

May 26, 2020

Dear Brethren,

These days we all have something in common. And when I say "we," I mean everyone in the whole world. Every single one of us is affected by the societal response to the global pandemic of Covid-19. We've canceled trips. If we're fortunate enough to have work, we've changed the way we do it. We've been forced to find masks to wear when we shop. We were told to stand in lines six feet apart from the person in front of us. Some have hesitated or refused shaking hands. We've been shocked to see shortages of goods. I could go on about how life has changed for everyone, but I think the point is clear. Life has changed on an unprecedented scale, and there's no way that we can completely escape from it.

Some of the sacrifices have been difficult to make. But with the difficulty in responding to the changes imposed upon us, it gives us a chance to be tested. Generally speaking, tests are necessary if we want to determine how successful we are in achieving our goals and ambitions. With the difficult circumstances that we all face, what are the results of our tests? Do we find ourselves expressing short-tempered unrighteous anger, lack of patience, greed, frustration, depression, and fear? Or do we find ourselves grateful, kind, understanding, generous, faithful, and loving? It's no surprise if we pick a few items from both of those lists. In whatever way we find ourselves behaving, the results of our actions provide us with insight into the state of our hearts. Difficult circumstances help us understand our true selves.

To be tested is a privilege because the results teach us how to improve. It is never easy to endure difficulty, but knowing that circumstances are purposeful in producing good in our lives (compare Romans 8:28), we can be confident that life's difficulties will help us in the long run. Peter writes a challenging admonition for us to follow: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7). While it seems contradictory to rejoice in various trials, they provide us with information that we cannot otherwise obtain about ourselves. When we consider the end result of our trials, we can see our hearts more clearly. Do we produce the fruit of the Spirit in difficult times, or only when life is easy? Without this kind of information, how would we otherwise be able to learn how to grow? In whatever shape they take, the tests that we all endure provide us with invaluable insight about the underlying motivations of our behavior—which is what the Bible refers to in addressing the "heart" of a person.

Christians need to expect to be tested by difficult circumstances. Since we live in a world that opposes God's teachings, when we follow God, we will find conflict with the world. Jesus Christ states that His true followers will be persecuted for their beliefs (compare Luke 21:12, John 16:2-3). In this time when the governments of the world prohibit Church gatherings and other essential Church functions, it is clear that God and His people are under attack. And we know that times will only get worse, increasing the difficulty of our tests.

But we have nothing to fear. We need to remember that God and His righteousness will prevail, and that He believes in our ability to overcome. "For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment [abundance]" (Psalm 66:10-12). As we can see, we must expect to be tested—refined in the fire like silver and gold—so that we can remove the impurities and things that hide deep within our hearts. But we can also see that the planned result of the process will be ABUNDANCE! Trials are difficult by design, but

they help us to become purer, training us for life in the future Kingdom of God.

This Truth only makes sense to people who understand God's plan. "Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand" (Daniel 12:10). If we are among the wise, we will understand that the difficult times we endure in the world have a purpose. Can we see that we are being refined right now? It's true. The real question is, what are we doing with the information resulting from our personal tests? What do our trials say about what lies within our hearts? If we are being refined—and we are being refined—we have an opportunity to examine our hearts and do something about it.

If we come through our trials judging our hearts to be 100% pure already with nothing more to work on, we need to think again. A Scripture that we should take into consideration reminds us of our human condition: "The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:9-10). It is humanly natural to look into our hearts and judge that we have nothing to fix. Our truest desires in our hearts can be deceitful, though. Since our hearts show us what we value the most, it is hard to see if our hearts' desires may be misplaced. It's no wonder that man's heart is deceitful! Our values are founded on what we believe to be right and true, and our hearts reflect this. Therefore, it is difficult to judge on our own that we may have something in our hearts to fix.

In order to correctly and fully understand our hearts, we must have the mind of God so we can think like Him (compare 1 Corinthians 2:16). And the only way we can have the mind of God is with the Holy Spirit living within us. From the very beginning God knew that His people would need the Holy Spirit to learn righteousness and overcome the world. With the Feast of Pentecost upon us, we observe the memorial of when the Holy Spirit was given to the first-generation Christian Church (compare Acts 2:1-4). Like the first Christians, we too have the Holy Spirit available to help us.

Since we have a need to examine our hearts with the mind of God, we use the Holy Spirit within us, and look to God for help. He is the One who searches the heart and tests the mind. Since we are able to discern the Truth with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can see ourselves as God sees us. In that way, through the tests and trials that He gives us, we learn about what really lies within our hearts. With that information we can compare it to the standard of His righteousness and figure out what to do about it. If we find that our hearts direct our thoughts and actions in ways that lead us away from producing the fruit of the Spirit, we have some work to do. Do we find that we're not faithful enough? Are we showing God's love to our brethren and our neighbors? Is there something in our hearts that shows that we have our treasure misplaced (compare Matthew 6:19-21)? If we discover that we have work to do in our lives, we should be encouraged by it. We know that we have the opportunity right now to improve the way we live so we can please God more. The tests that we endure refine our hearts, showing us how to direct our efforts to produce the change that God wants to see.

In the difficulty of these end times, we are confident that God knows what we are going through. The world around us will falter, but God's people are supposed to emerge stronger. We have a unique opportunity right now to take advantage of the tests we're taking to examine our hearts and become refined. As we observe the Feast of Pentecost, we are reminded of the great gift of the Holy Spirit which God gives us. Will we use the gift of the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts and find ways to increase our treasure in heaven?

With brotherly love,



Eric Rank