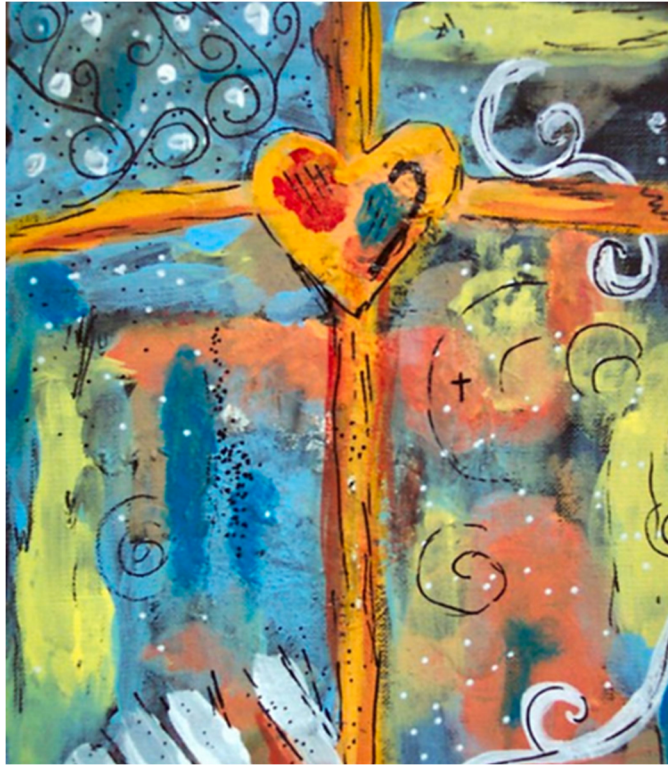


# Tempered Hearts

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.  
Amen.

## Background

In our present series Take Heart—we've been looking at Scriptures that help us to live wholeheartedly throughout all the seasons of life—particularly in times marked by stress and difficulty.

Now the heart is extremely important in the Scriptures—it stands for the whole person. All of you—your emotions, your motivation and concentration, your decisions, actions and interactions. The heart is the very center and source of who you are.

We have to be careful with our hearts. As Proverbs reminds us:

"Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life."

We don't open up our hearts to just anybody.

We can entrust our hearts to our loving God who says to us through the prophet Ezekiel:

"I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you,  
I will remove from your body a heart of stone and  
give you a heart of flesh."

God empowers and enables us to live life wholeheartedly.

I like how sociologist Brene Brown defines wholehearted living as daily practicing the gifts of imperfection: courage, compassion, and connection. But to live spiritually heart-healthy lives we often have to undergo stress tests—that strengthen the condition of our hearts to exhibit not only courage under fire, but compassion under fire, and connection under fire.

We really see these gifts of imperfection at work in the Apostle Paul in our Scripture reading today. It's one of the first letters he's composed and his warmth and vulnerability shines through a little more than most of his writings.

In this scene we find him in a long-distance relationship with the church he planted in Thessalonica. Paul misses them terribly. He was in Athens doing other missionary work. His travel plans to go back to Thessalonica were cancelled, so he sent his ministry protégé Timothy to encourage and strengthen the church on his behalf. Timothy has just gotten back to Paul with encouraging news about the fledgling church. Yet Paul's still worried that these pressures and persecutions might be shaking their faith or weakening their love for one another and all people. And so Paul hopes and prays that their hearts might be tempered by these challenges, rather than tempted by them. He prays that God would make their hearts strong, blameless, and pure before God and one another.

So let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:

### **Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (NLT)**

But now Timothy has just returned, bringing us good news about your faith and love. He reports that you always remember our visit with joy and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you. So we have been greatly encouraged in the midst of our troubles and suffering, dear brothers and sisters, because you have remained strong in your faith. It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord.

How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence. Night and day we pray earnestly for you, asking God to let us see you again to fill the gaps in your faith.

May God our Father and our Lord Jesus bring us to you very soon. And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows. May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – “Tempered Hearts”

Presbyterian pastor and professor Tod Bolsinger in his new leadership book “Tempered Resilience” talks about how blacksmiths can teach us a lot about how strain and stress can actually strengthen materials. Blacksmiths take raw material, like scraps of iron, and make something new and different and better out of the discarded material.

But there’s a process involved. First, the scraps need to be heated to become soft and pliable. The heat needs to be extremely hot, not just sort of hot. A medium heat will make the metal weaker—it won’t do. But intense and repeated heat is part of the tempering process. From there, the heated iron needs to be held securely on the anvil and then pounded and pummeled into a new shape. The process would need to be repeated over and over: fire it, hold it, pound it, repeat—and then finally plunge it into the water.

The iron comes out of the water a new creation—both pure and mixed, forged for a new purpose, yet never losing its original makeup. The heat, hammering, and hydration make it tempered iron.

YouTube Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkOEA3c38Qw&t=477s>

Regular iron is brittle and breaks with contact. But tempered iron is strong and flexible—able to withstand the stress. The stress of heat makes it stronger, tough and adaptable. Tempered iron is that perfect balance between too soft and too brittle so it doesn’t break when used as a tool.

God is the blacksmith. We’re the discarded scraps of iron. God uses—

the HEAT of the HOLY SPIRIT  
the ANVIL of ONE ANOTHER  
and the HAMMER of HARSHIP

—to transform us into something useful, strong, beautiful, and new. There’s a purpose in all this.

So when you’re feeling pummeled this pandemic, and the pressure cooker and heat is on high with all the political drama, and you’re getting doused and dunked in cold water, remember this: God is tempering you. God is tempering the church. Our hearts are being tempered, not tempted. We’re being made stronger and more flexible. We’re tempered, but we don’t have to have a temper tantrum. God is using these extremes to sharpen and strengthen us.

We can sharpen each other too—as the book of Proverbs says,

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

God then uses us as his unbreakable tools and resilient instruments of peace to make a difference around us. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this imagery when he talked about our calling to “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

With God at work in us, and with tempered hearts, we can go about the work of hewing, where:

“every valley shall be exalted,  
every hill and mountain shall be made low,  
the rough places will be made plain,  
crooked places made straight.”

Or as the Apostle Paul puts it in our passage:

“May the Lord make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before  
God our Father.”

With tempered hearts, we’re strong and flexible. We can exhibit GRIT, GRIND, and GRACE.

The grit of resolve.  
The grind of effort to grow.  
The grace of God to stand firm.

So Immanuel, may the FIRES of AFFECTION bring us joy. Like Paul, let’s enjoy friendship with one another. Paul actually liked the Thessalonian church. There’s a fondness, the sheer delight of each one coming alongside each other for our betterment and welfare. Like the Thessalonian church, let’s remember kindly one another and think well of each other while we’re apart. Thank God for your friends and family.

I’m going to put my heart on my sleeve here Immanuel—I like you guys. You warm my heart and encourage my faith when I hear things like:

“John, I read and journaled through the entire Bible this year”—it gives me joy.

“John, my daughter and I discuss Sunday’s message together.”

“John, I’ve been blessed and so challenged helping in the food pantry or coming alongside the immigrant community.”

“John, I have this big surgery coming up—but I’m trusting in God like I never have before in my life.”

Your faith boosts my faith. You all inspire me to keep trusting in God. It’s beautiful and contagious.

Let’s look to God to help our love abound—not only for each other, but for all people as Paul says. Not just church members, but everybody. We care and help each other—filling in the blanks, encouraging each other, inspiring one another to grow. Cheering each other on to keep putting one foot in front of the other, to keep being faithful and doing what needs to be done.

Affection opens us up—so we widen the circle, rather than shutting others out. Not just the bare minimum, but abounding and expanding and growing and overflowing in love. Extending grace to all kinds of people—not just your own. We invite those who look differently and think differently into the virtuous circle of trust. God uses this act of loving to temper and strengthen our hearts.

We can HOLD FIRM because we know that God is firmly holding us. We're held together by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who helps us love one another and all. The Spirit helps us keep pressing on in prayer, praying for each other, day and night. Not just in emergencies or in fox holes, but in all times and seasons, we draw strength from God. Prayer is a way for us to experience, enjoy, and encounter God's heart. And the Spirit settles down our hearts so we can strive after God. There, in the Spirit, we find healing and unity and peace and strength.

God is going to get us through this together with tempered hearts, where God will lead us—when Jesus comes with all of his saints.

And the "Thy kingdom come" we've prayed for, will finally arrive.

Amen.

---

Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright 1996, 2004, 2007, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois, 60188. All rights reserved.