

Cathedral of St. Philip  
Summer Bible Story Series  
July 7, 2013

Crucible: A Test of One's Mettle

Tom Creely, PhD

A crucible is a porcelain type of instrument used for melting, refining, and purifying a substance in extreme heat.

Therefore crucible is a severe test. A test of our mettle – our strength of spirit and staying quality.

SLIDE: The Prophet Daniel had a significant leadership role in the province of Babylonian. With the king's permission he appointed fellow Jews Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as administrators.

Before the satraps, prefects, governors, counselors, treasures, justices and all other officials, Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that all peoples should bow before the 90 by 9 feet gold image he had made whenever the musical sounds of various instruments were heard. The cost to someone not bowing down before the image upon the first played note was being thrown into the fiery furnace.

The music played with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego standing tall and not bowing down before the god. Seeing an opportunity to act on their jealousy, the astrologers reminded King Nebuchadnezzar of his edict for anyone not bowing down would be thrown into the furnace. The astrologers proceeded to report to him that the three Jewish boys had not bowed down.

However, Nebuchadnezzar gave them a second chance to obey the edict to obey and serve his gods and worship the image. They firmly refused saying,

*“O Nebuchadnezzar we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us*

*from your hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

Furious, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter and had the three Jewish boys tightly bound.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood helpless watching what was before them and what they had to face and experience, even though they didn't want to go there. Even though they were fearful, their faith overcame it.

Having cast them into the intense flames and heat, Nebuchadnezzar stood watching for them to perish. Except, they didn't perish. Nebuchadnezzar witnessed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walking around the blazing furnace unbound with a fourth person who looked like the son of the gods. Alarmed at their survival, Nebuchadnezzar called for them to come out of the fire. They came out without a hair being singed and no odor of smoke.

Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed: "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!" Because they were unwavering in their obedience to God and recognizing the divine power bestowed upon them, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that no one cast a disparaging word against them or they would be torn to bits. He gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego greater leadership responsibility in the province of Babylon.

BLANK SLIDE: Years ago a very junior Marine Recruit made an allegation against me, which jeopardized my career and my ministry. I was facing administrative disciplinary action. It was difficult to understand why or how this was happening. Knowing I was innocent, how was I to prove my innocence?

My senior officer told me I needed to speak with the Assistant Judge Advocate who was the investigator. Having grown up with law enforcement and a belief in "truth, justice and the American Way," I thought I would answer question and explain the situation, and it would be over. He asked me to read and sign a piece of paper. It

was my Miranda Rights. Being not guilty, I signed that I didn't need an attorney. I was wrong and realized they were throwing a rope over one of those enormous live oak trees.

I continued to exercise daily by swimming. One day in the pool while swimming laps, I felt a strong discomfort and disturbance of my soul. The intensity increased and seemed to be like the water bubbling rapidly around me. A voice came to me saying, "Just go and confess to the allegation and it will all be over. Just confess you'll feel better." I jumped out of the pool to get changed. As I was dressing, I felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, which immediately calmed my racing heart and panic. The Holy Spirit reminded me of the conversation I had with the Executive Officer prior to swimming. The Executive Officer said, "Tom, this allegation is false and doesn't add up." I realized the voice I had heard in the pool was not that of God.

I was under tremendous stress. With intensified prayer and devotional life, and fasting, I drew closer to God. I became more aware of the Holy Spirit speaking and acting.

Finally, I received the Assistant Judge Advocate's report. After reading it, I went in to deep depression for a day. What he said was quite different from what I had said. He listed 8 points that were twisted and manipulated from what was said in the interview. Some were outright fabricated.

A day later, the Holy Spirit spoke: Are you going to give up? How important is my ministry to you? Are you willing to fight for your ministry and my call in the midst of this persecution?

That was a turning point. For the first time, I had to decide whether to bend to the pressures, humiliation, gossip, and false accusations and destroy God's purpose and will or to defend the ministry to which God had called me and be obedient. It was a spiritually and emotionally excruciating crucible event!!! I was ready to fight! From that point on the hand of God prepared the way and engineered circumstances.

Armed with a renewed power, a second wind, and a stiffer spine, Joyce and I, with the help of two attorneys fought back. I took the report to a local attorney friend who was a Marine Reserve attorney. After reading the report, he said, "Tom, I don't care if your Jesus

Christ. Don't you ever talk to an investigator without an attorney present. They are railroading you. I know these people."

A few days later, I went to the non-judicial punishment proceeding where the Commanding General called 13 witnesses. He questioned them in detail about my career, character and ministry. Each of the 13's answers exonerated me.

Near the end, the General asked me my side of the story. I told him I would be happy to tell if the Marine Recruit gave me permission given it was privileged communications between penitent and priest. I had an obligation to protect the penitent's words.

Looking to the Judge Advocate, he ordered that the Recruit be brought before him. The Judge Advocate squirmed. The General repeated the order. The Judge Advocate responded, "We sent the Recruit home." In other words, I couldn't face my accuser.

With all of the witnesses in my favor and a missing accuser, the evidence against me had been soundly refuted and I was completely exonerated.

What had caused all of this to happen? Jealousy! Envy!

A chaplain senior to me was under the impression I was getting a coveted leadership position that he had wanted. He conspired with a senior enlisted person to coerce the young Recruit to make the false allegation.

To be conspired against, falsely accused, and demonized presents a challenge to our being in Christ and to our place in family, work, and society. How will people see us, judge us, accept us compared to the Father's demand for obedience? His demand for obedience is predicated on his purpose and not ours. In other words, his purpose supersedes any desired outcomes in the crucible event.

As faithful men and women in Christ, we face where we don't want to go. However, we must pass through such crucible, which can be spiritually painful and exacting. God doesn't remove the challenges no matter how much we wish they would go away. What matters is how we deal with them. With God's power and grace, passing

through the pain and anguish is necessary for us to advance to our end goal.

Avoiding the hard decisions and responsibility leads to greater insecurity and self-dependence.

Through pain and suffering we learn what is truly important. We recognize that we are carrying around emotional and spiritual baggage we no longer need.

Crucible events may begin with between you and an antagonist. However, the self versus the antagonist role becomes secondary, and the “I – Thou” relationship becomes primary. A crucible event challenges our thinking, values, and relationship with God. Through the human struggle we find clarity that differentiates between the world and God. God’s power through suffering brings our own reality to the forefront for reconciliation.

The question each of us must ask in our relationship with Christ is “Who do we want to become?” I ask clients who they want to become as a leader. It is their values that inform and shape their leadership style.

Manipulating, controlling, or avoiding the crucible event on our terms and power is to our own detriment. It sets the stage without redeeming qualities for others, and much less for our selves.

Our focus ought not to be on the pain and suffering or what sympathies we might be tempted to desire from it. Our focus ought to look beyond the persecution and hurt to the higher plain of the Christian ethos. That is where we are bestowed the wisdom of God.

Charles Spurgeon’s words resonate to the faith challenges of followers of Christ:

*Stars may be seen from the bottom of a deep well when they cannot be discerned from the top of a mountain: so are many things learned in adversity which the prosperous man dreams not of. We need affliction as the trees need winter, that we may collect sap and nourishment for future blossoms and fruit. Sorrow is as necessary for the soul as medicine is to the body:*

*"The path of sorrow, and that path alone, leads to the land where sorrow is unknown." The adversities of today are a preparatory school for the higher learning.*

Crucible events test our mettle, our strength of spirit.

In the midst of a crucible event, our awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence and power and attentiveness to its leadership is essential to persevering. Union with God in prayer establishes the lifeline of oneness.

How we face the challenges of today determine how we will face more complex and demanding challenges tomorrow.

SLIDE: 5 Steps for a Crucible Event

1. Pray without ceasing.

Theologian John Janaro says, *"Suffering and tribulation are a school for [prayer]."* It is prayer that brings us in close communion and union with Christ. We are called to come close, even closer. Out of prayer comes obedience, which is more worthy than sacrifice.

Have you ever had a panic attack because of the fear or threat? A simple prayer repeated over and over of "The peace of God" can bring calm and assurance.

It is only through prayer that we become resolute or steadfast in our faith. Being unwavering gives us the power to follow through to the next day.

It is important to simply be in God's presence drawing near to his embrace and comfort without asking for anything, or explaining our situation. Prayer isn't always verbal, it is the intentional focus of our hearts and minds.

2. Engage the adversity by facing our fears.

The greatest immobilizer to obedience to God's will in our lives is FEAR.

Fear is a natural and innate emotion that alerts our senses, mind, and spirit to threats and risks. Fear is an early warning system. Therefore, it's important to take note of the fear and assess it.

The three responses to fear are: cowardice, hubris, and courage.

Cowardice is the lack of will to take risks for what is right and righteous – run and hide. Hubris is our own self-righteousness, narcissism acting out of our own power and authority. Both cowardice and hubris are self-interest.

Courage is central to our Christ-like character. Being a courageous man or woman means that you are a person on whom others can depend in the face of risks. Alasdair MacIntyre said, *"...a man and his actions become identical..."* *"To judge a man is to therefore judge his actions."* Our actions to God's will are to be judged. We ARE what we believe. We need to take risks for the right reasons.

### 3. Embrace the persecution

To engage is to bind oneself to the challenge. It is human nature to want to run or hide from the challenge that frightens us.

To embrace is to cherish and love the suffering. That is a challenge. It is a step further than engaging. You can engage in battle, which we do spiritually with the power of the Holy Spirit. Embracing adversity is sharing in the glorious suffering of Christ in the midst of pain, fear, and uncertainty.

Scripture tells us "you will be persecuted." Suffering for Christ is noble and holy. We are called as faithful followers of Christ to pick up our Cross.

### 4. Fast to enhance awareness of the Holy Spirit.

Fasting has never have been a spiritual discipline for me until this crisis that threatened my ministry. In the midst of tremendous stress and tension, I naturally reduced my intake of food. I simply ate

healthy and consumed less. By eating sufficiently to curb hunger rather than feeling full or stuffed, our senses sharper.

After a few days I recognized that I had become keenly aware of the presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit. Fasting guards against distractions and red herrings. Our ability to discern truth from the lie is greatly enhanced.

Uncertainty is a reality as a disciple of Christ. We don't like to have uncertainty in our earthly life. A strategic plan, logical flow of events, and having control provides certainty in our minds. Yet, a disciple can only have one certainty – The Power of Jesus Christ.

5. Expand your spirituality through devotional readings.

The Word of God in Scripture and the Classical Christian Writings of St. Augustine, St. Clair, William Law, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer along with modern writers Richard Rohr, Timothy Luke Johnson, and others give words of warning, endurance, strength, perseverance, hope, power, love, and so on.

I found a devotional reading prepared me for what was ahead for that day or the next. Another would affirm God's hand engineering circumstances that occurred the previous day. Other days, it was the assurance of being near to God. God always affirms his presence and power for those who seek obedience to his will.

Recently in devotional readings I've come across the word "docile." "Docile," from my perspective paints a picture of someone weak, cowardice, blown by the wind, easily pliable. From leadership and ethics terminology, "docile" is not reflective of what we tend to think of strong ethical leaders.

Classical Christian thinkers note that our "will" ought to be "docile." "Docile" is a characteristic of strong faith in Jesus Christ when we have no sight beyond our nose. "Docile" is the abandonment of the self to the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and guard us. It is being without a personal agenda or strategy. It is total vulnerability to the blowing of the breath of God, the ruach.

George's sermon about who do we want to become is important in this story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abenego. We can only expand our capacity for becoming by experiencing the suffering for Christ. That is how we become obedient moral leaders and learn to take a stand.

When we truly abandon the self to the Lord, he fulfills all of our needs. In the midst of the trials, we have to learn to rest and relax under his protection. Our desire is to draw close to the Lord.

St. Catherine of Siena, one of the greatest spirituality writers: "...we conform ourselves with him in pain..." For Christ, we learn to bravely "*embrace pain and disgrace and dishonor for love of him.*"

As disciples we must expand our capacity to suffer. At the same time, we must offer up the pain. There is our joy and peace.

We are not to run away from suffering or complain to others about our treatment, which cheapens it. It ought to become a badge of honor to suffer for Him.

How do we respond to our pain and suffering? There are four words that ought to reflect the spirit of God in us:

SLIDE: *Be silent! Swallow, suffer and then smile.* (Mother Elvira Petrozzi)

Moral courage doesn't come from our own power. It comes from God, who alleviates our fears and emboldens us with his words through the Holy Spirit.

Throughout Scripture there are numerous imperative statements to not fear. "*Be of courage, be strong,*" "*Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid,*" and "*Take heart and be of courage,*" are some of the mentioned in the New Testament.

Being a Christian isn't for the weak of heart. Spurgeon notes:

*Pray God to send a few men with what the Americans call "grit" in them; men, who: when they know a thing to be; right, will not turn; away or turn aside, or stop; men who will persevere all the*

*more because there are difficulties to meet of foes to encounter; who stand all the more true to their Master because they are opposed; who, the more they are thrust into the fire, the hotter they become; who, just like the bow, the further the string is drawn the more powerfully it sends forth its arrows, and so the more they are trodden upon, the more mighty will they become in the cause of truth against error.*

Testing our mettle enables us to see who we are, what we are made of, and who we will become in Christ.

Each crucible event in our lives leads us to greater freedom.

The Rest of the Story:

Three months after God's victory and deliverance, I invited the chief conspirator and senior officer to lunch. After casual conversation and calling his name, I said, "I am fully aware of your leading role in the conspiracy against me." He immediately drops his head and never looks at me again. Taking command of the conversation, I ended with this, "You put my family through hell, you almost cost me my Navy career, and more importantly, you almost destroyed the ministry to which God has called me to. But, I want you to know that I forgive you. You have to live with what you've done. You have to face your self in the mirror." He never spoke to me again.

The Commanding General called together all senior officers, senior staff non-commissioned officers, and top civilians and publically appointed me the first Director of the Marine Corps Family Team Building Program, which I stood up successfully. Six months later I was appointed to that coveted leadership position of Regimental Chaplain.

Someone close to the General told me his comments about the administrative hearing. In reflection, the General said, "I don't know exactly what happened in the proceeding, but I do know that God was there."