

# THIS IS A TEST

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Holy Spirit Conference

Jesus disorients us. On purpose.

I had worked hard one hot Saturday. I came in, cleaned up, and found my special spot. The closed doors told my family not to disturb me. I settled in with my Bible for time with the Lord. I made the mistake of bringing the telephone in with me because of a call that I didn't want to miss. When Karen called from the store, I took it. Small disturbance. When she called back ten minutes later, I took it, thinking that she must need me. She didn't. Slightly bigger disturbance. Then Gabriel, my son, called just to check in. Shortly after, in what seemed like orchestrated interference, Naomi walked in as if she had been invited. While I didn't blow up at anyone, the level of frustration was increasing.

At some point I suspected a divine conspiracy. I had unconsciously claimed that I deserved my time of quiet after working so long. Entitlement puts us under the law. God was frustrating me, tampering with my schedule to bring me to a place of grace and freedom. When I realized that I was being tested, I yielded, chuckled a bit—and the test was over.

“When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do” (John 6:5,6). Jehovah Sneaky! Philip got out his calculator, then said, “Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” (v. 7). Jesus was asking a faith question, not a math question. Philip flunked the test. When you fail, you take it again.

Jesus frustrated the disciples by letting them row all night—and get nowhere. That would challenge the patience of fishermen. He disoriented them by sending a storm that threatened their very life—while He slept.

The Scriptures the disciples knew told them about a God who tested His people. They heard about Moses, who said to a new generation on the banks of the Jordan, “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands” (Deut. 8:2). Their first test as people freed from Egypt by a mighty miracle came on the heels of Miriam's victory song: “Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter” (Exodus 15:22,23).

Not an easy test to go through in the desert. How might we expect them to respond? “Of all the luck. We finally get to water—and we can't drink it. We get this after a great deliverance. We're going to die. What do we give to our kids? Moses!!!”

“So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?” (v. 24). Thus began forty years of testing, with Israel flunking most tests. God finally said, “You’re not graduating. You’re all going to die in the desert.” Instead of passing, they reversed the process and tested God. The psalmist writes, “Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways’” (Psalm 95:8-10). God gives us tests not to taunt us but to teach us His ways. His ways are different from our ways. Isaiah says they are higher (Isaiah 55:9). If we are going to walk together with God, we need to know how He operates. Moses said, “Teach me your ways so I may know you” (Exodus 33:13).

So what are God’s ways related to testing? I’ll try to answer this question. I don’t want to say that I know the ways of God regarding testing, or He will show me tomorrow how far off I am. Here is my best shot at this time of my journey:

**God is teaching us to live above our circumstances,** not by them. We learn in the desert to live by faith. Between the promise and the Promised Land comes the desert. The desert brings us surprises, frustrations, disorienting experiences. Moses told the Israelites, “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna...to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3). So when we are short on food, as the Israelites and the disciples were at times, we learn to look up. When a problem frustrates us, we acknowledged the tension—and look up. That generation of Israelites never learned—and they never graduated. The disciples got it—and they turned their world on its head.

**God not only frustrates us—He causes or allows pain.** “David wrote, ‘I know, O Lord that...in faithfulness you have afflicted me’” (Psalm 119:75). We might say, “God is good; He wouldn’t do that.” But God is good, and He does that. We are not dealing with a Distant Dad; we are reckoning with a loving Father who wants us to share His character. We must come to the place where we can say that God is good even though we are experiencing more pain than pleasure. A part of parenting includes causing or allowing pain. So does training for athletics. The reason God causes or allows pain is that...

**He is more concerned about what happens in us than what happens to us.** Careful with this one. We could turn God into a monster. As a parent, I care about what happens to my children. But I don’t want to over-protect them, or I will stunt their emotional and spiritual growth. God cares about our misfortunes and our trials, but He is not as concerned about our circumstances as He is about how we view our circumstances. Our reaction to a hardship betrays a temporal mindset that He knows will get us into trouble. He is crafting us to look like His beloved Son, and that project ends when we see Jesus face to face.

**God doesn’t usually tell us when we being tested.** Teachers tell us when they are going to give us a test; God normally doesn’t. Jesus did with Peter, about to be sifted by Satan.

He did with Smyrna, about to undergo a severe testing. But He normally doesn't appear to. Jesus could have said to the disciples, "Just so you know, you are going to be tested tonight by a storm." Then they would have said, "Let's stick with the rowing, boys; we can pass our test." God didn't tell Elizabeth that she would not give birth until after she was past child-bearing years. God remained silent, but the people didn't; Elizabeth was called "the barren one." I wouldn't call someone barren who gives birth when it isn't possible.

But Jesus *has* talked to us. His brother said this: "Consider it pure joy..." (James 1:2). So while we have not usually been forewarned for any of the specific trials we are facing, we have been given a heads-up regarding tests. This Scripture can change your life, and I'll tell you why. When a young man named Willie came to Christ, he joined our brotherhood house. He grew from day one, sailing along in his new-found joy. One day it hit another friend and myself, "It's not always going to be this easy. We need to warn him." Good we did, because the next day he faced his first real test. But the warning made him ready for the battle. We likewise tell young people going into marriage, "Don't be surprised if you have a tough first year. Many couples do." I told that to a young friend startled by the difficulties, and it encouraged him that he wasn't alone. A wise grandfather said to his grandchildren, "Life wouldn't be so hard, if you didn't expect it to be so easy."

### **WHAT IS A TEST?**

A test is a physical, psychological or spiritual trial that God uses to develop our character. It tends to disorient us, threatening our peace and joy. We either pass or fail, responding to God or reacting to the test. We don't naturally look forward to tests, because they frustrate us and often cause pain.

A normal response to finding bitter water in the desert is to find someone to blame. A normal response to finding giants in the land of promise is to say, "We're not going." A normal response to feeding five thousand for lunch with one little sack is to say, "Can't be done." But God is going after something different in the tests we are given.

We read in Genesis 22, "Some time later God tested Abraham." The normal response to hearing God tell you to sacrifice your son that came by a promise would be to say, "That's not God. I'm not going to do it." But Abraham planned to go through with it, believing that God could raise his son. Hebrews says, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

The normal response for three young men being threatened with their lives if they don't worship an image would be to say, "We will bow down outwardly; God knows our heart." Not even close. "Okay, let's be clear. We have two choices—bowing down or the furnace, right?" "Right." "We'll take the furnace." If you want to experience the personal presence of God, pass a difficult test like this one.

The normal response to being unjustly beaten and thrown in the back of a jail with stocks on would be to groan and say, “This was not fair.” Your first response might not be to say, “Hey, Silas, do you know any good choruses?” Like I said, pass a test and see God come close. He visited the jail, and the whole place got rockin’ and rollin’. Regardless of the source of trials, God can use them to upgrade our faith and experience of His presence.

The normal response to being put in chains would be to say, “Now I cannot get out and preach the Gospel.” Can you imagine being chained to the apostle Paul for six hours? He wrote to the Philippians, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Phil. 1:12,13). Paul learned to turn tests into triumphs. Obstacles became opportunities to trust in God.

The normal response to moving onto your property, then have the neighbors antagonize you in every way possible, including breaking into your shed multiple times, would be to fight back. Our friend, John, had learned to overcome evil with good. So when they shot up his irrigation hoses and shot out his security lights, he returned this frustrating situation with love, and one family member eventually received Christ.

### **WHAT ARE TESTS LIKE?**

**Everyone gets tested.** Tests are common and universal in scope. James wrote, “Consider it pure joy *whenever* you face trials...” not “*if* you face trials.” Peter told suffering saints, “You know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (I Peter 5:9). Paul wrote that “no temptation [one form of test] has seized you except what is common to man” (I Corinthians 10:13). Testing has a democratic nature. Peter also wrote, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you” (I Peter 4:12). Tests often take us by surprise. The fact is--we’re going to have plenty of them. Because God loves us and is committed to our maturity, He gives us tests. A friend says, “I was due for a promotion at work and someone with half the experience and half the skill got it. Strange.” Unfortunate, yes; strange, no. Or, “You wouldn’t believe what happened. My brother cheated me out of part of my inheritance. That’s the strangest thing that ever happened to me.” No, it is unfortunate but not strange. It happens often. Or, “My neighbor is accusing me of running over his freshly planted grass. I saw his son do it, and I think he did too. Weird!” Not weird, common, but unfortunate. “Think it not strange...”

**Tests reveal our attitude.** “Consider it pure joy...” Joy is not a normal response to trials. Our attitude will determine what we receive from the test. The earlier we embrace the test as something God can use, the sooner we can pass it and receive the rewards that it brings. James says, “Consider it pure joy when you *face* trials...”, not when you *finish* them. It is easy to have a good attitude at the exit; fewer people praise God at the entrance. If we can enter with faith and gratitude, we’ll go through it better, learn more, probably come out of it sooner, and receive a promotion. Our attitude doesn’t show when we are cruising along. You don’t know people until you know them in the midst of a test. You know the Israelites when they come upon bitter water. You know the real Abraham

when God asks him to sacrifice his son. You may think you know someone. Then you see him when the pressure bears down, and you see something you have never seen before. Tests reveal our true attitude. You know me in pain better than just knowing me in pleasure.

**Tests are varied.** “Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of *many* kinds...” “...though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in *all kinds* of trials” (I Pet. 1:6). Different physical exercises develop different muscles. Consider the variety of tests that “exercise” different areas of our life: finances, family, health, relationships, inner wholeness, habits, temptation, work. If God sees that we are lacking the fruit of love, He may test us by sending us someone we find difficult to love. James wrote that “perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

**Tests develop character.** “You know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” Paul said “we rejoice in our sufferings, because we KNOW that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character...” (Romans 5:3). It is what we KNOW that enables us to rejoice at the outset of hardships. Tests answer our deepest desires and most earnest prayers. People who exercise KNOW the outcome. That is why they accept the pain and even embrace it. Sore muscles prove that good things are coming.

The word translated “perseverance” (“endurance” in some translations) is called by Chrysostom “the queen of virtues” (New Testament Words, p. 145). It is used in the New Testament with hope. People who have developed perseverance live with hope. It also connects with testing. Most often it is related to glory. People of perseverance live with eternity in view. They hit the tape running, knowing that the end is not the end. Jesus finished strong. He said, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Paul finished strong. He said, “I have fought the fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). My dad finished strong. I asked him close to his death if he had any unfinished business. He answered, “No, I think I did what I was supposed to do.” It’s not as important how you start as how you finish. Do you want to finish strong? Then, as James writes, “Perseverance must finish its work...” This comes as a gift—through testing.

**Tests bring tension.** Four truths about tension: 1) God causes it. Consider sibling relationships. Think of the tests Jesus gave the disciples. 2) God always uses it. It is built into the physical and spiritual universe. 3) Tension precedes breakthrough. It shows that God is working. Graham Cooke said, “Tension doesn’t mean something is wrong; it means something is happening.” When we fall asleep spiritually, God rouses us with tension. When He wants us to move forward, He encourages us with tension. 4) We must learn to steward our tension. Pain-free living may look like a good goal, but if we are targeting ease, tension comes as a threat and we stiff-arm it. If, however, we are focused on character and breakthrough, we can embrace tension and use it in our favor.

**Tests come from different sources.** What if it is not God who sends a test? It doesn’t matter. Some are hand-crafted by God. Some are sourced in the devil. And some trials

come our way by wrong decisions or actions, either ours or others. And some come from both God and the devil, like the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Regardless of the source, we can thank God for how He is going to use the test to refine our character. If we are being tested because of disobedience, we can thank God. “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” (Hebrews 12:11).

**Tests are made to pass.** “These have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (I Peter 1:7). He never designs a test so hard that He hopes you fail it. Satan, on the other hand, tempts us, hoping that we will fail. He comes “to lie, kill and destroy” (John 10:10). His sinister joy comes when we flunk tests and dishonor God.

**Tests get stronger as we grow.** Tests are harder in graduate school than in grade school. Mature Christians face more difficult tests than newer ones. Paul went through severe trials, but he also impacted multitudes. You may look at a Joseph and say, “I would sure like the influence that God gave him,” but you might not be prepared to go through the character tests in order to arrive there. The greater the anointing, the greater the testing. When James and John asked to sit at Jesus’ side in the coming kingdom, He didn’t tell them that they made foolish requests. He asked them if they were ready to pay the price those seats would cost. They said they were—and they did. An anointing is free—but you pay for it!

**Tests can confuse. Ask for wisdom.** Trials can raise questions about me or about God. I can interpret pain as the absence of God. They can change our picture of reality—or of God, turning God’s smile into a frown. Tests sometimes come with a message, but the pain can cause the truth to be twisted. Here are some distorted but common messages that we sometimes hear in disorienting experiences:

- § God is angry with me.
- § God isn’t listening to my prayers.
- § God did this to teach me some kind of lesson, but I don’t know what the lesson is.
- § God is getting even with me for something I did twenty years ago.
- § God is not here; He is somewhere else.
- § God is not as good or as powerful as the Bible says He is or as I thought He was.
- § God causes everything, and everything is given for a purpose.

As we ask for wisdom, we must learn to anchor ourselves in the goodness of God, lest we turn God into a monster. He is not; He is a compassionate Father.

**Tests passed bring a reward.** “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). A crown (“stephanos”) speaks of victory and authority. We are rewarded with an upgrade and a new revelation of God. If we pass a test in the area of finances, we come to know better the God of provision. God revealed not only the interpretation of the king’s dream to Daniel but the dream itself, and Daniel came to know the God who reveals mysteries. It stayed with him throughout his long life, and God showed him things He had never told a human being. If I am quick to anger, I

have not sufficiently received the God who is slow to anger. If I give in to anxiety because I think I might be late for an appointment, I need to experience afresh the God of peace. Who does God want to show you He is in the trial that you are presently going through? Our greatest need is the knowledge (experience) of God, and tests can bring us that good gift.

**Tests produce a testimony.** Have you ever heard a powerful testimony and said, “I wish I had a testimony? You can have one by responding rightly to a test.

- § Abraham was carrying out God’s directive to sacrifice his son. God stopped him in the act. Abraham looked into the thickets and saw a ram caught. God had supplied a sacrifice. “So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord Will Provide’” (Gen. 22:14).
- § Joseph learned to trust God in the midst of unfavorable and unjust circumstances. When he revealed himself to his brothers, he said: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20). He came to know the sovereign God who overcame evil with good.
- § David was rescued by God on numerous occasions. He came to know the God who delivered him from disaster or death: “They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me” (Ps. 18:18, 19).
- § Elijah: “‘The God who answers by fire—he is God...’ Then the fire of the Lord fell...” (I Kings 18:24,38).
- § Daniel: “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever...I thank and praise you, O God of my father...you have made known to us the dream of the king” (Daniel 2:20,23).
- § Nebuchadnezzar: “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God” (Daniel 3:28).
- § Daniel: “My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions” (Daniel 6:21).
- § Paul: “I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me [imprisonment] has really served to advance the gospel” (Phil. 1:12).
- § Jesus: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18).

We came to the halfway point in our home addition. Drew, living downstairs came up early one morning in the late winter to tell me we had water in the basement. I followed him down—and found the rug floating in our living room. My heart sunk. I grabbed the shop-vac and quickly filled it up. After wheeling it outside and dumping it, I realized that I had made no recognizable change. I called a plumber and asked what one does when the basement floods. He told me to call restoration specialists, which I did. Then I woke up Clint, a young adult living with us, to help us start dealing with the multiplied damage.

We had only started when one of us realized what was going on. I had spoken on testing the previous Tuesday at our young adult community. The next three days our new boiler was malfunctioning, and we had no heat. We went to bed with our clothes on, and only

our heads were cold. The night after the heat was restored, the pipe burst. One of us said, “Sounds like we are getting a chance to live out what we talked about on Tuesday.” Clint suggested we sing, and we started with “Jesus Loves Me.” We experienced an incredible joy in the midst of this momentary disaster once we simply recognized that we were facing a test. We determined to go through it rejoicing rather than complaining.

The restoration people came an hour later. After surveying the extended basement of five rooms, they told me that they had never seen this much water in a residence. They did their part quickly and efficiently over the next four days. Insurance estimated the cost to repair at \$12,000. Since we were able to do the work ourselves with the help of hired friends, we saved \$8,000, which we used to complete the addition. I had run out of money and wondered how we would finish our massive upgrade. God knew all the time; through a basement flood! What looked like a disaster was turned into a huge blessing.

**Tests last “a little while.”** We wonder as we are going through a deep testing, “How long will this last. “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 1:6,7; See also I Peter 5:10).

Our need in the face of trials is to recognize the potential they bring rather than the annoyance or harm they cause. Thanking God for tests we are going through does not make the test go away, but it does make the test easier to pass. Grumbling does not impress God in the slightest—but gratitude does, especially in the midst of hardship.

One of our greatest needs is to deepen our faith in the sovereignty of God. He overturns evil, He reverses the path of the enemy, He takes something bad and recreates something good. We learn to believe in the redemptive purposes of God, who uses our failures and the failures of others for His good glory. Or as a friend of mine says, “Everything belongs!” When we see God do this, then we also can learn to do what is commanded—to overcome evil with good.

So we could say with James: “Consider it pure joy... when your boss criticizes you in front of other workers...when a sibling cheats you out of your portion of the inheritance...when you are ticketed unjustly for running a red light...when a so-called friend spreads malicious gossip about you and people who know you well believe the rumor...when termites eat away at your house...when a co-worker you trust chooses a friend for the position you were praying to get...when your car breaks down after you are laid off work.”

(One word to leaders: you need special grace in the wake of a trial that hits your community. David knew how to encourage himself in the Lord when a raid took his army’s families and possessions and they considered stoning him. Moses failed to enter the Promised Land because he didn’t honor God when the people used him for a scapegoat. He reacted with anger and struck the rock rather than speaking to it. We must learn not to react when the people we care for react and blame us.)

How about offering this prayer? “Father, we see that pain is the pathway to new freedom. The cross precedes the resurrection. We are sorry for wasting our tests rather than turning them into victories. Forgive our complaining. Give us your Holy Spirit, so we can see our obstacles truly turn into opportunities, because you are on the throne. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

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