

## *THE PHASES OF FAITH*

*By Latayne Scott*

While others around us in the world and even those in the church may conclude from their own personal experiences that serving God doesn't pay off in the real world, they are echoing the thoughts we find in Malachi 3:14—

*You have said, "It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out His requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty. But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper and even those who challenge God escape."*

*Those who say such things have made fundamental mistakes in assessing personal experience, in concluding that pleasantness of personal experience is equated with favor from God. We find in a subsequent verse how godly people responded:*

*Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored His name. "They will be mine," says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."*

*The fact is that God not only ultimately makes a distinction between those who are His and those who are not in eternity; but He also tries and tests His people while on this earth. We should talk to one another as did the believers of Malachi's day to encourage one another in our faith.*

*There is a Biblical profile of faith, one that could even be regarded as one regards a road map. If you know where you are along a route, and you can see and be assured of the destination, you won't feel as "lost" along the way. The building of personal faith is not a seamless, homogenous stream. If we example the great people of faith of the Bible, we find that their faith was exercised in phases. But most often we find ourselves in the middle phase of faith, where it is tested, and that is where we often lose heart.*

*For a Christian, personal suffering is never meaningless or pointless. We live under a completely different cause-and-effect system than others in the world. Not only do the*

*personal circumstances of our lives have meaning that is intended to build our faith, we are told to pay attention to those events and learn from them.*

*"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed." --1 Peter 4:12-13.*

*We are told that we are to evaluate our experience not in terms of how comfortable it makes us or how fulfilled it makes us, but in terms of how much it contributes to the building up of our faith.*

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. -1 Peter 1:3-5.*

*As Christians, we are shielded in a special way by God's power. That thought is echoed in Romans 8:28:*

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." -Romans 8:28*

*That means that in every circumstance, either pleasant or unpleasant, God is constantly filtering out everything that could ultimately harm the believer and his faith. Here's a situation: we could assure our children that they could go into their classrooms at school, and if someone were to ignite tear gas in that classroom, all the students, including them would probably go through the experience with the same physical effects. However, the believers in that room could be assured that God would not let anything come of that which would threaten their souls or dim their faith if they trusted in Him and did not doubt His character or His intentions toward them. Non-believers, however, have no such protection. We truly do live in a different cause and effect system than others.*

*Here's another assurance from Scripture that this is true. When we previously looked at 1 Peter chapter 1, we found that we are shielded by God's power. Peter continues:*

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. - 1 Peter 1:6-9.*

*Trials, says Peter, are used by the Lord to refine your faith and to help you learn to love the God that you cannot see in the midst of circumstances that overcome all your senses. This knowledge should fill you with joy, because you should see them as mileposts along the road of your destination - the goal of your faith, the salvation of your soul.*

*If we know the roadmap or Biblical profile of faith, we should look for these milestones of testing along the way. 1 Peter 5:6-11 tells us plainly that when we submit to God's mighty hand, He will "in due time" lift us up. No trial therefore is open-ended—the God of grace and mercy will after the period of suffering restore us and make us, who feel so weak in the middle of the trial, strong, firm and steadfast. Hebrews 12: 1-13 reminds us to look to Jesus who went through trials as well, and then not to forget the fact that being disciplined is a mark of being a child of God. The Hebrews writer tells us flatly that we tend to forget that, and lose heart and become discouraged when we ought instead to be actively looking past the unpleasantness of the trial to a time when God will surely give us a harvest of righteousness because we've been trained by trial. And James 1:2-4 tells us that our attitude in testing should be one of joy, because we "know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" that leads to maturity and completeness. Later in verses 12-15 James warns us not to accuse God of tempting us, but only in helping us in temptation and trial that should be regarded as a test that is a prerequisite to a crown of life.*

*From all of these verses we can see that unpleasant circumstances, whether you call them trials or testings, are optimized by God to build our faith if we are believers. God is not random in His treatment of us. He has a particular will, a preference that is best for us, in every situation. He does not want us to evaluate our own experience and choose those options that seem most pleasant or comfortable for us. He wants us instead to sacrifice*

*our own judgment, our own experience-based assessments, and even our preferences to the goal of finding out what He wants in any situation.*

*Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will." -- Romans 12:1-2*

*We can see a progression here. If we lay on the altar everything that has to do with our bodies - our desires for comfort, our senses; and give up the world's way of looking at things, the patterns of human experience and assessment the world says will make things better or more pleasant for us, then our minds will be renewed and we'll be transformed. In that state, we are able to test and approve just what it is that God wants for us in our daily situations.*

*Of course those decisions will not look sensible or practical to the world. Its patterns tell us to seek the path of least resistance to our own personal happiness. However, the Bible never advises that. God most often calls us to hard, courageous acts that will not bring immediate relief to a trials, nor personal advancement, nor comfort and ease.*

*We must be strong in encouraging one another in this matter. When our brothers or sisters are suffering trial, we must help them look for the "roadmap" of faith and see where they are along the way to their destination of glorifying God in their lives. We must be honest and forthright with new Christians and tell them up front that if they want to truly live the richest and most rewarding Christian life that it will not be one that makes everything easier for them -in fact, that the life of a committed believer will probably be much harder on them than their previous life as an unbeliever from the world's point of view.*

*If the profile of faith has a roadmap, we can find it most clearly seen in the life of Abraham. Romans 4:12 tells us that we actually walk in the footsteps, along the roadmap, of the father of our faith, Abraham.*

*Abraham experienced clearly the three phases of faith that we all undergo. Phase 1 is the expression of Promise by God; Phase 2 is the period of Contradiction, and Phase 3 is the Resolution of the trial. These phases are cyclical in our lives as they were in the life of Abraham. He didn't just have one trial with the three phases, he had many. Like us, he failed in some instances and triumphed in others, but because he was like us not under the same cause-and-effect system as the world, God made everything in his life work together for his good as He does for us.*

### *PHASE ONE: THE PROMISE*

*In Phase 1, we are given promises from God. 2 Peter 1:4 speaks of the "great and precious promises" God gives us in order to participate in His nature and escape the corruption of the world, and the preceding verse 3 tells us that these promises are the outgrowth of his divine power, which He assures us He transfers to us so that we will have everything we need for both life—yes, everyday life—and godliness.*

*We depend upon so many of those promises: that God will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), that He will meet all our needs (Philippians 4:19), that He will take care of food and clothing for us (Matthew 6:25-32).*

*Abraham was a man rich in promises. God spoke to him openly about what He wanted to do for Abraham:*

*Genesis 12:1-3. Here God promised Abraham guidance to a new place, personal protection against his enemies, and an extended blessing to the whole world through Abraham.*

*Genesis 12:7: the promise of at least one child, and a land of inheritance for all his descendants.*

*Genesis 13:14 and following: the promise of a specific land and numerous offspring. It is significant that this promise was made to Abraham after he had made a personal*

*sacrifice by letting his nephew Lot choose what looked like a richer land. But afterwards God told Abraham to "walk around" in the land and assured him that everything in all four directions would ultimately be his.*

*Genesis 14:21-24. Abraham showed his understanding that these promises would come directly from the hand of God by refusing to be enriched by his enemies.*

*Genesis 15:1 and following. Abraham is told to not fear; that God would be a shield for him against all dangers, a great reward for him, that he would have a son from his own body, and that he would have numerous offspring. In addition, just trusting in God to provide what He'd promised would be put on Abraham's account of righteousness -in other words, his "line of credit" with God would be without limits as long as he believed and trusted Him.*

*Genesis 15:8-21: In this passage Abraham gets even a map of the boundaries of the land he'll inherit. In addition, Abraham gets confirmation of the promise of God by a covenant that God graphically illustrates by passing between the cut halves of sacrificial animals. God assures Abraham of his question about how he can know that he'll gain possession with two assurances: one, the appearance of a smoking pot signifying God's presence passed between the animal halves; and secondly God made a promise that He'd not only give the land to Abraham's descendants, they would temporarily give it up and then He'd rescue them from slavery and give it again -this time not to rich, powerful people like Abraham's family, but to pitiful helpless slaves only alive because God had personally fed them for 40 years. In other words, what Abraham got was a symbol and then a promise of something that would happen long after his lifetime. (In the same way, are we not assured of God's help by symbols and assurances of things that will happen after our deaths as ultimate vindication? Later, Moses would ask for assurance from God of the future and be told something similar -you'll know I was with you, God said, when you're back here at this mountain worshipping Me—after the fact of your rescue! (Exodus 3:12)*

## *PHASE TWO: THE CONTRADICTION*

*As we will see in the life of Abraham, after we know the promises of God, we are inevitably faced with a contradiction to those promises. For Abraham, he knew beyond any doubt that he was to have at least one child to lead to descendants who would inherit*

*all the things that God talked to him about. However, there was one problem. Abraham was very old, and his wife Sarah was sterile. How, he must have wondered, could the promises of God be fulfilled when he was getting old and his wife couldn't have children? It was at this point that Abraham made a strategic mistake that we all make. He continued to believe that God's promises were valid, that's true; but he decided that he needed to do something to "help God out" in getting those things to become reality. He did not wait but rather took things into his own hands and from that point on brought about a situation that caused him, his wife, his concubine Hagar, his son Ishmael and indeed the entire Near Eastern world to this day great grief. He and Sarah decided not to wait on God but to move things along by letting Hagar enter the picture.*

*You see, he had the promises, but the contradiction he saw - his age, Sarah's age and sterility, perhaps even a loss of hope—led to him not relying on God to resolve the situation, but led to him thinking he ought to do it.*

*This is not the first time that a contradiction has entered the picture of Abraham's life. Just after Abraham got his very first assurance that God would bless and protect him, Abraham had found himself in a position where he was afraid for his life. In Genesis 12 he was told he'd be made into a great nation, that anyone who challenged or cursed him would be cursed; but as soon as he found himself in a famine he went to Egypt and let his desire for protecting himself lead him to think that it would be best for him to let his wife Sarah be the price of his own survival by letting her become the wife of Pharaoh. Only the direct intervention of God to make sure that His purposes weren't thwarted in spite of Abraham's fears and devices to protect himself saved the day.*

*But God is persistent in keeping His promises, and even in making more specific promises to Abraham, about His specific will in Abraham's life:*

*Genesis 17:1 and following: God reaffirms His own identity, elaborates on His promises and even tells Abraham that He's going to represent him with a new name and that he and Sarai will have new identities as exemplified by the new names. In addition, God institutes the symbol of circumcision and tells Abraham in effect that the deed to the new land is one that he will wear carved into his own flesh and into the flesh of his descendants -more permanent and irreversible than a tattoo. He also tells Abraham the name of his son who is to be born, and says specifically that Sarah the sterile one will be his mother.*

*Genesis 18: As the three angelic visitors elaborate on the promises previously made to Abraham, he is told that not only is a child coming, but even the season of the year in which he is to be born; and Abraham and Sarah are assured that nothing is too hard for the Lord.*

*But immediately when another contradiction emerges, Abraham takes the counsel of his fears and his desire for self protection and again sells Sarah to another man! He has seen God's fury and wrath against Sodom and Gomorrah, seen how God could protect even Lot against the mob and the fire and brimstone; and still he resorts to self protection against Abimelech in order to keep himself alive.*

*(A thought for consideration: could it have been that Sarah had been childless all these years because Abraham had begun to believe his own lies about her being his sister? In Genesis 20:15 he said that from the time God had told him to leave Ur, he had agreed with Sarah to tell everyone, wherever they went, that she was his sister. Maybe that's why Hagar mocked her, as an old maid who had to travel around with her brother?)*

*But the situation when Sarah returned from Abimelech was about to change. It was true that Abraham was 100 years old, and that Sarah was long past the physical age of childbearing. But God completely overcame those factors which seemed like ironclad contradictions to His promises of a son.*

*As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed -the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." --Romans 4:17-23.*

*With the birth of Isaac we can see clearly the first two phases of faith: the promises of God that were followed by contradictions that were real. Sarah was too old, and so was Abraham. But as in the faith of us all, the contradictions were followed by an inevitable third phase: that of a resolution.*

*By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.—Hebrews 11:11-12.*

### *PHASE THREE: THE RESOLUTION*

*In the case of the birth of Issac, God Himself miraculously resolved the situation that Abraham had tried to work out himself with Hagar and with his own reasoning processes when he speculated about Eliezar of Damascus (Genesis 15:2-3).*

*The very fact of the birth of Isaac had a profound effect on the faith of Abraham. He had seen God bring life out of the death of his own body and the deadness of Sarah's womb. Like all resolutions, it was completely satisfying and built the faith of the one who waited for God to resolve the situation. And like all resolutions, it was not just an end in itself: it prepared Abraham for other contradictions in his life. And it prepares us and teaches us about contradictions in our own lives: when we see that God has promised us certain things and then it seems impossible to us that God will keep those promises because of the great weight of the contradictions that seem to oppose them.*

*In the case of Abraham, a greater test would face him. In order for all the promises of progeny and inheritance to come to fruition, Isaac would have to have children of his own. Yet before the time that Isaac married, God told Abraham to take his child, his only child, whom he loved, and offer him on mountain as a burnt offering.*

*Promise: many descendants through Isaac. Contradiction: Take him to a mountain and offer him as a burnt offering. Where could be the resolution in that? Yet we know from the account in Genesis 22 that Abraham believed that the child and he would return from the place of sacrifice (verse 5) and that God Himself would provide for the sacrifice and all its implications (verse 8). We must not forget the compliance of the young man Isaac who carried the wood, trusted his father, and allowed himself to be tied up and placed on the altar by an aged man he could surely have resisted.*

*Abraham reasoned that since he'd seen life come out of death, a living child out of the dead womb of Sarah, that life could come out of a sacrifice situation if need be.*

*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.—Hebrews 11:17-19.*

### *LIVING IN THE PHASES OF FAITH*

*Now, God has given all of us many precious promises about His protection, His shielding of us, His provision for our needs. We all at the moment of our baptisms become inheritors of those promises, the Phase 1 of our faith. (For many of us, just the act of accepting those promises is an act of faith.)*

*It is only when those promises seemed to be challenged or contradicted by our own circumstances that we enter into Phase 2—contradictions. God promises to protect us, but we find ourselves in trouble. He promises never to leave us, but we feel alone. He promises us that He'll provide for our needs but we face financial troubles. Our child is ill, our husbands or wives abandon us, our jobs fall apart, it seems that nothing is going right. It is at this precise point that we can make a decision as did Abraham to trust God, to believe His promises no matter what our circumstances look like; to triumph.*

*Here are seven things we should do when we find ourselves in Phase 2 contradictions.*

1) ***Elevate the promise above the contradictions.*** *Abraham "considered Him faithful who had made the promise" -Hebrews 11:11. In the midst of a contradiction, we must stay close to the Lord and remember His promises. We have something Abraham didn't have—even though the Lord spoke specific promises to him several times, we have a whole book of promises that God swears He'll keep to us! And we can like the believers of Malachi's time talk to one another about the Lord. Thus we have two resources even Abraham didn't have to be able to focus on the promises to us. In times of trial, we can write down all the promises God has made that pertain to such a situation, and elevate*

*those in prayer and in our daily speaking to others about it. Think what a difference this would make in Christian households if moms and dads in financial or other trouble told their children and each other, "God promised to take care of us, and I'm willing to take the repercussions of anything I've brought on myself and trust Him to provide for us."*

2) ***Don't let the contradiction define the situation.*** *If we believe what 1 Peter and the other scriptures teach us about trials, they're not about the situations themselves but about how we respond to them -opportunities to let God work, to build our faith, to triumph. Many times we wish we could really show our faith like those of the first century who gave up their lives for the cause of Christ, but often we pass up our own opportunities for taking a stand for the promises of God in our own lives. A financial reversal is not about what we don't have or no longer have; it is about looking earnestly for God's provision in it. After all, when we're comfortable and have all we need, how do we know that God is providing? It is only when we are without our own resources that we can see Him working.*

*In Exodus 15, 16 and 17 we see the sad story of how the children of Israel forgot what God had just done for them by getting them out of Egypt, rescuing them from Pharaoh's army, and giving them manna and quail. Worse than that, they forgot the promises of God that all those provisions signified. Instead, they let the contradiction of their own needs define the situation and begged to go back to the slavery of Egypt. The promises were meaningless to them, His miracles had been wasted on them as they defined their situation not as another opportunity for God to step forward and keep His promises but as the defeat of God.*

3) ***Look for the resolution.*** *God doesn't put us in situations just to leave us there and let us squirm. He has a plan and a reason for everything He does, and every promise and contradiction are followed as night follows day by a resolution. Remember what 1 Peter said about suffering for a little while so you could be lifted up? And that there is a goal of our faith which is being achieved?*

*We must always operate as did Abraham on the assumption that each situation we are in is resolvable. That includes health issues and troubles. No cancer is unresolvable by God. No marital distress is unresolvable by God. Nothing is hopeless, it is resolvable - but only by God. We know that He's not just tempting us to sin (James 1) and that if it's a situation where we might be tempted to sin, there's a way out.*

*1 Corinthians 10:13 tells us that when we're tempted, to look for the way of escape. God assures us that every box of temptation in which we find ourselves has a door out. We don't have to make the door, it's built in. We just have to keep turning around in the situation, looking, feeling for the door out that God pre-planned into the situation. Even the most-tested man of all history, Job, found that God is the one who resolved his situation. And see how he did it! In the grand scheme of things, Job's life was just a few years. During the first part of his life, he lost his ten children to death, and all his possessions. God resolved the situation for Job, took him out of it, and gave him more*

*riches than he'd ever had on earth, and in eternity where Job is now, he has twenty children!*

*It must be true that phase 3, the resolution, will fulfill all the requirements or conditions posed by phase 1, the promise. All contradictions in phase 2 will be resolved in the resolution that God will bring about. Abraham operated on this kind of faith. When he went up on the mountain to offer his only beloved son, he assured his servants that "the boy and I will come back." That's the kind of faith God requires of us--not that we accurately predict -- or even understand-- how He will resolve a situation; just that we trust that He surely will.*

4) **Learn to think non-naturally.** *This is what Abraham did. When he tried to reason in a natural way, the solutions to his childlessness problem were: adopt Eliezar of Damascus or have a child by an Egyptian woman. Each of those solutions was not what God had in mind. Abraham saw that God works non-naturally—having a son when you're a hundred years old is not natural! So by the time another contradiction surfaced in his life, that of taking Isaac up on a mountain to sacrifice him, Abraham already knew that non-natural reasoning was his only way to use his mind.*

*We must learn to give up the habit of speculating on "natural" ways we can solve our own problems, and learn as Abraham did that we should depend upon Him to help us. And then when a non-natural solution comes about as the result of our faith, we know who to honor, and who did it.*

5) **Wait.** *The most often-repeated commandment in the Bible is to wait on the Lord, yet it is probably one of the hardest for us to keep. We want to take action, to solve our own problems, to not be accused of being lazy or uncaring. Many times we are so busy solving our own problems that we can't see the way of escape before us, or we walk right past the manna He is providing.*

*Sometimes He actually hems us in so we don't have any choice and we should be careful to see that not as a restriction but as a protection. When the children of Israel were crossing the Red Sea, God had the waters pile up on each side of them. (It's a great miracle to have the waters pile up upstream, but to have them pile up downstream is a hydraulic impossibility except by God.) Not only did that define the path the Israelites were to walk in, it kept the Egyptian army from dividing and flanking them on the side to attack them there. And God let the armies of Pharaoh, those men furious with the tears of mourning for their dead children still wet on their cheeks, God let those men get through the Sea too, almost to the other side before He made the wheels of their chariots fall off so they couldn't retreat and then had the waters released to cover them up forever. Sometimes God lets a situation get to the point of looking completely hopeless from the human point of view so that we will clearly recognize it's His power that has rescued us from it. But unless we're willing to wait, to let it get to that point, we can't know for sure that God has done it. Moses told the people the same thing we should remember: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will*

*bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." -Exodus 14:13-14.*

6) **Look to the Lord.** *Many times in a contradiction, we try to add up our options and count up our resources and see what we can do. While the Lord doesn't want us to be lazy or to ignore our responsibilities, He doesn't want the situation to be the focus of our attention. He wants to be the focus of our attention. A contradiction is a training ground to teach us to look up. James 5:13 says, "Is any of you in trouble? He should pray." That's the focus we should have. In fact, all the situations of life—being happy, being in trouble, being sick -are listed in James 5 as having only one solution—looking to the Lord to resolve the situation (or in the case of happiness, looking to Him to praise Him.)*

7) **Rejoice.** *All of the passages from 1 Peter and Hebrews 12 tell us that we're not to just face contradictions gritting our teeth but that we are to have not only a mindset of joy, but our speech and our demeanor must proclaim that to the world. We've been counted worthy to be treated like God's true sons and daughters, and the opportunity to see Him work clearly in our lives and to increase our faith.*

*We get to walk in the footsteps of Abraham. We get to share in both the sufferings and glory of Jesus. And we get to be examples for our brothers and sisters. Finally, whatever is not accounted for here on earth will be put right in heaven by a God of justice who promises to wipe every tear from our eyes and to make it all up to us. To Him be all the praise and honor and glory!*