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The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

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Series: I Timothy

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

The story is told of an elder in a large midwestern church who was quite the pillar of the congregation, but who fancied himself to be a good bit more spiritual than he was. In the marketplace he was known for his bad language, his hot temper, and his shrewdness in business at others' expense. One day he made a guest appearance in the High School Sunday school class to talk about "letting people know that you're a Christian". After piously giving his little speech, Elder Smith turned to the young teens and asked the question, "And just why do people say I'm a Christian?" There was dead silence. Finally, a little lad in the back sheepishly answered, "Is it because they don't know you, sir?"

Men, I wonder how many people scratch their heads in confusion or ridicule our Lord in derision when we, in some way, announce that we're Christians. If they had no Bible to read but our lives, *how much of the Gospel would they know?* We, the men of the church, are meant to represent the Lord Jesus Christ to a lost world. We are to represent by our sacrificiality, our humility, our generosity, and our quiet gentleness, how Jesus looks in human form. Is it any wonder so many of our opportunities to witness go unheard, because the absence of Christ-likeness in our lives nullifies what we say? They aren't impressed with what we know...only with how we live. Edgar A. Guest wrote it this way:

I'd rather see a sermon
Than hear one any day,
I'd rather one should walk with me
Than merely show the way.

The eye's a better pupil
And more willing than the ear
Fine counsel is confusing,
But example always clear;

And the best of all the preachers
Are the men who live their creeds
For to see the good in action
Is what everybody needs.

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

I can soon learn how to do it
If you'll let me see it done,
I can watch your hands in action,
But your tongue too fast may run.

And the lectures you deliver
May be wise and true;
But I'd rather get my lesson
By observing what you do.

For I may misunderstand you
And the high advice you give;
But there's no misunderstanding
How you act and how you live.

The Christian world has passed through unbalanced decades where the emphasis in the church was on doing rather than knowing, followed by years of emphasizing knowing without doing. We need to gain the balance, both in the church and in our lives. We men are supposed to show the way, not just be loudspeakers that talk about it. I think so often a weary congregation and weary families are saying to us:

“Thank you for your teaching,
We'll take it under advisement...
But show us how it works in life...
That's a better advertisement!”

And that, is what Paul was trying to say in I Timothy, chapter three, as he zeroed in on how the men in the church were to behave and what they were to become if they were to be some of the few good men God was looking for to change the world.

So Paul, in the opening verses of chapter three, begins to interview the men in the church for leadership positions. He begins with those who were to serve as overseers, spiritual shepherds of the flock; and then he moves on to those who would be available for the task of deacons, servants who would tend the needs of the flock. Both tasks require similar qualifications, but they would have different responsibilities, for *both would be representing different realms of Christ's ministry to the church*. The elders would be demonstrating Christ's role as shepherd. The deacons would be demonstrating Christ's role as servant. Both would need clearly to be reflections of the nature of God *in their lives as well as their ministries*.

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

We began in the last two lessons by looking at the call to be “blameless” and the “husband of one wife”. We learned that the blameless man wasn’t sinless, but that he was carefully bringing his life to the place *in God’s power* where he was not subject to unexpected judgment for anything that contradicted who he claimed to be in Christ. He was becoming blameless. That is he was not consciously continually bringing about any situation in his life which he could be unexpectedly attacked and be found guilty. We learned that the “husband of one wife” was a “once-married man” whose heart beat for only one woman with the same intensity that Christ’s heart beats for the church, a man who gives himself away with the same abandon that Christ gave Himself for us: gladly dying, to self, to the world, and if need be, to life itself for the one to whom he has given his heart. And all this was to be without regard to either worthiness or gratitude because his faithfulness is predicated on the same thing as God’s faithfulness to Israel and to us. He chose us, and He has chosen to keep His Word. Therefore, He will never leave us or forsake us, and when we were the most repugnant, still in rebellion and sin, He died for us. We, as husbands, assume that role when we say, “I do”. That is why the marriage vows say, “till death do us part”. It’s not just a neat thing to say. It conforms to God’s commandment that “what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”

Now, having seen those two basic criteria unfold, we look to the other lists on God’s application form for leadership in the church, and we begin the process of taking the tests He has designed for us. As I see it, there are basically four tests: the test of character (who we are); the test of self-control (how we behave); the test of time (how well we wait); and the test of trial (how well we handle the responsibilities we have already been given). The fifteen or so questions he asks us can easily be divided into four distinct tests that each of us can take. The first of those four tests will take a couple of studies, and it looks like this:

The Test of Character

- 1- Are you calm in the storm?
- 2- Are you living to serve?
- 3- Are you the essence of dignity?
- 4- Are you giving yourself away?

Those four questions are nothing more than the application

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

of four of the Greek words Paul uses to define the role of the godly man. The first is the word *nephalion*, translated “calm, sober, watchfully at rest”. The second is the word *eipekes*, translated “patient, gentle, one who relinquishes rights as a servant does.” The third word is the word *kosmion*, translated “a life that is dignified, well-ordered, sensible”. The final word is the word *aphilargoron*. That word means “one who is not driven to get, but to give; one who is not covetous of things.” Those four words form the basis of the first test of the man of God. They demonstrate certain basic character qualities that Christ in us will reflect, *if we’ll let Him*. So I have simply formed four questions that might give us an idea of how we are doing in those four areas, and we will use them as a test, if you will, and call it, “The test of character”.

Question 1- Are you calm in the storm?

The first basic test of character of the man of God is the test of *nephalion*. The King James Bible translates it “vigilant”. The NIV uses “temperate”. Others use the words “sober”, or “watchful” or “calm”. Perhaps that word “calm” says more than any of the others, though it is in effect *a combination of those words that best expresses what the Greek is saying*. Its literal meaning would probably be typified by one whose eyes are so focused on things eternal that he while remains a realist concerning the circumstances, he is at rest in the circumstances, because of his confidence in God’s sovereignty.

A mature man doesn’t panic when the bullets start to fly. He stays cool. He stays restful. He stays confident. He is watchful, though. He knows the bullets are flying. He doesn’t live in one of those spiritual cocoons that imagines that life will have no problems if you have enough faith. No one had more faith than Jesus. And no one had more difficult circumstances. He was despised, rejected, ridiculed, and condemned *by the very people He came to help*. He had no place to lay His head, had to be buried in a borrowed tomb, and lived the life of an itinerant preacher who was cast out of His own church as a heretic.

His trials were not because of the absence of faith, but rather because of the presence of it. God tested His own Son *in all points like as we would be tested*. The tests weren’t proof of His weakness, but of His strength in the Father. Likewise, God’s man, who is portraying Christ to the church and to the world,

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

must demonstrate the same calmness under fire, if the world is to see the Mind of God in action.

We will look to God's Son as He lived on planet earth to demonstrate how He, in us, will look when we set Him free to be Himself. And always He was *nephalion*. Never did He lose His watchful calmness under fire. There are at least two special illustrations of this in Scripture that help us relate to our own trials. One was when He was being tempted (in Matthew 4). The other was in the midst of one of life's storms (in Mark 4). In the first illustration, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. In much the same way the Spirit will allow us to be tested to prove us.

Let's read Matthew chapter 4 beginning with verse 1,

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

(That shows us where, why and by whom.) We continue:

And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.

Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple,

and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."

Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him. (Matthew 4:1-11 NKJV)

Now I want you to notice two things about that passage because it tells us how we are to respond if Christ in us is responding in times of temptation. First, Jesus was preparing for the test for forty days and 40 nights as He fasted and prayed. (Most of us can't fathom doing that for forty minutes and forty hours would be an eternity.) So when the bullets were flying and the bombs were falling, He so had the mind of God that His spirit soared and the Word flowed and the enemy fled.

Secondly, Jesus had His Father's Word engraved on His heart. So every time Satan threw his fiery dart, the Master responded, "It is written". The Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, was, of course, equal to the task; and after three such attacks, the devil fled, and angels came and ministered to our Lord.

Why was Jesus so calm under attack? Why was He so watchfully prepared? *Because He never altered His priorities. He never got too busy to spend time with the Father; and He was never too busy to spend time in His Father's Word.* So when the bullets were flying and the bombs were falling, He so had the mind of God that His Spirit soared and the Word flowed, and the enemy fled.

Men, the man of God who would pass the test of *nephalion* must be a man whose priorities in life never waver. No one ever had a fuller agenda than Jesus Christ. No one ever had more *natural ability* than Jesus Christ. No one ever had more to do and less time to do it in than Jesus Christ. But He knew that "*of His own self He could do nothing*". So never at any time did He let the connection between Himself and His Father fray or be broken. Never did He cease meditating on His Father's Word. Too busy? My friend, if the God of eternity in human form *had to take the time to fast and pray and meditate in the Word*, how dare we have the audacity to think we need it less and less as time goes by? The longer we live, the tougher the tests; the tougher the tests, the greater the need for power. The greater the need for power, the more crucial it is that we *make time with God a progressively greater priority*. Satan whispers to us, "You've been in the Word for years, ease up." Have you ever heard the lie? I've bought that lie and I've paid the price.

That premise is no sounder than saying that you don't need

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

water any more, because you've been drinking it for years. The longer you live, the more important it is that you drink that H₂O. Your body needs it even more. And the older you get, spiritually, the more intense the battle becomes, because God trusts you even more. So *the older we get, the more important it becomes to spend quality time alone with God and quality time meditating in His Word.* The Living Water is our lifeline. Test 1 is that how we prepare for temptation really involves everything we do.

A second example is Jesus in the midst of life's storms. Turn to Mark 4:35,

On the same day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side."

Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him.

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling.

But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm.

But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?"

And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"

(Mark 4:35-41 NKJV)

This wasn't a temptation from Satan this was round two. This was one of those *natural circumstances of life* that had the potential to either glorify God or cause sheer pandemonium, *depending on the response.* In the case of the apostles, it was absolute panic and fear. Not so with Jesus. He was *at rest.* Watchful? Yes, He knew about the storm. Fearful? No, He wasn't afraid of the storm. He saw the storm simply as a way for His Father to manifest His glory. Since His Father was greater than any storm, *why should He be afraid?*

The apostles weren't up for the test. So *for their sakes,* Jesus calmed the storm. Now in the case of the apostles their response was sheer panic. I can relate. I'd have been so scared that I really

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

would have turned to God and said, “Don’t You care?” Oh, not overtly, but that’s what I would have thought. But look at Jesus; He was at rest. Watchful? He knew about the storm, but He wasn’t fearful. He wasn’t afraid of the storm because the storm was simply to be a way for His Father to manifest His glory. They were amazed. At what? That God had it all under control? No, that Jesus could take away a storm. They missed the whole thing. Beloved, *it isn’t what Jesus can protect you from that makes Him so wonderful*. It’s what Jesus can take you through as more than a conqueror that makes Him so wonderful.

What Paul is saying in I Timothy 3 is that if you are to become one of those “few good men” that God is looking for, you’re going to have to spend the rest of your life on your knees and in the Book. Christian activity is no substitute. Religious experiences won’t last. Spiritual cliches will wear thin. Past stories and past glories will grow old before you know it.

The calm, steady, persevering man of God will one day rise to the top of God’s heap and become *the kind of man God wants to lead His church*. He won’t get there because of what He’s done. He’ll get there *because of who he is*. He is a man of the Book. He is a man of prayer. So like His Master, when the enemy unleashes his thunderbolts of death, God’s man will stand like a rock... calm, prepared, and at peace. When problems beset the church, he’ll quietly point people back to the source of their strength. When pain and pressure and problems beset his world, he will stand like a mighty oak in a raging storm. Trees about him might topple and fall. He will be rooted and grounded in the Rock. He will stand.

Men, here is your first question and is test number one. “How calm are you in life’s storms?” Do others see you as a model of peace or do they see you come to pieces?

When the howling winds of adversity beat against your house, do you panic? or do you pray? Do your children see you as a model of peace? or as one who comes to pieces? Is your wife confident that your strength is in Jehovah? When she needs you the most, are you a rock she can lean on, or is she afraid to share what is really happening in her world for fear you’ll go out of control? The first test of a man of God, Paul is telling us, is his stability under fire. Jesus in us will stand when temptation comes becomes we have seen it in action in chapter four. In I Corinthians we read,

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.
(I Corinthians 10:13 NKJV)

If we have on the armor of God, when Satan attacks, *we will stand.*

Secondly, Jesus in us will not panic when life's "difficult circumstances" cloud the sunlight on the horizon and cause our hearts to tremble.

Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling.

[because] There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the most High.

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn. (Psalms 46:2-5 NKJV)

The man of God, who is walking with God, will be noted for his calm, watchful, sensible response to temptation and testing. He will be the anchor when the winds are blowing against the home and against the church. The Comforter through him will be a comfort to those around him. He will be noted for how he views life's tragedies and life's triumphs from God's perspective.

Men, I want us to spend a week meditating on Matthew 4 and Mark 4. Study the Savior in the wilderness faced with the awesomeness of satanic attack. Study the Master in that little boat when the winds of adversity were blowing against it with such force that from a human perspective there was no hope, and all those about Him were filled with panic and fear. And then ask God to give you a reflection of *your life under pressure*. Christ in you wants to demonstrate to the world in which you live *just how He still responds today...2,000 years later* to life's temptations and life's storms.

Then ask your wife or someone you have chosen to help you fill out your resume for godliness to assist you in assessing how they see you in life's difficult places. How steady are you when the telephone rings and it's bad news? How spiritual are you

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

when your plans go awry? When the boss calls with new orders? When the car breaks down? or the kids don't behave? Am I a rock or do I crumble into sand?

Remember. By meditating on how Christ responded to trials and tests you can visualize how He in you *will respond when you let Him*. Then by learning to relinquish control *the very second temptation comes or the very second the clouds overhead begin to form, victory is yours*.

If the Word is in our hearts and we have spent adequate time in the presence of the King, when the tests begin to come or the temptations begin to come we won't wallow in them first and give the devil a stronghold. The second we are aware of their presence we release ourselves into the King's hands, the Word flows, the devil flees.

We won't take this much time on the other tests of character. But this one is crucial to determining whether or not we are becoming the men of God we are called to be. And so, in closing, here are some steps we can take to begin the process of evaluation and transformation. We spend so much of our time as Christians *hearing*, and so little time *responding to what we hear*.

We may well be the most educated, most accountable, least responsive men in history. "To whom much is given, much shall be required." And we in the midst of this 20th Century glut of radio, tapes, television, seminars, and Christian bookstores lined with information, may have unconsciously mistaken knowledge for wisdom. Remember, knowledge is nothing more than information received. Understanding is knowledge personalized. Wisdom is understanding applied. If we are simply overeducated *hearers of the Word*, we are only learned fools. That's not what God is after.

The Test of Character: The Storms of Life

For Further Study and Application

1- Begin a process of self-evaluation. Ask your wife or a friend to agree to make you accountable the next six months.

- a- Are you constantly in the Word? Has it become so natural that to miss time in the Scriptures is like missing a meal?
- b- Do you spend quality time alone with God, worshipping and interceding and praising? Or have the pressures of time robbed you of the only really important thing in life?
- c- When life's storms arise, do those around you view you as mature, calm, secure? Or are you one of the first to panic?

2- Read and reread Matthew 4. Ask God to compare your response to temptation with His. What is lacking? What can you do about it?

3- Read Mark 4 again. Ask God to give you His kind of response in life's storms. Memorize Philippians 4:6-7, to remind you of where the peace comes from.

4- Tell God you want to be a man who is calm, temperate, and watchful at any cost. Ask Him to make you into that kind of a man.

That's the first test of character of a man of God. Are you calm in the storm? Jesus *always* is. And Jesus is...in us. He has told us to stretch forth, to reach with all we possess that we might become *that kind of man*. By His Grace, may we settle for *nothing less*.

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