

Refining Fire

by Ona Matulionyte

Key Verse: “See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction” Isaiah 48:10.

Faith Story: Isaiah 48:1-11

Faith Focus: “Refining Fire” is a follow up for the “Treasure Hunt” lesson, during which the students were encouraged to internalize the truth that God valued them as a merchant would value treasures and pearls. The “Refining Fire” session focuses on the fact that a treasure of God should expect some hardships. Just as pearls are formed through the pain of a mussel or as the precious metals are purified in fire, so Isaiah 48 reveals that God at times purifies people through affliction. The focus of the lesson is not the question whether God afflicts people, but how people can respond to hardships in truth. This class will be an opportunity for reinterpreting some of their own experiences.

Session Goal:

Encourage students to recognize some positive aspects that afflictions may have brought to their lives and see those events through “God’s eyes”.

Session Objectives:

By the end of this session students will have:

Discussed a newspaper article

Written a response to an unfortunate incident of their lives

Looked up Isaiah 48:1-11

Written a new response

Chosen a Bible verse for meditation

Advanced preparation and materials needed:

Bibles for all students

Clips from a recent newspaper that contain a tragedy that changes sufferer's life

White/blackboard

Chalk/marker

Pens for all students

SESSION OUTLINE

Focus (10 min):

Ask the students to divide into small groups of 2 to 4 people. Give each group a recent newspaper article that reports some tragedy. Let them read the article and discuss with the help of these questions:

How do you feel about the accident?

Whose fault was it that the tragedy happened?

How drastically will the lives of the victim/s be changed?

Can the victim/s recover?

Connect (10 min): After the small groups have discussed, let them come back to their places

and share some main impressions to the class. The teacher may make notes on the board.

Then ask the students to remember one incident in their lives that they saw as unfortunate, (ask them to choose one that they are comfortable enough to reflect on). Let them write down the feelings they had during and after that event. Ask if they felt that they were the precious pearl or like God's treasure during those events.

Explore the Bible (15 min): Ask the students to read Isaiah 48:1-11 and look for the answers

to these questions:

What is the problem with Israel, in vv 1-8? (Pride of being the Israelites; lack of holiness; stubbornness to change their treacherous nature.)

How does God deal with Israel? (He warns about the future so that they can change, and then brings about what he foretold.) Remind the students that God refers to the exile and other hardships that Israel experienced.

How is God refining Israel? (Through affliction.)

Give a mini-lecture on the exile to Babylon. Here are some important facts to include:

After the nation of Israel divided in 922, the new southern kingdom, Judah, felt self-righteous towards the northern kingdom, Israel. They thought they were God's favorites.

This feeling of superiority was intensified when Israel fell to Assyria in 722 and Judah didn't fall, although the people of Judah failed to note that there were several good reasons why Assyria didn't conquer them at the same time: Israel's land was more desirable, Israel was more politically unstable and Ahaz, King of Judah bribed Assyria to keep it from attacking.

This over confidence that they would never be defeated helped keep Judah blind to its own sins of idol worship and oppression against the poor. After the prophets pleaded for Judah to repent, the LORD allowed Babylon to defeat Judah in 587 BCE.

This fall was devastating to Judah, because the people lost everything they thought meant God's special blessing: land, king and Temple.

Babylon exiled 995 of the people. The people suffered terribly.

However, in exile in Babylon, the people of Judah rediscovered their story and began worshipping more often in synagogues. This brought spiritual revival.

When the students find the verse that speaks of refinement, move into sharing but not intense discussion. Share some thoughts on precious metals, pearls and diamonds.

For example, the teacher may ask questions related to precious metals, such as in what form are they found, and then respond with more detail to the answer that students provide. Use the following facts to help you:

The pearls form when a mussel is irritated, or in other words, when it feels pain because of an irritant, such as sand or a parasite, that enters its shell. Because of the pain, the mussel coats the irritant with calcite and in this way forms a pearl in the process of many years.

Another example of a valuable gem is a diamond. It forms in extremely high temperature (magma). Before a raw diamond becomes a gem that is suitable for jewelry, it goes through a scrupulous process of cutting. Diamonds have the capacity to disperse light into all colors of the rainbow, but this is realized only when they “suffer.”

Likewise, precious metals that are found in ores such as gold and silver have to be melted in the furnace in order to be purified. Gold is extremely malleable, so through “suffering” in the fire and through pressure, it can be molded into a variety of forms just like clay in potter’s hands.

Remind the students that not only the metals and minerals go through “purification” process. Plants also have to be pruned; for example wild apple trees bear significantly smaller apples compared to the fruit of a tended tree.

Move into reflection about purification and God’s people. Introduce these ideas:

It is not easy to believe that you are cared for by God during accidents and tragedies. However, God is always good, and he can use anything bad that happens to us due to people’s choices or other circumstances.

Sometimes, as Isaiah 48 shows, unfortunate events can be seen as a purifying time.

Treasures of God are not promised to live a problem free life. The Israelites were God's chosen people. However, they experienced lots of hardship, such as the exile.

Apply (7 min): Move into a discussion about what this lesson can mean for us today. Ask, *can you think of any time when good people suffered and nothing good came of it?* If the students can't think of any experience like this, or if they are afraid to say anything for fear it goes against this scripture, you should bring up some examples. For example, a girl who gets raped may not experience anything positive from this tragedy. It is true that suffering can be redemptive, but it isn't always redemptive. Note that suffering of the innocent is one of the most challenging facts to reconcile with the idea of good God. Christians may not be able to see any redemptive outcomes in many forms of suffering.

Invite the students to look at their lives through the eyes of God and ask them to remember their unfortunate event once again. This time ask them to write down some ways that God used the hardship for good, or the ways that it still could be a source of refining. Note that if some students think that their suffering does not seem to have any redemptive value, encourage them to give that situation and memory into the hands of God, and choose another, perhaps lighter memory.

Respond (7 min): Spread some printed Bible verses and ask the students to choose one that would give the best answer to their situation.

Suggestion for Bible verses:

Hebrews 13:5

2 Cor 12:9-10

1 Cor 10:13

Rom 8:38, 39

Rom 8:26

Rom 5:1-5

Jn 16:33

Mt 11:28

Mt 5:3-12

Jer 31:2-5

Ps 147:3

Ps 62:5

Deut 31:8

At the end, remind the students about the “Treasure hunt” lesson and the commitment to rest in God’s love and to meditate on Bible verses. Encourage them to use the new Bible verses that they chose.

Insights from Scripture

Educational notes:

If this lesson is done in other than classroom settings, such as a retreat, it could be followed by a calmer time with space given to grieve and share. In this case, a mentor or a leader should be available for the students to talk about hardships that they are going through or have experienced in the past. A place for confession could be offered as well. It may include writing an apology letter to God for blaming and rejecting Him during hard times.