In Abraham's test the Lord followed a pattern that continues in the New Covenant era. He commanded that Isaac be sacrificed, and he commanded that Isaac

85. John 21:19. Psalm 139:16. Job 14:5.

be spared. That resembled God's work at the Cross, where we see his justice and love, holiness and grace in perfect harmony.

Abraham's test resembles the Cross of Christ in too many ways to be a coincidence. Both involve the substitutionary sacrifice of a lamb who is a ram. Both involve a father giving his beloved son. Both involve a son submitting quietly to their father's action, going like a sheep to the slaughter. Both involve God's provision for what man lacks. Both involve the ultimate test of a man's life, in particular the test for obedience and surrender. Both involve a son to be sacrificed on wood. Both involve death and resurrection.⁸⁶ Both happened on a mount in a region named Moriah, perhaps the same mountain.⁸⁷ Like the Cross on Golgotha, the altar on Mount Moriah showed the ocean depths of God's heart.

The Cross of Jesus is the greatest revelation of God. Given its similarity, the testing of Abraham must also be one of his greatest revelations. It was not an anomaly.

86. Hebrews 11:19 says, Abraham "considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

87. 2 Chronicles 3:1 says, "Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite." That event in David's life also involved a major sacrifice (see 1 Chronicles 21).

On the contrary, God calls everyone to the same obedience and the complete surrender of what we love most. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26–27, 33). Jesus said the most important commandment is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Romans 12:1 says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Jesus calls us to surrender in spirit every relationship and priority dear to us, to sacrifice our very selves. God calls us to sacrifice Isaac.

How does Abraham’s test differ from our similar tests? First, again, God has commanded in Scripture that no one may offer a child in sacrifice. He never intended for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and he forbids anyone today to slay a person in ritual sacrifice. The second difference is how God communicates. When he tests you about surrendering something, he ordinarily does not speak with an audible voice as he spoke to

Abraham, but rather through his written Word, your conscience, and other people and circumstances. But such a call is no less a test. Jesus summons everyone to full surrender, and you know whether you have complied. You know if you love something or someone more than God. You know when the central issue in a trial is whether you will surrender what you most value. You also will know whether God is returning what you surrender, just as he restored Isaac to Abraham.

Abraham's test reveals God's heart, for he does not change. This trial shows how important it is to God that you fear him in a way that results in obedience. This trial also shows his jealous love. He will not have rivals. His jealousy is not the insecure, sinful jealousy we experience but rather a divine jealousy based in covenant love. God does not need your love, for he is perfectly self-sufficient, yet he has freely chosen to set his steadfast love on you and enter covenant with you. Divine love is covenant love, which we must requite in faithfulness.

How can we draw near to the God who tests his friends the way he tested Abraham?

God's fierce, covenant love is what draws us even though he tests us. His love is worth everything. His

love is better than life. His love can be trusted. In fact, one of the most encouraging things about Abraham's test is God's jealousy. It shows how much he cares about you. Your love matters to the Lord of all. The worst thing that can happen to you is not to be tested as Abraham was; the worst would be if the Lord of the universe did not care about your love. I do not want the one who holds my life in his hand to be indifferent. I am glad my affection matters infinitely to him. What could be more flattering or give greater significance? Not success or fame. Not family. Not wealth. Not anything we withhold from him. God tests deeply because he loves deeply. He will prove true to those who prove true to him.

Such love is why we need not fear this trial. Fallen hearts avoid surrender. In some ways we want to be close to God and his blessings, yet at the same time we want to keep our distance lest he require us to surrender what we love most. We fear what he will ask from us. This is one reason people avoid God, the Bible, and church. They know they have something he wants, and they do not intend to release it. It has become their god, their supreme desire, the one thing they feel they cannot live without. If the choice is between God and Isaac, they choose Isaac.

Surprisingly it is this unsettling quality of God's heart—his jealousy of Isaac—that assures you can

wholeheartedly draw near. For he requires surrender because he loves you greatly. He requires surrender because that love will satisfy infinitely more than your Isaac. He requires surrender because he knows his generous intentions to reward your sacrifice extravagantly. He requires surrender because he is God; therefore he alone deserves your ultimate devotion. It glorifies him, and that glory will delight you forever.

In the end, we lose what we withhold from God and keep what we give. Abraham's ultimate test ends with these words about him and his son: "They arose and went *together* to Beersheba."⁸⁸

88. Genesis 22:19, italics added. This is the third repetition in the story of the crucial word "together."

Chapter 13

Tested by Suffering and Loss

The Book of Job is easily misread, and the result is a misperception of God. I once sat in the apartment of a man in Evanston, Illinois, who wanted to talk about him. He said, “I believe in the God of Job. He treats us like puppets. He toys with us.” As our conversation continued, I learned he had fastened his view of the Lord on a misinterpretation of this story and had no regard for what God reveals of himself elsewhere in Scripture. For this man, Job was the Bible’s only Book, and he interpreted it cynically, using his distortion to rationalize his dislike for the Almighty. The trial of Job was God’s defining moment.

So this story’s portrayal of God tests us, particularly if we suffer pain and loss, which can skew our perceptions. We might focus on things in the book that raise hard questions about God and blow them out of proportion, while we overlook signs of his love. Therefore our final task in this book is to understand correctly the story of one man’s providential suffering and loss,

what it reveals of the God who tests us, and how it harmonizes with his self-revelation elsewhere in Scripture.

Section one

Keys to the story of Job

In the first sentence the narrator provides the most important information about the main character: Job is “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). This is not merely human opinion, for seven verses later God himself describes him in the same way: “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8). Job’s righteousness before God is crucial to the story because he is shortly to undergo calamities that will cause everyone in Job’s world to conclude that the Lord regards him as wicked.

Job is not only righteous, he is wealthy. He has thousands of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys, making him the most prosperous man in the East. He also has ten beloved children, for whom he prays regularly like a priest. But his riches he is soon to lose, not by his own fault but by satanic attack.

Satan approaches God’s throne and says, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every

side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land” (1:9–10). Satan then makes an accusation that becomes the crux of Job’s test. It casts a shadow not only on Job, but more importantly on God himself. Satan claims that if God took all Job’s wealth Job would turn against him. In other words, Job does not truly love God; he loves only God’s gifts.

That insults not only Job, but God. Something crucial is at stake that the Lord cannot ignore, so he agrees to test Job by permitting Satan to take what he has. On one calamitous day Job loses his possessions, servants, and children. The pivotal question is, after such loss will Job still fear God? Will he sin by speaking against God?⁸⁹

The answer is emphatic. “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” Job does not turn against God. He does not speak against him. He does not doubt him. In a display of superhuman trust, Job passes the test blamelessly.

89. This question is seen in Job 1:5, 11, 21–22; 2:5, 9–10; 40:1–5; 42:3. Job 40:4 has the significant words “I put my hand over my mouth.”

But there is a second test coming, and this one unravels him. Satan requests and receives permission from God to test Job again. This time Satan afflicts him with painful, festering boils from head to toe. The pivotal issue is, when Job suffers physically will he turn against the Lord and speak against him. The narrator unmistakably portrays God as ultimately responsible for Job's suffering. God reigns even over Satan. Job knows that, and now he sits in dust and ashes, clothed in sackcloth, scraping his oozing, scabby boils with a piece of broken pottery, wasting away to blackened skin and bones, mourning his losses and pain. But unlike in the first test, Job now has many issues with God.

Those issues will find words when Job's three friends come to his aid. Appalled at his condition they sit with him on the ground for seven days without speaking. When they finally open their mouths, however, it is not to console him, but rather to call him to repentance. And so begins an argument that rages for about 30 chapters. The crux of the debate: Is God giving him what he deserves? Is Job's suffering just? The three friends blame his problems on secret sins, while Job claims to be blameless, that God is treating him unfairly.

He laments:

Oh that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would

be heavier than the sand of the sea....The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me. (6:2-4)

You [that is, God] scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I would choose strangling and death rather than my bones. I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are a breath. (7:14-16)

My soul is poured out within me; days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest....God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. For I know that you will bring me to death and to the house appointed for all living....But when I hoped for good, evil came, and when I waited for light, darkness came. My inward parts are in turmoil and never still; days of affliction come to meet me. I go about darkened, but not by the

sun; I stand up in the assembly and cry for help. I am a brother of jackals and a companion of ostriches. My skin turns black and falls from me, and my bones burn with heat. My lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep. (30:16–31)

With his lamentation, Job raises questions:

Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave? Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? (3:20–23)

I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked? (10:2–3)

Meanwhile Job's three friends take turns assaulting him with one theme: the righteous receive blessing from God's hand, but the unjust sooner or later reap what they sow. Since Job is suffering, he must have sown injustice. They see clear cause and effect. $A+B=C$.

Finally God has had enough and comes on the scene in a storm to make things right. First he takes Job to task. “The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’” God is not happy with much of what Job has said. Job “darkens counsel”; he had brought darkness not light to the debate. Job had said that God dealt unfairly with him, punishing him though he is blameless. Job had said that evildoers sometimes escape punishment. So Job had accused God of running an unjust world, and he—Job—was exhibit A.

For four chapters God corrects Job by listing a sample of his mighty works in the earth. Like a prosecuting attorney God riddles Job with questions. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?” “Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?”⁹⁰ Thus God makes one overwhelming point: He is infinitely greater than Job, divine not human, superior not just in degree but in kind, so awesome in wisdom and power that his purposes mute the questions of mortal man.

90. Job 38:4, 12; 40:8–9

Job gets it. Contritely he responds, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (42:2–6) In the first test, Job had not sinned against God by accusing him of wrong, but under the lash of the second test he did. Here he admits his sin and repents.

Next God corrects the three friends. He confronts the ringleader:

My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. (42:7–8)

In this short paragraph God refers to “my servant Job” four times. That is the same Job God just finished reprimanding, the same Job God allowed Satan to test to the limit. In effect, God says, “You are wrong. He is my man, my servant. I am proud of him.” That is how the book began, with God’s telling Satan of his pride

and delight in Job: “Have you considered *my servant Job*? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (1:8, italics added). Moreover, after the first test, when Satan again came before God, the Lord spoke identical words of pride: “Have you considered *my servant Job*? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity” (2:3, italics added). Now, after the second terrible test and despite the failure in Job’s integrity, God still regards him as his man. He is “my servant Job.” Under unbearable suffering, he had cracked, but not broken. God rebuked him for what he said but forgave him and drew him close again to his side.

God’s rebuke of the three friends has another puzzling repetition. Twice he says the identical line: “You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” Notice that God tells the friends they were not right in what they said. That is somewhat surprising because if you did not know the end of this story and read the 29 chapters of debate between Job and his friends, you would probably agree with most of what the three friends say about God and the moral order in his universe. You might disagree only when they apply their maxims to Job and accuse him of wrongdoing.

Notice also that God says Job spoke what is right. That too may surprise you because in the debate you may wince at much of what Job said. After all, God reprimanded him for good reason. Yet now God himself says Job spoke something right, something that must have been fundamentally right despite particular faults. And God says Job's friends spoke something fundamentally wrong, despite their high praises of God with which we would agree. What was it?

Actually the friends were wrong on several counts. They were wrong in their belief that all who suffer loss and pain suffer because of their sins. That is true for some, but not for all.⁹¹ They were wrong to condemn Job, to presume they could act as his judges, for no human knows the heart of another, and God alone judges all.⁹² Moreover, the friends had an incomplete picture of God. They knew rightly that he is just and great, the infinitely wise Creator and Judge, but they did not realize God is also mysterious, that his ways are beyond tracing out, especially in the rough terrain of human suffering and evil.⁹³ They did not understand the depths of God's steadfast love, that its intensity may move him to test his dearest servants with suffering for the sake of an increasingly glorious relationship, for their highest good and his highest glory. They did not believe

91. See John 9:1–3.

92. See James 4:11–12.

93. See Romans 11:33–34.

that God would allow a blameless person to suffer. Although the Old Testament reveals this, the idea comes to the forefront in the New Testament in Christ and his church.⁹⁴ What the three friends had wrong made what they had right useless and misleading.

Meanwhile what Job had right vindicated him in God's sight. Although Job was right in maintaining he was blameless,⁹⁵ that is not what God was referring to when he confronted the three friends. God said Job had "spoken *of me* what is right" (42:7–8, italics added). For starters, Job was right in saying God does not give everyone their due in this lifetime. He saw with painful clarity that God might let the righteous lose everything. He saw clearly that unjust people might live full, prosperous lives on the earth and go to their graves in peace. Job realized that we cannot reduce God's great ways to small formulas. The Lord's purposes are exponentially bigger than simply rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked during their lifetimes. The righteous Judge of all souls will finish that vital task at the Final Judgment and do it with meticulous perfection to the praise of his glory. But in our lifetimes he pursues a glory even greater than his awesome justice. He is showing the heights and depths of his love. He is wooing hearts. He is giving grace upon grace, wave

94. See Isaiah 53, Philippians 1:29, 2 Timothy 3:12

95. God himself had said to Satan that Job was "a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8).

after wave. He is creating fierce, unshakable trust in the hearts of his beloved. He is ensuring that the righteous will live by faith.

Tested to the core of his soul, Job had held to his faith in God. “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (13:15). “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (19:25–27). “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit” (10:12). Job did not understand what was happening, but in his need he knew where to turn. He knew God is good and just, despite seeming evidence to the contrary. Nothing could persuade him otherwise. Nothing could stop him from seeking God, from moving toward him rather than away. This glorified God and disproved Satan’s challenge that Job served the Lord only because he was rewarded handsomely.

In effect, Satan claimed God needed to buy love. This was the lie God deemed to be such an insult that it must be disproven. The task was so important that God assigned it to his choicest servant, to a man who was worthy. And so to blameless Job was given the exalted task of vindicating the glory of God, a mission worthy of a king. In this trial God was not giving shabby treatment to his closest friend. Rather, he was entrusting his

highest purposes to his best man. In order to make the point, the mission had to be conducted in the dark, and so pain and loss fell on Job without warning or explanation. But by suffering in the dark for what seemed to be no purpose, he actually suffered for an exalted purpose and refuted Satan's lie. Job would cling to the Lord because God is worthy of total devotion, not merely because of what he gives but because of who he is. In fact, Job shows that even if God chooses for a season to allow evils to overwhelm us, he is still worthy of total devotion. He is still the highest good and the only one deserving unqualified love and trust.

Job had passed the test—that period when God's normal way with him was suspended for an unusual purpose—and so God restored him to an even more blessed normalcy. First he vindicated Job before his three friends. Then the “LORD restored the fortunes of Job.... And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before” (42:10). The narrator selects telling details to highlight God's goodness. God gives him exactly double the number of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys. Moreover he restores his relationships with his friends and siblings. The narrator is careful to show that these friends and siblings give Job the consolation

he had gone without during the trial: “Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold” (42:11). Job is no longer the forsaken.

And God again gives him children, the same number as before, exactly seven sons and three daughters. The emphasis falls on the daughters, for the narrator provides their names, not the sons’ names. The narrator calls attention to their appearance: “In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters” (42:15). So God brought delightful beauty before Job’s eyes to make up for all the trouble he had seen. Job is so wealthy and finds such happiness in his daughters that he defies the cultural norm of bestowing his inheritance only on his sons and instead grants his daughters an inheritance with their brothers. He is a happy, prosperous, contented man.

His happy days lasted far, far longer than his season of suffering. “After this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons’ sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days” (42:16–17). God’s favor toward Job is emphasized by the extremely long period from the end of the trial till the end of his life. This pleasurable period lasted two lifetimes. If we esti-

mate that his trial lasted approximately 3 to 18 months and that the blessed period before the trial had lasted some 60 years, we see that God's blessing on Job lasted some 200 years and the trial roughly 1 year. And that does not take into account Job's blessedness through all eternity. The good and loving heart of God is in those numbers. Those 200 years are normal. Eternal blessing is normal. The one year of agony was a temporary suspension of God's normal ways for the sake of a test that served an extraordinary purpose.

Nevertheless, though temporary, the test was real, and terrible. It, too, teaches vital lessons about God's ways. As Job endured pain and loss, his perception of God became distorted in ways, but clear on four truths.

Section two

God makes much of us

What we value is shown by what we make much of. My wife makes much of our children, grandchildren, and other family members. She displays their photos around our home. She contacts them daily, sends cards and gifts, and talks about them. So we make much of what we love.

Job saw this characteristic in God. Near the end of one lament, Job said to him:

Leave me alone, for my days are a breath. *What is man, that you make so much of him, and that*

you set your heart on him, visit him every morning and test him every moment? How long will you not look away from me, nor leave me alone till I swallow my spit? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? (7:16–20, italics added)

Job realized that by testing him God made much of him. God treated Job as though he mattered infinitely. His every thought mattered to God. His every word, motive, affection, priority, delight, choice, and belief mattered to God. He could not escape God's caring gaze long enough to swallow his spit. God would not look away for a moment. Job called him the "watcher of mankind." God was not testing him because he did not matter.

Rather God watches a person with unblinking, undistracted attention because he cares so much. "You set your heart on him," Job says. The heart is the center of affection. God commands us to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,"⁹⁶ and Job discovered the reason he commands such all-encompassing love: because that is how he loves us. God loves us with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He created us and set his heart on us. You matter to him infinitely more than you matter to any other person. We struggle

96. Mark 12:30

to understand why God tested Job as he did because we cannot comprehend the magnitude of God's love.

Because he makes so much of us, he tests us, not just now and then, but continually. Job felt as though God tested him "every moment" (7:18). Was Job right or was he exaggerating? Does God really test you every moment of your life? For approximately three- to eighteen-months he did indeed test Job continually. There was no let-up, no rest day or night. Mercifully the physical torment had a beginning and end and was the exception, not the rule. Although the loss of his first ten children was permanent for this age, they could enjoy eternal reunion in heaven. But God tests in many ways, including four that we face every moment of our lives: (1) the test of obedience to God's commands; (2) the test of stewarding time, money, and spiritual gifts and callings; (3) the test of waiting; and (4) the test of exclusively worshiping God. Some people face the terrible test of pain for a lifetime. God does indeed test you every moment.

He does so because he makes much of you.

God is good

Secondly, Job saw clearly that God is good. Job's pain and loss bewildered him because he was accustomed to the Lord's relentless goodness. Until this crushing trial, Job could have written David's words: "You anoint

my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (Psa. 23:5–6). Although in his suffering Job struggled to keep God’s benevolence in mind, he did not completely forget, as shown in one sweet remembrance: “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit” (10:12). In that confession of faith Job remembered three ways we experience divine goodness.

First, in his goodness the Lord grants life. Job realized that above the blessings of wealth, family, friends, and honor, a greater and prior goodness is the gift of life, which is an infinitely complex work of divine power and wisdom. We usually take life for granted, but those who face death realize how good is this gift. It comes from God’s deliberate action, not chance. You could not bring yourself into existence. He wanted you to live, and he gave you life. Foreknown and enabled by God, your parents conceived you physically. Still, your life required more than physical existence; you needed a human spirit, the nonphysical part of your being. Your soul is more than electrical impulses in the brain. Rather, God created your human spirit; it did not just

happen.⁹⁷ You owe your existence to him: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Even if we suffer as horribly as Job, to the point that we prefer death, life is still a gift. God is good.

Second, in his goodness the Lord grants steadfast love. Here Job used the important Hebrew word *chesed*, “steadfast love,” to describe God’s heart toward him. *Chesed* was the love that people swearing a covenant committed to one another. *Chesed* was not a term used loosely. Job knew God had made a covenant of steadfast love with him, and he knew God would not break it. God’s covenant love would rest on him forever. Steadfast love does not waver in bad circumstances; it remains even during a trial, unfelt perhaps, but never removed. Steadfast love is a promise from the God who does not break promises to seek your highest good and be your God. Even if you lose everything, if you have God’s commitment of steadfast love, you have everything. For if he has committed to you his steadfast love, then the pain and loss of a test is temporary, but his steadfast love is eternal. When God promises his steadfast love, he promises himself. You will always have him, and having him you have everything. God is good.

97. Zechariah 12:1 says, “Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him.” See also Hebrews 12:9, Ecclesiastes 12:7, Isaiah 42:5, and Isaiah 57:16.

In his goodness the Lord had granted life and steadfast love, and third, Job said, “Your care has preserved my spirit” (10:12). God has taken care of you in countless ways. When you were a child, he gave you parents, guardians, and teachers who dressed you, cooked for you, wiped your face, and supplied shelter, medical treatment, and education. He provided work skills and gainful employment. He gave your nation some measure of law and order and an economy. None of this came from luck, but from God’s deliberate action. James 1:17 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” Psalm 145:16 says, “You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing.” Ephesians 5:20 says we should be “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father” because everything—literally everything—comes from him. Unknown to you, he has protected you by warding off thousands of accidents and diseases. Every moment of your existence he has cared for you as a mother tends an infant, as a father brings home a paycheck, because that is his heart. God is good.

God is potter

Job also knew that God is Potter, and we are clay. He says:

Your hands fashioned and made me, and now you have destroyed me altogether. Remember that you have made me like clay; and will you return me to the dust? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. (10:8–11)

The analogy of potter and clay affirms that God designed and created us down to the last gene of our DNA. He enables every breath, every heartbeat. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Therefore he has sovereign right and power to do with us as he pleases. Thankfully, everything that pleases him is righteous and good, loving and wise; but even if it were not, we could do nothing to change the situation. God has all authority. That is reality. We have no more control over him than clay does over a potter.

Job expressed this reality in various ways:

After he lost everything in the first test, he “fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’” (Job 1:20–21). Why would someone respond to overwhelming loss with worship? Because he knew the sovereign Potter had just exert-

ed his rights, allowing what had just occurred, and he revered that sovereignty. He knew the sovereign Potter had given and the sovereign Potter—not Satan, the intermediate cause—had ultimately been the one who had taken away. Sovereignty is awesome. It rightly inspires worship. Moreover, Job had observed God’s creation and kindness long enough to know that not only is the Potter sovereign he is also “blessed”—he is good. As we saw above, Job knew, “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit” (10:12). He knew what Jesus later affirmed: “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18).

When God corrected Job, Job acknowledged him as irresistible Potter: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2).

One of Job’s accusers affirmed the analogy, saying to Job: “Behold, I am toward God as you are; I too was pinched off from a piece of clay” (33:6).

Job said:

Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back? Who will say to him, “What are you doing?” (9:12).

He is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both (9:32–33).

The hand of the LORD has done this. In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.... With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding. If he tears down, none can rebuild; if he shuts a man in, none can open (12:9–14).

He deprives of speech those who are trusted and takes away the discernment of the elders....He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth (12:20, 24).⁹⁸

[Man's] days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass (14:5).

He is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind (23:13–14).

That God is Potter and we are clay is one of the biblical truths most difficult to swallow. It is humbling, and we are proud. It contradicts beliefs cherished in Western culture about independence, freedom, and self-determination. It seems to contradict God's love.⁹⁹

98. So the Lord did with Zechariah (Luke 1:19–22) and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:31–37).

99. And we tend to resolve seeming contradictions with either-or answers rather than both-and answers. That is, God is either sovereign or loving, rather than sovereign *and* loving.

The analogy brings to the minds of some a God who is cold-hearted, cruel, capricious, a petty god playing with puppets—definitely not the God revealed in his son Jesus, his perfect image.

But even Jesus taught the Potter-and-clay principle when someone asked why a certain man was born blind. That is the ultimate Potter-and-clay question. Jesus said it happened “that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3). Then Jesus “spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing” (John 9:6–7). What a remarkable “coincidence” it is that Jesus healed him with clay. The Potter is Healer. The Potter is Redeemer. The Potter is love.

We need to keep the Potter’s love in mind when we see the implications of this humbling principle taught elsewhere in Scripture. Paul wrote, “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?” (Rom. 9:20–21).¹⁰⁰ Paul makes it explicit that because God is Potter he has unrestricted rights to do with us as he pleases. Job was right.

100. See also Jeremiah 18:1–6, Isaiah 64:8

What a humbling truth this is. God creates us for his good purposes. Paul wrote, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). Job would understand what Paul meant about “fear and trembling.” Paul and Job understood the implications of being clay in the hands of an almighty Potter. Although God has given us a measure of free will to “work out” life and salvation, we can “will and work” only with him. As clay, we have no right to demand anything of the Potter or to fault him. Rather we have the responsibility to fear a being as great and holy as God—and by his grace the privilege to love him knowing he came humbly in Christ to save us.

How astounding that the Potter came in humility. Jesus said, “I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mat. 11:29). We dare not misjudge his lowliness. If we suffer in a test, we dare not let the Potter’s humility embolden us to rise up insolently and fault God. The surprise is not that we suffer, but that despite our sins he shows mercy and patience. The surprise is that despite our rejecting him he redeems and makes much of us in love. The surprise is that he would suffer and die on the cross for his enemies. His humility should humble us and win our trust. The almighty Potter himself became clay for our sakes. The almighty Potter let his clay creation scourge

him with a metal-tipped whip and pound spikes into his hands and feet. In love the Potter chose to suffer physical and spiritual pain infinitely worse than Job's, for he suffered for the sins of all his people.

In one moment of clarity Job accurately described the wise response to a Potter like this, and it is particularly important when we are in pain:

From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, "We have heard a rumor of it with our ears." God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out. And he said to man, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding."¹⁰¹ (28:20–28)

101. Verse 28 echoes 1:1,8 and 2:3. The repetition and the climactic arrangement of 28:20–28 reveals the weight placed on the attitude of fearing God and turning from evil.

God is redeemer

While the analogy of Potter and clay suggests human powerlessness before God, that we cannot control him, Job understood something further that convinced him of what God would ultimately do for him. In the core of his being, in a place that could not be moved, this crucial conviction contradicted the ranting that had passed his lips in the delirium of suffering. His triumphant declaration lasted six sentences. It resembles a shaft of sunlight that for thirty seconds breaks through a sky churning with black storm clouds. In the throes of a lament Job cried out for tools to engrave in stone the words he wanted as his lasting testimony to God and mankind:

Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. (19:23–27)

At the core of Job's confession are the words, "My Redeemer lives." His confusion and complaints did not change that conviction. Job did not say, "The Redeemer lives"; he said, "My Redeemer lives." Suffering did

not break that relationship. Loss did not cut that bond. Amazingly, even his sense that God had turned against him did not break it. He fiercely clings to calling God “my Redeemer.” Although this contradicts some of what he has said and will say, it is not surprising that a man delirious with sorrow is inconsistent. So Job wants his words engraved in stone—where they will not change—that he believes God is still his Redeemer, and his Redeemer lives even though his situation has not been redeemed. That is faith.

The Hebrew word for redeemer, *ga'al*, was deeply significant for the Jewish people. The redeemer, the *ga'al*, was the person in your family network who came to the rescue if you became helpless. In Western society if we fall on desperate times we typically look to the government to be our safety net, with programs like Social Security or unemployment insurance, or we look to non-profit charitable organizations like churches or homeless shelters to help us find food, housing, and medical care. There were no such safety nets in Job's society. So you depended on family, and if you lacked that, you became a beggar or slave. The culture stipulated which person in your extended family was responsible to rescue you. That particular relative had this title: *ga'al*. The redeemer was the savior of one who could not save himself. The redeemer was the hope of the helpless.

Modern society has stories of journalists who have adopted the cause of people they believe were unjustly imprisoned. Sitting in jail, such prisoners are powerless to free themselves. They must have someone on the outside who fights for them. The journalists investigate, uncover information not presented in the trial, publish articles, and eventually get the prisoners' sentence overturned. Because of these journalists, innocent people walk from penitentiaries free. Such a journalist is a redeemer.

Job was certain he had a Redeemer. Although Job's family and friends had abandoned him, he knew God would not. How did he know? Perhaps God had revealed this through Job's own conduct. Job had redeemed members of his family and even people outside his family. He says:

I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the

unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth. (29:12–17)

In former days of wealth and security, Job had been the quintessential redeemer. He knew how a redeemer thinks and feels and what a redeemer does. As he redeemed others, he must have reflected on how God-like this was. In this way God had likely revealed that he is the ultimate Redeemer. Job knew God's heart, that he was an infinitely greater Redeemer than Job. He knew this would end in redemption.

But in the meantime, in the shadow of mysterious trials, Job did not know what his Redeemer would do. His Redeemer had not treated him as expected. Quite the opposite. Nevertheless regarding the future Job was certain of what God would do. First, he was sure his Redeemer would “stand upon the earth.” Job believed God would “at the last” appear in a manner Job could see with his eyes. He said, “I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold.” How could someone who has died see God with eyes of flesh? Job believed something that perhaps no one before him had known: “After my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.” He believed two contradictory things, that his skin, his body, would be destroyed, and yet somehow he would see God. He would not in that moment be a disembodied spirit. He

believed that “in my flesh I shall see God.” Job believed in a Redeemer who would give a bodily resurrection.

Job’s understanding of two other seemingly opposing ideas comes together in another surprising declaration of faith: “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (13:15). Job knew God had unhindered power to do whatever he wanted with him; even so he knew he could trust and hope in the Potter who is also Redeemer. God tests to the uttermost but also redeems to the uttermost.

These verses represent Job’s most important understanding of God. They explain why he was the Lord’s man despite failures. He believed God was his Redeemer no matter what. He believed God cared about people on this planet and would in the end stand on earth as their Redeemer. He believed God would redeem his body from the grave in a physical resurrection. Those are three momentous tenets of faith, and all are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Prophetically Job foresaw the person and work of Jesus. The name Jesus means Savior. Jesus is coming again at the end of this age, he will stand on earth as triumphant Lord, and he will give believers a resurrection body like his. He will redeem us body, soul, and spirit. Job’s understanding of God as Redeemer is the clearest revelation of Jesus Christ in the Book of Job, and it came in a horrific test.

These few verses about God as Redeemer are the gospel of Job: the righteous shall live by faith in their Redeemer.¹⁰² Job was righteous because his faith in God as Redeemer was engraved in stone. Even in his erring laments he had exhibited faith because he repeatedly said he wanted to talk to God about his situation. The trial did not turn Job into an atheist, nor into one who acknowledged but hated the Lord. His impulse was to move toward God, not away, to bring questions and struggles to him.

Job's confidence in his Redeemer was well placed, for in the end his hopes were not dashed. Quite the opposite. As we saw, his Redeemer finally came and "restored the fortunes of Job," (42:10) vindicating him before his three friends, restoring him to favor with family, neighbors, and other friends, prospering him with twice as many possessions as he once owned, blessing him again with ten children, granting him 140 more years of life, and rewarding him in the coming age in ways we have yet to see.

In the end, God's redemption far exceeds our expectations. Our Redeemer is more kind and generous than we imagine. Our Redeemer will not just rescue us from suffering; he will also exalt us as kings and queens. He will restore our fortunes like the man who

102. Romans 1:17 says, "The righteous shall live by faith."

was “the greatest of all the people of the east.” He will reward us with a prosperous inheritance in the new earth. He will not only redeem our lives, but also the entire created order, raising his creation to a glory and beauty, strength and joy, prosperity and peace that we can now scarcely comprehend. We will sing with Job for ages everlasting, “Our Redeemer lives!”

If we did not have a Redeemer, we would have every reason to fear and despair. We and those we love would be on our own in an evil world. We would be vulnerable to the attacks of Satan, demons, and evil people. In the event of disease and accidents, economic downturn and unemployment, we could turn only to each other. What fragile, limited creatures we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Even the hardest among us, even special operations soldiers like the Navy Seals, can be killed in battle, hit by friendly fire, felled by sickness, beset by post-traumatic-stress disorder. The bottom can drop out on anyone. If worse comes to worst, we could be like Job: abandoned by all, left homeless, helpless, horrified. Alone.

But how sweet to have God himself as redeemer. Your redeemer is not limited by time, but is eternal and so can rescue you forever. Your redeemer has unlimited power and therefore can solve any problem and overcome any opponent. Your redeemer has steadfast love and favor and so will never leave you but will seek your

highest good in everything. Your redeemer is Immanuel, God with you, the God who also became man and will be the God-man forever, who sympathizes with your weakness and need. Your redeemer has pledged a covenant with you and will faithfully uphold it forever. Your redeemer has none of the limitations of humanity and all the perfections of deity.

Having God as redeemer is better than having the ultimate human redeemer. Imagine having as your redeemer the President of the United States and at his command the U.S. military. Imagine that he also was the richest and most generous man in the world and the shrewdest investment advisor. Imagine that he was better networked in your career field than any other. Imagine that he was also the world's smartest and handsomest person, and a wonder-working medical doctor. How reassuring it would be for one person to have all this power to benefit you and to know he was devoted to your highest good, that he was your redeemer. But even he is limited. Doctors are limited. Soldiers are limited. Wealth can do only so much. Sooner or later this redeemer will die. Sooner or later you will die. Eventually you must stand before the judgment seat of a holy God and give account for everything you have thought, said, and done. In the end if he is merely another fallen human, even the best redeemer is worthless.

But when God in Christ is your redeemer, you are fully redeemed forever. He has no limits. He can do and wants to do infinitely more for you than any human. Through faith in Christ you have such a redeemer. Your redeemer lives. Say it with Job and let it secure your soul: “My redeemer lives.” He initiated your redemption. He first loved you. He knew your plight and chose to redeem you before you knew you had a plight. “God, who *began* the good work within you, *will continue his work until it is finally finished* on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Phil. 1:6¹⁰³). No matter how God the Potter tested Job, Job still hoped in God his redeemer, and for good reason. No matter how God tests you, you can hope in your redeemer Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, sinless, crucified for your sins, raised from the dead, and seated in power at God’s right hand as your Advocate.

This test will end, and you will come out as gold

Job uttered another magnificent statement of faith. He was convinced that “When he has tried me, I shall come out as gold” (23:10). Job recognized his suffering as a test ordained of God, not a meaningless accident. Thus he could endure the suffering without losing his

103. NLT, italics added

mind or faith, for he knew it had purpose. Knowing a test is a test helps you pass.

Moreover, Job did not expect his misery to end poorly. Rather he foresaw a good end, a golden finale. God was putting him through a trial that resembled the fiery refining of gold. His rigors would result in riches. Although he had lost nearly everything, he knew tests are temporary. When the trial had run its course, he would have great wealth, the wealth of his soul purified and approved.

The soul that has passed its trial has eternal value. Jesus spoke of the inestimable worth of the soul, even in the face of total loss: “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mat. 16:25–26). Jesus says your soul is your most valuable possession, aside from God of course. If you have lost much in a trial, your Father in heaven wants you to balance the mourning that weighs on your heart with the gain that abounds to your soul. Lament your loss and then move on, knowing if you trust him it is well with your soul, and prosperity of soul is lasting gain. God values that gain as we value gold, and he wants you to have the same values. He delights in your purified human soul. The tested and approved soul is wealth that endures forever.

For God has invested wonders in your soul. The wonder of conscious existence in the image of God. The wonder of a mind able to reason, understand truth, and know God. The wonder of a heart that can feel as God feels and love as he loves. The wonder of a conscience that can discern what is good and right. The wonder of a will that can choose one's course, choose to obey God, choose good over evil. The wonder of the spiritual organ of faith that can believe God. The wonder of an eternal human spirit united with a fleshly body of astonishing capabilities and senses through which the soul engages world and people. The human soul is a divine miracle, a gift beyond comprehension, the golden, crowning glory of his creation. The Lord designed the redeemed, tried, approved soul to know and love him forever in a relationship that is the ultimate treasure.

In this final test we have seen that he may try your heart by allowing pain and loss. Through it all you will prove true to Jesus if you remember what Job declared. God makes much of you. God is good. God is the Potter. God is your Redeemer. And after he has finished bringing you through the furnace of testing, your soul will come forth as gold.

Conclusion

In graduate school, one professor required me to write an extensive paper on a 20th-century theologian whom I had never read. I scoured one of his books and analyzed his ideas, which are wide open to various interpretations. I took the project seriously and thought much. Although I had worked hard, when I turned in the paper a few days before Christmas, I did not know what to expect.

I checked my mailbox regularly. Finally, a week or so later, the graded paper appeared. I received an *A*. That was gratifying, but far more rewarding was an extremely complimentary note from the prof. He actually said my paper was one of the best he had ever read.

As that compliment sank in, it marked me. The whole experience taught me what I am capable of, with God's grace, and equipped me for future challenges. My confidence grew.

Divine testing produces the same results. It not only gives God information, but also gives us essential information. Sometimes the information will be disheartening. We may get a low grade—and a wake-up call. If we respond well, however, good things await.

Other times, we will ace the exam, and our relationship with God and work for him in the world will expand.

Passing a test imparts something to the soul that can come in no other way. We now have proven worth and ability. We become approved. The apostle Paul wrote of his assistant Timothy, “You know Timothy’s *proven worth*, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel” (Philippians 2:22, italics added). Here the Greek word for proven worth is *dokime*.

Two cognate forms of that word (*dokimion* and *dokimazo*) are used in 1 Peter 1:7. Peter wrote to believers who had suffered trials “so that the *tested genuineness* of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is *tested* by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This is what God’s tests can produce in your life. By passing them, you and your faith prove true, and when Jesus comes he will give you praise, glory, and honor. This will mark you, for good, forever.

For more from Craig Brian Larson

Website: craigbrianlarson.com, where he blogs on the theme “Knowing God and His Ways”

Amazon author site:

www.amazon.com/author/craigbrianlarson

Twitter: @cbrianlarson

Facebook: www.facebook.com/craigbrianlarson

Other books by the author

Hang in There to the Better End

Ten reasons to persevere for those with every reason to quit

(ebook available at Amazon.com)

Practicing God's Presence

(ebook available at Amazon.com)

The Ultimate Experience

Why knowing God tops everything

(ebook available at Amazon.com)

Find What's Real in a World Going Crazy

Lasting happiness comes only from what is ultimate

(ebook available at Amazon.com)

Preaching That Connects

Using journalistic techniques to add impact
(co-author) (published by Zondervan)

The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching

A comprehensive resource for today's communicators
(co-general editor) (published by Zondervan)

The Preacher's Toolbox series

(general editor) (six books published by Hendrickson)

Sermon illustrations

(author or editor) (10 books published by Baker,
Zondervan, and Tyndale)

Pastoral Grit

The strength to stand and to stay
(Later republished as *Staying Power*)
(Published by Bethany House and Baker)

About the Author

Craig Brian Larson writes a weekly blog about Knowing God and His Ways. Go to CraigBrianLarson.com.

He has published many books and articles and served in editorial roles for Christianity Today's Leadership Journal and PreachingToday.com for fifteen years. He has a master's degree in theology from Wheaton Graduate School and a bachelor's from Illinois State University. He has served as pastor of Lake Shore Church in downtown Chicago since 1995. He and his wife have four grown sons, three daughters-in-law, and six grandchildren.

Brian's writing has focused on the themes of perseverance, preaching, and sermon illustrations. In his role as editor of Christianity Today's preaching resources, he read and listened to thousands of sermons by the finest preachers in America, including many sermons on subjects related to perseverance and trials, which gives him a rich, balanced perspective.

WILL YOU BE TRUE TO JESUS?

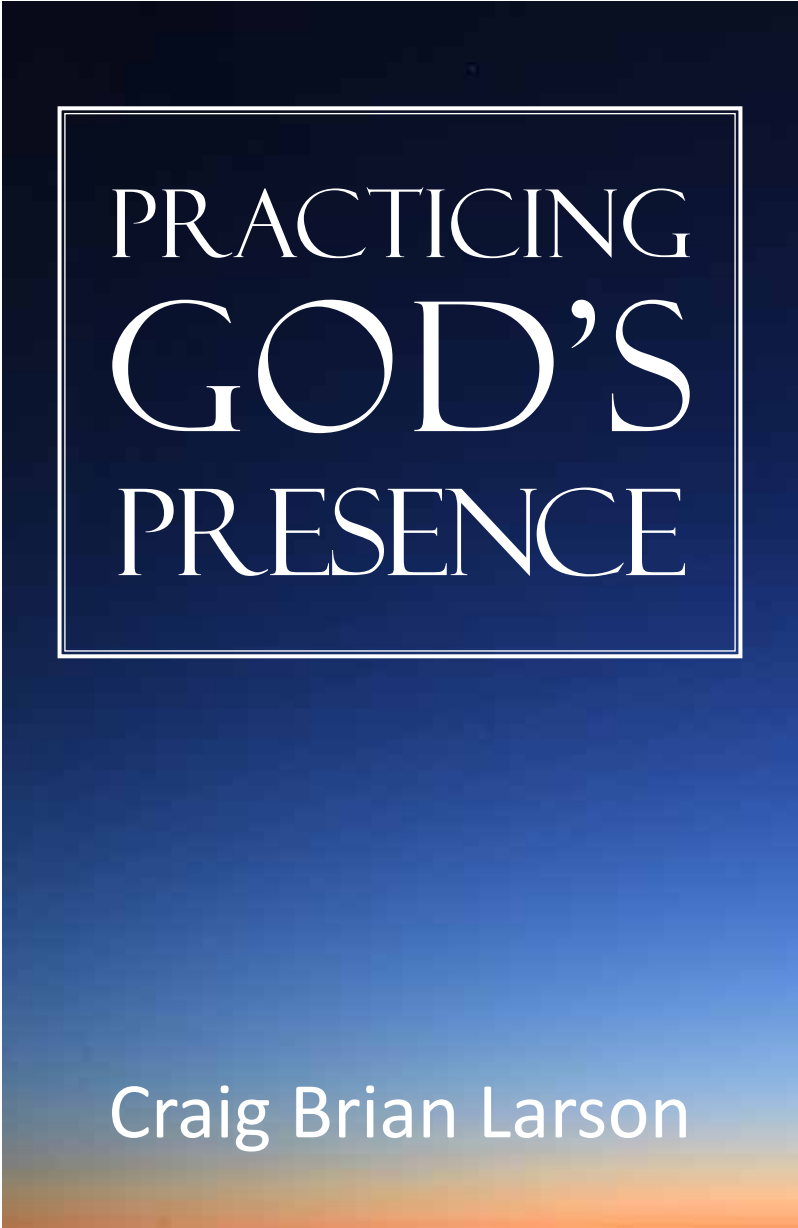
Kindle book on Amazon

Ten reasons to persevere
for those with every reason to quit

HANG
IN THERE
to the
Better End

CRAIG BRIAN LARSON

Kindle book on Amazon



PRACTICING
GOD'S
PRESENCE

Craig Brian Larson

Kindle book on Amazon

Find What's
REAL
In a World
Going
CRAZY

Lasting happiness comes only from what is ultimate

Craig Brian Larson

Kindle book on Amazon

THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

Why knowing God tops everything



Craig Brian Larson

WILL YOU BE TRUE TO JESUS?