

THE EFFECTIVE CHURCH LEADER PART 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE EFFECTIVE CHURCH LEADER

Adapted from the teachings of Frank and Wendy Parrish and Ralph Mahoney

In the New Testament, the word “effective” means active, powerful, strong, mighty; the dictionary definitions include “prepared and available for service”. So the purpose of this teaching is to help you – through Christ – become the most active, strong, powerful church leader you can be, one who is ready for service!

Godly leadership is service. Godly leadership means work – often hard work, but work that is always rewarding and lasting. Godly leadership, however, is not your ultimate goal, but **it is a means to an end: *the edifying and equipping of the Body of Christ, the spread of the Gospel and, most importantly, the glory of God!***

For this teaching to be effective in your life, you must study it prayerfully and apply what you have learned to your own life. You must also **study the Bible** along with it. The Word of God contains all that you need to know about godly leadership. Therefore, this teaching will direct you again and again to search the Scriptures.

As you study, let the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit lead you, teach you, and shape you into an effective, godly leader in the Body of Christ!

GOD SHAPES HIS LEADERS!

A. DEPENDING ON GOD

More than 2½ million Israelites followed Moses out of Egypt into the unknown wilderness. That was a huge leadership responsibility – one that Moses did not seek out (read Exodus 3).

Moses began as a **reluctant leader**. He did not believe that he had the skills or abilities to lead so large a group of people into such an important journey (Ex 3:11- 4:16). But God saw something in Moses that He desired to use. Moses' human limitations were not a problem for God – **nor are yours!** Moses argued with God about His call. He knew that he was not qualified to do what God was calling him to do (Ex 3:11-4:16). He likely doubted his own abilities and feared what this calling might involve. But God promised to be with Moses, and to provide the help he needed to fulfill God's great assignment for him. [We will study much more about what God taught Moses about leadership in Part Two: The Biblical Pattern for Leadership Multiplication.]

WE ALL NEED SHAPING

When Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he was inexperienced in God's way of leadership. God will often put people into places of responsibility before they feel ready or able. Perhaps you have already been thrust into a leadership position where you are facing frustration or even failure. If so, take heart!

Being given responsibility beyond what we are comfortable with is frequently part of God's shaping process. God uses these times of "stretching" to teach us important lessons. These situations grow our faith, expand our abilities and increase our trust in God. In such times, we learn to **depend more upon God** (Prov 3:5,6).

The Lord encouraged Moses by assuring him that his fears and weaknesses could be overcome by God's help and power. Moses – like every one of us – also needed teaching, shaping and help from others. He needed to develop his abilities. Most importantly, he needed a far deeper dependency upon God and His power and wisdom than ever before.

GOD'S ABILITY – NOT OURS

God does not choose His servants based upon their cleverness, talent or wisdom. If you are worried that you do not have the “skills” to fulfill God’s assignment for you, that is actually a good thing!

As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul taught us about that very thing: “...*not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence*” (1Cor 1:26-29).

Paul also recited the reasons he could have depended upon himself: his vast education; his zeal; his devout Hebrew heritage; his obedience to the Law. Yet Paul spent three years in the desert of Arabia separating himself from his own fleshly gains, in order to truly gain Christ (Gal 1:17; Phil 3:4-8).

Paul understood that in his own power or wisdom, he could accomplish nothing eternal. It was “...*not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God*” (1Cor 2:4,5). Paul was not trying to gather followers to himself. He wanted all to follow Christ Jesus the Lord! That could be accomplished only by the power and Spirit of God, not by the cleverness of man.

A wise servant of God recognizes that **it takes more than his personal ability or experience** to qualify him for the work of ministry. It is only through **God’s ability** – God’s calling, power, gifts, wisdom and anointing – that one will truly be fruitful in ministry.

God looks for those who are loyal to Him – and completely His – and then HE does mighty works **through** them (2Chr 16:9). It is the person’s heart, his character, his willingness to depend fully upon God and obey Him – these are the traits that will make him a vessel fit for the Master’s use!

B. CULTIVATING CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER

When people respond obediently to God’s call, God will take responsibility to prepare and shape them for His use. God will use His Word, His Spirit, circumstances, other people – whatever He chooses – to shape His servants.

That is the primary message of Romans 8:28: *“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”*. When we love God, He takes everything that happens in our lives and works something good from it. However, what is the true biblical meaning of “good”?

We may think that God’s “good” for us consists in: comfort, health or material blessings; a “powerful and successful” ministry; or easy circumstances.

But God’s “good” for us is much more important to our maturity than temporary comforts or worldly success. God’s ultimate good for each of us is explained in the very next verse – *“to be conformed to the image of His Son”* (Rom 8:29).

God’s “good” is when He uses everything in our lives to make us more like Jesus! The very best church leaders are those who daily yield to God’s work in their heart and life. They are becoming more and more Christlike in their character and ministry. Let us look at why that is so essential.

THE LEADER’S FIRST CALLING

We would all agree that church leaders must devote themselves to the daily study of God’s Word. They need to work at developing their gifts and calling. They will likely spend many hours in ministry service. Those things are all essential parts of ministry and are always important priorities.

In all the “doing”, however, leaders must not lose sight of **their most important quest**: to know Christ; to have His likeness formed in them; and to have His Spirit empower them!

Many people seek to find spiritual fulfillment from their “ministry” or “calling”, instead of through their relationship with God. They become far more concerned with what they can **do** accomplish than with who they are **becoming** in Christ.

Our spiritual destiny is not just about what we **do** for God. It consists instead in the conforming of our life to **be** like Christ’s. Our destiny – first and foremost – is Christlikeness!

There is no doubt that the Apostle Paul was an extraordinary man. God used him to lead thousands of people to Christ, write Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, plant churches and move in spiritual gifts with power. We would certainly say Paul fulfilled all that God called him to do.

Yet Paul's top priority was **not** his calling. It was his passion to know and become like Jesus! It was Paul who wrote, *"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death"* (Phil 3:8,10; read also vs.12-15).

The New Testament contains many references to our spiritual destiny. And almost every one of them points us in the direction of knowing and becoming like Christ. **God is not nearly as interested in what we will do for Him, as in what we are becoming to Him!**

1. WHAT IS CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER?

Becoming like Christ involves, in part, the development of our Christian character – our nature, our moral make-up. This is not revealed in how "perfectly" we can behave outwardly. It is about being truly "transformed" from the inside. That inner change will then be reflected outwardly through our attitudes and actions.

a. Reverence For God

Christian character is not about honoring or impressing man. We must all answer first to Almighty God. The starting place for Christlike character is the *"fear of the Lord"* (Prov 9:10) – our awe and reverence for Him and His holiness. Becoming Christlike begins with living out our faith with reverence and respect for God, Who looks upon our hearts (1Sam 16:7).

b. Servant-Heartedness

Christian character involves **sacrifice**. We must be willing to die to our own desires and lusts. We must lay aside our personal agendas or conveniences in order to become more like Christ. Remember, we are called to be **servants** of the Lord Most High!

Jesus encouraged us to bear in mind that true servanthood is not just doing what is expected. It is sacrificial; we must look for opportunities to do even more than our minimum duty! (Luke 17:10).

There might be times when **less** ministry activity is necessary, if other God-ordained priorities are being neglected (such as family or prayer). Most importantly, as servants of God we are to be **obedient** to all that He desires (1Sam 15:22,23).

c. Repentance

Developing Christlike character is described by Paul as putting on “*the new man*” (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). That is accomplished by living a **lifestyle of repentance**.

We must be quick to respond to the Holy Spirit’s correction. He dwells within each believer in Christ, affirming us as we are obedient to God’s ways. The Holy Spirit will also convict us on a moment-by-moment basis, if we are sensitive to His promptings.

Our response to the conviction of the Holy Spirit is **repentance** – a change of mind or direction. We may be in the middle of saying or doing something, but if we sense the Holy Spirit’s conviction, we should stop!

If we ignore the Holy Spirit, we will become less sensitive and eventually hardened to His work. However, as we respond, we become more sensitive to His will and promptings.

Developing Christlike character – or being **sanctified** – is a daily process of conviction, repentance and transformation! The Holy Spirit assists in our sanctification (2Cor 3:18; Titus 3:5). Of course, the Spirit also works through the Word of God. Sanctification cannot happen without the Word; but the Word must be accompanied by dependence upon the Holy Spirit!

d. Changed Behavior

Part of putting off the old man also involves changing our behavior. Paul was quick to point out that **we must make choices with our will** to leave behind the ways of our old nature. Carefully read Ephesians 4:25-5:21 and Colossians 3:12-17.

BEING TRULY TRANSFORMED

Being Christlike is **not** about only an outward conformity to rules and regulations. That is what the Pharisees did. They tried to look good on the outside, without allowing their hearts to be changed. That is called “self-righteousness”, and accomplishes nothing but legalism and spiritual death (read Matthew 23 and 5:20; 7:21-23).

Jesus called the Pharisees “*whitewashed tombs*” (Matt 23:27,28). They had the outward appearance of holiness, but were full of uncleanness and hypocrisy.

We cannot make ourselves pure and holy. We must rely fully upon Christ’s work. Christ has “paid the price” for our sanctification. It has already all been provided for us. But we should not just try to “act” outwardly sanctified. We must yield to God and cooperate with Him as He works in us to transform our lives. He will do that as we learn the Bible, obey God, grow in truth, and are instructed and led by the Holy Spirit!

Be assured that Jesus has provided what we need to become like Him; but we must also do our part as faithful and obedient disciples of the Master!

2. MORE THAN CHARACTER

A large part of becoming Christlike is obtaining the beauty and purity of Jesus’ character. But that is only part of what the New Testament teaches as becoming like Jesus.

When we receive Christ as our Savior, we become people of God’s Kingdom. **Every** believer has this privilege. It is not just reserved for leaders. As Christ’s “Kingdom ambassadors” (2Cor 5:20), we are to be living expressions of the life of Jesus. We are to do our best to represent Him and His desires here on earth. Thus, the goal of all believers should be to reveal both **Christ living in us**, and **Christ ministering through us!**

To have the full image of Christ formed in us means two things:

- To be Christlike in our character and personal holiness; and
- To be Christlike in ministry power and grace.

Jesus lived in complete holiness, righteousness and purity – we desperately need that part of His image formed within us. But Jesus also functioned as a servant, in all the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit – which we also need formed in us and released through us!

As we are becoming Christlike, our lives should manifest both the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22,23) **and** the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 12:4-11, 27,28).

Jesus said, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father”* (John 14:12). When Jesus went to the Father, He sent us the Holy Spirit. One of the reasons was so that we might be enabled to do the works of Christ!

THE LIFE AND POWER OF CHRIST

We can truly become like Jesus only by the awesome, inward work of the Holy Spirit (2Cor 3:18); by the life of Jesus “filling” every part of us. We cannot change our human nature on our own. But we can choose to open our hearts and lives to the work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit!

It is the Holy Spirit working within us – and our yielded, obedient response – that will form the “fullness of Christ” within us.

We can find true **“Christ-likeness”** only as we open ourselves to **“Christ-fullness”**! We must be willing to die to our own life and self-interests, in order to gain Christ (Gal 2:20). Just as John the Baptist spoke, *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* (John 3:30).

If our lives are filled with Christ’s presence and Spirit, we will be more loving, wise and gracious leaders. We will love God more, love His Body more and reach out to the lost like Jesus would. We will know God as our heavenly Father and be better equipped to respond to and obey Him. Our hearts will be filled with God’s desires, to know and do His will. We will be far more effective in what we do, because of Whose likeness we are revealing – Christ’s!

Even during times of great trial and adversity, we are to live in a way *“that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body”* (2Cor 4:10).

For truly our desire is to say, *“...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”* (Gal 2:20). Hallelujah!

How desperately the Church needs to rise up and reach to this dying world – with both the holiness and purity **and** the life and power of Jesus Christ! The world needs to see the beauty and character of Christ **in** His servants; and they need to experience the life and power of God ministered **through** His servants!

A STERN WARNING

Some people have a following or a “successful” ministry. This does not necessarily mean that they are serving God with their leadership gifts.

Just because their “gifts” still function, it does not mean that leaders are living according to the standards of Scripture. They may be living in rebellion or blatant disobedience to God. They may be teaching error, compromising the truth to draw a crowd. Yet they have been deceived into believing this is acceptable, just because they have the appearance of “success”.

It is a ***grievous error*** to think that God will excuse such lawlessness just because ministry gifts still function! Leaders living in this deception are hurting themselves and those they lead. They dishonor God and His Word. They are being led astray, and will cause others to miss God’s best for them.

There are serious consequences for such misbehavior (Matt 18:6). The leader is in great danger of himself being “*disqualified*” (1 Cor 9:27).

God uses people. People, who are sinner by nature, will fail (Rom 3:23). But a stumble into sin, followed by sincere repentance, is far different than living in blatant rebellion and sin while still ministering.

God is not mocked or fooled (Gal 6:7,8). Just because ministers seem to be “getting away” with unrepentant sin, **God is never deceived**. The Bible teaches us that many who “minister” will one day say, “*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?*” They seemed to be gifted leaders; yet they did not pursue knowing Christ and being conformed into His image.

They will not have fooled Christ. He will speak those terrible words, “*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!*” (Matt 7:21,22).

Our gifts and calling are not given so that we may serve our own selfish pursuits. God gives gifts to be used to serve our highest priorities: to know

and glorify God; to be conformed into the image of Christ; and to equip the saints for Christlike ministry!

YIELDING TO GOD DAILY

Scripture refers to God as “the Potter” and His children as “the clay” (Isa 29:16; 64:8; Jer 18:1-6; Rom 9:21). God is at work to mold us and shape us according to His will. This can be a painful process at times; but we must remember that the Master Potter loves us and always has our best and His highest in mind.

Transformation is a **lifelong process** (2Cor 3:18); **even mature church leaders must yield to God** and His dealings. The Holy Spirit is continually prompting us toward God’s will and His highest purposes for us. But it is our duty to respond to the Spirit’s conviction, and seek out God’s purposes – every day!

Do you want to be the most effective servant of God that you can be? Then commit yourself to becoming more like Christ! God’s shaping work, His Word and His anointing power are the key to a truly effective and godly ministry!

C. THE PATH TO LEADERSHIP

The spiritual transformation of **Christ being formed in us** happens over a lifetime. However, there can be specific seasons of intense shaping or preparation prior to a new ministry responsibility. The most life-changing of these shaping times occur during trials or great adversity.

Joseph was a man who experienced many long years of trial and preparation before He was released into the calling God had revealed to him. Examining the life of Joseph can help us understand some of the hardships we might face as the Lord shapes us for His use.

Many well-seasoned ministers of the Gospel have had experiences that are quite similar to Joseph’s. They may not have realized during a trial or hardship that God was using those circumstances to shape or lead them. But they came to understand later why God had chosen that particular path for them.

NOTE: Before we examine Joseph’s life, stop now and take time to read Genesis 37-49 in your Bible (see also Psalm 105:16-24).

AN EARLY CALL

Joseph was the firstborn son of Jacob with his favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob had prior children, but Joseph was favored over them all.

When Joseph was still a young man, God gave him a series of dreams (Gen 37:5-11). These dreams indicated that Joseph was intended to have a position of prominent leadership. This key role would help many people and preserve God's chosen people, Israel, through whom the Messiah [Christ] would come (Gen 45:5-7).

Perhaps Joseph would have been wiser to just ponder these things in his heart. But in his zeal, Joseph shared the dreams with his family. He went so far as to say that they would one day bow before him. His father rebuked him; his brothers were jealous and hated Joseph (Gen 37:10,11).

Joseph ended up being betrayed by his brothers. They sold him as a slave, and led his father to believe he had been killed by wild animals.

This time in Joseph's life must have been as confusing as it was difficult. God had given him dreams of the great things he would accomplish. Joseph had a sense of the call of God upon his life. But his experiences thus far were rejection, disappointment, betrayal and pain. He was now separated from his family and working as a slave in a pagan land. How could this possibly be part of God's great plan for his life?

GOD NEVER LEAVES US

Joseph was purchased in Egypt as a slave by Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. At this point in the narration, the Bible reveals a profound truth: "*The Lord was with Joseph*" (Gen 39:2). If the Lord was with Joseph, why had he been despised and betrayed by his brothers? Why did he have to suffer such hardship?

Only God can truly answer those questions. God sometimes delivers us immediately from trials and affliction; sometimes He allows us to experience them for a season before He delivers us. God is sovereign, loving and just. When our lives are submitted to Him, He alone decides the course our lives may take.

When circumstances become difficult, we may question whether God's presence is still with us. Be assured that trials do NOT mean that God has left you! God has promised to **never** leave you nor forsake you (Deut 31:8; Josh 1:5; Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5). Just as He was with Joseph, so will He be with you!

HOW STRANGE THE PATH...

Though God spared Joseph's life, He did allow Joseph to suffer betrayal and hardship. We can only conclude that God had a very special plan for Joseph that only God understood at the time.

There was a time when things began to get better for Joseph. He was allowed to be in charge of all of Potiphar's house and possessions. This was a great responsibility, and Joseph was faithful (Gen 39:1-6). But just as things began to go well, an even greater trial was looming.

The Bible tells us that Potiphar's wife noticed Joseph, and tried to entice him into an immoral relationship. God never tempts us with evil (Jas 1:12-16); thus, this may have been an attempt by Satan to destroy God's plan for Joseph.

But Joseph remained faithful to God and refused Potiphar's wife. In her bitterness, she falsely accused Joseph (Gen 39:6-18). Potiphar believed his wife's deception and, in his anger, had Joseph thrown into prison!

Joseph had served diligently and resisted temptation. Yet the outcome of his faithfulness was false accusation and prison?! How strange the path upon which God may take His chosen ones.

FAITHFULLY SERVING

The Lord continued to be with Joseph in prison and gave him favor (Gen 39:21). Amazingly, we do not read that Joseph became embittered, even after years of imprisonment. He served diligently in whatever circumstances he found himself. Thus, he was given more leadership responsibilities to grow in (vs.22,23). The time was not being wasted. God's purpose was still unfolding for Joseph's life.

Joseph was, however, aware that he had been unjustly imprisoned. He even tried to change his circumstances, but to no avail (Gen 40:14,15,23).

Joseph remained in prison as more years passed – more than ten years in total! He must have had moments of frustration, despair and even hopelessness. God's call to rulership must have seemed impossible.

TRIED AND PURIFIED

Even though the officer of Pharaoh forgot about Joseph for several years, God did not forget. At the right moment in time, Joseph was remembered by the officer and brought out of prison before Pharaoh (Gen 41:9-15).

God enabled Joseph to interpret the meaning of a significant dream of Pharaoh. This dream foretold a season of plenty, followed by a season of famine for all of Egypt. God also gave Joseph the wisdom to develop a plan of action that would save Egypt – and God's people – from much loss and devastation (Gen 41:28-36).

Pharaoh recognized that Joseph was a man full of the Spirit of God (Gen 41:38). He placed Joseph in authority over all the affairs of Egypt. Only Pharaoh himself would have greater authority (Gen 41:40-44).

When Pharaoh praised Joseph for his skill in interpreting dreams, Joseph knew the source of his wisdom: *"It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer"* (Gen 41:16). Joseph **gave God all the glory** – a model for us all when God uses us to minister effectively!

So what was the result of Joseph's many years of betrayal, disappointment, hardship and imprisonment? **Joseph emerged from prison as a man full of the Spirit of God, and full of wisdom!** He knew that His source for everything was God alone. Joseph's character had been tried and purified. He had been prepared to receive much responsibility and authority, and to serve with righteousness and integrity.

GOD'S SOVEREIGN CONTROL

The time came when Joseph was eventually restored to his brothers, and even to his father (Gen 42 – 49). Joseph had suffered many years of hardship because of what his brothers had done to him.

And yet, when Joseph saw them again, he said to them, *“But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for **God sent me** before you to preserve life”* (Gen 45:5). Joseph held no bitterness against his brothers. He freely forgave them. How could this be? Joseph later said to his brothers, *“...you meant evil against me; but **God meant it for good...**”* (Gen 50:20).

Joseph had learned an extremely important lesson: God was the One Who was in charge of the circumstances of his life! Joseph said to his brothers, *“for **God sent me...**”!* The Bible says again in Psalm 105:17 that **“He [God] sent”** Joseph as a slave to Egypt.

God sent Joseph? Didn't his brothers conspire to kill him, and then sell him as a slave? Yes, they did. But it was God, Who is greater than any circumstance, Who was in the midst of Joseph's life. God used Joseph's circumstances to uniquely **preserve him** and **prepare him** for a greater purpose. God turned the evil deeds done against Joseph into eventual good.

Church leader! Please know that when trials, rejection, misunderstanding and injustice come into our lives, God is there with us! If we are submitted and obedient to God, He will orchestrate circumstances in order to transform us for His use – even trials of fire (Deut 4:20; Isa 48:10,11).

God does not cause calamity or misery for us, to somehow “teach us a lesson”. Instead, **He meets us** – when calamity strikes or in the dark and shadowed valleys of life (Ps 23:4) – to walk with us and cause something useful to come from the trial.

We may have suffered terrible pain, abuse or rejection in our life. Only God can take all that the enemy meant for harm and destruction and turn it into something good. Our God is the Great Deliverer, Who heals, redeems and restores!

God has not forgotten you! God will never leave you! He alone can make all the things that seem to be against you work out for your good and the good of others, to His glory and honor! Christ's blood can cleanse you, His power can redeem you, His love can heal you, His Word can free you!

You can rejoice! As you daily yield to God, He is transforming you and preparing you – to make you more like Christ Jesus!

THE HOPE OF GLORY

Joseph remained faithful to God, no matter what. Joseph was eventually key to preserving God's people and furthering God's purposes.

We, too, must remain faithful, thanking God for His guiding and preserving presence in our lives (Matt 5:11,12; see also Proverbs 2:8; John 14:16-18). We must continue to trust in God, no matter the circumstances (Prov 3:5,6). We must choose to forgive those who have wronged us, and love those who persecute us (Matt 5:44-48). We must not repay evil for evil (Rom 12:17-21). These things are difficult to do on our own; but we can do all things *“through Christ”* by God's great grace!

We can live this life with faith, assured of this: God is with us, He loves us, and He will use everything in our lives for His highest good!

“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1Cor 15:57,58).

Remember this: We are honored to serve God in this life, and to give Him our lives for His use and glory. But a day ***is coming*** when those who have forsaken all to follow Christ in this temporal life will go on to their eternal reward! There will be no more pain, no more suffering, no more tears (Rev 21:4). The temporary light afflictions of this life will be past (2Cor 4:17,18; Rom 8:18); we will be with our Beloved Savior! We shall rule and reign with Christ, forever and ever (2Tim 2:12). Hallelujah!

D. HOW GOD USES TRIALS

Many mature church leaders can testify of times in their lives when all hope seemed gone. The circumstances and challenges had been so difficult, they almost lost all faith in God. They may have even given up on the dreams God had given them, allowing them to die in their heart. But out of their despair and ashes arose the purpose of God!

God had sustained them by His grace, and preserved them for His purpose. As they remained faithful, God used their trials to strengthen and prepare them for His use, just as He did with Joseph (Gen 49:24).

Every person whom God desires to use seems to face trial and adversity. The Scriptures recount to us their stories. **Noah** endured much scoffing and mocking. **Abram** faced many, many difficulties and tests of faith. **Moses** had to overcome adversity almost from the time of his birth. The **prophets** of God endured great persecution and hardship. **Jesus' disciples**, the Apostle Paul - none escaped great challenge and trial.

Yet God used every one of them as a participant in His grand plan of the redemption of mankind! Each of them was part of preserving God's people; ushering in the Savior; proclaiming His salvation to the ends of the earth; making disciples; equipping the saints; and more!

You may very well have your own experience of God's preparation through trial and adversity. Or you may be in the middle of a great trial right now.

SOURCES OF TRIALS

Where do trials come from? Some trials are the dealings of God. Some are self-induced through our own sin or rebellion. Some are direct attacks of Satan.

Many trials are simply the result of life in this broken world. Those can include:

- Civil or governmental *oppression or persecution*, just because we believe in Jesus Christ.
- *Family members or others who betray us* or despise us for our faith.
- Great *challenge to our ministry call*. Things may be especially difficult, and we may feel isolated or alone in our struggles. These attacks might come through other people, but it is actually evil forces that are at work (Eph 6:12). The devil would like nothing more than to snuff out the fire of your passion for Christ or your zeal for serving Him.
- Great *physical trial to us or to someone we love*. Someone near and dear to us may even die. The agony and grief that accompany such suffering or loss can be the darkest of oppressors.
- The *natural circumstances of this broken and sin-filled earth* can bring tremendous hardship. Famine, disease, pestilence, severe weather or natural disasters all bring with them great trials indeed!

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSEVERANCE

God does not promise that our lives here on earth will be lived in ease and comfort, or that He will keep us from pain or hardship.

This life is very short compared to eternity. It is temporary, and we are not to set our affections on this world or what it can offer (Matt 6:19-21; Col 3:2). This is not our permanent home; we are but sojourners here (Phil 3:20; Heb 11:13; 1Pet 2:11).

We are told that as believers in Jesus Christ, we will be opposed in this life (1Pet 5:8,9). We will face tribulation, persecution and hardship (2Tim 3:12; see also Mark 4:17; Romans 8:35,36) for Jesus' sake.

Scripture teaches that it will take much work and perseverance to successfully "finish the race" of this life (2Tim 4:7). We are told that we must "endure" to the end (Matt 10:22; 24:13; 1Cor 4:12; 2Thess 1:4; Heb 3:14). These verses imply holding fast to faith in Christ, even in the midst of severe difficulties.

Christ's own apostles faced beatings, imprisonment, lack and hardships (2Cor 11:23-33); they all, save one, died as martyrs for Jesus Christ. Many people in Old and New Testament times suffered at the hands of those who were opposed to God or the Gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., John the Baptist – Matt 14:1-12; also read Hebrews 11).

This life does hold great victories and joys for the believer in Christ. But those times of being "on the mountaintop" are mixed with the times when we must also walk through valleys of trial.

TRUSTING GOD IN TRIALS

God may not be the direct cause of our suffering and trials. He may or may not deliver us immediately from them. But we do know this about trials: **God will either deliver us from them, or give us the strength and grace to endure them!** And God promises to use everything in our lives – the good and the bad – to shape us more and more into Christ's image for His purposes (Rom 8:28,29).

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF TRIALS?

The Bible teaches us that trials are necessary for our spiritual growth. James put it this way: *"My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,*

knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience [endurance]. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (Jas 1:2-4).

The word “*perfect*” here means “maturity, wholeness” (it does not mean sinless perfection, as only God is perfect). Believers are strengthened in endurance and spiritually matured through trials.

There are many, many more things that trials accomplish for believers. Let us look at just a few of those now:

1. TRIALS TEST OUR FAITH

The Bible describes the preparation in Joseph’s life as a time when “*the word of the Lord tried [refined] him*” (Psalm 105:19 kjv). Peter exhorts us: “*Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try [test] you*” (1Pet 4:12a). God often allows our faith to be tried and tested with the fire of difficulty.

David wrote: “*For the righteous God tests the hearts and minds [inward parts]*” (Ps 7:9). God knows everything, so He already knows what is in our hearts. But His tests reveal to us what is in our **own** heart. We need to know the strength (or weakness) of our faith in God.

For instance, during trials are you anxious? fearful? angry? impatient? If so, that reveals areas of weakness in your faith, areas in which you are not trusting in God. These can become a great hindrance to God’s work through you in the future. Recognizing where our faith is weak helps us to face it, repent of it, and turn to God for His strength and help.

The Lord also tests our motivations. Do we love and serve God selfishly, just to get His blessings? Satan accused Job of such a thing. Job proved Satan wrong, and remained faithful to God, in spite of losing everything (read the Book of Job).

The Lord tests us to help us see whom we really love (Deut 13:3). Do we love God more than anything or anyone, no matter what? Is following Him more important to us than anything else? (Read Luke 14:26-33).

“The Lord tests the righteous” (Ps 11:5). Trials are a test that we can pass or fail. If we pass, we move ahead to greater strength in God. If we fail, we see where we need to still grow and learn from our failure.

2. TRIALS PURIFY US

When you purify gold, it needs to be heated to very high temperatures. Only in this way can the impurities in the gold rise to the surface so that they can be removed.

Sometimes it takes great heat and pressure in our lives to reveal impure thoughts, motives and actions. As they rise to the surface, we then have opportunity to confess and repent before God. He will cleanse us from our unrighteousness (1John 1:9), purifying and preparing us to do the will of God (1Pet 4:1-3).

3. TRIALS TEACH US DEPENDENCY AND HUMILITY

Mankind does not automatically go God’s way; it is usually quite the opposite (Isa 55:8)!

However, trials oftentimes reveal the error of our own ways and lead us to a place of greater dependency upon God.

As we are humbled, we tend to seek the Lord’s way more diligently. We are more willing to cooperate with Him and yield to Him. We recognize how desperately we need to depend upon Him – and upon His strength, wisdom, leading and power!

God tests us and humbles us through trials (Deut 8:16). But He also uses the hard times to remind us that **all** good things, **all** success, **all** fruitfulness are only because of God’s grace, love and power (Deut 8:17,18; Jas 1:17). Let us remember these things, lest our own pride ever cause us to think that our success in ministry is of our own doing.

Paul was used mightily by God. But he was given a physical trial to ensure that he would not think too highly of himself, or be *“exalted above measure”* (2Cor 12:7-10).

As God does mighty works through us, trials remind us that we have no true spiritual strength apart from God’s great grace and enablement!

4. TRIALS RELEASE GOD'S POWER

During times of great trial, our weaknesses are revealed. This is not to discourage us. It is to teach us to lean upon God and receive from Him. For God *“gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength”* (Isa 40:29).

When Paul was weak, Jesus said to him: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness”* (2Cor 12:9).

God is not limited by our weakness, for He sees what we can do and be **with His help and power**. God called Gideon a *“mighty man of valor”* (Judge 6:12). But at the time, Gideon was terrified and hiding from the Midianites (v.11)! God called Gideon anyway, and later enabled Gideon to fulfill a great purpose (read Judges 6-8).

“We have this treasure in earthen [weak, fragile] vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (2Cor 4:7).

We can thank God for trials that reveal our weakness and inadequacy. Though trials are hard on our *flesh* (human sin nature), they strengthen our spirit – pressing us to a greater dependence upon Christ and His strength! *“Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me...For when I am weak, then I am strong”*(2Cor 12:9,10b).

5. TRIALS STRENGTHEN US

There can be no victories without battles. Trials teach us to use our spiritual armor; they strengthen us in our spiritual “combat skills” (Eph 6:11-18). We learn about spiritual warfare and intercession, and grow in overcoming faith (2Cor 10:3-6; 1John 5:4).

As we go through trials, our “spiritual muscles” are exercised. We become stronger for the next trial. We can then face an even greater foe. Then we become even stronger. As we do, we become more useful and develop endurance (Rom 5:3,4; Jas 1:3). God can then use us in even greater ways! We go from *“strength to strength”* (Ps 84:7) and from *“glory to glory”* (2Cor 3:18)!

In the midst of such battles, we might be tempted with self-pity or fear. But we must resist such thoughts, and instead throw ourselves on the mercy of God in prayer! We can admit to God that we truly are but flesh – and then, in our weakness, cry out for God’s help and strength. When we pray, “I need you God! I cannot do this without You!” – God will respond. For truly we can do nothing without Him (Matt 19:26).

6. TRIALS TEACH US TO WAIT

Jeremiah lamented his trials and afflictions. But when he remembered the Lord’s mercies and faithfulness, he resolved: *“It is good that one should hope and **wait** quietly for the salvation of the Lord”* (Lam 3:26; read Lamentations 3).

Isaiah also taught us that God gives power to the weak, and renews the strength of those who **wait upon Him** (Isa 40:28-31). To wait upon God means to come into His presence with worship and prayer. It is to humble ourselves before Him, and take time to receive what we need from Him.

The Bible teaches that there are times and seasons for everything (Eccl 3:1-8; Acts 1:7). God may have **called** us, but it may not yet be His time to **send** us into the next phase of ministry. We may need to wait, and endure a shaping and growing season first.

As we submit our lives to God, we must wait upon Him for His perfect timing, even during trials. As we do, He will save us, strengthen us, direct us and help us to endure.

7. TRIALS PREPARE US

Suffering can actually spur spiritual growth and further our preparation: *“But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, **perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle** you”* (1Pet 5:10). God uses trial and suffering to **perfect** [prepare, complete] us, and strongly establish us in His ways.

Joseph was a young man when God gave him the dreams of his future. In order to fulfill such a great calling, Joseph needed time to develop godly character, wisdom and maturity.

8. TRIALS CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVE

During trials, we may reach to worldly temporary things for relief, such as possessions, money, traveling, or alcohol or other things. But we soon realize that these earthly things provide no lasting help, relief or comfort.

Trials reveal what has become our source for help and strength in time of need. Do we reach to God, or to something else?

Trials also lift our eyes toward heaven. When we lose a loved one, or face severe challenge, our hearts are turned toward our eternal hope. Heaven seems so much sweeter when we have a loved one there. Trials help us to realize that this world, along with all that is in it, is passing away. Eternal values and the will of God become much more real and important to us (2Cor 4 & 5; 1John 2:15-17).

Trials show us the emptiness of human resources. As we suffer, it stirs within us a hunger for the glory of God.

“...if indeed we suffer with Him [Christ], that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom 8:17,18).

Though God works all things for good – Christ’s image shaped within us – He is also preparing us for the day when He will reveal His glory through us, and we will be glorified with Christ! Hallelujah!

SAFE IN GOD’S LOVE

God uses trials and tests to **prepare** us, not to point out our failures or to condemn us (Rom 8:1). Remember: God wants us to **succeed** in fulfilling His calling! He wants to purify us so that our future will be fruitful. God is for us, not against us (Rom 8:31)!

God is vast and great, and His perspective is eternal. He sees and understands **everything** – so much more than we ever could! He has an eternal, Kingdom purpose to fulfill. We can choose to be a partner with Him in fulfilling it. But we must trust Him for whatever role He would give us to fill. God also promises to never leave us nor forsake us, to be our Helper so we need not fear (Heb 13:5,6). Just as He was with Joseph in the midst of his

trials, God is also *with* us, no matter what. We can never be separated from His great love! (Rom 8:38,39).

You may have suffered for your commitment to Christ. But hear Peter's encouraging words: "...rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1Pet 4:13,14).

GOD'S CHASTISEMENT SHAPES US

It is important to remember that Joseph had not done anything to bring hardship upon himself. The Bible does not tell us that Joseph rebelled or sinned against God.

Sometimes our own selfishness or sin can bring trial or difficulty into our lives. This is NOT the same thing as suffering in Christ. There will be no reward for the type of suffering that we bring upon ourselves through sinful choices or actions.

When Miriam spoke against Moses and was struck with leprosy, this was not suffering for God (Num 12). When Jonah spent days in the belly of a great fish, this was due to his own rebellion (Jonah 1). When Ananias and Saphira were struck dead, this was a direct result of their deceptive actions (Acts 5:1-11).

If we are rash or disobedient, or grasp for positions or power for which God has not called us, we will suffer by our own doing. If our lusts or passions override our good judgment, or if we attempt to exalt our self-will over the truth of Scripture, we may find ourselves in terrible trouble.

We are warned in Scripture to be careful, lest we suffer for our own wrongdoing: "*But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters*" (1Pet 4:15).

However, even when we have willfully sinned against God, all is not lost. God can still deliver us when we have sincerely *repented* [renounced our sins and turned from them]. Our failures may bring needless suffering upon ourselves or those near to us. But God can use even the worst failure in our life to help shape and transform us. His chastisement and discipline, and our response, will also shape us (Deut 8:5; Prov 3:12; Heb 12:7,8).

God can redeem and use even our failures. He is worthy of all praise, for His great forgiveness and redemptive grace!

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Trials will come to all of us. Jesus said, *“In the world you will have tribulation...”* (John 16:33). The meaning of the word *“tribulation”* includes “pressure, oppression, stress, anguish, crushing, adversity, affliction, distress”. It represents that which is free and unfettered being put under a lot of pressure.

We are free in Christ. But this world brings the pressure of tribulation and trial. How can we make it through trials, and grow from them? Here are some guidelines:

1) PRAY!

Prayer is **essential** for successfully enduring trials. We must continually be in prayer, asking God for strength, grace and wisdom. We must ask Him to sanctify the trial to us, using it for His glory and our good. We must search our hearts, and allow God to cleanse us of impurities. We must relinquish pride and self-effort, crying out to God in humility for His help and power.

We need to have a believing heart. We must trust that God has a purpose in the trial, and that He will supply everything we need to endure. He will give us wisdom as we ask (read James 1:2-8), so that we will know what to do in response to the trial. God WILL meet us, teach us, comfort us and help us!

PRAY IN THE SPIRIT!

Trials can be discouraging, even overwhelming. We sometimes cannot find the words to even pray. It is in these times that we can – we **must** – pray in the Spirit! When we do, the Holy Spirit helps us, praying according to the will of God (Rom 8:26,27). Praying in the Spirit is also a powerful and effective way to build our faith (Jude 20).

Trials can sometimes be direct attacks of Satan or demons. In such cases, we must submit to God and resist the devil (Jas 4:7); and contend in prayer and supplication (Eph 6:10-18).

PRAY WITH FASTING

Fasting helps to quiet our fleshly impulses and sensitize us to the Holy Spirit's voice. As you fast, make sure you are praying often. Also, take time to quietly wait upon God. Allow Him to minister to you and speak to your heart.

2) "COUNT IT ALL JOY!"

Paul and Silas had just been severely beaten and thrown into prison for preaching. Yet that very night they were praying and singing hymns to the Lord (Acts 16:22-25)!

The Lord, in His faithfulness, had put within their hearts "*songs of deliverance*" (Ps 32:7). As they sang, an earthquake shook them free, along with all the other prisoners. Even the jailor was converted! A strong church was established in Philippi as a result.

How could Paul sing during such trial? Because Paul was humble and yielded to God. Paul trusted that God was in charge of his life. Paul recognized God's hand at work in every trial and challenge. What faith and grace God gives!

God is **always** worthy of our praise. As we worship Him, our eyes are raised and our spirits are lifted. His hope and joy fill our hearts, giving strength for the trial.

We can have joy and thanksgiving in the midst of trials (John 16:33; Jas 1:2). We know that God will use them for our good and His glory (Heb 12:3-11)!

We can even triumph through trials if we will turn our hearts toward God in humble praise: "*Now thanks be to God who **always** leads us in triumph in Christ*" (2Cor 2:14)!

3) DO NOT RUN!

When you are being severely tried, you may want to run from God, from ministry or from your situation. This is a serious mistake! (Of course, this presumes that you are facing trials because you are obeying Christ's call.)

You may feel, "God, if you don't do something about this, I'm leaving!" But a much better prayer would be, "God, until you release me or send me to another assignment, I am staying right where I am. Help me to persevere, to be faithful to your call!"

It is only as you are proven faithful in one situation that you are prepared for a greater assignment (Luke 16:10; 19:17). Most often, God does not lead us to leave one assignment **unless** He is clearly leading us to our next assignment. If we move on prematurely, we will likely miss God's intended purpose for us. Or God may have to intervene in order to get our attention (read the first two chapters of Jonah for an example).

4) OBEY ALL THAT GOD SAYS TO YOU

It is important in trials to listen to God – then **obey!** His shaping path for you is unique. You cannot mimic what you see others doing. You must find out what God wants you to do.

It is necessary to be submitted in your heart to God. We must **let** the trial be used by God to accomplish its purpose (Jas 1:2-4). If we need wisdom, we can ask God for it. He desires to give us wisdom with liberality (Jas 1:5)! Obedience requires much prayer, perhaps repentance, searching the Scriptures – and waiting, waiting, waiting upon the Lord! Be quick to respond to God, and obey Him.

5) KEEP YOUR HEART RIGHT

Only you can choose your response to a trial. You can allow yourself to get angry, fearful or bitter. Or you can choose to receive God's forgiveness, peace, grace, and strength.

These are not always easy choices to make. Our grief or disappointment can be great. The attacks against us may be many. We may fear putting our full trust in God. It can take time to work through the challenges to our faith that arise during trials.

We must keep coming to God with our anxieties, fears and concerns. We can be honest with Him, for He already knows our hearts! We must submit our concerns to Him, asking for His help and grace.

Only we can decide to keep turning to Him and choosing His ways – for only He can make us effective leaders in His Kingdom! In Part Two, we will study in more detail some of the ways in which God accomplishes this.