

Refined By Fire

I Peter 1:3-9

July 16, 2023

Please open your Bibles today to I Peter 1 and while you're finding that, let me ask you a question. How many of you like to take tests? When you were in school, at the DMV, for certifications at work, or even physicals for jobs or sports? I dare say that none of us relish the thought of taking any kind of test. Some students even have a condition known as test anxiety which produces symptoms including headaches, nausea, sweating, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, and feeling faint. Teachers help students to develop strategies to overcome these fears since much of their schooling and academic future hinges on their ability to pass tests. This past fourth of July, I was afraid I'd fail my fireworks exam but I actually passed with flying colors. Years ago, my mom asked me why my math test had a big zero on it, "It's not a zero, the teacher ran out of stars, so she gave me a moon!" She didn't buy it either.

We all face tests. Some of the written tests we've fretted over are cake compared to the emotional, relational, or spiritual tests that get thrust upon us. How can we pass our tests? What does the Bible have to say about such things? If you are able, please stand as we read from I Peter 1:3
3-9 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his **great** mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are **shielded** by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be **revealed** in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

None of us like tests, do we? But Peter tells us in this passage that these come so that our faith may be proved genuine and that, if and when it is, it will bring glory and honor to God. How many of you want to bring glory and honor to God? This is our theme verse this year. Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God. When a student takes the SAT or AP test or some other exam and does well, it brings glory to their teachers! And Peter says the same is true here. When we do well on life's tests, we bring glory to our God, which should be our highest goal.

Peter also mentions the purification process for gold to help us realize what testing is like. Say refine. Gold and other precious metals are refined by fire. As the ore

is heated to extremely high temperatures, the dross and other impurities melt and burn away until only the silver or gold remains. Now, that's got to be painful for the gold, but there is no other way. Solomon tells us in Proverbs 17:3 The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.

So we must remember the purpose of testing. It's not to destroy. It's not to burn us up or to beat us down, it's to purify us. To burn away all that does not please God. All that cheapens our value. Everything that is extra and keeps us from being the beautiful exquisite jewel of His creation. And He knows just how to do it, just how much fire it takes without getting too hot and consuming us.

It often hurts so much because we don't want to part with what He needs to get rid of. It may be a habit or a possession or a relationship that He knows are not golden. And so He lights His burner and holds us in the crucible until whatever impurity melts away. The more tightly we hold onto those things, the more heat He has to use and the longer we have to stay in fire. The more we resist and fight against Him, the hotter the fire becomes.

How do we pass God's tests? Say Prepare. The first step in passing any test is preparation. It's submitting ourselves under instruction whether it's a teacher, a video, a manual, or whatever. We must submit ourselves to be taught. How often we resist that because we already know everything. Except that we don't. We can prepare for life's tests by attending Sunday School and Bible Study, with daily devotions and Sunday worship. It's helpful to see how others prepared and performed on God's tests. Abraham passed some and failed some. David the same. As did everyone else in the Scripture. We can and should learn from them!

When I was in college, it was always helpful to get ahold of a professor's past test to see how they tested and what kinds of questions to expect, etc. At VA Tech, they were called Coufers and some fraternities had who filing cabinets full. The Bible is full of coufers that can help us prepare for our own tests.

The great thing about God's tests is that they are all open book! We can consult the Bible to find the answers at any time. Many students mistakenly believe they don't need to study for an open book test. But someone told me a long time ago that the secret to taking an open book test was to know the book so well that you know where to find whatever you might need. The same is true with the Bible. If we're at work and a test comes, we may not be able to spend a lot of time finding Scriptures. Or in a conversation, or wherever. But if you have an idea where to find it because you've studied it, it helps immensely! When you're going through a test of grief or sadness, to know where to find hope and help in this book. When you feel like giving up, to know where to look. When you're struggling in your marriage or with your children or parents, to have an idea what passages might be good. Even though it's an open book test, it's a

big book, so spending time in it daily is a great way to prepare for life's pop quizzes and tests.

So study ahead of time, know the book, and use others. Most of life's tests allow us to work together! God never intended us to live life on our own. He put us in families and churches so that we can help others and be helped by others. When you're connected through a small group or a Sunday School class, there's a good chance somebody else in your group has faced that same test before. Sometimes when we're under pressure, we get a mental or spiritual block and our brothers and sisters can help us out of it. Unlike your final exams in school, the Christian life is a team event! Don't try to pass life's tests by yourself. In fact, one of the very lessons God wants us to learn is working together, fellowship.

How many of you have ever heard or said, "God will never put more on you than you can bear?" Many people say that thinking they are quoting the Bible. Hogwash. That's not in the Bible. 1 Cor 10:13 actually says, "No **temptation** has seized you except what is common to man. And **God** is faithful; he will not let you be **tempted** beyond what you can bear. But when you are **tempted**, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." So Number 1, this verse is about temptation, not testing. Now temptations can be tests, but Paul assures us that we'll never face either one that no one else has ever faced before. Everything we face in life others have faced before us. Don't let the Devil convince you you're unique. He would love for you to believe you just can't resist. That there's no way you can withstand his temptations and you just have to give in. That's a lie from Hell. Because the rest of the verse tells us that whenever we are tempted, God **will** provide a way out. It's up to us to take it.

Furthermore, when we misquote it, we imply that God is tempting us rather than testing us. James 1 tells us that (13) ... no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his **own** evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fullgrown, gives birth to death." So let's not blame our temptations on God, nor be deceived that they are so strong we can't resist them. Both of those are lies of the devil.

God can and often does put more on us than we can bear... by ourselves. He wants us to learn that we aren't strong enough to carry life's loads alone. That we need His help. Paul reminds us here that **God** is faithful. We usually leave that part of the verse out. But we also need each other's help as we said earlier. God will absolutely let us be tested or even tempted beyond what we can bear **alone**. Until we learn **that**, He'll keep teaching and testing us until we pass. Stop trying to pass life's tests by yourself. Rely on Him and on other believers.

Another thing we can do to ace our tests is to self-test from time to time. Say self-test. Many textbooks have self-tests in them so that students can see how they're doing. If they're ready for the real test or not. You can take the PSAT to see how prepared you are for the SAT. Gal 6: 4 says, "Each one should test **his own** actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else." So how do we do this? By comparing ourselves to the standard, to Jesus Christ. How do we measure up to His example and teachings? How are we doing obeying what His Word tells us? Where we find discrepancies, we should do the remedial work to get up to speed so we'll be ready for the real test.

2 Cor 13:5-8 tells us, "Examine **yourselves** to see whether you are in the faith; **test yourselves**. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is **in** you — unless, of course, you fail the test?" Imagine taking a physics test. That would be scary, except that you have Einstein's brain in your head. Paul reminds us here that as we face life's tests, we have Jesus in us! How awesome is that? So we must quit relying on our own strength, our own wisdom, our own expertise and rely on His.

Another thing that's important to remember is the way in which tests come. Many of us struggle when others criticize or curse us. Those are tests to be sure. We recognize those. The test is not to curse back. Not to respond with hatred and bitterness. But there are other tests that we sometimes don't spot. Prov 27:21 says, "... man is tested by the **praise** he receives." We all like praise don't we? We never think of compliments as tests, but Solomon says they are. How? We are tempted toward pride. To think more highly of ourselves than we ought. To get puffed up. Which puts us in line for Proverbs 16:18, Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

In fact, many can pass the tests of poverty, but far fewer pass the tests of success and prosperity. Look at the lives of those who have been ruined by too much money, too much popularity, too much praise. We all think we'd be different than those movie stars whose lives have imploded, or the lotto winners who have destroyed themselves, but the truth is we don't know. We don't know until we are tested in those same ways. The same weaknesses in them exist in us. Our test is to be faithful with whatever God has given us, much or little.

Some of you may be asking, "So does God purposefully make my life difficult?" Sometimes. He did that with Abraham. More often, however, He allows certain things into our lives that test us. A bad boss, a disease, a financial reverse. God didn't do it, but He allowed it. And by the way, not everything is a test. When bad things happen in our lives, God is not always testing us. Sometimes our own stupidity caused it! Don't blame that on God! And sometimes, because we live in a fallen universe, we all get sick, our cars break down, bad things happen. How do we know if these are tests or not? It doesn't matter. Our reaction should be the same either way. We're not only supposed to be Christ-like when we're taking a test but all day every day. We all know

people who passed their driving test that can't drive. Too often, I fear we spend a lot of time trying to figure out if God caused it, or the Devil, or is it a test, etc. It really doesn't matter. What matters is how we respond. Regardless of the origin of our difficulty, our reaction should be one of obedient faithfulness.

While we're being tested or enduring difficulties, let's be careful not to test God. We talk a lot about Him testing us while we fail to realize how we often test Him. We do that when we grumble and complain about our lives, our jobs, our spouses, our trials and tribulations. When we think He's being unfair to us. That He's not taking care of us or paying enough attention to us. When the Israelites did that in the desert, 1 Cor 10:9 says, "We should not test the Lord, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel." If you don't like snakes, you better not complain. Read Numbers 21. They grumbled about no water and all kinds of things. Let's not put the Lord to the test by grumbling or complaining.

The only time in the whole Bible where God tells us **to** test Him is with our tithing. Say tithing. In Malachi 3:10-12, God says, "Bring the **whole** tithe into the storehouse (10%), that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the Lord Almighty. 12 "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty." That's the only way we are to test God. Some of you have and have found He does what He's promised He'll do. But we are not to test Him with our griping, whining or our bellyaching or in any other way.

One of the most important aspects of this whole testing topic is for us to remember its purpose. We touched on this earlier. In our Scripture today, Peter says, "...so your faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." Don't you want to have genuine faith and not just a sham? Testing makes it real. In James 1 we are told that the testing of our faith produces perseverance which leads to spiritual maturity. In our Invitation to Give this morning, Paul says that through their severe trial, the Macedonians overflowed with joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. Testing can and should produce good things in us, if we allow it to. Whenever we are tested, we must remember God's goal of developing our best. Any good teacher roots for their students when they are taking a test. They want them to do well and that is never any truer than with our Heavenly Teacher and Father. He's not trying to destroy us but to mature us and build us up.

Perhaps you've heard of the silversmith who is refining a piece of silver, heating it up to unbearable temperatures, it seems. How does he know when the silver is pure? When He can see His own reflection in it. I don't know if that's true, but it

certainly is true spiritually. The testing of our faith is to make us more and more like Jesus.

And so, let us join David in Ps 139:23-24 by saying, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive (or wicked) way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” And then with Job (in 23:10) “... when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” For James (1:12) assures us that, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” That crown is much better than any big red A+, and it lasts forever! With Jesus’ help, go ace your tests with flying colors this week!