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## God's Tests

By David Servant

# FIVE

## The Training of the Twelve

Jesus trained His twelve disciples using the same method God used to train the people of Israel after the Exodus. That is, He often placed them in challenging situations where they had opportunities to exercise their faith. We can expect to be trained just as they were. Tests and trials are opportunities to grow. Let's begin this chapter by taking a look at one of the "training exercises" of the twelve in Jesus' spiritual boot camp.

Scripture records a time when Jesus once boarded a small boat with His disciples along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and said to them, "Let us go over to the other side" (Mark 4:35).

Before we continue any further in the story, let us ask: *Was Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee?*

I can't imagine that He was not. Jesus lived in perfect obedience to His Father's will. Surely He and His disciples were in God's will to journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

After embarking on their voyage, Jesus and the Twelve found themselves assaulted by a "fierce gale of wind" (Mark 4:37). Their boat began to sink as waves broke over its side. Amazingly, Jesus was asleep during all of this.

Now let us ask a second question: *Did God know beforehand that gale force winds would assault the Sea of Galilee when His Son and the disciples were traveling across it?*

Of course He did. If God is all-knowing, then it certainly didn't catch Him by surprise.

And now the final question: *So why did God lead His Son and the disciples to travel across the water during a time when He knew there would be a fierce gale?*

Certainly it was not because He wanted them all to drown. Could the reason have been that God wanted to give them an opportunity to trust Him?

Surely if you or I had been in the boat that evening with Jesus, we would have started praising the Lord when the storm struck, trusting that we were going to make it to the other side. Right? Of course—just as we *always* do when we find ourselves in trouble! The disciples, however, hadn't yet reached our level of faith! Rather than exercise faith, they succumbed to fear and woke Jesus—who subsequently rebuked the wind and the sea.

That is not the end of the story, however. Once the winds were calm again, Jesus turned to His disciples and said, “Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?” (Mark 4:40).

It’s obvious that He expected His disciples to have faith, and the reason is because He had told them it was His will to go over to the other side. They should have at least believed that they would make it to the other side, but they didn’t. They expected to die.

### **Taking the Test Over**

Here’s another question: *What happens if you don’t pass one of God’s tests?* The answer: *You get to take it over again!* The incident we’ve just been considering can be found in the fourth chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Just two chapters later, Jesus sent His disciples out on the Sea of Galilee once more to go “to the other side.” On this occasion, however, He didn’t join them. This time He wouldn’t be there to rescue them.

Perhaps you already know that the Sea of Galilee would be better described not as a sea but as a lake. It’s only about eight miles wide and fourteen miles long. From a vantage point on one of the high hills that surround it, you can see the whole body of water and almost any boats that are on it.

Sure enough, the winds began to rise on the lake, headlong against the disciples. It wasn’t a severe gale, but it was enough to challenge their little faith.

Again we should ask: *Were the disciples in God’s will?* Certainly they were. They were simply following the directions of Jesus, who was surely being led by the Holy Spirit. God wanted them all to go to the other side to minister to the people in that region. In fact, Jesus would shortly be traveling to the same destination, only He wouldn’t use a boat to get there. So the disciples were in God’s will, following God’s plan.

Did God know that the wind would be contrary that evening on the Sea of Galilee? Of course He did.

### **Row, Row, Row Your Boat...**

The disciples departed on their voyage sometime in the evening (see Mark 6:46-47). So let’s say they departed at 7:00 P.M. At most, those twelve grown men had to row about five miles, perhaps even less (from Bethsaida to Capernaum).

They made progress at first, but after they had rowed about three-and-a-half miles the wind began to blow against them. Still, they kept on rowing. When Jesus came walking to them on the water, however, the Bible says that it was about the “fourth watch of the night” (Mark 6:48). That means somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 A.M. What should have taken no more than a couple of hours took as much as eleven hours, and at least eight hours!

Now can you picture the scene in that boat? I suspect those twelve rowers were exhausted. Surely their backs, shoulders, and arms were sore. They should have been in bed hours earlier. They must have been very sleepy. They had been on the water for as many as eleven hours. And they were making no progress.

I can imagine Philip throwing down his oar and saying, “Gentlemen, this is ridiculous. Let’s just put up the sail and head back.”

Andrew: “NO WAY! We haven’t come this far to quit!”

James: “That’s right Andrew, plus Jesus told us to go to the *other side*. Remember how just two chapters ago we got rebuked when we panicked on this same lake?”

Peter: “Oh sure. But that was different. Jesus was with us then. This is ludicrous!”

John: “Okay, boys, now settle down. Let’s walk in love toward each other just like Jesus has been teaching us.”

Bartholomew: “Look who’s talking—the one who secretly wants to sit at Jesus’ right hand in His kingdom! And you’re telling us *we* should walk in love?”

Thaddaeus: “Boys, calm down! Hey, maybe we should do like Jesus did and rebuke this wind!”

Thomas: “I don’t want to be labeled a ‘doubting Thomas,’ but I seriously doubt that any of our rebukes would make a difference.”

So you get the picture. I imagine Jesus viewing the whole scene from His mountain perch and sadly shaking His head as He listened to the disciples’ arguments echo across the lake. After waiting eight to eleven hours for them to demonstrate a little faith, He sighs heavily, stands, walks down the mountain, and starts walking toward them on the water.

When the twelve disciples saw Him walking on the water, they were terrified, and who could blame them? Jesus assured them that they were not seeing a ghost, and then taught all of them a lesson about faith.

Peter said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water” (Matt. 14:28). Jesus replied, “Come!” and Peter stepped out onto the water. He was literally walking by faith. He knew he was in God’s will out there upon the water because he had a promise from Jesus on it.

But then he began to look at the wind and the waves. *This is impossible!* he thought to himself, and the Bible says that he began to sink. Mercifully, Jesus rescued him and got him safely back to the boat. As He did, however, He said to Peter, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:31).

Clearly, it was doubt that caused Peter to sink, and it seems reasonable to conclude that doubt is also what kept the disciples on the Sea of Galilee all night. There is no record of any attempt on their part to exercise any faith, and the Bible says that they were “straining at the oars” when Jesus came to them (Mark 6:48).

That reminds me of so many of us, myself included. We’re straining at life’s oars, trying with all *our* strength to overcome our difficulties. We should do what the twelve *should* have done. We should drop our oars (that means quitting our own striving, straining and worrying) and lift our hands in praise to God, trusting for His help. Apart from Him, we can do nothing, but through Him, we can do all things.

## **Other Tests**

Space does not permit us to do an exhaustive study of the spiritual growth of Jesus’ twelve disciples or to look at every opportunity God gave them to stretch their faith. Let me, however, briefly point out that they had to trust God for daily provision when Jesus sent them out by twos. He didn’t allow them to take along any money or even a bag to carry basic provisions (see Matt. 10:9-10). They had to trust God every single day.

Months later, Jesus asked them, “When I sent you out without purse and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything, did you?” (Luke 22:35). They had learned to trust God to meet their needs.

The Twelve had to learn to trust God for the words they would speak because Jesus did not even permit them to prepare a defense before their accusers. They would have to trust the Holy Spirit to give them “utterance and wisdom which none of their opponents would be able to resist or refute” (Luke 21:15).

Peter once had to trust that God would supply his tax money out of a fish's mouth (see Matt. 17:24-27).

Nine of the disciples failed to trust that Jesus had given them authority over all unclean spirits. Finding them unable to cast out a demon from a young boy, Jesus sternly rebuked them for their lack of faith (see Matt. 17:14-20).

Twice (can you guess why it was twice?) all twelve had their faith stretched to pass out a few loaves and fishes to feed a multitude. You may have noticed that when Jesus fed the five thousand (the initial time He multiplied food), He first asked Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?" John's divinely-inspired commentary states, "And this He was saying to *test* him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do" (John 6:5-6, emphasis added).

Concerning this same story of the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that Jesus' disciples came to Him and requested that He send the multitude away to the surrounding villages to buy food to eat. Jesus' response was startling: "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!" (Matt. 14:16). They, like Philip, were also being tested. Jesus was watching their response. Would they respond in faith or doubt?

If Jesus tells you that you can feed a multitude with a few loaves of bread and a few fish, you can. Just start distributing what you've got, and you'll see a miracle. Unfortunately, the Twelve responded with unbelief: "We have here only five loaves and two fish" (Matt. 14:17).

On numerous occasions the disciples had to exercise their faith as they ministered to needy people. Jesus had commanded them: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Matt. 10:8). All those things require faith.

Again, I don't have the space to examine every incident of the apostles' training. I just wanted you to see that God trained them in a very similar manner as He did the children of Israel. He will, of course, work with us in the same way because He is a God who tests.

Are you beginning to recognize God's tests in your own life? They often come in the form of troubles and difficulties! (O happy day!)