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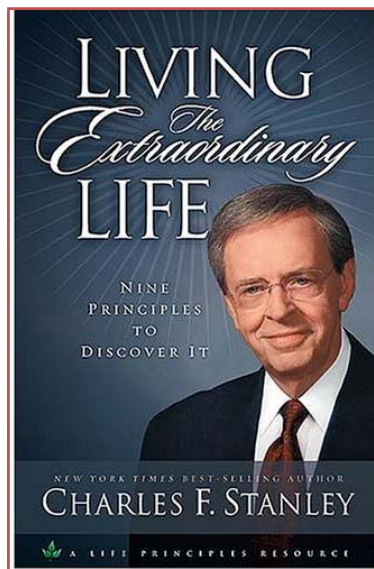
GOD REFINES US BY **FIRE**

[ADVERSITY & HOW TO RESPOND]

WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

OCTOBER 19, 2008

LESSON #7 FROM THE **MASTERWORK** SERIES STUDY OF:



GOD REFINES US BY FIRE

[ADVERSITY & HOW TO RESPOND]

Suppose a burglar breaks into your house and holds your child, your spouse, or best friend hostage until you disconnect your brand new wife-screen, high definition television set so he can steal it. Would you not sacrifice the television set for that person? Of course you would! In fact, you would probably plead, "Take the television set! Take the DVD! Take the stereo equipment! You can even shoot me if you want, just leave my child or my spouse alone!"

When a burglar breaks into your house and demands your valuables, your priorities become crystal-clear. You have no difficulty sorting out what is replaceable and what is irreplaceable, what is important and what can be sacrificed. When it is over, you can reflect upon your behavior during the crisis to learn what is truly important to you.

This is why God allows adversity to break into your life: it is a sort of fire drill to reveal to you what your true values and allegiances are. For adversity holds your spirituality hostage while it demands your possessions, your health, your dignity, or even your life. Your reaction betrays what your true values are, and when it is all over, you can ponder your reaction and reorder your priorities.

This morning we continue with the 7th Principle about living the extraordinary life from Dr. Stanley's book: *God refines us by FIRE*. Do you understand that whatever you are not willing to sacrifice is your greatest treasure, and wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be also? Adversity strips away the pretense and self-delusion and shows you what you treasure the most and where your heart truly is. Dr. Stanley tells us that *God uses adversity in the lives of His children!* What an understatement. The opening phrase of Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* says it correctly: "Life is hard!" Does anyone have any doubt about that? And don't

we wonder where God is during times of adversity and trials?
"Come on, Father. Where are you?"

As we start this morning, I want you to stop what you're thinking and listen to these reassuring words from **Psalm 50:15**. I'm reading from the New Living Translation. Psalm 50:15 says: *"Trust me in your times of trouble, and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory."* (Psalm 50:15 NLT) Just like the title on the board says, God refines us by fire. All week we've looked at the "WHY?" to that question and hopefully have a better and more godly understanding of why God allows trials and adversity to come into our lives for a season. But still we ask, *"WHY?"*

Do you recall what Malachi says about God? Turn to **MALACHI 3: 3 (NIV)** and let's refresh our memory as we pursue this thought for a moment: *²"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,*

Did you hear that: God sits as a refiner and purifies the silver. Malachi says that God is like a silversmith. I heard a silversmith once describe his job. And in fact, I want to read something that he said. Listen to this very carefully. Here's what a silversmith says he does when refining the silver. He said, *"I must sit with my eyes steadily fixed on the furnace, for if the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured." And in that interview he said, "I never take my eye off of the silver in the furnace. I don't want to take it out too early because if I take it out too early, it won't be purified. But I don't want to leave it in too late because if I leave it in too late, it will be injured." So he said, "When the silver is in the fire, I focus. I don't let anything distract me, I let nothing take off my focus. I watch that silver carefully, waiting for that right moment to take it out." And they asked him, "When's the right moment?" And he*

said, "I know the silver is pure when I can see my face reflected in it."

Maybe this doesn't happen to you, but I always think I'm in the worst part of the storm. As soon as the storm comes, I'm saying, "Okay, God, bail me out. Here I am. Find me. Rescue me." But sometimes he doesn't rescue me. Sometimes he doesn't come. I have to have the assurance that He is the great silversmith and while I'm in the furnace, He focuses and watches. His job isn't a quick rescue mission. His job is to purify me. So He holds until the right moment and then He comes. Never too early, never too late. Just on time.

At what age did you realize life isn't easy? The question isn't WHETHER you're going to have difficult times; the question is what you're going to do with those difficult times. Right? *I used to jog at least a mile every morning, early, early. No matter whether it was cold, wet, hot, whatever. I found it my time before the hustle and bustle of the day began to meditate and just talk with God. During those times, I'd often zoom in on one primary thought. For example, here's one: "God has the whole world in His hands."*

Remember that old gospel song? He's got the wind, the rain, the tiny little baby, yes, even you and me in His hands. How easy it is to forget that! And it isn't limited to our geography or our culture, you know. He's got Iraq in His hands (That's a relief, isn't it?), not to mention the Middle East, Afghanistan, Korea, India, China, Russia—all right there in the palm of His sovereign hands. And while we're at it, He's got our future, the election, our children, our circumstances, our friends, our foes in His hands...within His grasp...under His control. Even when imaginary fears skip in like a morning frost to blight our faith, He's there—in charge. What a great comfort? That basic thought really helps to stabilize us. Remember what one of our memory verses says, **JEREMIAH 29:11**? *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future."*

But, guess what? I forget that promise a lot. Do you? Aren't there times when we find it really hard to believe that our circumstance is truly in His hands? Not only are the wind and the rain and the tiny little baby in His hands, but life's minor interruptions as well as major calamities are too? In fact, would you believe they never leave His attention? So what about the hurricane in New Orleans or the tsunami in South Asia with more than 100,000 dying? Tough question, but the answer is still the same... "*in His hands.*"

So, if life is hard and God is really in control, the question comes back to WHY? Why do we have struggles and trials? What do you think? Most of us as Christians would rather not have to deal with this reality, much less talk about it. Unfortunately struggles are NORMAL for the Christian and if anybody tells you the opposite, they're flat out WRONG! Turn to **1 PETER 1: 6-7 (NLT)** and let's look at trials from Peter's perspective: *⁶So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. ⁷These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold--and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*

So we see that struggle is normal for the Christian. **Then, how would your life be changed if you came to regard your struggles as gifts from God meant for your benefit rather than burdens to be carried or punishments to be endured? How do we benefit from struggles?** [REVEAL TO US OUR INHERENT WEAKNESS; KILL OUR PRIDE AND ARROGANCE; HUMBLE US AGAIN AND AGAIN; FOR US TO CRY OUT FOR GOD'S HELP; REVEAL THE USELESSNESS OF HUMAN EFFORT APART FROM GOD'S STRENGTH' TEACH US TO RELY ON THE LORD ALONE; CAUSE US TO LOVE THE SAVIOR WHO DELIVERS US FROM SIN; LEAD US INTO A LIFE OF CONTINUAL REPENTENCE; MAKE US MORE WATCHFUL AGAINST SIN]

Do you ever think that adversity and our struggles are GOOD for us? How many times have you thought to yourself in the middle of

a trial or struggle how grateful you were for the struggle? *"Pour it on, LORD. I know this is for my own good."* To most people adversity, or suffering, is an enemy. Stop and think. Who ever thought of adversity as a friend? Or is it? Let's look at what James says in his letter to his church in Jerusalem in **James 1:2-4 (NKJV)**: *²My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.* Listen to the same verse from The New Living Translation: *²Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. ³For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.*

Or what about this paraphrase from Peterson's The Message: *²Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. ³You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors.* Now, as we continue, let's look at the next few verses from **JAMES: 1: 3-4**: *³For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.*

Notice the common thread running throughout all the translations. I think of the process as a domino effect. Trials and tests come that impact our patience and give it a chance to grow. As patience begins to develop, strong character is cultivated, moving us ever onward toward maturity. There is no shortcut!!! From these verses, we learn a great deal about trials and adversity.

FIRST - trials are common for Christians to encounter. Don't ever let anyone tell you (or you tell them) that when you become a Christian, you trials are over. Get real! Notice what James says in verse 2 -- **WHEN** you encounter, not "if." Trials are the rule, not the exception.

SECOND - trials come in various categories. They may be physical, emotional, financial, relational or spiritual. They may slip in

unexpectedly and knock on the door of your business, your church or your home. Any time, or any season. Suddenly, like a car accident, or a natural catastrophe. They can be directly related to our own sin, the sin of others, or not related to sin at all. Frankly, some trials seem to blow in without reason. The tragedy of 9/11, or Hurricane Katrina, or the tsunami in South Asia.

THIRD - trials put our faith to the test. What happens when you suffer? When I encounter it, there's something that simplifies life and draws me back to the basics. I've had clients facing terrible diseases and their untimely death, but not one of them have said, Dean, I'm sorry I can't work longer. I'm going to really miss working. But, discussions of children, family times, trips, wives, husbands, etc.

FOURTH - Without trials, there could be no maturity. James, in verse 4, says we experience trials so that we may what???? BECOME "PERFECT AND COMPLETE." Most often, because of the pain, the discomfort, or hardship, we try to cut our trials short - put an end to them. But what does James say we should do: ENDURE the trial...let it run to completion. When it does, you'll be a better person.

Remember the words from the old hymn: *"When through fiery trials my pathway shall lie, Thy grace all sufficient shall be my supply?"* Well fiery trials and ordeals aptly describe what most of us must pass through at one time or another in life ... some, more frequently than that. Peter addresses Christians who are going through just such desperate circumstances: Look at **1 Peter 4:12-13 (MSG)**: [The Message says] *Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.*

SO, HOW DO WE REACT? Isn't that the real test question? How do YOU respond? What happens when we face adversity and struggles? In the real world -it's still WHO YOU KNOW, isn't it?

We turn to those close to us, friends, family, and GOD. How do you really get to know God? (READ, PRAY, WORSHIP, LISTEN)

FIRST RESPONSE - usually is "surprise." "I can't believe this is happening!" But, in verse 12 that we just read, Peter says what? "Don't be surprised." The lack of surprise will enable us to be calm. Life is like a schoolroom, isn't it? We encounter pop quizzes and periodic examinations. The wonderful thing about God's schoolroom, however, is that we get to grade our own papers. You see, he doesn't test us so He can learn how well we're doing—He tests us so **WE** can discover how well we're doing. Look back over your life...Back 10 years ago when you were tested, perhaps you didn't do too well. Five years ago, you did better. Maybe last year, an even tougher test confronted you and you did rather well. Hopefully, with each test, we improve. **Have your tests made you a better person?** Have you learned things that you didn't think you needed to learn? Isn't that the way it usually is? **DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN A TEST COMES!** Even though you don't know you need to learn certain things, **GOD KNOWS**, and He sovereignty determines, "Now's the time." God is molding you into the image of His Son, and that requires trials.

SECOND RESPONSE - This one is even more amazing..."Keep on rejoicing." I hear you saying, "What? Are you kidding me? We're talking trials, right?" Right. "We're talking fiery ordeals, correct?" Correct. "And you're telling me to keep on rejoicing?" **WRONG!** I'M not telling you this -- **GOD IS TELLING YOU TO KEEP ON REJOICING.** "To the degree that you share the suffering of Christ, keep on rejoicing." Remember James' statement in verse 2 of James 1: *"Consider it all joy."* Why? Because trials enable us to enter into a more intimate partnership with Christ. Trials, therefore, become a means to a greater end: a deeper relationship with Christ on earth and a richer reward from Him in heaven. **JAMES 1:12** says: *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*

GOD has a crown reserved for those who endure the fiery ordeal. Now in case you still are not convinced that trials can bring rejoicing, I want you to look at a classic case in point, recorded at the end of **ACTS 5**. There we find that the Apostles, including Peter, had just been flogged and ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. (PAUSE and imagine that bloody brutal scene.) Look at what they did while they were still bleeding from the beating: ⁴¹*So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, REJOICING that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.* ⁴²*And every day, in the temple, from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

Now these men were just like us ... not saints, but real-life folks. Only difference - they refused to let their "fiery ordeal" steal their joy or deter their objective. An attitude of joyful gratitude opens our minds to glean lessons from adversity and suffering we would not otherwise learn.

So much for how to react! Now let's focus on what to remember:

Trials are never wasted. God never says, "Oops, made a mistake on that one. I shouldn't have given you that. I meant that for Joe or Beverly or Joan. Sorry, Dean." It's as if the Lord has our name on specific trials. They are specifically designed for us, arranged with our weakness and our immaturity in mind. He bears down and doesn't let up. And we groan and we hurt and we weep and we pray and we grow and we learn. Through it all, we learn to depend upon His word. You see there really is hope beyond our trials.

As implied by C. S. Lewis in "*The Problem With Pain*," trials are not an elective in the Christian-life curriculum: they are a required course. Trials 101 is a prerequisite to Christ likeness. But sometimes the tests are so gruelingly comprehensive that our tendency is to drop the course entirely. Especially if we feel abandoned by God. But look at **PSALM 139:1-5**: *Lord, you have examined me and know all about me. You know when I sit down and when I get up. You know my thoughts before I think them.*

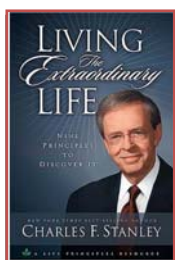
You know where I go and where I lie down. You know everything I do. Lord, even before I say a word, you already know it. You are all around me - in front and in back - and have put your hand on me.

Max Lucado wrote a great book several years ago called JUST LIKE JESUS. In it he said that God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you there. He wants you to be *just like Jesus!* Isn't that good news? You aren't stuck with today's personality. You aren't condemned to grumpy-dom. You are changeable. You are tweakable. Even if you worried each day of your life, you needed worry the rest of your life. God will change you. And he will change you to be just like Jesus. And guess how he does that? Sure, one way is adversity because on occasion we become a little insensitive to all that he has available.

SO, REMEMBER - First, when trials come, it's important to remember that God is faithful and that you can rely on Him; Second, when trials stay, it's important to remember to do the right thing and to take refuge in Him. **REST IN HIM**. We did a study a few years ago on this subject by Ray Pritchard and he had two simple words to make all we've talked about possible: **PRAY and STAY**. Don't run. Don't hide. Don't shake your fist at God. Don't start arguing. Don't make excuses. Don't try to bargain your way out. Pray and stay. **PRAY**: See God's face. Spend time with the Lord. Listen for his voice. Ask God, *"What are you trying to teach me?"* *Speak, Lord, and I will listen.* **STAY**: Wait. Be patient. Don't rush God. Refuse to run away. Affirm by faith that God is at work even though he seems invisible and your life seems chaotic.

There is no extraordinary life for us without struggle and adversity—this is the Seventh Principle. So, get ready for the FIRE!

Let's Pray.



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