

Testing Yourself In A Difficult Time

by Mack Tomlinson

This sermon emphasizes the importance of living by faith in uncertain times, drawing parallels between the Old Testament figures of Issachar and Ephraim to challenge listeners to choose faith over fear. It highlights the need to stay spiritually vigilant, treasure the church, and trust in God's sovereignty amidst societal challenges and personal uncertainties.

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 7:13, Psalms 112:6, 2 Thessalonians 1:6, Hebrews 10:38, Psalms 1:3, Matthew 24:13, Amos 5:14

Topics: "Living by Faith", "Trusting God's Sovereignty"

Description

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Transcript

Lord, this morning we want to thank you for mercies that are brand new. We want our minds and our hearts and our eyes to be lifted under the hills from whence comes our help. Our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth, the God of Jacob who defends us, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is with us always.

Lord, as the winds are blowing in our churches and in our nation and in the world, the winds of adversity, of change, we do pray you'd make us stable, full of faith and not yielding to fear. Thank you, Lord, for Grace Community Church. Thank you for the saints that aren't here that are home.

Encourage them, feed them, bless them, shepherd them, heal them, strengthen them mightily today. And Lord, you're not limited with many or few. We thank you that even two or three are gathered in your name.

There you are. So we want to worship you today freely. We don't want to be distracted.

So capture our hearts and our affections and our minds. Lord, speak now through your Word for the honor of your name. We pray.

Amen. Well, you know and I know the winds are blowing. And you know, when it's the wind of the Holy Spirit, it's always awesome.

But when it's the winds of adversity, the winds of challenge and change, we feel less stable. It doesn't mean we are from the standpoint of Christ's wisdom, but we feel less stable. Nobody really likes real change.

And look how much has changed since March 1st. And you guys have been through even layers of change with Tim and Ruby now in England and change makes us feel insecure. And it shows us what we're made of.

It exposes if we're fair weather Christians, fair weather church members, if we're faithful when things are good, but we disappear when things are hard. I want to speak this morning first about two men in the Old Testament. So turn with me to 1 Chronicles 12, and then we'll go to Psalm 78.

1 Chronicles 12 mentions Issachar, the men of Issachar. 1 Chronicles 12, 32. I'll wait till you get there.

This is a study in contrast. It's biographical, but it's autobiographical. We will find ourselves either connected to one of these two guys.

And the purpose of this message now is for you and I to see which one we are. Verse 32, of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do. And skip down to verse 38.

All these men of war, arrayed in battle order, came to Hebron with a whole heart to make David king over all of Israel. Sons of Issachar, who were men of understanding of the times, the times in which they lived, the culture, the days. They had discernment.

They had courage. And they knew in difficult days what Israel ought to do. If you're a Christian, so should you.

Now go to Psalm 78. We see this other bunch. Psalm 78, verse 9 through 11.

The Ephraimites, being armed with the bow. Zach, they were armed. They were equipped.

They were trained like the sons of Issachar. Armed with the bow, they turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to His law.

They forgot His works and the wonders He had shown them. Both of these records, Issachar and Ephraim, it's not talking about their past faith, what they did in the past. It's talking about their present response in the scenario.

Issachar, men of courage and wisdom who knew what to do. Ephraimites, armed. They were cowards and they took tail and run.

Which are you? Since the COVID hit, how have you responded? Are you an Ephraimite or are you a son of Issachar? This is an amazing thing to think about. Now, obviously, I'm not doing exposition. I'm doing exhortation.

If the book of Hebrews, if he can call it a brief exhortation, then I think I'm justified in calling my little sermon an exhortation. What's in a name? When I say a name, what comes to mind? Elijah. You're thinking things right now.

Moses. Judas Iscariot. Issachar.

Ephraim. Names reflect our character and our conduct and our actions. What are we made of? Fear and cowardice facing the battle or faith for the times in which we live.

See, if we have faith in easy times, good times, that proves nothing. The real test of faith is when there's changes and fears come and there's risk and a longtime preaching elder moves suddenly and maybe you came just for the powerful preaching. Now we'll see what we're made of.

I'm talking about our church in Denton and you and every biblical church. The changes expose us to see what we're made of and how we're responding. But the title of this message this morning is The Way Forward.

There's only one way forward and it's a way of faith. The way of faith. Responding in faith.

It's not by being neutral, not playing it safe, not trying to intellectually figure it all out so we can maneuver and figure out things on our own, leaning to our own understanding. It's not just coasting and hope things will return to normal. No, things may never return to normal.

When God is shaken, is shaking everything that can be shaken, He's doing something more substantial, more punitive, more redemptive, more eternal than any of us know. And if we have to have everything figured out and understand before we'll trust God, we're in trouble because He's not revealing everything what He's doing in the earth. These months since March, the virus, the chaos in our nation, the division, we may feel unstable.

We may feel more shaken than ever. But you know who gets shaken and their faith fails? Those who are not deeply rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ. Last Saturday night in Denton, there was a big windstorm and we were driving to our meeting and we came by a school near our house and there was a big line of trees right along the street and I looked and there was one limb that had broken off and I kind of looked.

The others had no broken limb, but one was broken off and the thought came to my mind. It's the weak limb that the wind gets. Are you going to be a weak limb and the wind's going to get you? The way for that not to happen is to be so deeply established in Christ, deeply, where you prove to be a son of Issachar.

Otherwise, you'd be Ephraim and you'll tuck tail and run at some point because you can't take the winds and the waves. No one knows the final reality of what's coming except God. You know, he often hides himself in his judgments.

He doesn't explain. He just acts. He just moves in times of judgment and he lets things play out and then we see the effects.

We see the effects of the wind. We see the effects of the judgment, but we can't understand. And any Christian that doesn't understand that God is not explaining everything, we just have to trust Him.

Anyone who doesn't understand that, they will not act in faith and live by faith when the wind's blowing. The Bible says the just shall what? Live by faith. Not believe the great confessions.

Not believe the church constitution. Live by faith. Now all that stuff's good.

I'm in favor of that. But the just have to live by faith. That means you and I have to trust God every day and focus on Him and evidence what stuff we're made of.

So let's think about this this morning. Faith says when the winds are blowing, whatever God is doing, I want to proactively and live in faith and obedience to Him. I do not want to be tossed about by what's going on.

How can I be like Issachar and not Ephraim? It doesn't matter how much you know or how well trained you are. Ephraim was, and they became cowards facing the battle and they ran home. The children of Ephraim, they were trained and equipped as well as the sons of Issachar.

They were men of battle. I don't know at this point what made them do what they did. Fear, a false report.

But they should have defended the ark of God. They should have conquered Canaan with the rest. They should have and they could have, but they would not.

And they did not. And they drew back. But Issachar was different.

They faced difficult times. It was a lot harder in those days. None of us have suffered in the last four months.

We've been inconvenienced. Right? Have you really suffered since March 1st? Well, if you've had a loved one or a friend somewhere that died of COVID, you've suffered in your heart. You know what I'm saying.

Most of us are just inconvenienced by things. We're spoiled, pampered Americans, even pampered and spoiled Christians in America. And we don't like to be inconvenienced.

And that's what's happened to our lives. So the children of Ephraim, they were trained and equipped. And they turned back.

That was their legacy. That's how they're remembered in the Bible. But the sons of Issachar were different.

Trained just as well. Men of war. But they didn't turn back.

They were men of discernment and understanding of the times. It was all right here. And it was all right here.

Regardless of the outward circumstances. Regardless of the winds blowing. They were not a weak limb that got broken and crippled.

So let's think about this. How they responded to their own situation. Because each of us will prove to be.

I know you. Hey brother. Good to see you.

How are you? Friend from the north here. Georgetown, right? Anyway, welcome. Good to see you.

The Dodds send their love. They didn't tell me that, but I know to say it right now. Anyway, what was I talking about? Issachar Ephraim.

Issachar Ephraim. We ought to go away today and make sure which one we are. Because a young woman of God, a young man of God, a man of God, a woman of God.

You will either prove to be Issachar or Ephraim. And there's no neutral ground. Men of understanding of the times in which they lived.

They knew how to live and what to do. They had courage to face the challenge before them. They didn't go by what they felt.

They didn't just react. They didn't slow down and retreat. They didn't give in to fear.

With wisdom and courage, they knew how to live and they did it. If you've never watched it, go back and watch Francis Schaeffer's series, *How Then Should We Live?* Because Schaeffer prophesied 30, 40 years ago the times that we're entering into. Awesome series by Francis Schaeffer.

The men of Issachar were in war times, battle times, difficult days, dangerous times, unstable times, not peaceful days. And they knew it was time for a serious mind renewal. For a serious minded perspective.

For wisdom, for vigilance, for action, and more than ever, to live by faith. You know, the truth is, we as Christians, and as a church, we fall into one of those two camps. Moving forward, our church and GCC will either behave like Issachar or we'll behave like Ephraim.

Now behaving like Issachar doesn't mean you're foolish. It doesn't mean you throw caution to the wind, you don't function with wisdom, no. But it means you don't let fear dictate your actions in following the Lord.

We must test ourselves this morning. How many of you children in school, how many of you love tests, school tests? Come on, somebody, some bright-eyed mega-brain ought to like, nobody likes tests? Alright, I'm giving you a test. I want you to test yourselves.

I'm going to ask me about me, and I'm asking you about you. So don't think of anybody else, think about yourself. Here's the test.

What has been your bottom line response in the last four months? To the pandemic, to the social unrest, and now to the Conways going to England. What's been your bottom line response? Have you given in to fear? Are you watching the winds and the waves and you're sinking? Have you become selfish? Have you believed lies? Have you chosen faith as your first response? Have you acted in faith or in fear? Examine yourself this morning. Be honest with yourself, be honest with the Lord.

And you may need to get along and do some spiritual homework. You may need to refresh, you may need to recalibrate, because you and I either are like Issachar or we're like Ephraim. Providence has come, hard ones, come to test our faith.

Guess what, they're meant to test our faith, to see what we're made of. What is to be our response to hard providences? To the mystery of things that God is doing and there's no explanation. When we can't see the end, we can only see the darkness or the clouds.

When it's scary, when things are past finding out, when your future seems uncertain, when you don't know what's going to happen, when all of society is saying or doing something opposite to reveal truth, where are you going to take your cues from? The Word of God, your pastors, wise saints in your church, or the world. If you watch more news than you read the Bible in fellowship, you're making a mistake. I'll just leave it at that.

We always, brethren, things might get more difficult in America. We have no clue what's coming, but we do have a choice on how we're going to respond. Am I going to radically, seriously, devotedly focus on the Lord Jesus Christ and be deeply rooted in Him, where whatever weakness in my limbs is there will be healed and I'll be a strong limb and won't be damaged in the storm? We always have a choice, either to be Issachar, full of faith and courage, or to be Ephraim, full of unbelief and prove to be a coward.

How many of you have read Pilgrim's Progress? You remember the story in there, Christian and faithful heading up a hill, and they're heading up, I think, to the Delectable Mountains. And here comes two men, Timorous and Mistress, running back toward them. Lions, lions, you'll be killed by the lions.

Well, they had a choice. What were Christian and faithful going to do? They hadn't seen the lions yet. They got the report, danger, danger ahead.

But Christian and faithful knew, you know, there's only one path. There's only one way. The king and his messengers said, we'll be safely carried through all the way.

So they go on, and what did they find with the lions? They stayed right in the middle of the path. The lions were chained, and the lions couldn't reach them. Nothing ahead of you can reach you without the express written consent and command of your Savior, the king who has said, come on, come on, I'm going to keep you all the way.

So are we going to believe the report that Ephraim believed, or are we going to believe the report Issachar believed? Make your choice. Brethren, we must have courage. We must take courage.

We must take heart. We must get our minds renewed more into the Bible more than ever because of the distractions, mental, intellectual information, the fears, the reports that are out there more than ever, they will rob our peace and our faith and our joy if we don't have our minds absolutely seriously renewed to this word and be kept. Thou will keep him in perfect peace, finish the verse, whose mind is stayed on thee.

Well, think about it, brethren. Our nation may never return to God. Some of us may face real physical persecution.

What are you going to do if you do? Prove to be an Ephraimite? Or follow Christ and count the cost and trust Him to the end? He said the one who endures to the end, that's the one who will be saved. Paul said fight the good what? Fight of faith. It's going to be a fight more than ever.

You've got to fight the fight of faith. You have to keep yourself in the love of God. You have to keep near the brethren.

Keep near your church. Don't take your cues from the world or you will have cracks as a limb and the wind that's coming may shake you and break you. Faith is a battle.

True faith believes what God has said. True faith acts and seriously obeys God. It goes forward, not backward.

And in trials and in fears and in instability and uncertainty, it sets its eyes on the living God. Though the mountains and hills are torn down and cast into the sea, I will not fear. The God of Jacob defends me.

The days ahead, how are we going to live? Are we going to, in fear, draw back? Or will our hearts say, you know, what new use right now does the Lord have for me, for us as a family? How can we serve Him

more? How can I advance the kingdom more? What new service can I have for Christ? How much deeper of an attachment can I have to my church than ever before? How much more can I serve and be an example? More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee. We will either be Issachar or Ephraim. There's no neutral ground.

We must understand the times in which we live to know what the church ought to do and how we ought to live. And that starts with us first. And you know, brethren, we know there's differences of opinions about the distancing, the mask.

It's very secondary. The devil even wants to use that to divide us with our silly, little, private, strong, half the time ignorant opinions. Our opinions don't matter.

We have convictions. Live with your convictions, but love one another and let nothing rob your unity. That's the sons of Issachar.

That's what they did. And you've got to live that way. Walk in love toward each other.

And you know, it's so easy for even strong, quick Christians to waver. Remember Elijah? He defeated 450 false prophets at Mount Carmel. Next day, he runs from a wicked woman and is sucking his thumb under a tree.

You can be strong one day, one week, and give in to weakness the next day. You can run well for a while and not continue to run well to the end. How we've been in the past doesn't matter now.

The present and the future is what will determine if I'm Issachar or if I'm Ephraim. Courage one day, coward the next. A saint one day, a sissy the next day.

Fearless one day, fearful the next. To the battle one day, running away the next. Issachar turned into Ephraim.

Now, that's the sermon. Let me give you some lessons. Closing application.

There's a few of these. What lessons and takeaways should we have from this last four months? Truths gained. Here's a few understanding of the times.

Lesson number one. Have you noticed this? Human depravity is pervasive throughout all society. Wickedness has come out of the woodwork, and it's everywhere.

In the Congress, in the White House, in the hospitals, in local and state and national government, in the health care system, in the media, at every level of society, depravity rules and reigns. Why would we take our cue from this society? It's pervasive. The God of this world has blinded the minds of those who don't believe.

He's the God of this world, the God of darkness. We live in a different kingdom and in a different realm. We've got to see as we move forward that this world is still lying in darkness, and it's controlled by human depravity, and that's never going to change.

Lesson number two. How easily God can and does shake everything that can be shaken. He brings an invisible tiny virus that stops the world in its tracks.

His judgments arrive and they work and stop the economy, sports, every public conference in the world, travel, business, companies. The beginning of birth pains, isn't it? And Jesus said this stuff's going to come. Pestilence, wars, rumors of war, men's hearts failing them for fear.

All these are but the beginning of birth pains, Jesus said. God shakes everything that can be shaken in order that what? Somebody finish the verse. The things that cannot be shaken may remain.

The church, the kingdom, the gospel, the true people of God. Those things will not and cannot be shaken. But we better make sure we're Issachar and not Ephraim.

God shakes everything. Are we okay? Are we fine with the Lord shaking everything? He works judgments in the earth. This is our God.

Lesson number three is connected to this. God rules over all of it. There's not a drop of virus Jesus doesn't control.

He controls the movement and the falling of every leaf, every grain of sand on the ocean beaches. He controls every bit of it. He's ruling and reigning, ordaining, maintaining all things.

He's working all things after the counsel of His own will. He's upholding all things by the very word of His power. God is ruling over everything.

The virus cannot touch you unless God ordains it. And if it does touch a believer, it's for their good. Americans don't like God being involved in anything.

I've had secular, heathen, wicked people get angry when I told them in a conversation that God was involved in 9-11. Boy, that made them mad. These are heathen people that don't believe the Bible, don't go to church.

Why? Because wicked men don't want God around. He is not in their thoughts in any way. And Americans, Christians even, don't like divine sovereignty at times.

We don't like things being shut down because we like our agenda and our schedule and our normalcy, keep going, busy our schedules, projects, plans. We're like little ants running around. And God stops the ant bed.

Be still and know that I'm God. We must learn through this, brethren, to be still and know that He is God. Lesson number four.

Even in judgments, God is still showing mercy. He's judging nations and with His church and in individual lives, He's showing mercy. The Bible says judgment and mercy are met together.

He preserves His people through earthly judgments, and He warns of judgments to come. And that's merciful. Think of it, brethren.

This so-called pandemic is a wake-up call to everybody that has ears to hear with basic things. Life is uncertain. What can come down the pike tomorrow that you had no clue was coming? Life is uncertain.

You're not in control of it. Life is fragile. Death is coming.

God is speaking in His judgments, but greater still, He's spoken already in the Bible. Clearly. And you know what? The final cosmic pandemic lockdown quarantine that's coming will make this year look like a Sunday afternoon birthday party.

Let me just read about it in tomorrow's newspaper. 2 Thessalonians 1. Listen to this. What's coming? He's speaking to believers.

He says that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you may be suffering, since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who know not God and obey not the Gospel, who will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. That's coming.

And there will be no escape. And He will gather His elect, His righteous unto Him, and they will hear, Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into the joy of your Master.

And the wicked, those who aren't in Christ, God's children, young people, old people who are unbelievers and not taking refuge in Christ, they will hear, Depart from Me. I never knew you. Depart from Me.

Into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. That's coming. But even in judgments now, punitive judgments, temporal ones, national judgments, God is showing mercy.

He's showing mercy. Not only today, but this entire year. He's been working judgments in the earth and having mercy at the same time.

That's lesson number four. Number five. Threats come and go.

Dangers come and go. But Christ is the same forever. Where is your focus? Have your eyes been on the winds and waves more than on Him? Dangers, changes, disasters, social ills, people in the church, test positive.

Suddenly, there's evil movements in the country. All of it comes and goes. But you know what? Christ in every heart can calm the storm.

You can have peace that passes all understanding instead of anxiety. He's the captain of the ship. He's at the helm.

He's in the front seat driving the car. Just hop in the back seat and don't be a front seat driver. He's in control.

Let your heart take fresh rest in Him because He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. The old hymn writer said, whether sunshine or rain, I know where my hope is found. Do you? Ephraim, they didn't.

They didn't remember. They didn't know. They forgot God's works and His wonders.

They didn't know where their hope was found. Issachar, they did. Lesson number six.

What a precious gift the church is. Have you treasured your church more since you couldn't meet together weeks ago? Were you missing the brethren? You know, the elders in Denton, we started getting bugged after a few weeks. Brother Mack, when are we going to meet again? When are we going to meet again?

And I'd hear that every three or four days.

I said, relax, we're going to meet again. Why were they doing it? They were so anxious to meet together. They wanted to meet.

Desiring one another. Longing for the saints. Wanting to worship.

And let's be honest, these things have distracted our worship, haven't they? But brethren, we've got to have full-orbed worship. When you come in to worship with the people of God, forget all of it out there and focus on Christ and fully worship Him as if everything was great in this world. The church has become more special to us.

It's a treasure. So appreciate your church more. Use it more.

Be more connected than ever. Spiritual isolation is not good or desirable. Spiritual quarantine is unacceptable unless you've got it and in love.

You're going to make sure you don't have any more before you're with the brethren. That's a loving thing to do. Because you know what? The saints of God will do whatever it takes to be together.

Let government in the future make worship illegal. You know what's going to happen? Christians are going to be filling houses and barns and pastures along riverbanks to worship God because we love the Bible and we love the saints. We love the Lord's Supper.

We love baptism. We love the kingdom of God. They will not shut down the kingdom or keep believers from worshiping.

Treasure your church more than ever. You can't keep Christians apart. Lesson number seven.

Because life is uncertain and unpredictable, stay alert and stay awake spiritually. Jesus was always saying that, wasn't He? Be watchful, not sleeping. Be Issachar, not Ephraim.

Be spiritually vigilant, not drifting, not half-hearted, not lethargic. Be a man of God. Be a woman of God who knows what the church should do and you model it for your brethren.

No slack. No lack. And no looking back.

How are you going to live? Like Issachar or Ephraim. Brethren, today let's get our eyes wide open and fill them with the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lift up your heart and your head.

Your Master calls you forward in faith. The way forward is the way of faith. And Jesus' words have never been more applicable when He said to His disciples, what I say to you, I say to everyone, keep watch and be on the alert.

Final lesson, number eight. Living by faith is the only way forward. Only way forward.

Remember Lot's wife. You get your eyes on the winds and the waves, you will prove to be a weak limb. And you don't have to be a weak limb.

I don't care if you're 16 or 80, you can be a strong limb. Rooted and grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ. Like that tree in Psalm 1. Firmly planted by the river's water.

Bringing forth your fruit. In season, out of season, all the time. I shall not be moved, the old song says.

I would be tempted to sing it. I'll spare you. I shall not be.

I shall not be moved. So brethren, it's hard to trust the Lord and live by faith when you don't have the answers. When you're afraid for your children.

When all the props and things and people you depend on are removed. Listening to the news and following in all of it. One time, I took my children and grandchildren, we were at some kind of fair, I don't know, a county fair.

They were on a merry-go-round. And I said, you know, I'm going to watch them all the way around. In about two minutes, I was dizzy.

I had to step away. I almost could get sick by just trying to watch. You watch the world and all the changing reports.

You'll be spiritually messed up in your head. Your faith will be lean. Fear will come.

And you'll be dizzy spiritually. Don't do it, brethren. Faith is the only way forward.

As Martin Luther said, how will we endure the prince of darkness rage unless we stand and not retreat? I love Psalm 112, 6-8. Listen to this, Psalm 112. Surely, talking about the righteous, surely he will not be shaken.

The righteous will be in everlasting remembrance. He will not be afraid of evil tidings. His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord.

His heart is established. He will not be afraid. I love John and Charles Wesley.

John Wesley rode his horse over 250,000 miles on horseback to preach the Gospel. That's ten times around the planet Earth he rode his horse to preach Christ. Charles Wesley wrote only about 6,500 hymns.

How about that for you musicians? Top that. Those early Methodists established churches, schools, orphanages, hospitals. At the end of his life, John Wesley was burdened for the slave trade in England.

He wrote a letter to a young politician named William Wilberforce. He wrote him a letter urging him to keep on toward abolishing the slave trade. At his death at age 88 in 1791, the old Methodists that still believed the Bible then, there were almost 80,000 of them around Britain, around England and Wales.

There were 40,000 in America. The Wesleys were sons of Issachar. Are you? Am I? Facing the future, we will either be Ephraim or Issachar.

In closing, consider the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7. Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what God has made crooked? In the day of prosperity, be joyful. But in the day of adversity, consider this.

God has made one as well as the other so that man may not find out anything that will come after him. Brethren, we don't know the future. We don't know the waves.

But we're in the ship with a faithful captain. He will keep us all the way. Are you Issachar or are you Ephraim? Let's pray.

Father, thank you for these two examples in the Bible. Apply this to our hearts. Help us, Lord, to shift gears, to man up, to go higher, to go deeper, to run more steadier, to be more faithful, more trusting, to not turn back in the day of battle.

Lord, have mercy on us. We pray, strengthen these brothers and sisters, their families. Thank You, Lord, that You're with us.

Best of all, God is with us. In the name of Christ, our strong Captain, our Warrior, the Rock of our Salvation, we pray, Amen.

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