

TRIALS, TESTING, & TRIBULATION*

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent was described as more crafty or subtle than any other of God's creatures. Even today, this subtlety makes the evil one an expert deceiver, distracter, and destroyer if we are not spiritually aware enough to discern his schemes.

*Genesis 3:1: Now **the serpent was more crafty** than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "**Did God really say**, 'You must not eat ...'?"*

*2Corinthians 2:11: In order that **Satan might not outwit us**. For we are **not unaware of his schemes**.*

Regardless of how the enemy is attacking us or attempting to divert or deceive us, Jesus conquered it at the cross. Everything we need for victory, godliness, and the fulfillment of God's plans for us was provided through the work of Jesus. We receive it as a free gift, by grace through faith in what Jesus accomplish for us. Our job is to discern the schemes of the enemy in order to respond correctly to trials as they come.

*2Peter 1:3-4: His divine power **has given us everything we need for a godly life** through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may **participate in the divine nature**, having **escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires**.*

We previously covered Jesus' parable of the four soils about how our hearts receive and respond to the word of God. Trials serve to amplify our response and thus, reveal the true condition of our hearts. This said, truth be told, there are only two ways to respond to the trials we face: with our flesh which is our inherited sinful Adamic nature or, by the power of the Holy Spirit, with Christlikeness which is our new nature in Him. Selfishness, self-defense, and focus on temporal values is our flesh. Trusting God, continuing to love, and prioritizing the eternal is Christlikeness by the Holy Spirit.

For a Christian, the token mark of being spiritually mature is to be like Jesus even to the extent of loving our enemies, praying for our accusers, and forgiving those who are murdering us. While our trials may be small by comparison, whatever we face, it is our right responses which prove us to be God's children. (Consider Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 23:34.) Now, Jesus calls us to be like Him and love one another as He loves us. True love is costly even when our lives are not on the line. Love costs us time and dignity; our own desires and way of doing things; our right to be right and our right to be mad and seek revenge. Love is not a feeling, it's a state of being which flows into action. (See 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; Romans 12:9-21.)

Knowing this as followers of Jesus, we set out to be like Him and bring the love of God to the whole world. Then, it happens. Someone whom we are loving with all this love that we have received from Jesus turns around and mocks us, rejects us, accuses us of being evil, or may work against us or our work for God. How do we respond? Do we respond like ourselves in self-defense, with a counter-mock, with retorted insults, or with equalizing rejection? Or do we respond like Christ, with mercy and love, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice?

TRIALS & CHASTISEMENT

Trials we face are not punishment from God because Jesus took all of our punishment upon Himself. (See Isaiah 53:3; James 1:13.) God is not the trial. He is training us through the trial. This is His chastisement and it can be unpleasant because when we want to justify or avenge ourselves, God instead tells us to deny ourselves, turn the other cheek, and trust Him, often in the midst of much waiting, patience, and

endurance. Through this specialized boot camp for character and faith, God brings us to spiritual maturity, making us like Jesus in responding to situations with right conduct and right beliefs.

*Hebrews 12:7-8, 11: **Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.***

Every trial and test of character and faith is an opportunity to be trained by God. Nevertheless, every trial feels like a spiritual, emotional, and often humiliating punch in the face. We should not be shocked but rather rejoice when trials come because God's righteous training through real life scenarios teaches us to love others and to carry out His purposes in spite of whatever is launched against us.

*1 Peter 4:12-13: Dear friends, **do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.***

Think of it like a loving heavenly Father training His children about how to defend themselves from a big schoolyard bully. The devil, the world and its ways, and our own fleshly desires intimidate and terrorize us while we live in this playground called the world. But our loving heavenly Father whispers to us through the Holy Spirit about how to handle all of these bullies the way that His beloved Son Jesus did.

The definition of *sin* is missing the mark and is an archery term used to describe an archer who did not hit the target perfectly. Major and minor offenses are still missing the mark. We all have yearnings from within for things other than what we have. These cravings of our flesh can range from totally ungodly, to things which may seem minor to us but are still out of alignment with God's will. Our flesh lures us by temptation and excuses or justifications for enabling us to indulge our lusts.

*James 1:14-16: but **each person is tempted** when they are dragged away **by their own evil desire** and enticed. Then, after **desire has conceived**, it **gives birth to sin**; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. **Don't be deceived**, my dear brothers and sisters.*

When trials hit our life, they evoke a reaction within us. Will we miss the mark by giving into the desires of our flesh or obey the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit whispers to us in purity, truth, and holiness. God's grace is so sufficient that all things are permitted, meaning that we are totally and absolutely free in Christ. This means that the enticement and allure of sin being forbidden has been nullified. This said, not all things are beneficial, good for us, or worth doing because they do not reflect the nature of Christ within us and are unloving towards others. (See 1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23.) The same divine nature which strengthened Jesus in the wilderness against all of Satan's temptations and testings is now within us to strengthen us so that we can respond the way that He did and pass the test.

*James 4:7: Submit yourselves, then, to God. **Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.***

TYPES OF TESTING

There are two primary types of testing which we will encounter as Christ followers. The first is a *negative test* in which the thing being tested is expected to fail and may even be tested in increasing levels of severity until it fails. The second is a *positive test* for genuineness in which the thing being tested is expected to be proven true. In the New Testament Greek, the words for this are *peirazo* and *dokimazo*, respectively.

God does not test us negatively. (See James 1:13.) Things which test us negatively [*peirazo*] include temptations, hardships, sicknesses, seemingly unfulfilled promises of God, deception, distraction, and accusation. While we are being negatively tested, it will seem that lies against God multiply in our mind and as this continues, we grow weary with discouragement, principally through thoughts of guilt, shame, and hopelessness, especially if we seem to be waiting a long time for God's promises to come to pass. Through all of this, our faith and character are tested.

For example, when Jesus was in the wilderness being tested by Satan, He was negatively tested [peirazo] by the evil one in every possible way. Another example of negative testing is when Jesus warned Peter that Satan had asked to *sift him like wheat*.

*Luke 22:31: Simon, Simon [Peter.] **Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.***

This expression is defined as “an inward agitation to try one’s faith to the verge of overthrow.” The enemy’s aim in negatively testing us is to lure us into failure in our character and our beliefs through all means available in increasing levels of pressure until failure is accomplished. Often it seems like this happens in increasing measures of difficulty and oppression or in many different areas of our lives at one time, pushing us beyond what we can endure on our own. Indeed, the enemy is trying to push us to the point of failure.

This said, when these negative tests and temptations happen in our lives we can respond rightly by following the direction of the Holy Spirit. In the same way that Jesus and Holy Spirit filled Peter responded to trials, when we live by the Holy Spirit’s direction, our faith and character will be proven genuine.

*1Corinthians 10:12-13: So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No **temptation [peirasmos]** has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be **tempted [peirazo] beyond what you can bear.** But **when you are tempted [peirasmos], he will also provide a way out so that you can endure.***

On the other hand, there is positive testing [dokimazo] which proves that our faith is genuine. This is the type of testing done by a jeweler who examines a diamond to ensure that it is not a fake. For example, when someone is nominated to be a deacon, the church must prove their character by testing [dokimazo] them. (See 1 Timothy 3:10.) More significantly, before we partake of communion, ingesting the very blood and body of Jesus, we are encouraged to positively test [dokimazo] or examine ourselves to see if we are truly believing all that He has accomplished for us. (See 1Corinthians 11:28-30.) In fact, some believers were experiencing weakness, sickness, and even death because they were failing the positive test of faith by not believing all that Christ accomplished for us through His body and blood.

This means that, perhaps, some of the trials that we experience are because we are not fully perceiving and believing what Jesus accomplished for us through His life, death, and resurrection. Therefore, we should positively test ourselves. Is our faith the genuine article?

Unlike Jesus, when we are negatively tested [peirazo], sometimes we fail. There are times when we give into temptation or we stumble into sin or error. It is exactly at these times when we may repent and return to Jesus by trusting that His sacrifice is sufficient to cover all our stumbling. Even if we have been negatively tested to the point of personal catastrophe, God’s grace is still unquestionably extended to us.

Then, we have the opportunity to positively test [dokimazo] ourselves and ask ourselves again if we really believe that Jesus finished it and that we are accepted by God because of Jesus in spite of our stumbling. We receive God’s grace afresh and can carry on in our walk with Him.

In fact, this is the whole purpose of every trial. Whether positive testing or negative testing and whether a test of character or steadfastness, the genuineness of our faith is proven. Enduring through trials draw us to spiritual maturity so that in every area of our lives we are mature and complete in Christ and walking in God’s will for us.

*1Peter 1:6-7: In all this you greatly rejoice, **though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.** These have come **so that the proven genuineness of your faith--of greater worth than gold,** which perishes even though refined by fire--**may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.***

*James 1:2-4: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, **whenever you face trials of many kinds,** because you know that the **testing of your faith** produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work **so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.***

TESTING GOD

As a side note, as we encounter various kinds of trials and tests, we can negatively or positively test God. When Jesus was being negatively tested by the evil one in the wilderness, He quoted from the Book of Deuteronomy, “You must not put the Lord your God to the test,” from an incident in Israel’s history. (See Luke 4:12; Deuteronomy 6:16.) In the historical account, shortly after the Israelites had walked through the waters of the Red Sea, they came to a place where there was no water and they started complaining. The conflict escalated until they professed that God must not be with them anymore or must have brought them out of Egypt in order to kill them in the wilderness. After the Lord showed Moses how to cause drinking water to miraculously gush out of a rock, Moses named the place Massah which means *testing* because they had tested God by saying, “Is God with us or not?” (See Exodus 17:1-7.) Even when they had seen God work great miracles on their behalf, they tested Him by their unbelief.

*Psalm 78:18-19, 21-22, 32, 41, 56: They **willfully put God to the test** by demanding the food they craved. They **spoke against God**; they said, “**Can God really** spread a table in the wilderness? ... When the LORD heard them, he was furious; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel, for **they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance**. ... In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; **in spite of his wonders, they did not believe**. ... **Again and again they put God to the test**; they vexed the Holy One of Israel. ... But they **put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High**; they did not keep his statutes.*

From this, we see that we put God to the test in a negative way when we do not believe Him or trust Him for our salvation, deliverance, healing, and sustenance. We negatively test God through our unbelief in His ability to fulfill His promises, when we doubt His goodness, or think that He has evil intentions for us even if this is what our circumstances seem to indicate.

However, the Apostle Paul encourages us to be so renewed in our minds away from the intellect, wisdom, and pattern of this world that we positively put God to the test.

*Romans 12:1-2 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to **offer your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then you will be able to test [dokimazo] and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.***

This said, our minds are renewed not through head knowledge of God but through putting our faith into action by positively testing God and His will. Jesus gave His disciples only one prayer to pray and this prayer includes the phrase, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (See Matthew 6:10.) Now, like a jeweler inspecting a diamond to confirm that it is real, we are encouraged to test the genuineness of God’s perfect and pleasing will—on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, each of us should constantly be putting God to the test in a positive way by genuinely trusting Jesus, particularly as we face trials and tests of life.

TRIBULATION

Jesus warned us that trials will come. In no uncertain terms, He prepared His followers for trials, particularly in the times to come before His return. He did this so that our faith does not fail and so we can endure to the end, no matter the cost.

*John 16:33 ESV: I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. **In the world you will have tribulation**. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

*Luke 21:12-19: But before all this, **they will seize you and persecute you**. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and **you will be brought before kings and governors**, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But **make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves**. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.*

*You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and **they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life.** (See Luke 21 and Matthew 24.)*

The word used for *tribulation* means “pressing or pressure, trouble, oppression, distress, the afflictions of those hard pressed by siege and the calamities of war and the straights of want.” We follow a crucified King. When we live our lives for the Kingdom of God by following Jesus and doing the things that He did, we wage war against the kingdom of the evil one. It is a clash of kingdoms that the world takes note of and that is opposed by all the forces of darkness. The epic battle to come between the powers of this world and the powers of darkness raging against the Kingdom of God will put every believer to the ultimate trial and test.

*Daniel 7:25: He [the man of lawlessness] will **speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time.***

*Revelation 13:7-10: It [the beast] was **given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them.** And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let them hear. **"If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed."** This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people. (Similar to Jeremiah 15:2.)*

No kind of trial, test, trouble, or hardship can separate us from God's love and eternal purpose for us if we will remain firm in our faith. Even if we are imprisoned, beaten, or martyred, we have not been abandoned over to death like sheep led to the slaughter. NO! We are more than conquerors through the victory Christ has won for us!

*Romans 8:35-39: **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?** As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." (Quoting Psalm 44:11, 22.) **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, **nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Jesus is with us in every trial to give us wisdom, strength, and courage to respond rightly, the way that He would respond if He were in our exact set of circumstances. God assured Jesus of eternal victory and Jesus believed Him. Now, because Jesus has already overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, we are assured of our victory when our faith is in Him. Will our faith prove genuine?

*Luke 18:7-8: And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, **when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?***

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