

LESSON

4 Am I Missing God's Design?

Sometimes it is pleasant to do God's will and sometimes it is difficult. Abraham faced one of those difficult times. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. But years had passed and no fulfillment had come. The plan Abraham and Sarah had made to bring about God's promise had ended in heartache. Then God had spoken again to Abraham and had reminded him of His promise. Finally, that promise had been fulfilled in the miraculous birth of Isaac. But Abraham's testing was not over.

A few years later, God told Abraham to offer Isaac—the son whom he loved—to Him on the mountain Moriah. Abraham was challenged to obey God in spite of his feelings, circumstances, or personal desire. Abraham met this challenge. He obeyed God's will and experienced a great miracle: God supplied a ram as a substitute for Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19).

You may be facing a similar challenge. God may be using certain circumstances in your life to test your faith also. In this lesson we will study how our circumstances are related to God's design for us. As you study, you will discover some of the ways in which God can use circumstances to help fulfill His design in your life.

The Plan

- A. Circumstances Raise Questions
- B. Circumstances Can Test Our Faith
- C. Circumstances Can Discipline Us
- D. Circumstances Can Encourage Us

The Goals

- 1. Explain why God allows our faith to be tested.
- 2. Discuss why difficulties arise when we are trying to follow God's design for us.
- 3. Show how difficult circumstances can be a source of encouragement.

A. CIRCUMSTANCES RAISE QUESTIONS

There are times when it seems God's will is confirmed by circumstances. There are other times when visible circumstances make doing what we know God wants us to do very difficult. Are difficulties an indication that we are missing God? Is it possible to know what God's will is by how hard or easy it seems to be? What happens if it appears to be impossible, that is, if all outward conditions seem in opposition to doing what we think God wants us to do? Let us consider the relationship our circumstances have to God's design or will for us.

B. CIRCUMSTANCES CAN TEST OUR FAITH

Goal 1. Explain why God allows our faith to be tested.

We learn how trustworthy a thing is by testing it. A sailor would want to test a boat by using it in a lake or harbor before trying to cross the ocean in it. A mountain climber would want to test the strength of a rope before having to trust his life to it when climbing a steep cliff.

On some occasions God seems to use difficult circumstances to test our faith. He tests our faith because it is our direct link

with Him; He works through it. Without faith, nothing we do fits into His design for us or is satisfactory to Him.

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Testing Reveals Our Faith

Some people think that they trust God when in fact they have never really *had* to trust Him. Circumstances and events have always supported their trust in God and have made doing the will of God the easy thing to do. In many cases they are doing what they want to do, and what they want to do happens to be God's will. How trustworthy is this faith?

God wants us to see how much we are really trusting Him. To show us this, He may allow outward supports and helps to be taken away. This may appear to make obedience difficult; it may even make us wonder if we really are *in* the will of God.

But if we do not allow God to test us and show us how much we are really trusting Him, the weakness in our faith will not be seen until Satan attacks.

Peter was sure of his loyalty to Christ. His own opinion was that he had more devotion than anyone else. Before Jesus' trial, Peter told Him, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matthew 26:33).

Application

1 Read the Scriptures referred to below. In your notebook, write an answer to the question about each one.

- a)** Luke 22:31. What warning did Christ give Peter?
 - b)** Matthew 26:34. What did Christ tell Peter he would do?
 - c)** Matthew 26:35. What did Peter say he would not do?
 - d)** Matthew 26:69–75. What did Peter do?
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The difficult circumstances Peter experienced revealed the weakness of his faith at that time. He could not stand without the outward supports.

But tested faith has value. The apostle James understood this value.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. (James 1:2–3)

Look at the ideas in those verses—trials, endurance. They indicate opposition and difficulty. Yet there is no indication that difficulty means we have missed God's plan for us. In fact, we are to consider ourselves fortunate when trials come!

Application

2 Read James 1:2–4 in your Bible. What is the final result of the testing of our faith?

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Testing Builds Our Faith


The testing of our faith through negative circumstances can also show us how much we *are* able to trust God. It can help build our faith.

No doubt Abraham's experience on Mount Moriah was a great victory of faith, the greatest he had won. He had been brought right up to the moment of sacrificing his son when God showed him the ram he was to offer instead. He had obeyed in spite of the difficulty; his faith was tested and proven. Now he had learned that God could supply a sacrifice; now he had learned that God could keep his family.

In 1 Samuel 17 we read of the time when David faced Goliath, a powerful enemy of Israel. It would be impossible for a


young man like David to defeat a huge warrior like Goliath! But when David heard Goliath's challenge, he was ready to fight him.

Application

- 3** Read 1 Samuel 17:34–37. David was ready to fight Goliath because
- a)** several of his brothers believed that he would be successful.
 - b)** Goliath was an ungodly Philistine and David was an Israelite.
 - c)** David had already learned to trust God when fighting lions and bears.
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What are some of the circumstances God allows us to face in order to test our faith? There may be dangers and disappointment. There may be those around us who do not trust us. Discomfort may be a problem. Reaching our goals may be delayed beyond what we are able to accept. In all of these, God is testing our faith in Him to show *us* where we lack and to cause us to trust Him more.

Application

- 4** We have studied two reasons why God allows our faith to be tested by difficult circumstances. Circle the letter in front of each sentence below that expresses one of those reasons.
- a)** Sometimes we need to be shown the actual strength of our faith so we are not deceived about ourselves.
 - b)** God tests our faith so He can find out whether we are weak or strong.
 - c)** Our faith is tested in order to show us that we have missed God's design for us.
 - d)** After our faith has been tested we are able to meet greater challenges than before.
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C. CIRCUMSTANCES CAN DISCIPLINE US

Goal 2. Discuss why difficulties arise when we are trying to follow God's design for us.

Difficult circumstances that arise as we try to follow God's will can also discipline us. The purpose of this discipline is to direct our effort toward the goal God has set for us. Some think discipline means punishment, but in fact punishment is not necessary to discipline. It only becomes necessary when there is a failure to respond to true discipline. Discipline is *training*; it is the choosing of certain activities in order to accomplish an objective.

In sports, discipline is learning to conform to the rules in order to win a game. Activity outside of the rules not only uses energy worthlessly but is also counterproductive. It is penalized.

Discipline may involve a program of conditioning. In sports this means that the athlete deliberately faces resistance in order to become stronger.

It is easy to see the connection between the idea of being disciplined and that of being a disciple. The twelve *disciples* of Christ were men *disciplined* to do His will. As we read the accounts of their lives, we see that Christ constantly allowed them, even led them, to face difficulties. These experiences were part of their training.

They were in a boat with Christ in a dangerous storm, but Christ did not seem to be doing anything about it. He was sleeping (Mark 4:35–41). Nine of them were left at the bottom of the mountain on which Christ was transfigured. There they were faced with a demon-possessed boy (Mark 9:14–29).

Application

5 Read Mark 6:34–44. Then in your notebook write an answer to the following questions.

- a)** What difficulty did the disciples face?
 - b)** What did Christ tell them to do?
 - c)** What resources did they have?
 - d)** What did Christ do?
 - e)** What was the result?
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In each of these negative, difficult circumstances, Christ took the disciples to the limit of their capability. He was teaching them *total* dependence on Him. He was drawing their attention to himself and away from their own limitations.

We should not allow difficulties to cause confusion in our minds concerning the will of God. Instead, we should realize that perhaps God is using those problems to make us single-minded concerning Him. This is why one of the keys to overcoming difficulties is to direct our attention toward God.

Application

- 6** Difficult circumstances *discipline* us by
- a)** helping us to realize that we are not following God's will.
 - b)** making it necessary for us to depend completely upon God.
 - c)** showing us that we have the ability to face the problem ourselves.
 - d)** bringing punishment upon us so that we know we have failed.
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D. CIRCUMSTANCES CAN ENCOURAGE US

Goal 3. Show how difficult circumstances can be a source of encouragement.

It is true that difficult circumstances test our faith and discipline us. But those same problems can be a source of

encouragement, depending on how we react to them and to what we know to be the will of God. Let us consider three aspects of this encouragement.

Proof That We Belong to God

First, difficulties can give us proof that we belong to God. The Scripture is clear about the forces of evil that are in the world. Satan is the enemy of the follower of Christ. He withstands the progress of the kingdom of God at every opportunity. Satan does this deliberately, willfully, maliciously. He is powerful, though his power is limited. He is even more deceptive than powerful; he is the father of lies.

Satan is the enemy of the Christian and so is the world system. This system is not one of righteousness. It is one built on deceit, oppression, and injustice. It is a twisted system, with men calling evil good and good evil. It is a system of promise without fulfillment, knowledge without truth. It is a system that is opposed to God and to the child of God. It is a system that rejected and then crucified the Son of God because He was righteous; His righteousness aroused the hatred of the system.

Application

7 Read John 15:18–20 and complete the following. Christ told His disciples that the world hated Him. He warned them that the world would hate them also because

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What, then, does the child of God expect when he begins to follow the will of God? He lives in a twisted environment and is trying to walk a straight path. In a dark world he wants to follow light. Never does Scripture show God's will as being in conformity with the system or even at peaceful coexistence with it. The two are in warfare, friction, conflict, and confrontation. Jesus said to His disciples,

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Instead of difficulty making us wonder if we have missed the will of God it could very well be an indicator—one promised by Christ—that we are in His will. This is especially true if the difficulty has come because of the contrast between the system of evil and our own righteous lives.

In Luke 6:20–26 notice the encouragement given to the disciples in verses 20–23. They are to be directly encouraged by the difficulties! At the same time, notice the warnings in verses 24–26. These warnings are directly related to receiving approval of the world system.

Application

8 Read Luke 6:20–26. Match each experience (left side) to the result Christ said it would bring (right side).

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|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| ... a) Poverty | 1) A happy result |
| ... b) Riches | 2) A terrible result |
| ... c) The approval of all men | |
| ... d) Mourning | |
| ... e) The hatred of men | |



Difficulties can encourage us. They may actually be indications that we are in God's will, not signs that we have missed it.

Opportunities for Victory

Second, difficulties can give us opportunities for victory. It is from the world system and being in the world that our tribulations come. But Christ has already conquered this world system.

Difficulties and opposition do not make it impossible to do God's will; the problems *can* be defeated. They actually make victory possible, for there must be conflict for there to be victory. We are overcomers and more than conquerors through Christ.

The character of a man can be discerned by looking at his enemies as well as at his friends. The Bible says that being a friend of the world is the same as being an enemy of God. This means that if we are the friends of God we will be the enemies of the world.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

Does a conqueror seek the approval of a defeated foe? Neither do we want to lose the discipline of keeping our attention on God by pursuing the approval or cooperation of the world system. On the contrary, the experience of victory over it gives us new determination to follow God.

Application

9 Read Revelation 3:21. To whom did Christ promise the right to sit beside Him on His throne?

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Confidence From Opposition

Third, difficulties can give us confidence that we are trying to please God. We mentioned the problems with both Satan and the world system and how those problems can be a source of encouragement. There is a third area in which we face difficulties. In Scripture it is called "the human nature," "the sinful nature," or "the flesh." It is not the physical body itself. It is that part of ourselves that agrees with and desires what the world offers.

It is bad enough to have Satan as an enemy. Besides this we live in a fallen world with the system it has produced. But

an even greater difficulty is that we are joined to an enemy of God—our human nature. We cannot divorce ourselves from it; again, we have to conquer. But to conquer there will be a battle.


Galatians 5 lists the works of the flesh or human nature. It is not a complete list, but it names enough of them so that we are able to recognize others that are unmentioned.

How can we be encouraged by the opposition of the flesh or human nature? Knowing that there is unceasing warfare between the flesh and the Spirit of God gives us confidence that when we refuse to follow the flesh we are pleasing God. If we were living simply according to our flesh there would be no battle. The flesh does not battle the flesh; the battle is between flesh and Spirit.

Application

10 Circle the letter of the true statement below.

- a)** The Christian life does not involve any battles.
- b)** Human nature opposes God.
- c)** Galatians 5 offers a complete list of the works of the flesh.



There are many ways in which God can use difficult circumstances to help you follow His design. They can help your faith to grow. They can help you learn to depend on God. They can provide opportunities for victory. Think about what Christ promised—a cross, a fight, a race, rejection by the world, temptation, and tribulation. But think what He also promised—victory, a crown, a throne, a white robe, and acceptance by the Father. James encourages us, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2).

Now that you have completed the first unit, you are ready to answer the Unit 1 Evaluation. Review the previous lessons, then follow the directions on the Unit One Answer Sheet. You should complete and send your answer sheets to your instructor for corrections.

Check Your Answers

- 6 b)** making it necessary for us to depend completely upon God.
- 1 a)** He told him Satan would test him.
b) He said that Peter would say he did not know Him three times.
c) He said he would never say he did not know Jesus.
d) He said three times that he did not know Jesus.
(Your answers should be the same or similar.)
- 7** they belonged to Him and not to the world (or a similar answer).
- 2** We become perfect and complete (or a similar answer).
- 8 a)** 1) A happy result
b) 2) A terrible result
c) 2) A terrible result
d) 1) A happy result
e) 1) A happy result
- 3 c)** David had already learned to trust God
- 9** To those who overcome
- 4 a)** Sometimes we need to be shown
d) After our faith has been tested
- 10 b)** Human nature opposes God.
- 5 a)** There was a large crowd of people who were hungry.
b) Give them something to eat (v. 37).
c) Five loaves of bread and two fish
d) He blessed the food and gave it to His disciples to give to the people.
e) Everyone had enough to eat.
(Your answers should be similar.)



Lessons

5 Is Being a Christian Enough?

6 How Can God Speak to Me?

7 Did Jesus Know God's Design?

8 How Do I Approach the Future?