

Russell Kelfer

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

521-B
Series: Testing

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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

Once again we are going to study the concept of testing. We have dealt with the fact that there are three basic principles in testing and seven ways that God tests His children. I had a little blackboard in my mind that I started checking this past week. I experienced all of the seven. As a review:

1- God tests us is by creating needs. He produces circumstances in our lives that we can't cope with so that we have to become dependent upon Him.

2- God tests recent instructions. This is the reason that we had notes in the mail that said, "Please end this series quick!"

3- God allows success or prosperity to test us.

4- God allows us to make a choice. He gives us situations where we have to make decisions. We then have to use the discernment of the Spirit to make the right choice.

5- God gives us impossible tasks or allows us to undertake impossible things. God lets us build our own ark.

6- On occasion, God inflicts us physically.

7- God tests us at the point of our greatest allegiance as He did with Abraham. God asked him to give up his fondest treasure, his son.

God does these things through six ways: tribulation, temptation, persecution, chastening, suffering and divine discipline.

God has a purpose in testing. He doesn't just do it as a game. He does this with a deep, spiritual purpose. We find in Scripture that God has many purposes for testing us:

1- To develop the mind of Christ so that our thoughts, our actions, our attitudes and our responses would be Christ-like. This is God's goal so that the second, third and fourth time the same test comes into our lives our response ought to become more and more and more godly.

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

2- To surface our weaknesses. You may have a problem with your temper, jealousy, pride or many other attitudes. God will continue to bring tests into your life so that you will wake up and realize that there are weaknesses to be dealt with.

3- To humble us. We learned this in Deuteronomy. God wants to bring us to a place of usability. In order to do this, He has to bring us to a place of humility first.

4- To advance the kingdom. There are other people who need Jesus Christ. We need to be placed in a position to share Him with them.

5- To draw us to the Word. How many of you, when you were in school, would look in the back of the math book to find the answers? The only time you did that was when you knew the question. Sometimes we have to look into the Bible to find the answers. God has to raise questions in us in order to create a need in our lives to find the answers.

6- To enlarge our vision of God. We looked at Job last week and recognized that, at the outset, Job had a godly response to testing. He said, "Lord, though you slay me, yet I will trust You. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." What a beautiful response. I don't think that any of us had that kind of response to testing this week.

However, that was not the end of his testing, it was the beginning. Beneath the surface there were needs in Job's life that those responses did not indicate. So the test went deeper and Job became hurt. His hurt then turned to bitterness. He began to curse the day he was born. His bitterness turned to hostility, and he began to question the wisdom of God and the purposes of God. He began to question the plan of God. He even questioned the fairness of God. His hostility turned into a vision of a greater God.

In the midst of despair, God came and spoke to Job. God didn't do anything to belittle Job. He simply enlarged Himself and showed Job who He was. When Job saw who God was, he repented and was restored. There was evidence of growth as a result of the testing and he came to know a God who had framed the heavens and brought the universe into existence. He found a far greater God than he had ever known before.

In the past few lessons, we have been learning how to sensitize our spirit so that when these tests come into our lives we will recognize them. The little test pattern of our mind will say, "This

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

is a test!” This is done not so that we can earn brownie points and say, “I’ve had 12 tests this week. How many did you have? My tests were bigger than your tests this week. I made a better grade than you did.” The tests are there in order to give us a greater vision and concept of God. Jesus Christ wants our attention so that He can minister to us.

More than that, in the last lesson we learned the reason God wants the tests to come into our lives is not just so that we will say, “This is a test!” but so that we will respond by seeing God as He really is. We realized the fact that it is not what God has or what God does or what God will do, but it is simply the fact that God is. That is all we need. The greater our vision of who God is, the greater our excitement concerning the tests of life will be. In a time of disappointment we simply need to realize that God is sovereign. In a time of loneliness we need to recognize that God is love, perfect love. In a time of weakness we need to recognize God is omnipotent. He is all-powerful. In a time of rejection we need to realize that God is omnipresent. He is there whether we realize it or not. In a time when we are without discernment we need to recognize that God is omniscient. He knows and He is all things. He is wisdom. He is faithful. He is light. He is grace. He is mercy. No matter what the circumstance or the test, God is. Because God is, He is more than adequate. He is all we will ever need.

7- God tests us to equip us for a ministry. II Corinthians 1:3-4 are some of our “lot” verses. These are verses we use a lot. The word “lot” can stand for a “Lifetime Of Truth” wrapped up in that one verse. You could spend the rest of your life studying and meditating on that one verse. We are going to look at II Corinthians 1:3-11 in the Phillips paraphrase. It is the basis for this entire lesson.

Thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He is our Father and the source of all mercy and comfort.

For He gives us comfort in all our trials...

(II Corinthians 1:3-4 JB Phillips)

He does this without exception. If there was a trial in your life this week in which you did not experience the comfort of God, it was simply because you were not available to God to receive it. We know this because the Scripture says that every one of our trials carries with it a package of comfort. God has gift wrapped it. Your name is on it. The circumstances are on it. God has mailed it to you, but if you don’t open your mail, it is not God’s fault. In all of

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

our trials the comfort is available. The reason is:

...so that we in turn may be able to give the same sort of strong sympathy to others in theirs.

(II Corinthians 1:4 JB Phillips)

During our troubles we receive comfort from God. He gives you a package and you are not to put it on a shelf. Comfort is a storageable item. It is a reusable commodity. God's comfort is given to us in a package and it is to be used at a later time for a specific purpose. What God has done is that He has given us something that is to be recycled in the fellowship. We will be able to give that same comfort and sympathy to others when they are having the same troubles.

Indeed, experience shows that the more we share in Christ's suffering the more we are able to give of his encouragement.

(II Corinthians 1:5 JB Phillips)

This passage is telling us that the more testing we have, the more testimony we have. This is where your testimony comes from. The more you are tested, the more you have a testimony. Paul tells us that the more we share in Christ's sufferings the more we are able to give His encouragement to others. This is true because the more we suffer, the more encouragement we receive and therefore the bigger box we have to unwrap and dole out to other people around us. If that is the case, we need to get more excited about the testings we receive because we are being equipped for a greater ministry. Paul goes on to say:

This means that if we experience trouble we can pass on to you comfort and spiritual help; (II Corinthians 1:6 JB Phillips)

Paul says, "God is not only teaching me, He is testing me so that I will have something to give to you so that you will be blessed. So, I can get doubly excited because He is growing me and helping you."

for if we ourselves have been comforted we know how to encourage you to endure patiently the same sort of troubles that we ourselves have endured.

(II Corinthians 1:7 JB Phillips)

"We are going to school," Paul said, "and the class is called 'Comfort.' We are learning to comfort by having to be comforted." He goes on to say,

We are quite confident that if you have to suffer troubles as we have done, then, like us, you will find the comfort and encouragement of God.

(II Corinthians 1:8 JB Phillips)

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

Paul said, “God didn’t just dole this out to me or the apostles or to the disciples. This is a commodity available to every believer.” He goes on to say,

We should like you, our brothers, to know something of what we went through in Asia. (II Corinthians 1:9 JB Phillips)

Here is the way Paul begins to share his comfort. He begins to share his circumstances. He told them it had really been rough, and they had been through some hard times. He wanted them to know about it because God had comforted them, and he wanted to share that comfort with others. Having shared the circumstances, he begins to share his heart.

At that time we were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact, we told ourselves that this was the end. (II Corinthians 1:10 JB Phillips)

Have you ever felt like that? This week? Paul did. He shared his heart with the Corinthians. He said, “We thought it was all over.”

Yet we believe now that we had this experience of coming to the end of our tether that we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God who can raise the dead. (II Corinthians 1:11 JB Phillips)

God is life. Therefore, God can raise the dead. Therefore, God gave them the privilege of going through what seemed to be a disaster.

It was God who preserved us from imminent death, and it is He who still preserves us. (II Corinthians 1:12 JB Phillips)

God created a need in order to create dependence. Paul ends with this:

We put our full trust in Him and He will keep us safe in the future and here you can join in and help by praying for us, so that the help that is given to us in answer to many prayers will mean eventually that many will thank God for our preservation. (II Corinthians 1:13)

Do you see how it works? Paul said, “God has kept us in the past, therefore, God will keep us in the future. Our hope is based on the experience of His blessing. The more of you who pray for me, the more of you who will get the greater blessing when you see God work this continued miracle. So you will be blessed, God will be glorified, and we will be strengthened. This is the way the body of Christ works. You will have to learn this.” So Paul shared

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

his circumstances. He shared his heart. He shared his purpose. He shared his life message.

In the King James Translation verses 3-4 goes like this:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort;

who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

(II Corinthians 1:3,4 NASB)

Paul is telling us that what God is doing to us and for us is to equip us for what He wants to do through us and with us. The word “who” means God. The word “comfort” is the word “paracletis” which means a calling alongside to aide, help or encourage. So God comes alongside of every believer in all of his testings, in the midst of them, while they are going on. Everyone, without exception, is what the word “all” means. The word “our” means a personal situation. It is designed for each individual Christian. The tests are the tribulations, the testings and the chastenings of God that we have been talking about in the last two lessons. God has decided to come alongside of us. He hasn’t sent us into the valley alone. He said, “I think I’ll go with you because I’ve got a ministry to perform.”

So God goes alongside as the Comforter in the midst of our tests for a reason. The reason He does this is so that we will be equipped to comfort. We will be called to come alongside of, to aide or encourage anyone who is in trouble. Every other Christian who is going through the same kind of trouble will need this encouragement. How are we to do this? We are to do this by using the same comfort, the reusable item that we received from Him.

Paul says, “You have passed through a test. You have been to class. You made a passing grade. Now I want you to teach the class. If you refuse to do so, the result is sin. It may be a class of one. It may be a class of two. It may be a class of three over a period of five years. I have people I want you to teach. I have people I want you to comfort with the comfort that you received or it will grow rancid like the manna in the wilderness. It is a part of your training for the ministry.”

Some of you have been involved in God’s training school, Comfort Theological Seminary. You may have recently graduated from Financial Failures 106. You may have just received a passing

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

grade in *The Mystery of Marriage* 212. You may have struggled through *The Essence of Employment* 263. You may have enjoyed *The Tragedy and Triumph* 310. Whatever it is, everyone has been tested and comforted and encouraged by God either recently or in his or her Christian experience.

I want to ask you to do something that is more practical than theological. I want you to think about what would happen in a class or small group, if as part of the body of Christ they would learn to function properly as in II Corinthians 1. Have you ever realized what would happen? It would be like it says in Ephesians that the whole body, knit together, ligaments and joints would begin to work together to build up the whole of the body so that it would be strong and filled with power.

How many of you have said to yourself, “I don’t have a ministry.”? If you have said that, it isn’t true. Maybe you don’t minister, but it is not because you don’t have a ministry. If you have ever been tested and received comfort, you have a ministry.

I want to go through a list of ministries that God has created in the body. If you have ever experienced or been through any of these tests, make a note and ask yourself if God may be equipping you to minister this comfort to someone else. You may say, “I haven’t been through any difficult situations in my life, and I’ve failed the ones I’ve been through.” God hasn’t failed them, and you have been through more than you give yourself credit for.

Have you ever been lonely or depressed? Have you ever been comforted by the Spirit of God or the Word of God or the people of God in the midst of that depression or discouragement? You may be a housewife who has experienced deep loneliness and God has comforted you in the midst of that loneliness. There are other housewives who have experienced deep loneliness and they need someone to comfort, encourage and love them. They need another woman who has been through the same experience and received the comfort of God to call them up and say, “I’d like to spend some time with you.” You may say, “I’ve never been trained in a seminary. I’ve never disciplined anybody.” That’s great. You know God and you have experienced His comfort. You have been trained in God’s Comfort Seminary to pass it on to someone else. You may say, “I can’t easily make friendships, but I went through a time when God ministered to me in that area. When people came to me and made friends with me, it was a real comfort. It

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

really meant a lot to me.” God was equipping you to go out and make friends with other people and do the same thing in their lives that He did in yours.

Maybe you have been a lonely church member. You may have been in a situation where it seemed that nobody cared. You were lonely and God began to minister to your heart. Now there are other lonely church members all around you. The comfort you received from God will turn rancid if you don't find them and pass on the comfort you received. You were trained by God to pass on comfort in place of loneliness.

You may be someone who is in the midst of loneliness and you want that kind of comfort. I believe the function of the body of Christ should be a need-meeting group. There ought to be an underground clearing place so that those of you who have a need and those of you who have passed through that need can meet together and have fellowship together and be strengthened. That is the way the body works. You can call it what you will. You can call it a ministry core. You can call it the body of Christ at work. This is the way the body of Christ should work.

Some of you may have been through a divorce or a bad marriage. You may be hiding in the background saying, “God can't use me.” Right in the midst of every group, there are those who have passed through or are passing through the same problem. They need you desperately. They need to know how to respond. They need to know that they are loved. They need the same kind of comfort you received when you passed through the same test. You need to come out of the woodwork and become available to them. They need you. You have been equipped and trained in the seminary of experience. You may have said, “I don't know why God allowed that experience to pass through my life.” Here is one reason. He was equipping you to minister to other people.

Maybe you have been through a serious illness or physical affliction. You may say, “I never want to go through that again.” Maybe you will, maybe you won't. But you did. That equipped you to minister to the needs of people who are afflicted with serious afflictions. You may have expected to die. You may have had to deal with frustrations of fear, anger, weakness and the needs of your loved ones. You may say, “It was the toughest time of my life, but when it was over, God gave me much comfort and real friendships. I learned so much about the person of God in the

midst of it.”

I want you to know that there are people all around you who are experiencing the same kind of problem you did. They need someone who has passed through the flood to remind them and encourage them that God’s boots are waterproof and that His umbrella is leak proof. They need to know that He sustains, encourages and keeps. You and I are selfish, having passed through that fire, if we are not willing to become vessels to put out that fire for someone else. We miss the blessing of being usable.

Maybe you are the parent or have been the parent of a rebellious teenager. Some of you have passed through the fires of having a rebellious teenager and others around you are coming into that stage where they have teenagers. They can read all of the books and listen to all of the tapes, but they need to talk to someone eyeball to eyeball who has been there. You can say, “You’re not alone. Many, many, many have passed through this fire and many, many, many will in the future. But let me tell you what God does in the midst of it. Let me tell you how He does it. Let me help you go through it.”

Maybe some of you have had a bad job experience. Perhaps you were misunderstood, misused, underpaid and overworked, but eventually you were spiritually blessed. You saw the hand of God upon it all when it was all over, but in the midst of it you hated every minute of it. I could give you names of people in this class who are going through the same problem. They are struggling. They are weeping. Their families are struggling. They don’t know what to do. Some of you are qualified to help them.

Maybe you have been in financial ruin or under financial pressure. Maybe you had your own personal crash. Maybe you have experienced your own personal depression. Maybe you had to crawl back on top and begin honoring the principles of God. God may have had you struggle for a while. You had to watch God put all of the pieces back together again. Having passed through it, there are some people you know right now who are going through the same thing. They are not sure they are going to make it and they need some encouragement. That is why God tested you. That is why God brought you through that. One great reason was to humble you, teach you and give you the mind of Christ. He also wanted to equip you to meet the needs of the rest of the group.

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

God wants to develop a group of counselors. We know that any counselor is best in the area in which he is experienced. There are hundreds of counselors in the church who are equipped primarily to counsel in only one area they have passed through, but they are equipped.

Maybe you have been through an unequal yoking experience. Perhaps this experience was in a business or in a marriage. You have learned the principles from it and would like to share those principles with someone else who is struggling in the same area.

Maybe you have been through a death or tragedy affecting a loved one. There are others who have just experienced a similar situation. There are others who will have to pass through that same trial in the future. They need you. Many can pass out all of the pious phrases and clichés, but someone who has been there has love, comfort and encouragement to pass out. They need you.

Maybe you had a quest for a deeper spiritual walk. God met that need, filled you with His Spirit and gave you encouragement and comfort. There are others who are struggling with that same battle. They want a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ. They need you.

Maybe you have a husband in the ministry. There are pressures and problems that are affiliated with that position whether it be a vocational or lay-ministry position. You are equipped, if you have passed through that, to encourage other wives who are going through the same thing. You can help them to understand and relate properly.

Maybe you have been through a marriage crisis. Some of you have. Most of us have in one form or another. Some are little and some are big. Everybody passes through them. They need the comfort and encouragement of someone a little older who can show them that when it is over, they will have learned some valuable lessons. They need to hear that God will see them through it.

Discipleship relationships are very important. Child rearing is another important area. There are some people who have reared families and have gone through the cradle to the teen years and on. They have seen the victories that have come out of the test. They know what God can do. There may be others who are struggling at different levels in meeting the needs of their children. They need you. Are you going to put your light in a

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

bushel and hide it? Are you going to hide the comfort God gave you? Are you going to hide the lessons God taught you?

Some of you have dealt with emotional illness in the past. You have struggled through deep times of depression. You have worked through deep emotional problems. You may have had a nervous breakdown. You may have experienced a serious emotional crisis. God met your needs and proved Himself adequate no matter how long it may have taken. Now you have something to give because there are others who are experiencing the same kinds of problems. They need you. The Lord needs you to be available to meet their needs.

Maybe you have had a problem finding the will of God for your life. God finally gave you some input, some principles and some wisdom. You were able to make wise decisions. There are people who have struggled with doors that didn't open and doors that did open. They are wondering if this is the will of God. They need you.

Maybe you were involved with drugs or alcohol. There are many Christians who are struggling with the same problems today. They need you.

Maybe you were involved in a cult or in the occult and went through a terrible crisis in the midst of it and God proved Himself to be more than faithful. There are others wrestling with the same problem. They need you.

Perhaps you went through a time of personal failure. Maybe you went through a self-image problem that you struggled to overcome. God gave you the grace to overcome it. Now you need to pass on that ministry. Are you ready to make yourself available to others?

What I am saying to is that every test that you passed through is for a purpose. It was to equip you to minister to the saints. Believe it or not, these saints are all around you. Granted we don't look like it, but in the eyes of God, we are His children and we need what He gave you. Are you going to bundle it up, tie it up, put it under the counter and hope you will never need to use it? Or, are you going to unwrap it, dump it on the table and call on the Lord, "Lord, I'm sorry. You've given me a whole lifetime of comfort. Now please equip me to go out and spread it around."

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

1- Accept your calling.

Meditate on II Corinthians 1:3-11. Accept the fact that one of the reasons for your past testing is that you were being equipped to minister. Quit fighting God in this area.

2- Assess your own message.

Take a piece of paper and make a list of the tests God has put you through. List the areas of your life that God has tested and the things He has been equipping you thereby to pass on to others. That is what the body of Christ is all about. On that list write down these thoughts: How did God minister to you? Did He use people or the Word? Was it continuous, quick or slow? How did God meet the need of your life? Make a notebook of comfort in each of these areas. Write down the ways God ministered to you. He may not minister to other people in exactly the same way, but you will have a point of reference from which to give testimony.

Write down what Scriptures helped you. Maybe you were in the midst of despair over a death. Maybe you were in the midst of despair over a marriage problem. Maybe you were in the midst of despair over a job problem. God gave you a verse. You asked for a verse, and you received a verse from a friend or from the Word directly. Write that down. God wants to equip you to comfort others. A person may come to you or God may lead you to that person, and you need to be able to share with them the same comfort wherewith we ourselves are also comforted by God.

What people or materials helped? I would encourage everyone who has been through a test and has received help to make a list of the books or messages or tapes that God might have used in your life or that you might have heard since and get a copy of each one. Put them in a file because God may send someone to you in the next few weeks. Mark my word. He is going to send somebody to you in the next few weeks to test you in this area. He will send somebody to you who is going through the same thing you went through. You need to have what you received comfort from to give to them. Make a list of what principles applied. Make a list of the frustrations you experienced.

The one thing that someone who is looking for comfort doesn't need is a bunch of cardboard Christians with pious expressions that say, "God is love. Everything is going to be all right. Praise the Lord." That is not real. What they need is to know, "Hey, I

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

went through the same thing, and it was tough. I hurt and it took so long that I thought I wasn't going to make it. But you know, all of the toughness and all of the time turned into blessing and joy. Let me tell you how it happened." Be real. Be honest. Make a list of the frustrations you experienced and be willing to share them. What qualities of God changed your perspective?

3- Begin to pray for people.

I plead with you to begin to pray that God will send you people that need the comfort He has given you. I don't care if it involves a marriage problem or a financial problem or a personal problem. God has been ministering in your life. I want to encourage you to have the courage to get down on your knees as couples or individuals and say, "Lord, You've been a blessing to me. You've poured Yourself into me in these different areas. I hereby make myself available to you. Do with me whatever You want. I want to be available to pass on whatever You have given me. It is not me, it is You in me. I want to be used." Begin to pray for people you know who have those problems. That is part of your ministry. You can pray for them with so much more power than someone who has never been there. You then begin to pray that God will send you or take you to people who need you.

4- Become available and sensitive.

We've all said, "Lord, use me." The phone rings and you say, "Oh no, I don't want to talk to that person right now." You get a letter in the mail and say, "Good grief, I don't have time to answer a letter." You may say, "Oh Lord, make me usable." What hypocrites we are. How usable we become will depend upon our response the first time God tries to use us. We don't need to ask God to drop these people in our laps, either. Once the Spirit of God convicts us and concerns us, we need to ask Him to give us sensitive eyes, and if need be, when we see a need we should go to them. If people hadn't come to us, many of us would still be struggling.

5- Be willing to share your message.

Paul shared the message. He shared the comfort. He shared God's perspective. He was willing to reflect honest love. There are too many "takers" in the Christian game of life. God has tested each one of us in different areas. He has comforted us in the middle of those tests. He wanted to develop in you a ministry.

Testing: To Equip Us to Minister

What is it going to take for you to become usable? Are you going to have to go through the course again? Are you going to have to pass through the same fire to wake up? Or, is God going to have your attention right now as a result of His Word? Are you then going to become accountable and willing to become available to meet the needs of the rest of the body of Christ? Is it going to take another test and more comfort? Or, are you ready to enter the ministry? Some of you are already in the ministry in a big way. Some of you are waiting in the wings and feel unqualified. I'm here to tell you that if you have ever been tested, you are qualified. I want to encourage you to memorize II Corinthians 1:1-11 and meditate on it in the weeks to come. You might want to get the Phillips paraphrase and memorize it that way.

Begin to reconstruct God's ministry in your life. Begin to pray that He will use you. Begin to make yourself available to Him. You can look back and say, "That was a test, but God is." Because you were tested and because God is, now you are equipped to spread the comfort of God. If it began with just a small group, what a transformation there would be in the lives of the Christian community. The God of all comfort comforts us in all of our testings to equip us to comfort those who are going through the same trouble, using the same comfort that we ourselves received of God. Let's go into ministry for God's glory.

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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

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