

REFINE US, Part 1

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Do you ever feel like being a Christian is hard—too hard? Do you wrestle with why your life is difficult in certain respects? When you try so hard to be good and to be kind, why don't people recognize and appreciate it? Why isn't life easier? When will you get a break?

Over the next couple of months, I want to address these questions with some answers from the Scriptures. They will be practical answers. They will offer guidance and encouragement. They will lead you toward peace and joy in your heart.

Groundwork

Today, I want to lay some groundwork for this series of studies. And groundwork is exceedingly important!

Jesus told a parable about the four kinds of ground on which His words fall—hardened soil, shallow soil, soil cluttered with weeds, and fertile soil. The same seed was sown every time, but each time, or under each condition, yielded different results.

This parable was something of a key to the rest of Jesus' parables, in terms of their expected impact on those who heard them.

Mark 4:13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, ¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced. ²⁰ And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

While all of this story is informative and useful, I will be concentrating today on the third condition and its result: On account of the word that has been received, trouble or persecution arise, and immediately those who received it fall away.

Exaggerated Feelings

Many are inclined to believe they should never be tested—that everything should go well for them, either because they are good or because they are blessed—and trials are a source of confusion for them. “Why me, Lord?”

Others feel that they are destined to trials and to always falling short of their dreams—that they are miserable people who deserve nothing and will get nowhere in life.

Both of these ideas exaggerate a person’s value—one in an overly positive direction, the other in an overly negative direction.

Here’s the truth: you may be a good person, but you’re not *perfectly* good—there is still room for growth. And you most certainly are a blessed person, but you are not *exempted* from trials by the Lord’s blessing. And you don’t deserve most of what you enjoy in life, but you are *not* a reject or a burden to the Lord.

Before I proceed, I need to deal with a common misconception that adds confusion to this theme. So, take a brief detour with me...

The Apostle James asks an important question and offers a revealing answer:

James 4:1 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from the evil desires at war within you? ² You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can’t get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it. ³ And even when you ask, you don’t get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

The truth is plain: Interpersonal struggles are the result of selfish greed and envy. Period.

But this truth is often misapplied as an explanation for personal (not *interpersonal*) trials—not yours, of course, because you know that you’re neither greedy nor scheming. However, we judge *others* (often without facts) when they are struggling as somehow *deserving* of their struggle, imagining that it is due to their own selfishness or sin.

While this is a possible conclusion, it actually is not the most common one for Christians. Jesus was very clear about the usual cause: Personal trials or persecutions arise “*on account of the word.*” You have embraced God’s words in your life and God is now putting His promises to the test. Your life is the crucible in which the test takes place.

The test is not given to see if God’s words can stand up to it, but to *show* that’s God’s words are more than enough! He watches over His words to perform them. He will not permit them to fall to the ground fruitless. But they will be tested in the heart and life of each one who receives them.

Psalms 12:6 *The Lord's promises are pure, like silver refined in a furnace, purified seven times over.*

“If I never had a problem, I wouldn’t know that God could solve them. I wouldn’t know what faith in God could do.” (*Through It All*, Andrae Crouch)

God’s promises are thrown up against the circumstances of your life—to overcome and transform them. Not magically, and not without resistance. Force is required to overcome natural law, or natural affections or inclinations. The question for us is: what force?

Zechariah 4:6 *This is what the LORD says to Zerubbabel: It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.*

So it is not the force of mind or will or brute strength, but the power of the Spirit of God active in our lives. I will say more about this later.

Let me recap: God gives us promises to transform our lives. When embraced in faith, those promises will be put to the test—in us—by the elements of our human nature and our life experiences.

God's Promises

Who has seen a book (and there are many of them) listing God’s promises for a happy, healthy, and holy life? Even if you haven’t seen such a booklet, it’s likely that you have your own list of the promises you’ve found during your reading of the Bible. We highlight those that we need for our situations. We underline those that we hope to enjoy in our lives. We embrace them in prayer and endeavor to “believe God” for them.

A few of those promises are given generally to the human race, regardless of anyone’s personal fitness to receive them. For instance, “*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” (Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Romans 10:13). That’s a carte blanche promise to everyone—come as you are, reach out to God and He will save you.

But most of God’s promises are conditional; that is, there is a condition that activates the promise—without meeting the condition, the promise is fruitless. The most common condition required is faith in God or, specifically, in Jesus Christ. But many times that condition can only be expressed by some action on our part—maybe a declaration, maybe a change in behavior, maybe a risk taken in faith.

God's Commands

These conditions may also be regarded as commandments, because they are necessary for the desired results.

We more often refer to God's promises than to His commandments. Over the next several months, I hope to change that—in a way that lifts us to greater obedience and greater celebration of who God is. For both express God's expectations—promises, His expectations *for us*; commands, His expectations *from us*.

Some seem to think that God's commandments are passé—of a different era, to be ignored. At the same time, they champion the fact that Jesus Christ is the “*same yesterday, today, and forever.*”

God has not changed. And His expectations have not changed. We have to get to the heart of the matter, the core of this relationship He has fostered with us.

Matthew 5:17 “Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. ¹⁹ So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. ²⁰ “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”

Apparently, there is a danger, common to us all, of misunderstanding the reason Jesus has come! Emphatically, He said He had *not* come to abolish (or abandon) the message of the Law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. None of it shall be dismissed until all is fulfilled. (True for Him, and true for us, too!)

Then, very directly, He warned that we ignore them to our own detriment, or we embrace them to our own benefit. We choose, by our regard for God's commands.

What He seeks in us is a kind of righteousness that is *better* than that of the religious teachers and Pharisees of His day. They were both meticulous and pragmatic, and no one could doubt either their sincerity or discipline. But the First Covenant required faith to be expressed in ritual obedience—that is the elementary school level of faith.

The Second Covenant requires something better. New Covenant faith expresses itself in acts of love—that is the college level of faith. (The acts are not necessarily different, but the motivations are.)

We are not leaving behind the God of the Old Covenant (He hasn't changed), and we should not leave behind the words of the Old Covenant (which is why our Bible contains both), but we must change the way we demonstrate our faith in Him, going deeper, if you will, into the spirit of God's commands, or, in Jesus' words, understanding why He came.

And this is where we will begin when we pick up this theme again in a few weeks.