

Testing Our Faith

Are you questioning if you are saved?" Elvan asked Antonne.

Antonne had been walking with the Lord for almost two years. He came to know Christ after Elvan shared the Gospel with him and invited him to church.

"It's not church that saves you," Elvan had said. "It's Christ. But the church is the Body of Christ, and it's important to be a part and stay connected."

"I was gossiping about Brother Richard a while back," Antonne said. "I did tell the Lord about it. I told Him I was so sorry. I didn't have any right to do it."

Elvan looked up from his coffee and stared at his friend.

"I tell you, brother, I've been staying on my knees in prayer," Antonne continued. "I've been asking God what more do I need to do."

Elvan sat the coffee cup down and smiled. "Sounds like you're on a good road, brother, in examining yourself in the faith—and there's nothing wrong with that. The Bible tells us to do that. The fact that you have an aversion to your sin is a sign that your salvation is genuine. There are some other things we can talk about as well; but know this, the Lord doesn't do anything halfway. Our salvation in Christ is secure."

1. *Have you ever felt the need to self-examine where you stand in relation to what Scripture teaches to assess if you are truly living a life of faith in Christ?*

2. *Have you ever been in a situation where you were asked questions about your faith by an unbeliever? How did you handle it?*

3. *Do you think it is necessary at times to gather with other like-minded Christians to encourage one another in what the Bible teaches? Why?*

Passing the Test

2 Corinthians 13:5-7, KJV

5 Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

6 But I trust that ye shall know that we are not reprobates.

7 Now I pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that ye should do that which is honest, though we be as reprobates.

2 Corinthians 13:5-7, NIV

⁵Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? ⁶And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. ⁷Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.

Paul began the final “chapter” of his letter with a warning, in anticipation of his next visit to Corinth: “This will be my third visit to you. . . . I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me” (2 Cor. 13:1-3). While many in Corinth had challenged Paul’s authority, Paul instead appealed to the authority of Christ who sent him. In essence, challenging Paul meant challenging Christ Himself.

This warning set up Paul’s following instructions: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (vs. 5). Especially given their behavior during Paul’s last visit, were those critical Corinthians really Christians? Was Christ truly in them—the only real criteria of a Christian? And if He was truly in them, should they not change their

behavior, regardless of how much authority Paul did or didn't have? Paul trusted that even if some failed this test, the larger church he had already spent so much time with and wept for would not fail it.

Furthermore, Paul added, "I trust that you will discover that we have *not* failed the test" (vs. 6). As the Corinthians got right with God, they would not only recognize Christ more clearly but also the authority He had given Paul and his associates. Self-examination would enable the Corinthians to better understand both their own spiritual condition and that of others.

Paul then exposed his heart for the church at Corinth and explained the reason for this "test": "Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong . . . so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed" (vs. 7). The true issue was not Paul's authority; it was the condition of the Corinthians' hearts. Even if Paul's authority or abilities should come into question, the more important matter was that on examining themselves, the Corinthians should repent and "do what is right."

4. *What did Paul instruct the Corinthians to do?*

5. *What did Paul say the Corinthians would discover, according to verse 6?*

6. *What did Paul pray for on behalf of the Corinthians?*

Truth and Restoration

2 Corinthians 13:8-11, KJV

8 For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.

9 For we are glad, when we are weak, and ye are strong; and this also we wish, even your perfection.

10 Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness,

2 Corinthians 13:8-11, NIV

⁸For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. ¹⁰This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come

according to the power which the Lord hath given me to edification, and not to destruction.

11 Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.

I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Regardless of the perception others may have had of him and his associates, Paul asserted, “We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth” (vs. 8). They had examined themselves and were certain that they were in the faith—and that their actions reflected their faith. Weak and imperfect as they may have been, they were confident that they were reflecting Christ and His truth to the best of their abilities. And they would continue to stand “for the truth” no matter what, without concern for how others perceived them.

Therefore, their weakness was not the important thing; rather, it was their actions, however feeble others thought them to be, that would somehow strengthen the church: “We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored” (vs. 9). The phrase translated “fully restored” (“perfection,” KJV) is a Greek word that suggests the idea of fixing something that is damaged or restoring what has been lost. Paul’s desire was not to be drawn needlessly into a power struggle with his adversaries. His prayerful concern was only for the well-being of the church.

Sadly, many churches today are torn apart because their leaders care more about exercising power than about the spiritual well-being of the people in the pew. While Paul could be rigid in regard to crucial doctrinal errors and unrepentant sin, his toughness arose from his love for the believers, not from a desire to establish his authority. We

need to remember that the spiritual well-being of others is more important than our having power over them.

Weakness was a huge theme in 2 Corinthians, but Paul didn't view weakness in the human sense of the word. Rather, the human insufficiency of Paul and his associates became a means of revealing God's infinite power. What they could not accomplish on their own, God would through them. Through both their weakness and God's power, the church at Corinth would "be fully restored."

In verse 10, Paul explained his reasons for writing the Corinthians one last time: "I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority." Once more, he asserted that whatever authority he possessed was "the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down." Paul's reasons for writing, regardless of tone, were always for the good of the church he loved and had invested so much time in. Sometimes he was "harsh"; sometimes he was "building you up, not . . . tearing you down." Always, he acted and wrote out of his love for this church. As the members of this church examined themselves and turned

back fully to God, even they could not fail to recognize that.

7. What did Paul declare about himself and his associates in verse 8?

8. What did Paul say about his "weakness," and what it was good for?

9. What reasons did Paul give in verse 10 for writing 2 Corinthians?



The ruins of the Temple of Apollo in Corinth (with the Acrocorinth in the background), one of many pagan temples in the city that put believers' faith to the test.

Photo: Rabe!

Churches Examine Their Faith

Paul gave a call to action to the Corinthians to examine themselves and test their faith in Christ, as some were questioning Paul's authority. There are times when Christians, whether as individuals or as a collective body, need to have a time of soul-searching, or testing, to ensure that their beliefs and actions align with God's Word.

The world around us is pushing Christian denominations to accept things that society now finds acceptable, no matter what the Bible says. Some denominations have begun blessing same-sex marriages. Others have ordained practicing homosexuals as ministers or church elders. Some churches have rewritten hymns to include more "inclusive" language. Whole denominations or individual churches have split over these issues or tried to reach some kind of shaky truce. Every church must examine where it stands and decide if it will stay biblical or not?

Debates among Christians are not new. For example, Christians have disagreed on what kind of music can be sung in worship and on what instruments (if any) should be allowed. But these new debates again strike at the heart of who we claim to be as Christians. Will a church decide to redefine what the Bible calls sin in the name of progress, acceptance, and inclusion?

Many Christians are now going through a testing of their faith. They must seek God's guidance, choose where they stand on the issues, decide whether they need to make a change, and keep their focus on God's truth.

10. *What kinds of challenges does a church congregation face when it's told to be "progressive" on biblical issues?*

11. *How can Paul's advice to the Corinthian Church to examine your own faith help?*

12. *What are some ways that congregants could encourage one another in the faith, while avoiding infighting over differences of opinions?*

Heaven Helps Those Who Help Each Other

The first-century Christians were persecuted on all sides for their faith. It was vital for these believers to rely on one another for support in the midst of trial and tribulation. We should understand that God calls us to a life of dependence not only on Him, but on each other. We should make it a practice to encourage each other in the faith.

► *Take some time this week to reflect on where you are at in your faith walk. Assess if there are any behaviors you exhibit that need changing or areas that need work. Brainstorm ways that you can be a voice of encouragement, not only for your brothers and sisters in Christ but also for unbelievers.*

► *Areas that need improvement:*

► *Strategies for encouraging others in the faith:*

KEY VERSE

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. —2 Corinthians 13:5a, KJV

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. —2 Corinthians 13:5a, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of March 11 through March 17

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. 2 Timothy 4:1-8—Proclaim God's Message at All Times.

Tues. Psalm 67—Let All the People Praise God.

Wed. Mark 5:1-2, 6-7, 11-20—Proclaim What Jesus Has Done.

Thurs. Acts 9:10-22—A Powerful Defense of the Faith.

Fri. Isaiah 1:16-20—Come, Let Us Argue It Out.

Sat. 1 Peter 2:4-12—Live Honorably among Unbelievers.

Sun. 1 Peter 3:8-17—Be Ready to Speak for Christ.