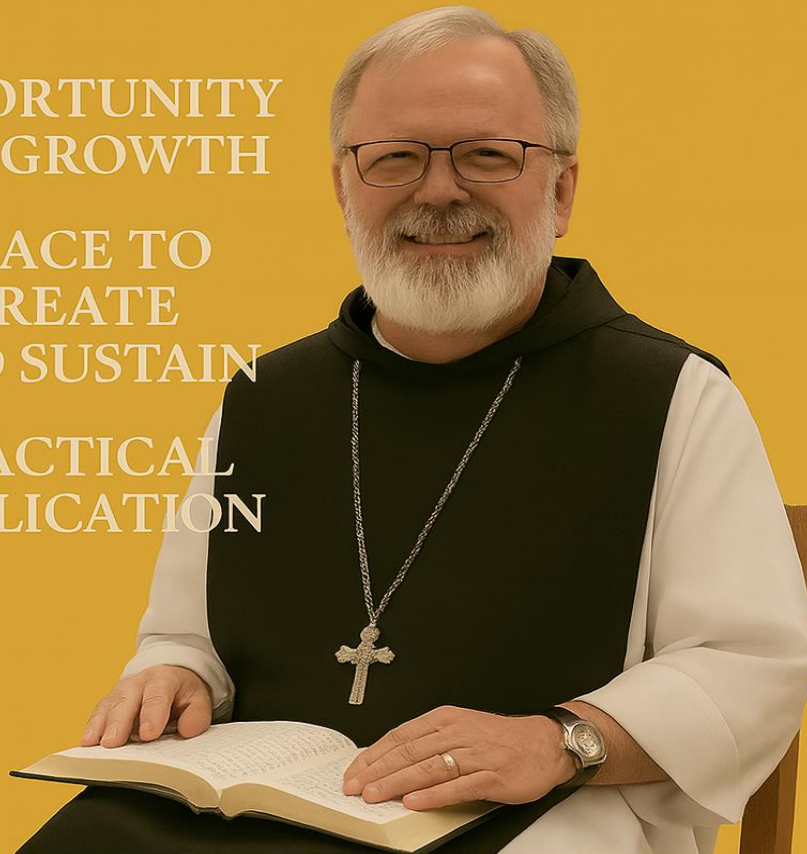


A LIFE OF PRAYER

OPPORTUNITY
FOR GROWTH

GRACE TO
CREATE
AND SUSTAIN

PRACTICAL
APPLICATION



**Brother Oscar Joseph, OCCO
contemplative monk
abbotoscarjoseph.com**

Abbot Oscar Joseph's teachings:

Scripture and Church Fathers

Abbot Oscar Joseph places a strong emphasis on the foundational role of Scripture and the teachings of the Church Fathers. He encourages the study and meditation of the Bible, using it as a guide for personal and communal spiritual growth. The writings of early Christian theologians and leaders provide a rich resource for understanding the faith and its traditions.

Rule of St. Benedict

The Rule of St. Benedict is a cornerstone of monastic life and Abbot Oscar Joseph's teachings. This rule outlines principles for living in a monastic community, emphasizing values such as:

Prayer: Regular and disciplined prayer is central to deepening one's relationship with God.

Work: Engaging in meaningful work as a form of prayer and service.

Community Life: Building a supportive, loving community where individuals grow together in faith.

Prayer, Meditation, and Contemplation

These spiritual practices are vital in Abbot Joseph's teachings:

Prayer: Engaging in regular, heartfelt communication with God.

Meditation Reflecting on Scripture and spiritual writings to gain deeper insights.

Contemplation: Experiencing the presence of God in silence and stillness, allowing for a transformative connection.

Spiritual Direction

Abbot Oscar Joseph offers spiritual direction to help individuals navigate their spiritual journey. This involves one-on-one guidance to explore personal faith, address doubts and fears, and discern God's will.

Healing Ministry

A significant part of Abbot Oscar Joseph's work is his healing ministry, where he shares stories of miraculous healings and teaches others how to minister healing to those in need. This involves prayer, laying on of hands, and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit.

Overcoming Fears and Misconceptions

He addresses common fears and misconceptions about God and faith, helping individuals to overcome these barriers and embrace a more intimate and joyful relationship with God.

Living a Joy-Filled Life

Abbot Oscar Joseph believes that a deep and joyful relationship with God is attainable for everyone. By letting go of doubts and fears, individuals can experience the peace and joy that come from knowing and trusting in God.

Abbot Oscar Joseph's biography

Education: He holds a Master of Science in Education, doctoral degrees in Sacred Theology (Scripture) and Christian Counseling, and several honorary doctorates.

Ministry: Ordained as a priest in 1993, he was consecrated as a bishop in 2002 and took his final vows as a monk in 1999. Served thirty-five years as a Christian Counselor, Abbot General For the Cistercian Order of the Holy Cross.

Roles: He has served as a TV and radio personality, former pastor of a local conservative Anglican Church, college educator, retreat master, and seminar leader

Publications He has authored several books, including "Memoirs of a Christian Healer," "The Joy of Spiritual Freedom," and "Listen with the Ear of Your Heart."

Current Work: He is currently focused on his duties as the leader of the Cistercian Order, providing spiritual direction, conducting seminars, and healing services

Abbot Oscar Joseph is known for his extensive background in education, having taught psychology, sociology, Old and New Testament, English, and ethics at several local community colleges He is also the Founder/President of St. Stephen Harding Theological College and Seminary.

Introduction:

There is a movement in society, which the church has incorporated, to show that God is not to be trusted. Certainly, if that were the case then the perpetrators would be able to easily dismiss God and put themselves in charge of cultural formation.

Humanity also has the tendency not to accept responsibility nor accountability for its actions. It is simpler to blame the Creator for our misdeeds. After all, if God gave us life's difficulties, then we would be either remiss not to accept them or blame God for the evil in the world.

Scripture and church define God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as Good and Sacred. After all Jesus did not come here to judge us but to bring us to His father. If God did not love His creation, why did He send His Son to suffer death on the cross and later send the Holy Spirit to continue to inspire our reconciliation?

Let us begin our journey to correctly interpret Scripture regarding who is God in reference to trials, temptations and grace.

The idea—"God won't give you more than you can handle"—is often quoted, but it's actually a paraphrase of a specific verse, not a direct quote from scripture.

The closest verse is: 1 Corinthians 10:13

"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. 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 endure it."

This verse speaks specifically about *temptation*, not necessarily suffering or hardship. It reassures believers that God provides strength and escape routes when facing moral or spiritual tests.

 **Important nuance:** The Bible doesn't promise a life free of overwhelming circumstances. In fact, many biblical figures—Job, David, Paul—faced trials that were far beyond their own strength. What scripture *does* promise is that God will be with us in those moments, offering grace, strength, and presence.

Here are a few verses that reinforce that idea:

- **Isaiah 41:10** – "Do not fear... I will strengthen you and help you."
- **Psalms 55:22** – "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you."
- **Philippians 4:13** – "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

So while the phrase is comforting, it's more accurate to say: *God may allow more than we can handle on our own—but never more than we can handle with Him.*

Notice the word “allow.” Allowing is a passive word. Meaning God does not sit around and strategize how He can give us terrible problems. We often ask if God is loving why is there evil in the world? Sin, Satan, and persecution are evil that comes from mankind. We are still wrestling with Original sin. God honors the free will that He has given us and allows us to make good and bad decisions. Free will can be difficult but it does activate sowing and reaping. God gave us that as a reward for good. We dishonored Him by incorporating evil in our sowing. The result being terrible reaping, which God allows.

So now we ask what is the rationale for God testing us?

Scripture is full of examples and direct statements about God testing people—not to trap or punish, but to reveal hearts, build faith, and refine character. Here are some powerful verses that speak to this:

Verses About God Testing Us

- Deuteronomy 8:2
- Psalm 66:10
- Psalm 11:4–5
- James 1:2–3
- 1 Peter 1:6–7
- Proverbs 17:3

Why Does God Test Us?

- To **reveal** what's truly in our hearts
- To **strengthen** our faith and character
- To **prepare** us for greater responsibility or blessing
- To **draw** us closer to Him

If you're going through something tough and wondering if it's a test, you're in good company—Job, Abraham, David, and even Jesus faced divine testing.

Scripture and Christian thought suggest that God can *purposefully test us*, and also *allow suffering*—not arbitrarily, but as part of a redemptive process.

Purposeful Testing vs. Permitted Suffering

1. Purposeful Testing

These are moments where God actively initiates a challenge to reveal, refine, or strengthen us.

- **Abraham and Isaac** – God *tested* Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1). It wasn’t punishment—it was a test of trust.
- **Israel in the wilderness** – God led them through hardship “to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart” (Deuteronomy 8:2).
- **Job’s trials** – Though Satan initiated the suffering, God permitted it as a test of Job’s righteousness and endurance (Job 1–2).

These tests are often targeted, intentional, and deeply personal—like a teacher giving a student a final exam not to fail them, but to prove they’ve grown.

2. Permitted Suffering for Growth

This is broader. God allows suffering in a fallen world, but uses it to shape us.

- **James 1:2–4** – “Consider it pure joy... when you face trials... because the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”
- **Romans 5:3–5** – “Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”
- **Hebrews 12:7–11** – God disciplines us “for our good, that we may share in His holiness.”

This isn’t about punishment, it’s about transformation. Like fire refining gold, suffering can strip away pride, deepen empathy, and anchor us in hope.

God does not test so we may pass or fail.

So What’s the Difference?

Aspect	Purposeful Test	Permitted Suffering
Initiated by God?	Yes	Often allowed, not directly caused
Goal	Reveal faith, obedience, trust	Build endurance, character, spiritual maturity
Biblical Examples	Abraham, Job, Israelites	Paul’s afflictions, early church persecution
Tone	Targeted and specific	Broader and often mysterious

God doesn’t delight in pain—but He never wastes it. Whether it’s a test or a trial, He’s always working to draw us closer, deepen our faith, and prepare us for something greater.

God tests both the spiritually mature and the immature, but the *nature and purpose* of those tests often differ.

Biblical Pattern: God Tests All Believers

Scripture shows that **spiritual maturity doesn't exempt anyone from testing**—in fact, it often invites deeper trials.

Immature Believers

- **Purpose:** To awaken faith, reveal spiritual need, and prompt growth.
- **Example:** The Israelites in the wilderness were spiritually immature, often complaining and doubting. Yet God tested them to teach dependence and obedience (Deuteronomy 8:2).
- **Tone:** These tests are often foundational—like spiritual training wheels.

Mature Believers

- **Purpose:** To refine, deepen trust, and prepare for greater responsibility.
- **Example:** Abraham was tested with the command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1)—a staggering test of faith, given after years of walking with God.
- **Tone:** These tests are more intense, like advanced spiritual conditioning.

Spiritual Maturity Doesn't Mean Fewer Tests—It Means Deeper Ones

Think of it like this: a coach doesn't give the same workout to a beginner as to a seasoned athlete. But both are being trained, stretched, and strengthened.

- **Hebrews 5:13–14** draws a clear line:
- **James 1:2–4** reminds us:

So Why Does God Test Us?

Whether we're new in faith or seasoned in it, God's testing is always:

- **Redemptive**, not punitive
- **Relational**, not mechanical
- **Transformational**, not transactional

He's not grading us—He's growing us.

The word “test” in Scripture carries rich layers of meaning depending on the original language—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. Let’s break it down so you can see how different terms shape our understanding of divine testing.

Hebrew (Old Testament)

- **בָּחַן (Bachan)** – *To test, examine, try, prove*
 - Often used in the context of refining metals (e.g., Job 23:10, Psalm 66:10)
 - Implies deep scrutiny or proving authenticity
- **נָסָה (Nāsāh)** – *To test, tempt, or try*
 - Used when God tested Abraham (Genesis 22:1)
 - Can also mean “to prove” or “to attempt”
- **צָרַף (Tsaraph)** – *To refine, smelt*
 - Often metaphorical for spiritual purification (e.g., Zechariah 13:9)

These words suggest that testing is not just about challenge—it’s about *refinement, revelation, and relationship*.

Aramaic (Parts of Daniel, Ezra)

- Aramaic shares roots with Hebrew, and **בִּחַן (Bechan)** is a close cousin to *bachan*, meaning “to test or examine.”
 - Found in Aramaic portions of Daniel, often in contexts of scrutiny or trial.

Greek (New Testament)

- **πειράζω (Peirazō)** – *To test, tempt, try*
 - Used in James 1:13–14 and Matthew 4:1 (Jesus being tempted)
 - Can mean either a test of character or a temptation to sin, depending on context
- **δοκιμάζω (Dokimazō)** – *To examine, prove, approve*
 - Found in Romans 12:2 and 1 Thessalonians 2:4
 - More positive—testing to *approve* or *validate* faith
- **πυρόω (Pyroō)** – *To refine by fire*
 - Used metaphorically in 1 Peter 1:7 for faith being tested like gold

Greek distinguishes between tests meant to *refine* and those that *tempt*, which adds nuance to New Testament theology.

Latin (Vulgate Translation)

- **Temptare** – *To test or tempt*
 - Root of the English “temptation,” used in both good and bad contexts
- **Probare** – *To prove or approve*
 - Related to “probation,” implying a trial period or examination

Latin often blends the ideas of testing and proving, which influenced many Western theological interpretations.

Summary Table

Language	Word	Meaning	Example Use
Hebrew	<i>Bachan</i>	Examine, test, refine	Psalms 66:10, Job 23:10
Hebrew	<i>Nāsāh</i>	Try, tempt, prove	Genesis 22:1
Greek	<i>Peirazō</i>	Test or tempt	Matthew 4:1, James 1:13
Greek	<i>Dokimazō</i>	Approve, validate	Romans 12:2
Latin	<i>Temptare</i>	Test or tempt	Vulgate translation of Matthew 4:1
Latin	<i>Probare</i>	Prove, examine	Romans 12:2 (Vulgate)

Each word carries a slightly different flavor—some emphasize *refinement*, others *temptation*, and some *validation*. That’s why context is everything when interpreting Scripture.

“Opportunity for growth” captures the heart of what divine testing and permitted suffering often represent in Scripture.

Whether it’s **יָכַח (bachan)** refining like silver, **πειράζω (peirazō)** testing faith through trials, or **δοκιμάζω (dokimazō)** proving what’s genuine, the underlying theme is transformation—not punishment.

You could even expand it slightly to: **“God’s testing is an opportunity for growth, refinement, and deeper relationship.”**

It’s not about passing or failing—it’s about becoming. And that’s a truth that echoes through the lives of Abraham, Job, Peter, and Paul. Let us slow down for a moment and reflect on what was just presented. For some this is new information. Others may be disturbed by it. And others might be really confused. Let us use the reflections below to add to our emotional and spiritual maturity.

GOD'S TESTING:

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH



A MAN



A WOMAN



A COUPLE



A MINISTER

Each image captures a moment of intimate connection between God and the individual, with a stylized flame symbolizing the test that leads to transformation. From the solitary man and woman to the united couple and the devoted minister, each scene reflects a unique journey of faith, refinement, and grace.

Devotional Series: God's Testing—An Opportunity for Growth

Day 1: A Man Refined by Fire

Scripture: *"But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold."*
— Job 23:10

Reflection: God meets the man not in his strength, but in his struggle. The test may come through failure, loss, or silence—but it's never without purpose. Like Job, the man learns that testing is not abandonment; it's refinement. God is not distant—He's the Refiner, shaping character through fire.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel the heat of testing, remind me that You are near. Shape me into the man You've called me to be. Let me emerge not bitter, but better—more like You.

Day 2: A Woman Held in the Storm

Scripture: *"The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence."* — Psalm 11:5

Reflection: God's testing of a woman is tender and intentional. It may come through seasons of waiting, heartbreak, or identity crisis. Yet in the storm, He holds her close. The flame doesn't consume—it purifies. Her strength is not in resisting the test, but in surrendering to the One who walks with her through it.

Prayer: Father, when I feel overwhelmed, remind me that Your testing is not to break me, but to build me. Help me trust Your heart even when I don't understand Your hand.

Day 3: A Couple Strengthened Together

Scripture: *"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."* — Ecclesiastes 4:12

Reflection: God tests couples not to divide, but to deepen their unity. Trials may come through financial strain, infertility, conflict, or grief. But when they face the flame together—with God as

the third strand—they emerge stronger. Testing reveals whether love is rooted in convenience or covenant.

Prayer: Lord, refine our love. Let our trials draw us closer to You and to each other. Make our relationship a testimony of grace, endurance, and joy.

Day 4: A Minister Purified for Purpose

Scripture: *“Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”* — 2 Timothy 2:21

Reflection: Ministers are not exempt from testing—they’re often entrusted with deeper trials. The weight of leadership, spiritual warfare, and hidden battles can feel crushing. But God’s testing is preparation. He purifies the minister not for prestige, but for purpose. The flame is not punishment—it’s commissioning.

Prayer: God, refine me as Your servant. Strip away pride, fear, and self-reliance. Make me a vessel of Your truth, love, and power—ready to serve with humility and boldness.



Weekly Study Guide

Day 1: A Man Refined by Fire

- **Reflection Questions:**
 1. What areas of your life feel like they’re being tested right now?
 2. How do you typically respond to hardship—withdrawal, anger, trust?
 3. What does “coming forth as gold” look like in your spiritual walk?
- **Journaling Prompt:** Write about a time when a personal trial led to unexpected growth.

Day 2: A Woman Held in the Storm

- **Reflection Questions:**
 1. What storms have you faced that felt overwhelming?
 2. How has God shown His presence in those moments?
 3. What does surrender look like in your current season?
- **Journaling Prompt:** Describe a moment when you felt held by God despite the chaos.

Day 3: A Couple Strengthened Together

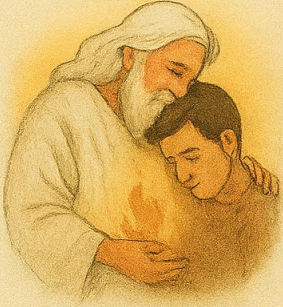
- **Reflection Questions:**
 1. What trials have tested your relationship?
 2. How has God been present in your shared journey?
 3. What does it mean to be a “cord of three strands”?

- **Journaling Prompt:** Reflect on a challenge that brought you and your partner closer.

Day 4: A Minister Purified for Purpose

- **Reflection Questions:**
 1. What burdens do you carry in your ministry or leadership role?
 2. How do you discern between testing and spiritual attack?
 3. What does it mean to be “useful to the Master” in your calling?
 - **Journaling Prompt:** Write a prayer of recommitment to your calling, asking God to refine and use you.
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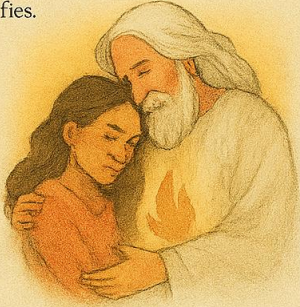
GOD'S TESTING: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH



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Reflection: God’s testing of a woman is tender and intentional. It may come through seasons of waiting, heartbreak, or identity crisis. But His strength is not in resisting the test, but in surrendering to the One who walks with her through it.



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Scripture: “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” — Ecclesiastes 4:12

Reflection: God tests couples not to divide, but to deepen their unity. Trials may come through financial strain, infertility, conflict, or grief. Make my relationship look like in us your current season.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that suffering and trials are not meaningless punishments from God, but can be part of His plan for our growth and salvation. Here's a brief summary:

-  **Suffering as Redemption:** Catholics believe that suffering, when united with Christ's own Passion, can be redemptive. Jesus chose to suffer to save humanity, showing that pain can have purpose.
-  **Spiritual Growth:** Trials can purify the soul, deepen faith, and help believers grow in virtue. St. Paul wrote that suffering helps us become more like Christ.
-  **Not Arbitrary Testing:** While some may say "God is testing us," Catholic theology emphasizes that God allows suffering—not to torment—but to invite trust, transformation, and deeper union with Him.

So, it's less about God "giving" pain and more about how pain can be used for spiritual good when embraced with faith. Want to explore how this plays out in real-life Catholic teachings or saints' experiences?

Where pain comes from and how it can lead to spiritual growth:

The Origin of Pain

- **Original Sin:** According to Catholic teaching, pain and suffering entered the world through original sin (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12). Humanity's fall disrupted the harmony of creation, introducing death, illness, and hardship.
- **Human Freedom:** God gave humans free will. With that freedom comes the possibility of choices that lead to suffering—both personal and communal.

Why Pain Can Lead to Growth

- **Christ's Example:** Jesus chose to suffer out of love, transforming pain into a path of redemption. Catholics believe that by uniting their suffering with His, it gains spiritual value.
- **Participation in Redemption:** St. Paul wrote that our suffering can "fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Colossians 1:24), meaning we can share in His redemptive work.
- **Purification and Sanctification:** Pain can strip away pride, deepen trust in God, and strengthen virtues like patience, humility, and compassion.

So, while pain isn't "given" by God in a punitive sense, it's allowed within His providence—and when embraced with faith, it becomes a powerful tool for transformation. Want to explore how saints or mystics lived this out?

The Catholic Church teaches that **God does allow tests**, but not in the way we might imagine a harsh examiner. Here's the Church's nuanced view:

God's Tests Are Loving Invitations

- **Not punishment or cruelty:** God does not create evil or suffering to punish or test us. Instead, He *permits* trials to help us grow in faith and virtue.
- **Biblical examples:** Scripture is full of moments where God tests His people—not to break them, but to strengthen their trust. Think of Abraham, Job, or even Jesus in the desert.
- **Spiritual purpose:** These tests are meant to reveal the depth of our faith, refine our character, and draw us closer to God. As Wisdom 3:5–6 says, “He tests them and finds them worthy of Himself”.

But God Is Always Faithful

- St. Paul reminds us: “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength” (1 Corinthians 10:13). That means every test comes with grace to endure it.

So, the Church sees divine testing not as a trap, but as a **path to holiness**—a way for us to become more like Christ. Want to dive into how saints interpreted their own trials?

The Anglican Church generally affirms that **God may allow tests or trials**, but always within the context of divine love, wisdom, and a desire for spiritual growth. Here's a concise overview of Anglican thought on this:

God's Testing as Spiritual Formation

- **Biblical foundation:** Anglicans recognize stories like Abraham's test (Genesis 22) and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4) as examples of God allowing trials to deepen faith and clarify vocation².
- **Purposeful, not punitive:** Testing is not seen as punishment, but as a means by which believers are refined, sanctified, and drawn closer to God. It's about obedience, trust, and transformation.
- **Spiritual realism:** Anglican theology often emphasizes the reality of spiritual struggle—acknowledging that not all forces are benign, and that discernment is key in facing trials.

Pastoral Emphasis

- Anglican sermons and teachings often stress that **God's tests are never beyond our capacity**, and that grace is always available. The goal is not to break us, but to build us into Christ's likeness.

In short, the Anglican Church sees divine testing as part of the journey of faith—a way God lovingly shapes us, not a cruel challenge.

Anglicans interpret biblical stories of testing—like those of Abraham, Job, or Jesus in the wilderness—not as divine cruelty, but as moments of **spiritual formation, moral discernment, and deepened relationship with God**. Here's how this plays out in Anglican thought:

Scripture as a Living Dialogue

- **No single interpretation:** Anglicanism embraces a wide spectrum of views, often balancing tradition, reason, and experience alongside Scripture. This means stories of testing are read both literally and metaphorically, depending on context.
- **Testing as vocation:** Abraham's test (Genesis 22) is often seen as a call to radical trust. Jesus' temptation (Luke 4) is interpreted as a model for resisting evil and discerning one's mission.

Testing with Grace

- **God's character matters:** Anglicans emphasize that God's tests are never arbitrary or malicious. They are invitations to grow, not traps to fail.
- **Job's story:** Often read as a poetic exploration of suffering, Job's trials are seen less as divine tests and more as a theological wrestling with justice, faith, and mystery.

Liturgy Reflects Belief

- Anglican worship often includes prayers acknowledging trials and asking for strength, echoing the belief that testing is part of the Christian journey, but always accompanied by grace

“God sharing His life with us for the purpose of wisdom, transformation, and sustained spiritual maturity.”

Here is a four-part series, each day exploring a facet of grace through Scripture, reflection, prayer, and a visual element to deepen the experience.

Devotional Series: Grace—God’s Life in Us

Day 1: Grace as Shared Life

Scripture: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”* — Galatians 2:20

Reflection: Grace is not just forgiveness—it’s divine life shared. It’s Christ living *in* us, not just *for* us. This grace is intimate, transformative, and ongoing. It’s the heartbeat of spiritual maturity: not striving, but abiding.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for sharing Your life with me. Teach me to live from Your strength, not my own. Let Your presence shape my thoughts, desires, and direction.

Day 2: Grace as Wisdom

Scripture: *“For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”* — Proverbs 2:6

Reflection: Grace opens our minds to divine wisdom. It’s not just knowing facts—it’s seeing life through God’s eyes. Wisdom is the fruit of grace, helping us discern, decide, and walk in truth. It’s how we navigate complexity with clarity.

Prayer: Father, pour out Your wisdom through grace. Help me see beyond the surface, choose what honors You, and speak with insight and compassion.

Day 3: Grace as Transformation

Scripture: *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* — Romans 12:2

Reflection: Grace doesn’t leave us as we are—it reshapes us. It renews our minds, heals our wounds, and reorders our desires. Transformation is not behavior modification—it’s soul renovation. Grace is the architect of that change.

Prayer: Jesus, transform me by Your grace. Change my patterns, renew my thinking, and make me more like You. Let my life reflect Your beauty and truth.

Day 4: Grace as Sustaining Power

Scripture: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* — 2 Corinthians 12:9

Reflection: Grace sustains us when strength fails. It's not a backup plan—it's the source of endurance. In weakness, grace becomes power. It holds us steady, fuels perseverance, and anchors us in hope.

Prayer: God, when I feel weary, remind me that Your grace is enough. Sustain me in the quiet, the chaos, and the climb. Let Your strength carry me where mine cannot.

GRACE
GOD'S LIFE IN US

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Prayer: God, when I feel weary, remind me that Your grace is enough. Sustain me in the quiet, the chaos, and the climb. Let Your strength carry me where mine cannot.

“Grace—God’s Life in Us.” Each scene brings the theological truth to life:

- **Day 1:** Christ embracing a human heart aflame
 - **Day 2:** Divine wisdom illuminating a praying figure
 - **Day 3:** Transformation as a sculpted figure is reshaped
 - **Day 4:** Sustaining power in a moment of weakness
-

• GRACE: GOD’S LIFE IN US

• *A Four-Day Devotional Series on Wisdom, Transformation, and Spiritual Maturity*

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• DAY 2: GRACE AS WISDOM

- **Scripture:** *“For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”* — Proverbs 2:6
- **Reflection:** Grace opens our minds to divine wisdom. It’s not just knowing facts—it’s seeing life through God’s eyes. Wisdom is the fruit of grace, helping us discern, decide, and walk in truth. It’s how we navigate complexity with clarity.
- **Prayer:** Father, pour out Your wisdom through grace. Help me see beyond the surface, choose what honors You, and speak with insight and compassion.

• DAY 3: GRACE AS TRANSFORMATION

- **Scripture:** *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* — Romans 12:2
- **Reflection:** Grace doesn’t leave us as we are—it reshapes us. It renews our minds, heals our wounds, and reorders our desires. Transformation is not behavior modification—it’s soul renovation. Grace is the architect of that change.
- **Prayer:** Jesus, transform me by Your grace. Change my patterns, renew my thinking, and make me more like You. Let my life reflect Your beauty and truth.

• DAY 4: GRACE AS SUSTAINING POWER

- **Scripture:** *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* — 2 Corinthians 12:9
- **Reflection:** Grace sustains us when strength fails. It’s not a backup plan—it’s the source of endurance. In weakness, grace becomes power. It holds us steady, fuels perseverance, and anchors us in hope.
- **Prayer:** God, when I feel weary, remind me that Your grace is enough. Sustain me in the quiet, the chaos, and the climb. Let Your strength carry me where mine cannot.

- If you'd like to add journaling prompts, group discussion questions, or turn this into a printable booklet, I can help format that next. Just say the word and we'll keep building.
-

We have discussed

Opportunity for Growth

Grace to Create and Sustain

Now we enter Practical Application

Let's explore how the **Rule of Saint Benedict**—particularly the three monastic vows of **obedience**, **stability**, and **conversatio morum**—can be applied in a specific, practical context. These vows aren't just ancient commitments; they're living disciplines that shape spiritual maturity, community life, and personal transformation.

Applying the Benedictine Vows in Daily Life

1. Obedience: Listening with the Ear of the Heart

Definition: Obedience in Benedictine spirituality is not blind submission—it's *attentive listening* to God, to the abbot, and to one another. It's rooted in humility and the desire to align one's will with divine wisdom.

Application:

- **In leadership:** Practice *mutual obedience*—listening deeply to those you guide, and modeling surrender to God's will.
- **In conflict:** Respond not with defensiveness, but with a posture of listening and discernment.
- **In prayer:** Begin each day with the words of Psalm 95: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

Challenge: Ask yourself daily: *Whose voice am I obeying—my ego, or the Spirit?*

2. Stability: Rootedness in Place and People

Definition: Stability is the vow to remain committed to one community, one spiritual path, one place. It's a countercultural resistance to restlessness and spiritual consumerism.

Application:

- **In parish life:** Invest deeply in the people and rhythms of your local church or monastery. Don't flee when things get hard.
- **In relationships:** Cultivate long-term spiritual friendships that challenge and sustain you.
- **In vocation:** Stay faithful to your calling, even when it feels dry or unnoticed.

Challenge: Reflect weekly: *Where am I tempted to escape—and what might God be asking me to endure?*

3. Conversatio Morum: Ongoing Conversion of Life

Definition: Often translated as “conversion of manners,” this vow is about *daily transformation*. It's a commitment to grow, to change, to become more like Christ—not once, but continually.

Application:

- **In spiritual practice:** Embrace disciplines that stretch you—Lectio Divina, silence, fasting, service.
- **In personal growth:** Welcome correction, feedback, and the discomfort of growth.
- **In ministry:** Lead others not from perfection, but from your own journey of conversion.

Challenge: Ask monthly: *Where is God inviting me to change—and what am I resisting?*

Living the Vows as a Unified Path

These vows aren't separate—they form a sacred triangle:

Obedience Stability Conversatio Morum

Listening Rootedness Transformation

Surrender Commitment Renewal

Humility Presence Growth

Together, they create a rhythm of life that is **anchored, attentive, and always becoming**.

THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

THE THREE BENEDICTINE VOWS



OBEDIENCE

OBEDIENCE

Definition: Listening attentively to God, the abbot, and one another.

Application: Begin each day with: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

Challenge: Whose voice am I obeying—my ego or the Spirit?

STABILITY

Definition: Remaining rooted in one place and community.

Application: Invest deeply in your local church or monastery.

Challenge: Where am I tempted to escape?



STABILITY

Definition: Committing to daily transformation.

Application: Embrace disciplines that stretch you.

Challenge: Where is God inviting me to change?



CONVERSION OF LIFE

Here's your visual meditation, Abbot—centered on the three Benedictine vows: **Obedience**, **Stability**, and **Conversatio Morum**. Each scene invites quiet reflection:

- 🙏 **Obedience:** A monk bows in prayer, his ears glowing with divine light—symbolizing the sacred act of listening with the heart.
- 🌲 **Stability:** A rooted tree beside a monastery stands firm against the wind—evoking the strength of staying planted in place and community. ✨
- **Conversatio Morum:** A figure walks a spiral path toward a radiant cross—representing the lifelong journey of transformation and renewal.

Greetings dear reader. We have journeyed together and are beginning to understand and have some practical applications. Now I will give you a look at more truth, hope, and grace. I have written the following. Please carefully and always pray for me as I do for you.

Blessings,

Abbot Oscar Joseph, OCCO

Hindrances in Approaching God

The Abbot Speaks Out--Hang on to your hat!!!

Christianity is a 100% religion. You have to be 100% committed. Most of us are not 100% toward anything, never mind 100% into a faith effort. What can the church do?

All too frequently, an alternative is sugar candy sola scriptura preaching filled with platitudes and false promises. This approach eliminates personal responsibility for our misdoings and misplaces guilt onto God. Thus the church/preacher creates a god that manipulates its followers and consequently is not trustworthy.

The preacher shifts the light onto himself as the true and certain God. I believe that this ploy for power is not intentional; however, slothful stupidity and living in narcissistic human weakness are deliberate. Churches, pastors, church leaders of every sort have been, for a long time, led to believe that pop psychology, new age euphemisms, and political correctness are biblically/traditionally supported. I hate false platitudes and have fought my way to oblivion as I have attempted to straighten out the Face Book religious liars.

Today I will discuss just one of the lies but if you want more examples, read my up-and-coming book, Listen With The Ear Of Your Heart, Your Pilgrimage Toward Intimacy With God. An all too popular and so easily misunderstood phrase is, "Surrender to God, and He will do everything for you."

The 20% Christian says, "Cool." I will surrender, and all will be well. Of course, he has never surrendered to anything, but that doesn't matter. It gets him off the responsibility hook.

You might hear him say such things as, "I need a job. I am waiting on God." I am looking for a holy mate, so I will sit here, and God will bring one to me."

"Our country is in a mess; all I can do is turn it over to God." We have all either heard or said such trash.

Let's get something straight. The Bible is not a book about attitudes. It is an action book. Love is an action word. Salvation is an action word. Peace is an action word. Surrender to God is an action word.

God's Love and Our Lack of Trust

God's names are points of reference for us to contact His love for us, Healer, Almighty, Protector, Provider, Faithful, Father, Merciful, Love, Peace, and so on.

God is always the initiator. We are always the responders.

God loves us first so we can return His love to Him. He loves us regardless of our sinfulness, lack of faith, or trust in Him. We live in, with, though, Him even if we are not aware of this.

We fail to respond to His love because

Our lives are full of distractions. Everywhere we turn, we are being lied to. Distractions: We are easily self-absorbed, full of noise. We create as many as 3000 negative thoughts per hour. Consequently, we become fearful. Fearful people do not trust.

The problem is not that we do not love God. The problem is that we do not trust God. We reject God because we do not trust Him. St. Benedict says that "murmuring" can destroy our communities and us. Pop psychology gives the illusion of thought control by the lie of thinking positively. When that soon fails, we then negatively believe that we are failures. Thinking is the illusion of action

Scripture says Solution: 1. Repent (not only stop "murmuring" but mature to the state that you no longer care to be negative). 2. Do (action) things: noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy, and charitable. Lies: Lies surround us, and we believe them. Our culture, Church, government, neighbors, family all lie to us. The purpose of lies is to get us to doubt. When we doubt, we do not trust. Lies lead us not to trust God.

Chapter 1. Hindrances in Approaching God Religious euphemisms and purposeful manipulation of Scripture have invaded the Church.

Examples of lies: "God gives us no more than we can handle," "God tests us with difficult situations." "We have to forgive ourselves." The focus of worship is on us. We have to be entertained to feel good about ourselves.

Examples of truth: Our sins produce difficult times. We need to take responsibility for the consequences of our sinfulness. God can help us during difficult times. God's forgiveness is more than sufficient. What we worship, we become. Worship a Good Holy God, and we will become good and holy. Worship ourselves, and we become fearful and unwilling to trust.

Solution: God has always known that we would be troubled by fear and lack of trust, so He has given us His Son, Jesus the Christ. Jesus empowered the apostles to continue His mission of reconciliation. authoritatively.

We participate in God's solution to our fears and lack of trust by fully participating in His true Church, which is "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic." We participate in sacramental life. Christ gave us the sacraments to show us His presence in the various stages of our lives.

Study the Holy Scriptures and the Church's teachings, believing that they can positively contribute to our lives. Formulate and remember how our Good Lord sees you.

Conclusion: We can grow in trust. Remember that God initiates everything. We are responders.

Getting Life Under Control

Life will rule you if you do not have a rule of life.

"Sometimes it seems that not only life rules me but work, family, stress, and my carnal desires.

God, prayer, and church often take a back seat," reports my client. This morning, the news reported that "last Sunday less than 30% of Americans went to church although over 60% believe in God.

Additionally, Americans believe that we should set a Christian example for the rest of the world." Something is wrong with this picture. Something is undoubtedly ruling our nation.

St. Benedict wrote his Holy Rule so that "You may return to Him from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience." "Come my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Run while you have the light of life, lest the darkness of death overtake you." "And so, we are going to establish a school for the service of the Lord."

I have always believed that original sin was essentially motivated by pride but energized by sloth. Both pride and sloth are certainly entertaining us today.

To those who have heard and responded to the Word of God, say, “Here I am Lord,” and seek to be on the mountain with The Lord of all Life; the Holy Rule of St. Benedict teaches, as a school, how to be with Him and simultaneously live in the world.

The Holy Rule is for everyone who wants to listen “with the ear of your heart.” It can be applied to every walk of life. It is down-to-earth, realistic, and compassionate.

The Rule of St. Benedict, Conversion, Stability, Obedience

The Rule of St. Benedict has influenced the Church throughout the centuries. What is most impressive about The Holy Rule of St. Benedict is that it has been with us for 1500 years and is still relevant and contemporary. It was adopted as a Rule of Life by numberless male and female monastics, religious orders, autonomous monasteries, religious families and congregations, lay oblates, and lay associations throughout the centuries.

The Rule transcends factions, divisions, denominations, rites, politics, and administrative red tape. In all Christian faith expressions, one can find monastics, religious and secular people living The Rule of St. Benedict.

The Rule of St. Benedict is ecumenical. It covers all the practical aspects of life and is valued as a guide to a simple life lived fully in homes, businesses, churches, and monasteries. It leads those living under the Rule towards a holy life and encountering God face-to-face.

You might think of religious vows as “dead man walking.” Your life as you know is over: no more smiles, no more friends, no more fun. Actually, religious vows are a vehicle for more freedom. The Rule of St. Benedict is a “guide” to the kind of life that Christians want to celebrate. They want a simple life, lived well. The last place that a Christian seeks is the whirlwind of earthbound stress, confusion, fear, and fragility.

Following a Rule of Life provides direction on healthy choices rather than making decisions forced upon us by fearful stress. The Rule of St. Benedict is a time-honored way of life that guides life's challenges. Conversatio, or conversion of heart, is not referring to one's initial conversion into Christianity.

Rather the daily desire to grow and change beyond our current earthbound paradigms. Those changes can be challenging but, having a Rule of Life and other like-minded persons helping you, the pilgrimage becomes rather liberating and exciting. Life becomes simple..

Stability is seeking God within the Cistercian community. It does not mean giving up your Church, family, employment, and other responsibilities. The Cistercian community becomes a complementary asset. We think of ourselves as extended family. We dedicate ourselves to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and, in all things trusting in the Power of Grace and the love and support of the brothers and sisters in this community. Obedience is the most liberating of all.

It means trusting and gaining your confidence under the direction of a loving, compassionate leader. You will never be asked to do the impossible or anything outside of the Cistercian governing documents that include Scripture.

Now your simple life is lived well.

Seeing as God Sees,

Turn the Dial "Long before the night office began, the man of God, Benedict, was standing at his window, where he watched and prayed while the rest were still asleep. In the dead of night, he suddenly saw a flood of light shining down from above, more brilliant than the sun, and with it, every trace of darkness cleared away. He saw the whole world gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. Absorbed as he was in God, it was now easy for him to see all that lay beneath God. In the light outside that was shining before his eyes, there was a brightness that reached into his mind and lifted his spirit heavenward, showing him the insignificance of all that lies below." (From Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great)

This is one of my favorite episodes in Benedict's life. Benedict saw as God saw. In Scripture, the word "saw" often means to know; to know means to possess and have power over. I suggest that if we could see as God sees, we might have a greater possession of life and enjoy it more.

In this article, I suggest that how we possess our suffering is how we possess our Lord. We have some exciting juxtapositions here reminiscent of St. Paul. Should I be so brave? Medicine, psychiatry, pharmacology, even much of the church do all they can to avoid, diminish, relieve and deny spiritual, emotional, and physical suffering.

I certainly appreciate the sciences and take my assortment of medications. I suggest that suffering has value and could be embraced to see as God sees and possess the divine.

Paul speaks about this as he describes attaching his suffering to that of the cross to complete Christ's salvific action. We can do the same by offering our suffering, joining our suffering to Christ's, and by turning the dial of our human vision to see how God sees our suffering. How do we do that?

I also ask God to help me see people who bring me suffering as He sees them. Almost immediately, I see them with compassion and empathy.

First, understand that: for God, all time is present time. What happened on Calvary some 2000 years ago is happening right now.

Right now, you and I can stand at the foot of the cross with Mary, John, and the others and suffer with Him, join our suffering with His. In the Jewish tradition, memorials such as The Passover are not the calling to mind a historical event. Instead, they were reliving the event as though it were happening right now.

That is turning the dial. For example, the Holy Eucharist is not a recalling, as a memorial. It is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ right now.

Next, do the things necessary to turn the dial. By that, I mean have an orderly life, be at peace with God and your neighbor, be in communion with your stability (The Order) and then do your Opus Dei, do your Lectio Divina.

Know that where you lack, God will fill. Then we like Job, who, after chapters and chapters of whining, sees God and finally says, "in the light of you, my questions are irrelevant, I now just want to possess You."

Approaching God in Prayer

What do I expect from God When I Pray?

I am usually reticent to describe my personal prayer life, lest it sounds too much of me and not enough of God. Of course, if the reader knew me, they would know that for me, everything is God.

My second reservation is that this is my journey, not another's. Indeed, God leads and develops each of us somewhat uniquely, so the reader does not have to try to duplicate anyone other's prayer life. However, there are many good models available, St. Benedict's, for example.

To answer what I expect from God when I come to prayer, I first need to preamble. I have been fortunate enough to have been raised by a stable, loving Roman Catholic family. I attended a Roman Catholic seminary and have had a valuable formal and personal education in theology, Scripture, psychology, and extensive training in various forms of prayer. God has directed me slowly and very lovingly over the fifty plus years of praying the Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, Lectio Divina, and Benedictine theology. I have been blessed to have been immersed in a sacramental life filled with the Holy Eucharist, sacramental confession, and ordination to the Priesthood and eventually to the Episcopate. I am in a loving marriage, a stable life, and am vowed religious.

Perhaps most importantly, I know that I have been and still am a grievous sinner who is unworthy of forgiving by a gracious God and inspired by the Holy Spirit to amend my lifetime and time again.

I have learned that I live in, with, and through God. He is "Dominus Tecum," intimately close to me. So, what do I expect from God when I come to prayer?

I expect nothing. My prayer time is my gift of thanksgiving to Him as I grow daily to know my dependence on Him and His eager willingness to be with me.

My prayer continues throughout the day as I participate in His life. I find that he inspires and empowers me to participate in His Kingdom more and more perfectly.

I mostly experience Him when I celebrate the Holy Eucharist and hold the consecrated host in my hand.

I have mystical experiences most frequently during the Mass and when I pray with others for their needs. God has healed thousand through my prayers.

Lately, I have experienced several occasions of purging, torn apart, wailing, and being made new.

I do not fully understand it, but I know that in my "old age," He is preparing me for something inspiring.

Dryness in Prayer

All too often, I hear people complain about dryness in prayer. They complain from an erroneous belief that prayer was intended always to be filling and meaningful. St. John of the Cross calls this spiritual gluttony.

I remember reading a letter between St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. She encouraged him to join her on a trip to see the latest "fad" in miracles. He responded that there were enough miracles in his garden, so he would not go.

Let me assure you that prayer is primarily an act of obedience and a joyful giving of our time to the Lord. When I pray, I give my gift, self-oblation of time, to my Creator. He is not obliged to respond in any way. When He responds, it is mainly through enlightenment or a better understanding.

I used to go to Him for emotional encouragement. He answered that it was my job, and I should go for a run.

Frankly, I find God the most during the Eucharist. I saw the bread turn into flesh. Frequently I feel joined with the saints.

I also become one with the Lord when I pray with others. He often directs my prayers and brings healing.

Br. Brendan, OCCO, reported that I had transcended on one prayerful occasion.

So dear ones, prayer can be inspiring at times. God will create those moments. Meanwhile, we do The Work of God.

Living in Grace

Listen with the Ear of Your Heart

"Can you hear me now?" "Can you hear me now?" The narrator repeats the question over and over throughout the popular commercial. That is an interesting phrase that markets his product and mirrors our personal need to be heard. I need to be heard.

You don't necessarily have to agree or support me, but please listen to me. When you listen to me, I am validated. I become a person of some value. To be validated, I will talk on the cell phone about trivial nonsense, chatter all day about nothing important to anyone who will listen, or even create an argument to get attention. That is a sad state of affairs, to be sure.

Let us speak about listening skills. We can recall what we know about listening skills by remembering what Mamma told us, "We have two ears and one mouth, so listen more than you speak." The 90/10 rule came from this. That is to listen 90% of the time and speak 10% of the time. Sure would be a peaceful planet.

Active listening means full participation by the listener and response to the speaker. Active listening might include such communication efforts as mirroring. Mirroring is speaking back to what we have just heard.

The opposite of active listening is passive listening. That consists of thinking of your response while listening rather than listening. You could also be viewing the sports channel, reading the paper, or almost anything other than

listening to the speaker. You are not present to the speaker and show little interest in what is being said.

The next level of listening skills is "to listen with the ear of your heart." At first, that may seem an unusual statement. But slow down for a moment and listen to the words, "listen with the ear of your heart." I think you will figure it out. Listen so that the speaker, or writer, moves you towards transformation. Imagine listening to your mate complain about his day. Imagine moving to the "ear of your heart" and the effect his words of sorrow, conflict, stress, and failure have on your heart.

Your response to him would be different than if you just heard the words. You would be transformed, moved, more charitable, and compassionate.

Here is some advice on how to speak to the heart.

The heart needs you to speak slowly. Look at your beloved. Do not be in a rush. Save your important messages to when you and your beloved are together. Do not discuss them over the cell phone.

Touch your beloved whenever something is significant to you. Speak softly.

The heart is tender. It gets frightened when you are loud, critical, and sarcastic. Be careful with your words. Say what you mean. Be clear and precise.

Please, do not continually repeat yourself. The heart hears better with fewer words. It takes practice "to listen with the ear of your heart." We need to develop a quiet spirit.

The quiet spirit is developed through a desire to be present to your beloved wither that be God or a person. Spend time in quiet. Let there be no noise,

Gratitude

Gratitude keeps us alive and kicking.

The lack of gratitude makes us self-absorbed and lifeless. I tend to think that when Eve said to Adam, "try this one," if they had stopped for a moment and had spoken words of thanks to the Lord for all He had given to them, then everything would have been different.

My point...gratitude changes us. We get happier, more empowered, more creative, more emotionally secure, more of the good things.

A friend of ours visited the other day. We mostly love her. We love her most when she is not griping, victimizing herself, and thinking that life should be easy.

Scott Peck says that people who complain believe that life should be easy. I agree.

We asked her why she believed that she should not suffer. She dodged that one with one of her famous "yes, buts..." "Well, but this," we all suffer. Her point is... that she deserves to have all good things given to her.

My point is to stop complaining. Do what is good, right, and holy. The persecuted apostles did not pray, "Poor us, Lord, please go change the hearts of our persecutors." No. They prayed, "And now Lord take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bondservants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus. (Acts 5: 29-30)

My message today:

Gratitude will open our souls to the unity of God, self, and others.

Gratitude moves us from limitations and fear to expansion and love.