

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 7: PROVISIONAL DISCIPLINES



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Provisional Disciplines

Provisional Disciplines
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Contents

Welcome to <i>Provisional Disciplines</i>	4
1 Ready When Needed	5
2 Recognize	7
3 Rejoice	9
4 Rest	11
5 Remain	13
6 Repent	15
7 Return	17

Welcome to *Provisional Disciplines*

Welcome to *Provisional Disciplines*, part 7 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. There are times in our lives when we need to be able to draw on a certain raft of disciplines to help us continue in the Kingdom path and rest of God. Typically, times of temptation or trial require skills that we may not need every day, like we do spiritual, relational, vocational, and communal disciplines.

Provisional Disciplines examines those practices that we must be ready to employ from time to time in our walk with and work for the Lord. Keeping these “tools” sharp and ready will help us to make continuing progress in our Kingdom-and-glory calling from the Lord.

ReVision studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Let the lesson sink into your soul as you consider how to apply its teaching to your life.

Don't neglect to take each day's *Next steps*. This will greatly help you to learn the point of each lesson.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. At the end of each study questions for discussion allow you to pull your learning together so you can make this study more a part of your daily walk with and work for the Lord.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview. Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to see the many other *ReVision* studies, and other resources, available to you at no charge.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Ready When Needed

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. 1 Peter 5.8-10

The Good News of the Kingdom

Life in the Kingdom of God is an adventure of knowing the power of God for increasing righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17-19). This is what makes the Kingdom of God such Good News. As our vision of the Kingdom and its glorious potential grows in clarity and appeal, we will apply ourselves by every means to seek and layhold on that glorious realm for every area of our lives.

This means mastering the various disciplines by which we invest the time God gives us for knowing, enjoying, serving, and glorifying Him. The more proficient and consistent we become in bringing God's discipline to bear in our souls, relationships, callings, and communities, the more we will realize the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom working in and through us.

Jesus portrayed the Kingdom of God in the most attractive terms: a pearl of great price, a great catch of fish, a fruitful garden, a great treasure, and so forth. He wanted us to *want* the Kingdom, to desire it with all our soul and strength, and to enter and dwell in that Kingdom through Him. He is the Way into the Kingdom, the Life of the Kingdom, and the Truth which allows us to flourish in the freedom and fruitfulness of the Kingdom of God (Jn. 14.6).

So the Kingdom is truly *Good News* because, in it, we realize increasingly our full potential as the image-bearers of God, citizens and ambassadors living and working within the realm of His authority and power. Overall, therefore, those who have made the turn into the Kingdom of God know peace and joy that nothing can obscure or destroy.

But this does not mean that our lives in the Kingdom will be completely free of trials.

The inevitability of trials

Jesus promised that we would have trials and tribulation in this life (Jn. 16.33). Such trials are not what we might prefer. Trials, and the suffering that comes with them, can cause us to experience doubts, confusion, disappointment, set-back, and even physical or emotional pain. Why does life in the Kingdom require such experiences from time to time?

The Lord has His reasons, and they all relate to His good and perfect plan for helping us to become more like Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 8.28; Heb. 12.3-11). The trials we can expect to endure in the Kingdom of God are of various sorts, including temptation (in fact, the word for "trial" and "temptation" is the same in the Greek), opposition or persecution, physical distress (such as ill health, loss of employment or property), or betrayal or other interpersonal trials. Sometimes our trials are self-inflicted, as when we fall through temptation into a life of sin, or when we act imprudently. At other times our trials come as a result of the bad intentions or decisions of others. Still other trials are the result of Satan being allowed to exert himself against us in one way or another, as in the case of Job.

God uses all the trials we must endure to shape us more into the image of Jesus Christ, so that, as Peter observed, after we have suffered a bit we may be perfected, established, strengthened, and settled in our course of Kingdom living. As we train our bodies for obedience, using the various disciplines we have been

Provisional Disciplines

considering in this series, we will find, at times, that something in our discipline is lacking. We keep stumbling or regressing, or we aren't growing or bearing fruit as much as we'd hoped. At such times God may step in to refocus, redirect, or reshape the course of our lives by leading us into some trial. Then we need to be prepared to respond in ways that allow us to see these trials for what they are and to endure them so as to gain the benefit God intends.

Provisional disciplines

Since such trials might be described as *provisional* – that is, not normal or routine, and only occurring from time to time – we require certain *provisional* disciplines to deal with them. As we shall see, the effective use of these provisional disciplines requires that *others* of our disciplines, especially *spiritual* disciplines, be kept in good and continuous working order.

Provisional disciplines are the special tools in our disciplines tool kit that we haul out only as often as they are needed. Provisional disciplines draw from and are applied with other disciplines, to help us navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of trials, so that we don't end up shipwrecked or off course whenever we encounter difficulties of one kind or another. We must master the use of provisional disciplines and keep them in good working order, even if we only require them from time to time.

As in every other area of our lives, so also in times of trial, realizing the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom requires the skilled and timely use of disciplines. In this series we will be considering various provisional disciplines and how they may be specifically and effectively deployed in the face of trials.

For reflection

1. Why is it appropriate to refer to these as “provisional” disciplines? Can you give an example?
2. Why should it be that Christians should have trials and tribulations in this life? Can you give an example of how a trial helped you along in your walk with or work for the Lord?
3. How would you describe the state of provisional disciplines in your life at this time?

Next steps – Preparation: What are some of the trials and difficulties you might expect to face as you continue seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness? How well prepared are you to deal with these challenges? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

2 Recognize

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Matthew 16.22, 23

Oops

Sin is just that slippery because temptation to sin can go unrecognized. We fail to see the red flag waving before us, and the next thing you know it's bridge out and into the drink of sin and shame. So blind to sin can we be at times that we can even think, like poor Peter, that we're doing something really noble and good, something to please the Lord, when in fact we're standing in the way of Kingdom progress, duped by the devil and in danger of a drubbing.

Then, when we've fallen into sin, we become a trial for someone else. Imagine how Jesus must have felt to be taken aside and rebuked by His own disciple. Happily for all, Jesus – unlike Peter – recognized the situation for what it actually was, and took appropriate action.

But what Peter *failed* to recognize was that he was setting himself up for sin by becoming suddenly full of himself and what he may have regarded as his newly-achieved rank among the disciples. To be succinct: Peter reasoned that the Word of the Lord was neither good nor reliable. It did not describe what Jesus deserved, and it did not indicate, as he saw it, the way to the promised Kingdom. So Peter, out of what must have seemed to him like the best of motives, *opposed* the Word of God with his own ideas!

But where Peter failed to recognize the situation for what it was, Jesus right away understood what was going on, and recognizing Peter's protest for what it was, He took the necessary action, even though it must have been painful for Peter.

The first step in using the *provisional* disciplines God has provided is to *recognize* that we have come into a trial and to determine the type of trial to which we have come. In this instance, Jesus succeeded, where Peter failed miserably.

Sources of trial

Some trials come upon us because of the wicked intentions or foolish decisions of others, or the frailties of our bodies and the uncertainties of life. These are normally not too difficult to recognize, as Jesus did in this instance. Sometimes, even, we can see them coming. But the schemes, failings, or mistakes of others don't have to plummet us into the icy waters of disappointment, discouragement, or defeat. Even when others betray, attack, offend, or otherwise seek to do us harm, we can remain on the Kingdom path of righteousness, peace, and joy. The sooner we learn to recognize what is happening – like Jesus did with Peter's lapse – the more quickly we can deal with the situation, so that it does not impede our progress in seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God.

On the other hand, we can often be the source of our own suffering – like Peter – because we fail to recognize three classic detours from the Kingdom path. These are sin, spiritual warfare, and becoming side-tracked by self.

We can see each of these at work in Peter. He *sinned* by opposing the Word of God – by actually *denying* the Word of God and preferring his own ideas to those of Christ. If he had only recognized the sinfulness of such a position, as Jesus did, he might have avoided the shame he was made to experience.

Second, Jesus recognized that Peter had fallen under the sway of the devil. By having too high a view of himself Peter became an unwitting traitor in the *spiritual warfare* that rages continuously around us. Again, if

only Peter had remembered what he must certainly have known about Jesus' encounters with the devil, how the devil consistently sought to oppose Christ and His Word, he might have rebuked himself and kept silent, rather than speak up and suffer the rebuke of the Lord.

Finally, Peter considered *himself* to have the better insight concerning the Kingdom and how to attain it. Aren't we all a bit like this? We find the teaching of God's Word to be difficult, inconvenient, or perhaps a challenge to our comfort or expectations. So, rather than simply obey the Lord, we rationalize our way around the teaching of Scripture in order to justify what *we* want to do, all the while assuring ourselves that, because we're *sincere*, we therefore must be right. We need to learn to recognize that voice of self, inviting us to oppose the Word of God, or else we may find ourselves objects of the Lord's chastening.

The suffering Peter experienced – rebuke, humiliation, embarrassment, and so forth – was of his own making. And all this because he failed to *recognize* the situation for what it was. The discipline of recognizing *temptation* – on Peter's part – or recognizing *trial* – as Jesus did – can only be developed by deep and consistent immersion in the Word of God and continuous prayer. Through the Law and Word of God we learn to recognize sinful tendencies, situations, and courses of action (Rom. 7.7); and through the Word of God and prayer we, like poor Peter, can recognize our mistakes and resume our journey with the Lord.

The practice of provisional disciplines begins as we *recognize* the nature of our condition – whether we are being tested, or whether, having already failed the test, we are being chastened and summoned to return to the way of the Lord.

For reflection

1. What would you say are the keys to being able to recognize when you have entered into temptation? Why is it important that you be able to do so?
2. Explain the difference between Peter's *failure* to “recognize” and Jesus' *successful* recognition in the situation described in this lesson.
3. Are believers responsible to help one another in developing and practicing this ability to recognize trials? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Recognizing our situation requires that we stay alert to what's going on in our lives, that we “walk circumspectly,” as Paul put it (Eph. 5.15). What is the role of prayer in this discipline? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

3 Rejoice

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. James 1.2-4

When trials beset

Jesus promised us that in this world we would have tribulation – trouble, difficulty, obstacles, opposition, loss, setback, and more (Jn. 16.33). For most of us, I suspect, that's not exactly a happy prospect. Who wants to get up each day thinking, "I wonder how I'm going to get it in the neck today?"

Jesus did not tell us these words in order to make us anxious and fearful, or to discourage us, so that we "lay low" in our faith and don't live fully for Him. As we know, His is a Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit, and it is unthinkable that our King and Savior would want anything for us other than what will bring us into more realization of that promised boon.

So, at the same time Jesus warned us about trials to come, He told us how to respond to them, once we've *recognized* them for what they are: "...but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Our lives in the Kingdom of God have been hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3.3). Christ has already overcome every temptation, trial, or test the world could throw at Him, and our lives have been hidden with Him in God. The joy of God, the peace of the divine Trinity, and hope of everlasting glory are ours *now*, regardless of the trials or challenges we must endure – or whatever we might bring down upon ourselves by our selfish, sinful choices and behavior.

So Jesus tells us how to respond when trials come: We need to rejoice.

Rejoice? Why?

It remained for Jesus' half-brother, James, to flesh out the details of this *provisional* discipline of rejoicing in the face of trials. James tells us that we can rejoice in the face of temptations and trials as long as we keep them in a proper perspective. We must call to mind that the end of all such tests, as the Lord allows or brings us into them, is to improve our life with the Lord toward completion in Christ (Jms. 1.4). Trials of all sorts are for the exercising of our muscles of faith. Just like an athlete only gets stronger by the arduous work of exercise and other bodily disciplines, so our faith only grows as we are exercised with trials and temptations.

But if we can *recognize* these for what they are – whether foisted on us by others, facing us in the form of temptation, or fallen into by our own bad choices – we can turn what might feel like danger or disaster into development into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rejoicing in the face of trials strengthens us in patience, so that we don't lose heart or slide further into sin. And patience, as we continue to exercise it, will grow us heart, mind, and conscience into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But it starts with rejoicing – at precisely the moment rejoicing is the last thing we feel like doing.

How to rejoice

When we recognize that a trial is coming upon us, or has already descended upon us, the first emotion that rises within us is not usually rejoicing. It might be fear, anger, alarm, doubt, sadness, shame, or any number of affections that can leave us feeling discouraged, defeated, and depressed. Indeed, the Lord can use just such affections to signal to us that we have entered into a trial, thus helping us to recognize the situation for what it is.

Provisional Disciplines

But while such affections may be normal as a first response to trial, they must not be allowed to linger. We must move on from them to rejoice, for rejoicing engages the spiritual muscle of patience.

So, in order truly to rejoice in the face or midst of trials, we need to face down all negative affections. Identify what you are feeling – fear, anger, defeat, whatever it may be. Thank the Lord for each of these affections, for He is using them to alert you to this unique growth opportunity to which He has brought you.

Then, as you are thanking the Lord, focus your mind and heart on Him, exalted in glory. Sing a hymn expressing the greatness and majesty of our exalted King. Meditate on Him in His beauty, sovereignty, might, goodness, and love. See Him looking at you in the midst of your trial, and know that He does all things well and works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Stay there, seeking the face of the Lord, until His glory begins to surround and gather you in (2 Cor. 4.6).

Then turn to His Word for the words of rejoicing He has prepared for you. Read and pray through a psalm of rejoicing, such as Psalm 84 or 103. Read the psalm aloud, pausing to express your own feelings within the lines of God’s script for rejoicing. Let the psalm become your own words, so that your mind and tongue lead your heart to a true experience of joy in the Lord.

Then focus on the prospect of growth, deliverance, improvement, or direction that you know, by faith, the Lord has in store for you through this trial, and rejoice all the more. The provisional discipline of *rejoicing* can help you to gain the benefit God intends for whatever trial or suffering He allows.

For reflection

1. Why is it so difficult to rejoice in the face of trials or temptations? Is rejoicing *only* or even *primarily* a feeling? Explain.
2. Briefly summarize the steps T. M. recommends taking in order to get to rejoicing. How does this compare with your experience?
3. Have you ever tried praying a psalm of rejoicing to “jump start” rejoicing in our soul? Do you think this could be a helpful practice? Why or why not?

Next steps – Transformation: What can keep you from rejoicing in the face of trials and temptations? How can you overcome this? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

4 Rest

*“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You.
Therefore I abhor myself,
And repent in dust and ashes.”* Job 42.5, 6

Job’s trials

When, in the sovereign wisdom and grace of God, Job began to enter into his trials, he seemed to be on top of things, though things were very bad, indeed.

He seemed to have *recognized* the situation as the work of God, and he trusted God implicitly to do what was right (Job 1.21; 2.10). But for Job, the situation went south from there. We see him, sitting on that ash heap in silence for more than a week (2.13), and we hope he’s facing down his negative affections and looking to the Lord and His glory and might, so that he might rejoice, grow in patience, and gain the blessing God intends for him.

Instead, when Job finally begins to speak, we can feel our hearts sink. The first words out of his mouth are a combination of woe, anger, and despair. He even seems to deny that rejoicing about him or his situation is anywhere near a proper response (3.6). Job is wallowing in all kinds of negative affections, and we can understand why this is so. We’ve all felt this way before, and we don’t condemn Job any more than we condemn ourselves.

But while *we* might be content to wallow in negative affections, God has other things in mind. If Job would not turn his mind and heart to God, then God would turn his mind and heart for him, which is precisely what we see God doing in chapters 38-41. God takes Job’s face in His own hands, and escorts him on a *tour de force* of the cosmos, all the while asking or implying, “Who did this, Job? Who? And if I can do this, do you suppose I might be able to care for you as well?”

Wrong turn to rest

In our text, Job has come to the place where he is able to *rest* in the Lord. Resting in the Lord is where the Lord wants us at all times. But sometimes we need to go through a season of *unrest* before we can grow in the deeper rest God has in store for us.

In our text, Job’s situation has not changed; but he is at peace, and we get the sense that his faith has grown, especially after his confrontation with the Lord. Through all of chapters 3-37, Job became increasingly angry about his trials, first at his knuckle-headed “friends” and their pop theology of suffering, and then at God. Job became angry at God because he felt God owed him an explanation for all this suffering. But God is not in the business of explaining things when what He’s trying to do is increase our trust in Him.

We see no indication that Job went from *recognizing* his situation to *rejoicing* in it, since, as we’ve seen, rejoicing is the provisional discipline that normally leads to *rest*. But it’s not always necessary to employ *every* provisional discipline in order to gain the benefit God intends for us. Sometimes we will get to rest and the blessing that comes through trials by another path, as we shall see.

However, we should point out that Job’s situation, which was bad enough already, became even worse when God showed up and accused him of pouring out empty words and making brazen demands of His Maker and Lord (Job 38.1-3; cf. 42.1-5).

Rejoicing in the midst of trials is a proper path to rest, and might have worked in Job’s case, if he had not failed to *recognize* that demanding God come down and give an explanation for his sufferings was a temptation

Provisional Disciplines

he should have resisted. Instead of choosing the path of rejoicing, Job descended from innocence into sin, compounding his suffering even more.

Only after God's exhilarating but humiliating rebuke was Job able to get to the place of rest. But since he did not choose to go via the path of rejoicing, and thus fell through temptation into sin, he could only come to rest by first coming to repentance. We'll have more to say about repentance in a future segment.

Rest in the Lord

The endgame of suffering is always rest in the Lord, being content in Him, with Him, and because of Him. God is always working to strip away anything that gets between us and Him and prevents us from finding all our peace and joy in Him.

As God confronted Job with his sin, Job's other trials paled into relative insignificance. Job came to *recognize* his sin and to *repent* of it, and in doing so, his soul was suddenly and truly at peace. Nothing in Job's outward circumstances had changed; he was still sitting on that ash heap, covered with boils, abandoned by his wife and friends, and bereft of his children and wealth. *But he was at rest!* And rest is a condition of complete, unwavering, peaceable, and, yes, even joyful dependence on and participation in God.

Rest like this – true and perfect rest in God – is the prize to be gained through trial, and the right use of provisional disciplines can help to get us there.

For reflection

1. What is the “rest” of the Lord? How do you experience this “rest”?
2. How can trials deprive of this rest? Trials should put us on a quest to regain our rest in the Lord: Explain.
3. “The endgame of suffering is always rest in the Lord, being content in Him, with Him, and because of Him.” Is it possible to know the Lord's rest even in the midst of suffering? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: What is it like to know true and perfect rest in God? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

5 Remain

And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. 1 John 2.28

The “fix-it” fixation

We do not like things to be broken. If something goes wrong or doesn’t seem right to us, then we want it to be fixed, set right, repaired.

In fact, when anything goes wrong, we almost always will try to fix it. We’re “fixed” on fixing things as the solution to all our ills. And when we can’t figure out how to “fix it,” then we’re left befuddled, upset, and perhaps looking for someone to blame.

At such times we need to recognize that we’ve entered into some period of trial and begin groping our way toward the Lord’s rest. This is what the people John was writing to were trying to do. They had a problem and they didn’t know how to fix it. So they turned to the Apostle for help in being restored to the Lord’s rest.

The problem

What was the problem these people were trying to fix? Apparently, quite out of the blue, certain members of their fellowship had become disgruntled and simply left (1 Jn. 2.18, 19). Their doing so seems to have thrown the rest of this congregation into something of a tailspin. People probably started blaming one another, which provoked the defense, “It’s not my fault! I didn’t do anything wrong.” John counseled against ever thinking that we’re without sin at any moment in our lives (1 Jn. 2.8-10). We should always be ready to accept the possibility that we may be cause of our own sufferings.

But we don’t have to defend ourselves, John reminded them. We have an Advocate Who knows how to intercede for us (1 Jn. 2.1-3). In His love we can, as needed, confess our sins, repent, and move on.

Instead of blaming one another we need to help one another keep focused on Jesus and following along the path He has marked out for us in His Law (1 Jn. 2.3-8). This is the way of love, and love, not hand-wringing or blame-laying, is the way Christ wants us to live (1 Jn. 2.9-11).

Perhaps those who left took a fair amount of material resources with them? Maybe they were “big givers” and the congregation didn’t know how they’d make it without their support. John warns his readers not to love the things of this world, but to focus on the Lord and increase love for Him (1 Jn. 2.15-17).

The problem this church was facing couldn’t be fixed, either by laying blame, changing course, or trying to persuade those who had left to come back. So what should they do? How could they get over this disruption – this trial – and recover the rest of God which was evidently eluding them?

This way to rest

John’s advice to this congregation was not that they should keep trying to fix their problem, but that they should *abide* in the Lord (1 Jn. 2.28). They would get through this muddle and renew the assurance and strength in the Lord John knew they possessed (1 Jn. 2.12-14), but the way to that rest would be through abiding in the Lord.

What did John have in mind?

First, we are abiding in the Lord when we continually *focus on our beginning* in Him (1 Jn. 3.11-24). Remember

Provisional Disciplines

that you belong to the Lord, that He has died for you, and that even though the world may hate you, His love for you remains unchanged. The trials we endure should confirm the fact that we belong to Him Who promised in this world we would have tribulation (1 Jn. 3.13-16).

It's good to review the Lord's good work in our lives, all the glorious details of how Jesus chose us, died for us, rose again for us, and, in His good way and time, brought us to Himself and has blessed us.

Second, we abide in the Lord when *strain toward the end of our salvation* (1 Jn. 3.1-3). Our focusing on the Lord must be not only on what He *has* done for us, but what He is *preparing for us* even now, and *what we will know and enjoy* when finally we see Him face to face. We should rejoice in the Lord's coming again, and encourage one another with all the prospects of completion, joy, and blessing His coming will include (1 Thess. 4.13-18).

Finally, we abide in the Lord, and may expect to know His rest, as we *stay the course of love*, which is His good and perfect will for us in all things, at all times (1 Jn. 4.7-21). Love is the way to overcome whatever the world might throw at us, or whatever we might stumble into ourselves (1 Jn. 5.1-5). Love is the fulfilling of the commandments, the realization of Christ's presence, and the good work that overcomes every evil (Rom. 12.21).

We can't fix everything, and even for the things we can fix, we need to learn the discipline of abiding in the Lord. Because no matter how long it takes to fix things, or even if they can't be fixed at all, abiding in the Lord together will enable us to know and enjoy His rest, come what may.

For reflection

1. Why is it so difficult to abide in the Lord when trials beset us? Why is it so important that we do?
2. Summarize in your own words T. M.'s suggestion for abiding in the Lord? Is this consistent with your experience?
3. Is it possible to abide in the Lord and still feel the pain of adversity or other trial? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation, Preparation: How can believers help one another abide in the Lord? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

6 Repent

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:21

Repentance

We have mentioned repentance a couple of times in this series on provisional disciplines. We can imagine Peter had to repent of his hubris in opposing the Lord's plan. Job declared that, when he came to see his sin before the Lord, he repented of it, and thus came to know the Lord better. And the church which wrote to John about their problem was encouraged to let repentance have its complete work, wherever it seemed to be in order in their situation.

Every Christian knows we need to repent. Repentance is both an attitude of heart and a discipline we practice. We repent in our hearts when we come to hate the sin that has been revealed as present within us (Ps. 97:10). And we practice repentance as a discipline when take the steps repentance requires in order to overcome the evil in our lives with the good works for which we have been redeemed (Eph. 2:10).

Repentance begins with being convicted of sin. This is a work of the Spirit of God (Jn. 16:8-11), and He can do this on His own initiative (Ps. 139:23, 24) or through the agency of another believer, like Jesus confronting Peter.

Repentance begins, that is, when sin is exposed within us. Conviction enables us to *recognize* we have a problem. We should probably rejoice in that, but we mustn't hesitate, rejoicing or not, to let the work of repentance come to completion. Repentance is the path that can lead us to the rest of the Lord once again.

Once repentance has begun in our hearts, so that we see the sin in our lives and are disgusted with it, then we can begin the work of overcoming this evil with good works of love. The discipline of repentance involves two steps.

Confession

The first step is confession. The word "confess" means simply "to agree." In confession we agree with the judgment of the Holy Spirit that something in our lives is not what it ought to be. Regardless of how the Spirit brings us to see our sin, seeing our sin, and even being troubled by or disgusted with it is not enough. We must *agree* with the Spirit concerning our sin, and this entails speaking to the Lord in prayer, and perhaps, speaking to others as well.

Psalm 51 is an excellent example of a prayer of confession. David, refusing to recognize the sin of adultery and conspiracy to murder which he had committed, brought trouble upon himself in the person of the prophet Nathan. Nathan shamed the king and humbled him with sorrow as the Spirit of God used him to bring David to conviction for his sin. The Word of God pierced David to the depths of his soul, and not only did he immediately agree with Nathan and the Spirit, he went further than that.

David confessed his sin to the entire nation of Israel by writing a song about his wickedness. Here is an important principle: Confession of sin should always extend as far as the reach of the transgression. David didn't just sin against Uriah and Bathsheba – no innocent herself, by the way. He sinned against the whole nation, and so it was before the whole nation that he needed to make his confession known. Psalm 51 fits that purpose quite well.

Penance

Confession is the first and indispensable stage of repentance. We may be sorry to have been caught in some

Provisional Disciplines

sin and resolve never to do it again. But if our heart has not been changed and we have not publicly agreed, to the extent of the transgression, through some act of confession, then our repentance will end up being shallow and probably short-lived.

But confession is not enough. When evil is discovered within us we need to recognize it, of course. But we also need to *overcome* it, as Paul instructs. And the way to overcome evil is by taking up good works instead. In the history of Christian practice this part of repentance has been called *penance*. Penance is a provisional discipline and not a sacrament. The practice of penance follows the formula used by ancient Celtic Christians, who defined penance this way: “contraries are by contraries cured.” That is, if something in you is contrary to the Law and Word of God, and you agree that this is so, then you must take up a regimen of practices which are the “contrary” of that behavior, in order to train your soul and body for living the love of Christ. As Paul put the discipline of penance in Ephesians 4.28, “Let him who stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with *his* hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”

In some cases, repentance will require the help of a wise counselor and perhaps a prayer partner. We must be careful about thinking we can “manage our sin” by ourselves. We need others to support, guide, instruct, and hold us accountable.

The end of repentance is restoration to God and His Kingdom path, and this is the path, as we have seen, of perfect peace, joy, and love. When we come to recognize some wickedness in our lives, we should understand that we’re already suffering by our separation from the Lord (Ps. 66.18), and we’re likely to know more distress and shame the longer we persist in this condition. Listen for the conviction of the Spirit, then take up the practices of confession and penance. Soon enough you will be restored to your rest in the Lord, and you will grow in Him as a result.

For reflection

1. How far-ranging should our confessions of sin be? Why?
2. What are some ways the Holy Spirit might convict us of the need to repent?
3. “contraries are by contraries cured”: Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Do you have a soul friend or prayer partner? Someone who would feel free to point out some sin in your life if necessary? Someone whose opinion in such matters you would respect? Do you think you would benefit from such a relationship?

7 Return

*I thought about my ways,
And turned my feet to Your testimonies.
I made haste, and did not delay
To keep Your commandments.* Psalm 119:59, 60

Unpleasant, but necessary

It pleases God, from time to time, to allow or bring us to one or another form of suffering. This can come to us at the hand of others, as a result of unforeseen circumstances, or by our own foolish choices. At times things just seem to be going wrong, and we feel out of sorts, out of step with the Lord, and out of His will. These times can be most unpleasant, and this is precisely what the Lord intends (Heb. 12:3-11).

If the tribulations we encounter in this life were not unpleasant then we would have no incentive to be done with them and to return to that place of rest which we enjoy in the favor of the Lord. Provisional disciplines are those practices we turn to when our lives are out of sync and we're trying to find our way back to the Lord. Recognition is the first step, when we come face to face with whatever is depriving us of the Lord's rest. Then we seek return to that rest through rejoicing, abiding in the Lord, repenting of sin, or all of these together.

But when these disciplines have done their work in us, we will be ready to return to our rest in the Lord and to take up afresh our Kingdom journey with Him.

What will tell us that we're truly ready to return to the Lord, and that we have entered into His rest once again?

Four indicators of rest

Four indicators should be present in us to suggest that our practice of provisional disciplines has cleared the way, paved the path, and brought us back to the favor and rest of the Lord. The first of these is *humility*. The picture of humility is the penitent on his knees before his Lord, sorrowful at their separation, ashamed at his failure or betrayal, weary from his woe, and seeking the restoring grace of his Master.

God does not owe us His rest. He grants rest to those who seek it humbly, knowing they don't deserve His favor and pleading with Him to restore it. Humility is important to remind us who *we* are before God – foolish, fumbling sinners – and who *He* is before us – our Creator, Redeemer, Judge, and Lord.

With that humility we should experience a growing *hunger* for the Lord and His Word. When repentance has done its work, leading us to hate our sin and to seek a path of goodness and restoration, we will look eagerly for the lamp of God's Word to illuminate our path. Our time in the Word should become more precious, concentrated, and fruitful. We should find greater delight in seeking the Lord in His Word, and more frequent encounters with Him there, as He makes His glory known to us.

At the same time, we should find that we are more interested in *hearing* the Lord as He speaks to us from His Word. We will pause and linger over the Scriptures, waiting on the Lord to reveal Himself and His will, reflecting on the implications of His Word for our daily lives, thinking deeply and personally about how the Word speaks into our daily lives. We will not satisfy the hunger we have for the Lord, as we enter into His rest, unless we make sure we're hearing what He has to say to us specifically.

Then, finally, when we have heard God's Word in all hunger and humility, we must *hasten* to obey it,

Provisional Disciplines

beginning the moment He makes His will clear to us. Whatever you learn from the Lord, commit to Him in prayer. Write it down. Make plans for the day ahead, how you will actually put this Word from the Lord into practice in your life. Take the initiative, seeking the power of the Lord to help you carry out His will for every aspect of your life.

The rest which we can know in the Lord is sweet, reviving our souls, renewing hope and resolve, and giving us strength to serve the Lord in the Personal Mission Field to which He sends us each day. We can know that we have settled into that rest when we linger before the Lord in humility, hungry to hear and heed His Word, and to hasten from His presence into daily and complete obedience.

The practice of provisional disciplines allows us to overcome the trials and tests that threaten to divert us from the Kingdom path of the Lord. When challenges to our Kingdom-and-glory calling arise, we need to recognize them for what they are, rejoice at the prospect of growth they afford, seek the rest of the Lord, repent of any sin, remain in prayer and God's Word, and return to Him by the most expeditious path.

We don't have to let the tribulations of this life obstruct our progress in entering more deeply into the Kingdom and glory of God. When trials arise, have these provisional disciplines ready, and let them serve you well as you continue seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God in every area of your life.

For reflection

1. How can we know when we have achieved "return" to the Lord?
2. How effective are you in the use of provisional disciplines? Where do you need to improve?
3. Provisional disciplines do not *eliminate* the tribulations we experience in this life. What *do* they do?

Next steps – Conversation: How do you experience the rest of the Lord? How can Christians help one another enter more fully into the Lord's rest? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

Provisional Disciplines

Questions for Review or Discussion

1. What do we mean by *provisional* disciplines? What is the goal of such disciplines?
2. What are some situations that might indicate the practice of provisional disciplines?
3. Once we *recognize* that we have entered temptation or a trial, what should we do next? What is the goal of provisional disciplines? That is, how can we know when our practice of these disciplines has accomplished God's purpose?
4. How can believers help one another in the practice of provisional disciplines?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life and ministry?

Additional thoughts, comments, questions, or items for prayer:

Provisional Disciplines

Questions for Discussion

1. What do we mean by “provisional” disciplines? How do these relate to spiritual, relational, vocational, and communal disciplines?
2. If we don’t learn to use provisional disciplines, what will likely happen to us when temptations, trials, or tribulations beset us?
3. How can believers help one another to make better use of provisional disciplines?
4. Where do you need to improve most in the use of provisional disciplines? What are you planning to do to improve that area?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you planning to put that lesson to use in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Additional insights, questions, or thoughts:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.