

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?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *1 Peter 4:12, 13*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: We can face a variety of pressures that can cause us to turn away from God.

Feel: Prepared to confront these challenges and to prevail over them, with Jesus' help.

Do: Resolve to claim God's promises of help and strength, even when they appear to bear no relation to our reality.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Crucibles That Come (*1 Pet. 4:12, 13*)

A How does the image of the challenges we face as crucibles help us to understand their purpose better? What is a crucible? Its function?

B To what extent can the trials and difficulties we face be blamed on Satan? Do our trials have a supernatural source? Why, or why not?

C Some difficulties result from sin, some from unwise choices. Does God punish us by these difficulties or merely let us reap the results?

II. Crucibles of Sin (*Rom. 1:18*)

A Why is it often necessary for us to suffer adverse results in order to be brought back into God's will?

B Can all or most suffering in a Christian's life be traced back to secret sin or sinful thoughts?

III. Thorns and Other Undesirable Things (*2 Cor. 12:7*)

A It would be fairly easy for us to assume that suffering is random and has no meaning. How can we know that this is not the case?

B Can or does all suffering have a spiritual meaning or dimension? If so, how much does it depend on the mind-set we bring to it?

C Is it ever appropriate for us to judge the spiritual experience of others by what we see of their circumstances or problems?

► **Summary:** When we accept God's will in our lives, we can imbue these trials with spiritual meaning and become stronger by facing them.

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?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate!

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

Introduce the analogy of the crucible. This analogy is the framework for the entire series of lessons, and the use of the analogy needs to be understood by the class members.

Peter's statement in the memory verse "do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering" (*1 Pet. 4:12, NIV*) may have been more understandable to first-century Christians than to us. Faced with a panoply of pagan religions, all legally recognized and popular, they probably were not too surprised that their illegal and unpopular faith engendered trials and tribulations.

Most of us, on the other hand, probably live in more or less tolerant societies that for the most part leave us alone.

However, other kinds of crucibles bubble and boil, some unexpected and some within our own ranks. How does all this fit together?

Go through the four crucibles studied this week and solicit some experiences and comments from the class members about their personal familiarity with these crucibles.

►STEP 2—Explore!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

Bible Commentary

I. The Value of Testing

Testing is a common occurrence. Students regularly submit to testing. Automobiles and manufactured goods undergo testing. Pharmaceuticals

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

appear on the market only after extensive testing. People in various occupations are submitted to batteries of tests to see how well they perform. Some professions must submit to periodic upgrading through batteries of tests. The purpose of all this testing is to ensure quality.

II. Spiritual Testing

In the spiritual realm, testing is a little more of a controversial issue. If grace is free, why would the Lord need to submit anyone to a test? This week's lesson frames an answer, clearly showing that the Lord's purpose in testing people is to *refine* them. Refining eliminates impurities and results in a superior product.

III. Keeping an Accurate Perspective

Progress in Christian experience often is looked upon in terms of a series of tests, reinforced by quoting Ellen G. White's statement that "God will bring you over the ground again and again until with humble heart and subdued mind you bear the test that He inflicts and are wholly sanctified to His service and work."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 214. This declaration sometimes is paired with the statement "Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a lifetime."—Ellen G. White, "Transformed by Grace," *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 560.

These statements reflect biblical truth, but sometimes they are explained poorly, and in the hearers' minds sanctification comes very close to being a matter of human merit, part of a grading system through which we attain or lose eternal life.

God's "testing" is not this kind of grading system. It is, to use educational terminology, a redemptive-disciplinary system geared toward character development. It is a result of salvation, not a cause.

This week's lesson emphasizes very clearly, using the analogy of a crucible, that tests God may apply, or circumstances He may choose to *inflict*, clearly are designed as part of a refining process to forward the progress of our journey toward the kingdom.

So there will be no misunderstanding regarding this process, Ellen G. White stated to one person immersed in the crucible of purification, "Your trials and temptations borne in God will purify and humble, but will not destroy or endanger you."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 93.

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- 1 The crucibles of purification and maturity are really *blessings in disguise*. What can you do to *undisguise* the blessings and find out what they are?
- 2 Can you live with the statement in Sunday’s lesson that the fiery ordeals are to be considered normal—they can and should be expected?
- 3 What does it mean to have a “simplified view of the Christian life”? How does your personal view of the Christian life perceive the issue of trials and tribulations?

Dealing With Personal Crucibles

Write down what you consider to be the kind of crucible(s) you are currently in. Then attempt answers to the following questions:

- 1 How did I get into this *crucible*? (Sometimes we fall into inexplicable and unexpected crucibles, and sometimes we make our own crucibles and complain bitterly when we fall into them!)
- 2 If I am completely confused about the nature of my current crucible, how can I identify possible issues of purification and/or maturity in spite of my confusion?
- 3 Thursday’s lesson tells us that Paul felt his “thorn in the flesh” was “given him” by the Lord for a reason. Can you identify a “thorn” that the Lord may have “given you” for a purpose? What’s the purpose?

Witnessing

People who are in difficult situations are always disposed to spiritual input. Your personal testimony of how the Lord has helped you get through a *crucible* is invaluable. Even if you never have been through the particular crucible your friend is dealing with, just the fact that you care is a valuable testimony and spiritual influence. It opens the door for other aspects of Christian witness.

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, With God's help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?

Getting It All Together

Looking for personal solutions to *crucible* problems involves both knowledge and practice. It also involves an honest willingness to do something about it and to use adequate resources.

Resources

Try the following in your search for the nature of your personal crucibles:

- 1 Talk over the situation with some people you trust and confide in them. They might have gone through the same thing and have some valuable counsel to give.
- 2 Present the situation to the Lord in serious intercessory prayer. This can be done personally or with a group of people you respect and trust.
- 3 Read something devotional that will give you courage to face the situation and also something instructive that will give you some hints and tips on how to deal with whatever your crucible is.

Practice

An interesting and helpful activity for your class would be for the members to do the following. Some might be willing to share their plan with the other class members. Some might want to work in groups to develop a plan.

Make a plan about what to do the next time your personal *crucible* presents itself (if you can identify it, you will know when it appears). The plan should include some specific actions you will take.

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:

- ❶ 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?
- ❷ 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”?
- ❸ 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?
- ❹ 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?
- ❺ 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.