

No Longer Brain Dead

Trials and Testing

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A couple of months ago, Nancy and I celebrated our fortieth wedding anniversary; and upon reaching that kind of a milestone, I started to think about what forty years of marriage meant. I started to consider what the number itself meant, and I remembered that it typically is associated with trial and testing in the Bible. You can ask Nancy and she will tell you, that I have been quite a trial and test for her over the years.

Actually, our trial and testing started even before we got married. It started when the two of us, as goofy nineteen-year-olds, decided we wanted to get married sooner than later and I, as an unemployed college student, went to ask Jim Treacy if I could marry his daughter. You see Nancy and I had come up with a plan that she would continue to work while I finished school.

Anyway, I went into the den at their house and asked Mr. Treacy if I could speak to him alone. Now he knew exactly what was going on, as did the rest of her family. Nancy and I only had eyes for each other from before our senior year in high school. He made it very formal, just he and I, sitting across the room from each other. Nancy, all her sisters, and her mother were hiding around the corner in another room, so that they could eavesdrop.

Nancy's father was one of the nicest men that had I ever met, but a Chicago policeman, with guns in the house, and me, a lunatic nineteen-year-old who had concocted a plan with his daughter, the 'apple of his eye,' to marry and live on love!

I began by saying, "Mr. Treacy, I would like to marry your daughter, and we would like to marry soon. We love each other very much, and we know we can make this work."

Now he already knew the game plan Nancy and I had, but he had to ask THE question.... "So, how do you plan on supporting my daughter?"

And the nervous college blockhead responds, "I think I might get a job someday!"

As Mr. Treacy, in his most fatherly protective manner, bellows, "YOU THINK YOU MIGHT GET A JOB SOMEDAY?"—hysterical laughter erupts from around the corner in the other room, as our trial and testing actually began that day!

Trials and testing are part of our lives, whether we are members of the Body of Christ or not. As the old worldly saying goes, "What does not kill you makes you stronger!" But our times of trials and testing are different from the rest of the world, because God is designing specific trials and tests that are custom made for each and every one of us, individually.

Setting up the graphic picture, which Richard drew in his sermon a few weeks ago, of God's careful and thoughtful creation of Adam from the mud of the earth, can we also see God continuing to do this which each of us individually? Can we see Him getting right on down in there and continuing the molding and shaping of each of us, so that we each will fit exactly into the Family in the way that He sees fit! Do we also see that He is expecting maturing, thoughtful responses all along the way from His beloved creation?

Please turn with me to Deuteronomy, and as you are turning there, I want you to try to make up your mind right now to consider all of the verses that we touch on today, not in a prophetic manner addressed to Judah, Israel, the church, the world, or any other way that God may intend them, but take them personally, as if they are pointedly directed at you, which, we know, is surely one of the ways God intends them to be taken.

Deuteronomy 2:7 For the LOORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hand. He knows your trudging through this great wilderness. These forty years the LOORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.

Do you think that those people, or even Moses, considered all the works of their hands during this severe trek through the wilderness, to be blessed and to be watched over by God?

Deuteronomy 8:2-20 And you shall remember that the LOORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LOORD. Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the LOORD your God chastens you. Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LOORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. For the LOORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and

springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LOORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the LOORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LOORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth." And you shall remember the LOORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LOORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations which the LOORD destroys before you, so you shall perish, because you would not be obedient to the voice of the LOORD your God.

Brethren, do you think that they considered the fiery trials that were upon each of them as a blessing from God? Did they see God's hand involved in it even when they, and so many of those they traveled with and loved, grew weary under the weight of the journey! Seeing so many in pain and dying, did they see God blessing them all the way through, even in those things that caused pain and seemed to drag on and on?

Now let us continue to take these instructions very personally and consider that at the end of this chapter God raises the level of the bar higher than He had before. We always draw an analogy of their wilderness journey compared to our walk through this life, with the Promised Land as the Kingdom of God, which is right, but let us take this a little further.

Their trek was not over at the end of the forty years; as a matter of fact, this was merely

the prelude to starting to apply what they had learned on the first part of the journey. And, to carefully think and meditate always about what God had done so far, and continued to do as He expands their blessings to include the great wealth in the land, and knowing how to use it.

The blessings increase, but so does the weight of responsibility to reason as God reasons through all of the new trials that they would encounter. Collectively and individually, God must be in the forefront of all their thoughts and actions and ours. An important key here, for us, is to constantly call to mind the whole journey with thanksgiving, so that each of us can deal with the ever-increasing responsibilities of governing ourselves while the spirit-born mind and heart of God matures in our lives.

One of the things that became clearer to me, as I considered these past forty years, was God's obvious physical blessings and deliverances early on, before we had even been a part of the Body of His Son; because He knew exactly what it would take to pull us to Him and our own physical well being, as a driving force of human nature always seems to be the most important to us.

However, once we had reached that point, where He has increased our blessings to mutually managing the blessings with Him, He starts expecting something a little bit different, just as He did with Israel, when they entered the Promised Land. He expected a thoughtful continuation of life's journey, with the ever-increasing blessings and responsibility based on a relationship from the inside out rather than the outside in.

I would like to tell you a story, and I want you to understand, everything I am going to tell you had very little to do with anything great or otherwise that Nancy and I did, but it had everything to do with what God was doing. Everything was done by Him, and through Him, because we did not even have the means to seek Him yet.

I would like you to think of this as how a loving parent guides His children, to accomplish the purpose of developing both the child and the family, even though, as the comedian, Bill Cosby, used to say, "The kids are brain dead!"

When Nancy and I got married we were kids, and for all of you young people listening out there, I do not recommend it. And not because it did not work for us, but because it did put us behind the eight ball and was not the wisest of things to do; but God was watching and working out His purpose, even though the blockheads could not see it then!

I intended to be an architect, but the marvelous plan Nancy and I had hatched, which

had proved to be such an interesting conversation point for Nancy's father and myself that one day, did not quite work out as we "not-so-carefully" planned it.

Soon after we married, I started working as a maintenance electrician at a hotel while I was still in school, and I ended up working in hotels for most of the rest of my time at work.

It just so happened that one of the other fellows working there, unbeknownst to me, was a member of the Worldwide Church of God. He and I did not spend much time together, because I worked a different shift, but we had the opportunity to talk occasionally and develop a rapport, although very seldom did we talk about religion.

While I was still working at the same hotel, and shortly after our first two sons were born in 1972 and 1975, Nancy and I decided we needed to become better Catholics, if for no other reason than to be able to give our children a solid direction. So we started studying and looking into things and realized that the Catholic Church was wrong, and that we needed to look elsewhere. We started looking into other Christian religions, and all of them seemed to have pieces of the truth, but so much of it still left questions.

It was about this time, that I started working the same shift with Jack, the man in Worldwide, and we occasionally talked about religion. He had pointed out to me that many of the customs of the churches were not only traditions of men, but keeping them was not pleasing to God.

As Nancy and I started to learn things, we did them, to the best of our understanding at that time. When we found out Easter was a pagan custom, we stopped doing it. When we read Jeremiah 10, we quit having a Christmas tree, even though we kept Christmas for another year, but without the tree. And when we saw that we should keep the Seventh day Sabbath, we did it—on Wednesday—because that was the seventh day of my workweek at the time! God the Father and the Son were watching and probably saying, "The blockhead and his wife are at it again!"

It was around this time that my friend from Worldwide, Jack, gave me the booklet, "Which Day is the Christian Sabbath?" along with the warning that if I learned these things, I became responsible to do them.

Over the next few months, as Nancy and I studied, we became convinced of something; and that something was that it was not the seventh day that fit my schedule, but the seventh day that fit into God's.

At this point, we knew that we had to start keeping the seventh day Sabbath as God gave it, but it would probably mean losing my job. However an interesting thing happened before it even became an issue. My friend Jack got a better paying job somewhere else that better suited his skills and interests, and I got his shift, which included Friday and Saturday off. So the lunkhead and his bride were blessed before we even asked!

By this time, Nancy and I had all four of our children, and although we were not affiliated with any church group, we had seen our responsibility to do certain things; and we were keeping the Sabbath and no longer keeping the holidays like Christmas and Easter.

I had been working, as an electrician in this same hotel from the time I was in college, but about a year after getting Jack's shift, someone put me on to a better paying electrician's job working for a department store chain. Not only was the pay better, but also so were the hours, with Saturday and Sunday off.

I think it was at this time that God made His hand more easily and immediately apparent, physically, than any other time in our lives and any time since.

I had been working at my new job for about year, when I received a call one Saturday morning from one of the stores that they were having problems with their all-electric kitchen, and they needed me in right away. Well, I reasoned that this was an emergency, and although someone else could have taken the call, I went in and took care of it. It turned out to be a very simple problem of resetting a safety circuit after they had billowed too much smoke out through the stove exhaust. It took me about thirty minutes.

A few weeks later, the department store chain had the grand opening of their newest store, which happened to be a store within my region. The grand opening was scheduled for a Saturday, and they asked me to be there on standby, just in case anything went wrong.

I reasoned again, it is only stand-by; I will not really be working, so it should be okay, besides, I really did not want to make an issue out of the Sabbath, it was kind of embarrassing. The blockhead was using that zippity-do-dah reasoning again!

The following Monday morning there was a page for me at the store where I was working; there was a call on hold for me. The call was from the assistant chief electrician for the chain, who told me because of cost cuts, there was going to be a lay off and he wanted to give me a heads up that even though I had done good work, it was

"last one hired, first one fired" policy and I was the last one hired a year ago.

At that moment, I had one of the most amazing moments of clarity and conviction that I had ever had in my life. I immediately went upstairs to the electric shop, closed the door and got down on my knees, and I told God that I absolutely understand now the importance of doing His will, and that His Sabbath is not to be broken or taken lightly. I told Him from the bottom of my heart that I knew that I was being laid off because I broke the Sabbath; and I understood then what I only heard before, and I would never break His Sabbath again!

Before I had totally finished my prayer, there was another page for me for an outside call. I got up from my knees and walked over to my desk to call the operator and have the call transferred to the shop. It was Nancy, and she said that she had just received a call from Ray Egan, and he wanted me to call him as soon as possible.

Ray was in charge of the Engineering department at the hotel where I had worked, from shortly after Nancy and I had married until the year before, when I left for the job with the department store chain, and I had not heard from him during most of that year.

When I called him back, he told me that the man who had been chief electrician at the hotel for a number of years, and who everyone thought would stay in the job until he died, had walked into his office first thing that morning and told him he had just decided out of the blue that it was time for him to retire; and that he was retiring at the end of the month.

Ray offered me the chief electrician's job, which meant a twenty-five percent pay increase, a regular weekly schedule, and the opportunity to move into a management position and to run my own department.

Brethren, these things all happened before we even contacted Worldwide and were baptized and set apart to receive God's Holy Spirit.

Going back to what Bill Cosby said, and applying it to ourselves at the time, in the world; without God's spirit—we were brain dead.

And yet, God was continuing to carefully do exactly what He needed to do in order to continue in the creation process of His family, using whom He will, when He will, to accomplish His will.

Without God's Spirit, as I said, we were brain dead. And, just as with Israel, He used

spectacular physical deliverance to make us understand a point, and move us to where He wanted us to go.

Just by looking at the timing of the thing, God spectacularly showed that He is absolutely sovereign over His creation, and that He is the one who works things out exactly as He sees fit. He showed that to us, and we knew that He was going to do that all of the time.

Brethren, this is exactly what He does for us, all of the time! Is it not? Of course not, we are not getting those physical things all of the time, or is it?

It has just changed. Just as with the Israelites, as recorded in Deuteronomy, God is blessing us ALL ALONG THE WAY! But unlike physical Israel, He does not expect His children, imbued with His spirit, to be as much of a bunch of blockheads as we were when we first began this incredible journey.

As the truth of God's word, and His Spirit working in us, brings us ever closer to maturity, His purpose for us moves beyond ourselves and from "the here and now" towards the forever and eternal purpose of the mind of God! He expects us to be moved less by the spectacular physical deliverance from our trials and testing, (although that is not entirely out of the picture), to a mind and heart that reasons as He does, through those trials and testing with the Family, with eternity in mind as He has!

Today, with all of the severe trials that seem to be part of the common lot of almost all in God's church, this sermon is not intended to give you something that you do not already know, but to encourage all of us to remember all the way that God has brought us, and continues to bring us. We are no longer brain dead to be tossed about by every trial, but we now have brains infused with the power of God's Holy Spirit, so that we mature in thinking and acting as God would, no matter what the situation is, or how long it lasts.

I told you this story because it is typical of what we all go through, when we are brain dead.

But our courage now comes from always remembering, with thanksgiving, what God has done for us; while using the new mind He has given us to consider, what He continues to do in moving every part of His creation toward His Kingdom.

He expects us more and more to deal with the circumstances as they come, as led by His Holy Spirit dwelling within us, even when physical deliverance is nowhere in sight.

Just as He trusted His Son to finish His job and fulfill the Father's will no matter what, He trusts us to understand and do the same, no matter what our circumstances.

Brethren, when God first miraculously pulled us into the Body of His Son, He did it all. Our response was like a baby taking a first step to a parent with outstretched arms; a baby who was then picked up and carried by that very pleased parent as he continued to grow. But as the child grows, what then pleases the parent is maturity and learning to walk as the parent walks.

God expects His children to be learning to walk as He would walk through this minefield of a world that is completely contrary to Him. This is what His Son did, and this is what we are supposed to be doing to become like Him in everything.

I wanted to take the little bit of time left in this message to take a quick look at just a few scriptures that might help us to understand how to live with the trials that God is purposefully seeing us through, so that we may find the real deliverance that He expects for us, according to His purpose.

I would like you to turn to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah lived in times not unlike what we have today. He began prophesying during the time of the righteous King Josiah, who was zealous in restoring honor to God. Jeremiah got a chance to experience relatively good times for about eighteen years, and from then on it was pretty much downhill and into captivity. Keep yourselves in mind when reading these scriptures, and also keep in mind that these were real people and what they went through.

Taking these verses personally, I do not think it is too hard for us to interrelate our own times with the march to desolation during Jeremiah's days, and what trials and tests it must have been bringing down on those few who were still struggling to stay faithful to God's way.

One of the first things that I want you to notice in Jeremiah, are all the false prophets and what they taught: "It is not that bad and don't sweat it! God will look the other way!"

Jeremiah 14:10-14 Thus says the LORD to this people: "Thus they have loved to wander; They have not restrained their feet. Therefore the LORD does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now, And punish their sins." Then the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for this people, for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering

and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOOD! Behold, the prophets say to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.'" And the LOORD said to me, "The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart."

Jeremiah 23:9-10, 16-17, 24-27 My heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake. I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine has overcome, because of the LOORD, and because of His holy words. For the land is full of adulterers; for because of a curse the land mourns. The pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up. Their course of life is evil, and their might is not right. Thus says the LOORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LOORD. They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The LOORD has said, "You shall have peace;"' and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, "No evil shall come upon you." "Can any hide himself in secret places, that I shall not see him?" saith the LOORD. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" saith the LOORD. "I have heard what the prophets said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed.'" How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who think to cause My people to forget My name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbor, as their fathers have forgotten My name for Baal.

Brethren, again, taking these scriptures personally, one of the first lessons for us to be considering in all of our times of trial is whether the truth of God is the bedrock of our beliefs and actions, or have we allowed ourselves to just go with the flow?

What are we allowing as the driving influences of our lives? We do not need to have someone directly telling us the smooth things: we can just be absorbing them by giving an overabundance of our time to them in the entertainments, the politics and the cares of this world and allowing them to move our God-blessed minds away from the truth of God's word.

We are no longer brain dead and God expects us to recognize these subtle false prophets, whether they are men or just the circumstances around us, and just maybe

God is using a particular trial that we are going through to steady us back on the right course.

There are so many distractions in this end-time world; we do not need physical false prophets to contradict God's word. This world's false vision of how to handle things is a driving influence pushing all of us around, and God may be allowing a particular trial to help us see where those anti-God influences are coming from in our lives, and we need to cut them out of our lives if we want to be on the same wave length with God. So, our false prophets are not necessarily men, but just the circumstance as well that surrounds us.

Another important lesson that we need to learn in times of trial is closely tied back to the first. God is always doing things His way to produce in our new Spirit-driven minds the ability to analyze the situation, and to do what the truth of His word tells us to do.

Remember, take all of these things personally, and see them in light of our own circumstances today.

Jeremiah 27:6-10, 14 And now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant; and the beasts of the field I have also given him to serve him. "So all nations shall serve him and his son and his son's son, until the time of his land comes; and then many nations and great kings shall make him serve them. And it shall be, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and which will not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will punish," says the LORD, "with the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand. Therefore do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who speak to you, saying, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon.' For they prophesy a lie to you, to remove you far from your land; and I will drive you out, and you will perish."

Jeremiah 24:1-10 The LORD showed me, and there were two baskets of figs set before the temple of the LORD, after Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away captive Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the princes of Judah with the craftsmen and smiths, from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Babylon. One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first ripe; and the other basket had very bad figs which could not be eaten, they were so bad. Then the LORD said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "Figs, the good figs, very good;

and the bad, very bad, which cannot be eaten, they are so bad." Again the word of the LOORD came to me, saying, "Thus says the LOORD, the God of Israel: 'Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LOORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart. And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad'"—surely thus says the LOORD—"so will I give up Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for their harm, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I shall drive them. And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers."

The circumstances under which we live may seem to be oppressive and wrong to us carnally thinking, but God is working out His plan and purpose, even to the point of taking into captivity. Those He considers as, "good to be used in His service" for their own benefit, He put into captivity. Remember in the Book of Daniel...that people like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were in this group and along with the "physically good things" that happened to them in captivity they went through pits of fire and lions' dens to accomplish God's purpose.

So, while the false prophets will be pushing for rebellion, as it says in Jeremiah 24:14; God tells His people that they are to be doing the things that lead to peace, even in captivity and testing and trials, because that is the way He thinks, and we are supposed to be learning as He thinks.

Jeremiah 29:7, 11-14 "And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LOORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LOORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you," says the LOORD, "and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places

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where I have driven you," says the LOORD, "and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive."

In a world of confrontation, chaos, confusion and rebellion, God wants His children to be thinking and acting in peace, knowing He is working out everything for the good of His family. The more we know this, trust Him, and walk this way, the more we will be able to endure our trials and testing.

Brethren, living in this life is living in captivity. We are living in the captivity of this world because it is a blessing that Jesus Christ requested this very thing for us from His Father:

"I pray not that you should take them out of the world. They are not of the world even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through Thy truth!"