

The Crucibles That Come



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 9:7–16, Rom. 1:21–32, 2 Cor. 12:7–12, 1 Pet. 4:12–19, 5:8–11.*

Memory Text: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (*1 Peter 4:12, 13, NIV*).

In chemistry labs one often places various materials into a small container and heats them to extreme temperatures. As the container becomes hotter, the materials either melt, fizzle, spit, or burn brightly, depending upon what they are made of. The container is called a crucible.

A crucible is defined in the dictionary as (1) a vessel used for melting a substance that requires a high degree of heat, (2) a severe test, (3) a place or situation in which concentrated forces interact to cause or influence change or development.

These definitions also give us a helpful insight into what happens in our spiritual lives. This week we'll highlight some reasons that we may suddenly find ourselves under pressure and experiencing tests in places in which circumstances cause us to change, develop, and grow in character. This will help to give us an awareness of what God is doing in our lives so that when we enter a crucible, we will have an idea of how to respond.

The Week at a Glance: What are the causes of the difficult times that we experience through our lives?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 13.*

Surprises

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (*1 Pet. 4:12, NIV*).

Surprises, painful surprises, can come in many ways. A car veering across the road into your path. A sudden notification that you’re losing your job. A medical test that gives you unexpected bad news. The betrayal by someone you loved and who you thought loved you. As bad as the pain can be, it’s always made worse by the element of surprise.

This week we will look at a few specific types of painful situations or crucibles that should not take us by surprise. To begin, let’s go back to the text for today in Peter. The Greek word for “surprised” in 1 Peter 4:12 means to be “alien” or “foreign.” Peter is urging his readers not to fall into the trap of believing that fiery ordeals and trials are alien to Christian experience. Rather, they are to be considered normal—they can and should be expected.

The word used for “fiery ordeal” (*NRSV*) or “painful trial” (*NIV*) or “fiery trial” (*NKJV*) comes from another Greek word, and it means “a burning.” In other places it is translated “furnace.” This experience of suffering for our faith could therefore be considered a “smelting process,” the process of the crucible.

Read 1 Peter 4:12–19. What is Peter’s message?

Many of us are surprised about suffering because we often have an oversimplified view of the Christian life. We know there are two sides—God, who is good; and Satan, who is bad. But often we then automatically put everything that feels good in the box with God and everything that feels bad in the box with Satan. But life is not so simple. We cannot use our feelings to decide what is in God’s box or Satan’s box. Sometimes walking with God can be challenging and hard. And following Satan can appear to bring great rewards. Job, who is righteous yet suffering, illustrates this when he asked God, “ ‘Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?’ ” (*Job 21:7, NIV*).

Peter was referring to trials that are the consequence of standing up for Christ. But there are also other reasons that trials come. How could 1 Peter 4:12–19 help you to tactfully explain to a friend why they should not be surprised at the painful trials they might face?

Crucibles of Satan

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8, NKJV).

Read the above text. What’s the message there for us? Ask yourself, “How seriously do I take these words?” What things do you do in your life that show whether you take them seriously?

Have you ever watched a hungry lion? It’s awesome because you know it can catch and eat just about anything it wants. Peter says that Satan is prowling around in the same way. The great tragedy is that when we look around, we can see the consequences of his desire to kill. Death, suffering, and the twisting and perverting of morals and values are everywhere. We cannot escape seeing the work of Satan.

Read 1 Peter 5:8–11. How should Christians react to Satan’s prowling?

What does God promise to do for those who are suffering? *Verse 10.*

Peter writes these words in the context of responding to Satan’s attacks on Christian faith. But as we have mentioned, Satan is at work in many different ways. And although we must be aware of the reality and the power of our enemy, we must never be discouraged, for we must always remember that Jesus has beaten Satan, that Satan is a defeated foe, and that as long as we stay connected with Jesus, as long as we cleave to Him in faith, we can never be defeated either. Because of the Cross, Christ’s victory is our victory.

Think about the other ways that Satan causes pain. How could reading 1 Peter 5:8–11 help us to deal with the anguish that we experience because of our fate in living in a sinful world where Satan is allowed to wreak havoc?

Crucibles of Sin

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18, NKJV).

Everything we do has a consequence. If you stand in the hot sun with ice cream, it will certainly melt. Cause and effect always go together. And no matter how desperately we would want things to be different, it is the same with sin. It always reaps consequences. It is not that God sits in heaven wondering what terrible things He could do to people who sin; no, sin itself comes with its own built-in consequences.

The problem is that many times we think that we can somehow outwit God and sin without the consequences. It never happens. Paul makes it very clear that sinning has not only consequences for eternity but painful and distressing consequences today.

In Romans 1:21–32, Paul describes the process of people falling into sin and the consequences of those sins. Read prayerfully and carefully these verses, and summarize the essence of what he is saying, focusing specifically on the stages of sin and its consequences.

Earlier Paul describes these consequences as the “wrath of God” (vs. 18). God’s wrath in this passage is simply God allowing human beings to reap what they sow. Even for Christians, God does not always intervene immediately to remove the pain that results from our own actions. Many times He allows us to experience the consequences of our actions in order that we may understand how deeply damaging and offensive our sin is.

We have been considering the consequences of breaking God’s moral laws. But what about breaking God’s health laws? Our bodies are God’s home. If we abuse our bodies by failing to eat healthfully or exercise, or if we regularly overwork, this is also sin against God. And this has consequences that can create the conditions of a crucible.

How, in your own life, have you reaped the immediate consequences of your own sins? What lessons have you learned? What changes must you make in order not to go through something similar again?

Crucibles of Purification

“Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Behold, I will refine them and try them; for how shall I deal with the daughter of My people?’” (*Jer. 9:7, NKJV*).

“If the Spirit of God brings to your mind a word of the Lord that hurts you, you may be sure that there is something He wants to hurt to death.”—Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour & Company, Inc., 1963), Sept. 27.

How do you understand the above quote and text? What has been your own experience with the pains involved in the purification process?

Read Jeremiah 9:7–16. God says that He will “refine and test” (*NRSV*), or “melt” (*KJV*), Judah and Jerusalem (*vs. 7, NIV*). What two reasons does God give for this? How will the refining happen? (*vss. 15, 16*).

God’s refining and testing involved drastic action. There are perhaps three reasons why such refining and testing may feel like a crucible. First, we experience pain as God uses circumstances to bring our sin to our attention. A little earlier, Jeremiah unhappily writes, “ ‘The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out’ ” (*Jer. 6:29, NIV*). Thus, sometimes drastic action is needed in order to get our attention. Second, we experience anguish as we feel sorrow for the sin we now see clearly. Third, we experience frustration as we try to live differently. It can be quite uncomfortable and difficult to keep choosing to give up the things that have been so much a part of us.

Think about the sins that you struggle with. If God was going to refine and test you today, how might He do it? What action could you take now to deal with this before God would want to take drastic steps with you, as He did with Israel?

Crucibles of Maturity

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure” (2 Cor. 12:7, NKJV).

There is a big difference between cutting down and pruning. We cut down plants that we don’t want anymore; we prune plants that we want to develop into greater fruitfulness. Both processes, however, do involve a sharp knife. Indeed, pruning requires cutting parts off the plant that might seem to a novice gardener like destroying it. In a spiritual context, Bruce Wilkinson writes, “Are you praying for God’s superabundant blessings and pleading that He will make you more like His Son?

“If your answer is yes, then you are asking for the shears.”—*Secrets of the Vine* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001), p. 60.

People have wondered what Paul actually meant by a “thorn in my flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7, NIV). Ideas range from Paul’s having constant attacks from enemies to having a speech difficulty. It seems that this was actually a problem with his eyesight.—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1107. Amazingly, Paul believed that his “thorn” was “given me.”

What do you think Paul meant by “given me”? Who gave it to him? How was God able to use it for Paul’s benefit?

Notice that Paul’s “thorn” had a definite purpose: “to keep me from becoming conceited” (vs. 7, NIV). It was not because of any specific sin he had committed but to prevent him from sinning in the future. Paul recognized that he had, by nature, a weakness to sin and that this “thorn” could guard against it.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–12. How does Paul deal with his “thorn”? Do you think that Paul’s weakness had any other spiritual benefits to him? How can the way that Paul responds help you to deal with “thorns” that you may have to carry?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, Nov. 18, 1903; Ellen G. White Comments, p. 1182, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4; “Enduring Trials,” p. 92, in *My Life Today*.

“He who reads the hearts of men knows their characters better than they themselves know them. He sees that some have powers and susceptibilities which, rightly directed, might be used in the advancement of His work. In His providence He brings these persons into different positions and varied circumstances that they may discover in their character the defects which have been concealed from their own knowledge. He gives them opportunity to correct these defects, and to fit themselves for His service. Often He permits the fires of affliction to assail them that they may be purified.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 471.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 It really can be hard while we are reaping the consequences of our sin. “Will I ever be able to be made right with God again?” we ask. What promises does God make that can encourage us to persevere through such times and not give up? (See what Paul writes later in Romans 5:1–11.) What can you say to someone who is asking this very question?
- 2 What does Ellen White mean by “His providence”? How does this work? How do you know when something happens by God’s providence? What acts of God’s “providence” have led to trials in your own life? As a class, discuss what you’ve learned at this time. How might you help someone else who is wondering whether some event is indeed “His providence”?
- 3 If you know someone going through a crucible right now, does it matter, or should it matter, what brought it on? That is, how should you react to them and their suffering, regardless of what caused it?
- 4 A Christian young man living in South America went through a bitter trial. After it was over, he moved to Europe and later commented to someone, “I left my corpse in South America.” What does that mean? Why must we all, in a sense, leave our corpse somewhere? What role do trials have in that process?
- 5 As a class, plan an outing to a hospital or somewhere where you could be of help, comfort, and cheer to those who are, for whatever reason, being squeezed in a crucible.

Running Away to God

by SERGEI VENEVTSEV

I was born into a Russian family that had no use for God. But in high school I had to take a class called History of Religions. The teacher, a Muslim man, taught about most main religions, but he had more enthusiasm for Christianity and read quotations from the Bible and told us Bible stories.

I decided religion might help me make sense out of life, so I began searching different religions. I tried several different religions, but they left my heart empty. It seemed they all were the same, saying I must earn favor with God—whatever His name was—by my deeds. I did not need such a religion; I needed answers to my questions.

Then I saw a TV program produced by Seventh-day Adventists called, *Waiting for the Second Coming*. It caught my interest, and I thought, *It would be good to belong with these believers who live as a family*. But I did not know where to find these Adventists.

I started reading the New Testament, and though I did not understand many things, I kept reading, for I found great peace. I began to pray, and to my surprise, God answered. Then I broke up with my girlfriend. I prayed again, but it seemed that this time God did not answer. Angry, I shook my fist at God and shouted, “I do not need You. I will reach my goals myself!”

The results of my prayer came immediately. I had been a peaceful person, but after I rebelled against God, I became hard and wanted revenge on everyone who hurt me. I started drinking and fighting. Evil spirits entered my life and our home. I began to think life was futile and not worth living.

Then a friend invited me to a Christian meeting. At first I refused to go, then I changed my mind. I decided it would be my first and last time at a Christian meeting. But once there, I was touched by the songs, the prayers, and the Bible study. I could hardly wait for the next one. Within a year I had surrendered my life to Christ.

After high school and my term in the army, I returned home to work as a literature evangelist. Then God called me to serve as a Global Mission pioneer in an area where there were no Adventists. The Lord blessed my partner and me and led us to people who were searching for meaning in life. In our first year nine people have been baptized and others are preparing.

I praise God for being patient with me, loving me, saving me, and allowing me to serve Him.

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