

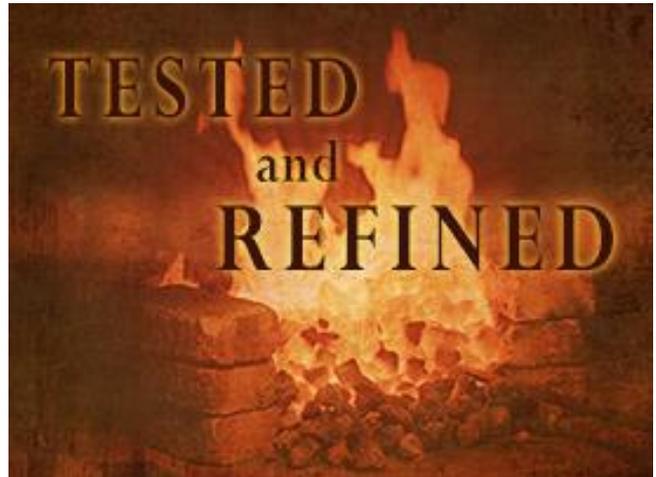
## TESTED AND REFINED

4th June

Readings: Judges 2:10–19; 3:7-11

Alyson, a young mum, tells of a time when she was called into her daughter's school. She writes...

The principal gently pushed a sheet of paper across the table so I could see. "These are the markers for dyslexia." There was a pause. My eyes filled with tears. I didn't want this for my girl. I wanted an easier road, one that didn't include her being painfully slow to read, of her embarrassed by not being able to spell simple words, or maybe even giving up reading because it's just too hard.



How would you respond to receiving similar news about your child? If you were a friend what would you say to Alyson? She went on to write...

Later into my sadness and frustration, a wise friend said: "A life of ease is not your deepest desire for your daughter. Isn't your deepest desire that she learn to fully trust in the Lord rather than herself? - and the Lord is giving her an opportunity to do just that."

What do you think of her friend's response? It's tough news to hear – for anyone? It's like the Lord's giving this mum a test and it's too hard. This raises so many questions. Does God allow tough times to test us? If so, what do they look like and is this one?

Well today we're going to look at these questions. We'll tease the answers out from our passage in Judges and then we'll see if this helps with Alyson and her daughter

*Let's pray*

Well, we're early in journey through Judges. Last time I preached we jumped ahead to the calling of the third judge Gideon as we commissioned Josh. So, today we pick up Judges back in chapter two.

Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten.  
Judges 2:8

Now Judges has two introductions, both starting with the death of Joshua. Chapter one started with “After the death of Joshua...” and goes to put positive spin on how God’s people failed to rid the Promised Land of the Canaanites. However, with this second introduction we have a more honest account of what happened - telling us how it really was.

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the Lord handed them over to raiders who plundered them...

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the Lord’s commands. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways. Judges 2:10–19

Here we have the pattern repeated time and time again in Judges

- i. God’s people turn to idols
- ii. God sends a nation to oppress them
- iii. God’s people cry out to God
- iv. God sends a Judge to rescue
- v. God gives them rest

We see this pattern played out to-the-letter with the rise of the first judge, Othniel.

Who’s Othniel? Well, we were introduced to Othniel in chapter one as Caleb’s son-in-law. He won Caleb’s daughter’s hand in marriage because of his courage and ability as a mighty warrior. As we read Othniel’s story see if you can identify the pattern.

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz,

Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died Jdg 3:7–11.

Now compared to Deborah, Gideon and Samson there's none of the colour and intrigue that make these other Judges so interesting. However, we're told something very important. It was when God's Spirit came upon Othniel that he was able to lead Israel to overpower the king of Aram. None of the half measures we saw in chapter one. Fully obedience by the power of God's Spirit Othniel was a great Judge.

The other thing to note is Othniel is the best and most effective of the Judges. The next two are pretty good but the rest of the Judges are a poor bunch. Othniel is a model leader who trusted God, and by God's Spirit, was fully obedient.

Yet, as this sad and painful pattern begins it's natural to ask why? Why this repetition!? It seems all so futile, pointless and a tremendous waste. Well, we're told why in 2:22 and 3:1-2

"I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their forefathers did." Judges 2:22

These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites... ) Judges 3:1–2

Did you pick it up? The Canaanites were left to... test Israel. Now there are two different testings described here so let's unpack each verse to see what this testing looks like. First God's people are...

## **1. Tested by Temptation**

I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their forefathers did. Judges 2:22

So why have I called this testing by temptation. What do I mean by this? Living amongst God's people were also sorts of customs and practices that were in opposition to God and his ways. Instead of living among people who worshiped one God, people in the neighbouring village worshiped idols and it was attractive. Instead of living among people being faithful to one wife the people in the next valley were promiscuous and it looked like fun. Instead of living among people expected to be fair in business dealings the people across the border got away with what ever they could - and well there was money to be had. The pull of the world was all around them and it was strong.

God's saying, "When faced with temptation will you look up or to the side? Will you look to me and my ways or will you look to the lure of the world? Will your hearts run after me or will your hearts run after the same as your neighbours - wealth, sex, power and the like? Will you give in to these temptations or remain faithful to me?"

And in many ways we are similar. We live among people who're not interested in God and his ways. For us, lure of the world takes on different forms than that of late bronze age Middle East but it's just as strong. We're in the midst of many temptations calling us to put something else before God. We want it and we want it now. And the world says can have it. If you have enough money or the right connections then it's yours. It may be something bad - like the thrill of an affair. Or something good like a stellar career with all the trappings but at the expense family or our integrity. In all these things we are being tested.

And was Jesus ever tested? Yes, he was. We have a clear account of this after his baptism. Forty days fasting in wilderness and Satan tempts him with - food, wealth, and to use his power for personal gain. What was his choice? To look up and not sideways. To look to his heavenly Father and not to the pleasures of the world.

So we take courage from the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

How do we overcome temptation? Like Jesus... we resist. We resist knowing as we look to Jesus he will provide a way out.

This then now brings us to the second type of testing...

## **2. Tested by Trial**

These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites...) Judges 3:1-2

The Canaanites living among the Israelites and the surrounding nations would be an ongoing difficulty so that God could teach them warfare. As God's people looked to him, with eyes were fixed on the God who rescued them from Egypt, he would teach them to win battles they never should have. Against overwhelming odds God would come through so they might learn to trust and worship God with all their hearts. So as the Canaanites living among them or surrounding nations got the upper hand God's people were forced to look to God for deliverance - and God came through. God was teaching them to be dependent upon him and not idols of their hearts. When oppressed and all circumstances pointed to being abandoned by God he would teach them to trust him.

Now was Jesus tested by trial? Just as he was tested by temptation in the wilderness Jesus was tested by trial in the Garden of Gethseme. How? Well knowing he was going to the cross would he falter or would he endure? Jesus was pushed to breaking point - so much so his sweat was like blood – yet Jesus endured. And on the cross though every circumstance, the mocking crowd and the whispers of Satan told Jesus God did not care, he endured.

And we to are also to endure. In Hebrews the write references the Garden of Gethsemane saying...

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Hebrews 12:4

Then goes on to say...

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. Hebrews 12:7

Trials come into our life not because we're abandoned by God but because we are his dearly loved children. For as we face trials with eyes fixed on Jesus we're refined to be more like him. Refined like precious silver and the purest of gold.

Now let me tell you a story. There was a lady who was studying a passage in Malachi where God talks of himself as a refiner and purifier of silver. Puzzled she thought she'd see if there was a local silversmith she could chat to. Well she made contact and he invited her to watch him at his work.

As she watched the silversmith he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest to burn away impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse that says: 'God sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.' She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there watching the whole time. The man answered yes, not only had he to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked, 'How do you know when the silver is fully refined

He smiled at her and answered, 'Oh, that's easy -- when I see my image in it.'

You see God tests us by temptation and by trial so that we can become more and more like Jesus.

And this brings us back to Alyson the young mum with the news of her daughter's dlysixia. Was this testing by temptation? No. Was this testing by trial? Yes and this is how she took it after wise friends words.

“A life of ease is not your deepest desire for your daughter. Isn’t your deepest desire that she learn to fully trust in the Lord rather than herself? - and the Lord is giving her an opportunity to do just that.”

And this is how the young mum took these words, “My friend was right”, she said. “I want above all else for my daughter to hope in God and for him to use her mightily in his kingdom—and often the path that leads us there is one of great difficulty. A quote from Charles Spurgeon came to mind: “The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction.”

So what have we learned today? Well the pattern in Judges is tragic. It shows God’s people rejecting God, crying out and then being rescued. But, as it is sad it also gives us hope. How? Because we see God working with the likes of you and I. He will rescue us despite our frailties, our set backs, our sin. This is Good News. We also see God tests those he loves. How does he test us? Firstly by allowing temptation so, as we look to Jesus, we can resist and chose God above all else. Secondly we are tested by trials. So, as we look to Jesus, we can endure and be equipped to serve. And in all this God’s purpose is to mold and shape us to be more like his Son, Jesus. He who has captivated our affections and whose table we now come. Let us pray