

Peter's Epistles #22

The Testing of Faith

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Translation of 1st Peter 1:6-7:

In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, your joy overflows, though at present it may be your lot to suffer for a time through various trials to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine. This validation of your faith is far more valuable than gold, for gold, though it too is assayed by fire, ultimately perishes. But your faith, when proven genuine in the crucible of life, will result in praise, glory and honor for you at the glorious return of Jesus Christ.

Introduction: Our last study covered the need to maintain our faith under the pressures and temptations omnipresent in the devil's world. This is no easy task, given the fact that a central purpose of the Satan's world system is to keep mankind in a state of unbelief (or, in the case of believers, to return us to it). That is why in the previous lesson the dangers inherent in losing our grip on our faith in Christ were stressed, for, as verse five stated, our "ultimate deliverance" from death through eternal life is completely dependent upon our continuing belief. In verses six and seven, Peter shifts the emphasis of his discussion about faith and provides us with some positive inspiration and motivation for perseverance in our belief in Jesus Christ. The pressure the world puts on our faith, it turns out, is necessary. For without testing, there would be no way for our faith to be refined, to be strengthened, to be proved genuine. It is very much in God's plan, Peter tells us, for God to validate our faith before the court of heaven, and to justly reward us for staying faithful in spite of the pressure, testing and temptation we face in the devil's world.

The Fiery Furnace: When king Nebuchadnezzar ordered the three friends of Daniel (Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego) to be thrown into the "furnace of blazing fire" for failing to worship the golden image he had set up, none of the assembled multitude expected these three believers to survive (Dan.3:1-30). But God did deliver them, and in miraculous fashion, causing them to endure the fantastic heat in such a way that "not even the smell of the fire came upon them." The testing of our faith in the smelter of the devil's world is analogous to the fiery trial of Daniel's three friends, for in similar fashion, God sometimes allows us to undergo testing which in the world's eyes ought to "burn away" our faith. However, when we successfully endure such severe testing, it serves as a witness to the world – both of the genuineness of our faith and of God's miraculous power to deliver those who believe in Him and His Son.

The Smelter of Faith: The "fiery trials of life", as Peter calls them (1Pet.4:12), also serve to refine our faith. As gold is proved in the fire and separated from impurities, and as steel is strengthened in the blast furnace, so our faith can only be purified by perseverance under pressure, and can only be strengthened when we learn to rely on God in times of crisis. God allows testing to come upon us both for our good and for the good of our brethren here in the devil's world. When we conquer *by faith* the difficulties thrown in our path, the experience builds our trust in God, for we learn that He is sufficient to deliver us, not only theoretically, but in actual practice. Testing is the only way while still in this world that God can prove to us that He can and will deliver us from the trials of life, and the only way that we can prove to God that we really do believe in Him and in His Son, and are willing to trust Him even when the situation looks grim. When we do so, we become witnesses to our fellow believers both of God's goodness and power, and also of the power and value of faith. Through the successful application of our faith, we often build up the faith of others even more than our own. In the process, we also gain insight into certain areas of suffering that may help us to encourage others when facing similar tests (2Cor.1:3-4).

Pruning Our Faith: Testing can perhaps best be thought of as training, the practical application of our "instruction in righteousness" (2Tim.3:16). As we have noted before (cf. Jn.15:2), God carefully prunes the plant of our faith (through testing) that we might increase our production for Him. The pruning process, while often painful at the time, is meant to have positive results. Testing begets blessing, because only through testing can our faith be strengthened, thus hastening our spiritual growth and the blessings that accrue to that growth.

The Greek vocabulary in John chapter 15 sheds some light on the process of pruning our "plant of faith" through testing. In verse two, the word commonly translated "prune" is actually the Greek *kathairo* (from which the word catharsis is derived), normally translated "cleanse". The translators have taken some liberties here, not wishing to say that God "cleanses" branches, but verse three indicates that John's choice of vocabulary was not accidental, for Christ then says "you are already *clean*" (the Greek adjective *kathairos*, also derived from *kathairo*).

The sense of the analogy in John 15 is this: As believers, we are already cleansed from sin, for Christ died for our sin and God has forgiven us on the basis of our belief in Christ and His work. But though we are completely "positionally" clean, we are not "experientially" perfect from the moment of salvation onward. In other words, our positional sanctification does not produce immediate and complete experiential sanctification (see lesson #13): after we *become* Christians, we still need to learn *how to live* like Christians. The testing of our faith, the purification or "pruning" of our way of life, is an essential component, therefore, in our advance to spiritual maturity. Testing winnows out many of our flaws and imperfections as we learn to start trusting God more and more, and relying on our own assets less and less.

From the point of salvation on, then, our life in this world consists to a great degree of God continuing to "prune" and "cleanse" us. In fact, we shall never see the end of this process in this life: the apostle Paul, one of the greatest believers of all time, was repeatedly tested to a degree

the rest of us would not be able to stand, yet he learned to delight in God's process of perfecting him. He concluded that in the dire straits of testing, he was forced as at no other time to concentrate on and rely on the power of God; in a way that the world will never be able to understand, it was his weakness that made him strong, precisely because it forced him to depend on God, not on himself (2Cor.12:9-10).

The Christian life, therefore, includes in large part our negotiation of innumerable tests that challenge, strengthen, refine and validate our faith. In this respect, then, sin and faith are polar opposites, for faith trusts God and does things God's way in spite of what the world has to say, while sin doubts God and says, in effect, "I'd better take care of this particular need myself". Thus the essential mechanism of faith-testing is God continuing to work on our deficiencies by placing us in situations where we are forced to see and then work out our faith-weaknesses by trusting in Him and His Son to carry us through the crisis. To the extent that we are willing to do this (by gaining spiritual nourishment from the Word, then willingly applying under pressure what we have learned at leisure), to that extent we will continue to grow in the way God intends.

Testing Has Limits: Not many of us are destined to be tested to the degree of a Paul or a Job, yet in spite of the tremendously difficult trials that befell these two exemplars of faith, Paul could confidently say "yet from all of these, the Lord delivered me" (2Tim.3:10-11), and Job lived to see all his fortunes entirely restored (Job 42:7-17). We who profess to believe in God's promises and to trust Him for our deliverance, temporally as well as eternally, should keep in mind that the trials of this life are not eternal, but only temporary obstacles on our journey to eternal glory. Testing will end. Our life with God will not. And so while we do find ourselves here in this world, "a spectacle to men and angels" as Paul says, we need to consider certain principles that keep the suffering we endure in proper perspective:

1. Testing is Endurable: One principle of testing's limits that we should always bear in mind is the one of which the apostle Paul reminds us:

No trial has come upon you which is out of the normal experience of mankind.
Furthermore, God is faithful, and He will not allow you to be tested beyond your ability to endure it, but will provide with the testing a resolution to it, so that you may be able to bear up under it.
1st Corinthians 10:13

Paul did not possess the omniscience to tell us exactly what the resolution to all our tests would be. In some cases, like the parting of the Red Sea, God provides definite, miraculous solutions to the situations we face. At other times, His deliverance may be of a more subtle and less obviously dramatic nature. It is also true that God means for us to be delivered *through* some tests rather than *from* them, that we may demonstrate the faith and patience to weather a particular storm all the way to the end, rather than being miraculously plucked from the midst of it. What the passage above does make unmistakably clear, though, is that God has definitely promised to help us in all of the testing we shall ever encounter in this life. It is our job to have the faith and the patience to accept the "pruning experiences" He gives us as perfectly designed

to bring us to the peak of spiritual growth. If we truly do face the testings of the Christian life with this spirit, we stand to maximize our growth and the resulting blessing from God, for our own good as well as for the good of those around us.

2. Testing Does Not Last Forever: A second principle of testing's limits that we would also do well to remember is that while a particular trial may seem to be going on forever, we need to have the patience of God's perspective. In response to mockers who point out that the universe seems to them to be the same as it has always been, the apostle Peter is quick to point out that to God, "one day is as a thousand years", and that God is not "slow" to deliver on His promises despite the charges of unbelievers. In due time, in His own good time, at the proper and determined time, God will deliver us, just as His day of judgment will come "like a thief in the night" when men who lack faith least expect it (2Pet.3:8-10). In the history of the world, many believers have faced the test of having to wait for an answer from God (Job 35:14; Dan.10:1-13). For over three years, Elijah had to wait for God's deliverance from the persecution of Ahab and Jezebel, first subsisting on food brought by ravens and the little water still flowing in the brook Cherith, then by God's further miraculous provision during his stay with the widow of Zarephath (1Kng.17). But despite the duration of the trial, God kept Elijah safe and provided for him throughout, until finally accomplishing a mighty victory by his hand against the priests of Baal (1Kng.18). The Hebrew word for waiting on God (*yachal*, most often translated *hope*) is taken by some to be derived from a root meaning to twist and writhe. Waiting on God in times and circumstances of extreme pressure may very well give us the sensation of squirming, but it is just this sort of testing that is required to *build* our faith in Him and accelerate our spiritual growth.

3. Fainting Is Dangerous: Like the momentary loss of consciousness occasioned by physical fainting, spiritual fainting is the temporary loss of one's virtue perspective – momentarily losing sight of one's faith in God, one's confident hope of eternal reward, and one's dedicated love for God and His children. Spiritual fainting is a dangerous (though not unprecedented) response to the pressure of testing, and the examples of Elijah's flight, Peter's denial of Christ and Job's eventual loss of patience with God immediately come to mind. All three of these men were exceptional believers, and all recovered from their lapses almost immediately. Nevertheless, it should be noted that under the extraordinary pressures of their respective circumstances, they all did suffer a momentary crisis of faith, or spiritual fainting spell. If such a thing could happen to great believers of this caliber, we need to accept the possibility that we too are vulnerable to lapses of this sort, especially since suffering and testing are part of the normal course of the Christian life. As the apostle John intimates, we are all participants in "the tribulation" that befalls all believers, "the kingdom" that all believers anticipate, and "the endurance in Jesus Christ," that all believers must demonstrate to maintain their faith (Rev.1:9). When we find our faith under heavy pressure, pressure we may feel to be unfair or unbearable, we must remember that we are neither the first to carry this burden (whatever it may be), nor shall we be the last (1Pet.5:8-9). Believers of the future whose lot it will be to endure the Great Tribulation will certainly find themselves confronting far worse pressure and testing than the rest of us shall ever have to experience (cf. Rev.8).

4. Christ Set the Example For Us: Lest we think that we are being unfairly singled out for incredible suffering, we should always keep in mind the example of our Lord, "who endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not become weary and lose heart" (Heb.12:3). Our Lord's life was the most difficult one a human being has ever lived, a fact that is all the more awe-inspiring considering that He humbled Himself to it by His own choice that we might be saved (Phil.2:6-8). He led a life of complete service to those He loved, and was rewarded by them with opposition, disbelief, disrespect, betrayal, persecution, and was finally executed horribly like a common criminal. Yet He tells us that if we would wish to truly be his disciples in this life, we too must "pick up our cross and follow Him" (Matt.16:24). For us as Christians, this means that life is not a self-indulgent passage of time, but a mission given us by God, and the successful completion of that mission necessarily involves hardship, heartache and suffering. We have it on good authority that all who wish to live such a life of following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ will receive their share of sufferings as a result (2Tim.3:12). But without persevering in the face of the devil's opposition, without "sharing the sufferings of Christ" we cannot accomplish the tasks God has set for us to do during our short stay in this world (2Cor.1:3-7; Phil.3:7-11; 1Pet.4:13).

5. God Is the One Who Supports Us: In all our trials and tribulation God is with us (Ps.3:3). He sent His Son to die for us, that we might be His very own children, and He has given us His Holy Spirit to dwell within us and comfort us. Our Father knows what we have need of. He clothes and nourishes the lilies of the field and the birds of the sky, and He shall also do the same for us (Matt.6:25-34). God knows of our material needs, and of all our other needs as well. He made provision for them all before time began. God also waits to answer our prayers in time of need. Our Father will not withhold any good thing of which we have need (Matt.7:7-12). The scripture is filled with the testimonies of believers who have witnessed God's faithfulness in this regard. As David testifies, through all he had witnessed in his life, he had never seen God forsake the righteous or their children (Ps.37:25). As long as we continue to be faithful and follow our Lord faithfully, we can affirm with assurance the statement of the apostle Paul: "God will provide your every need according to His wealth in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil.4:19).

6. There is a Bigger Picture: We have seen that testing is a personal and individual issue, a trial designed to strengthen and validate our faith. But the process of faith-testing is more than this. Testing (and our successful negotiation of it) is also a ministry of witnessing, a sign and an encouragement to those who observe it of the value and the power of faith as that faith is honored and supported by God. In times of trial, it may often seem to us that no one else sees or understands our pain or difficulties, but we must remember that only God knows whose hearts have been touched by our noble conduct under pressure. So we ought to keep this special ministry in mind whenever things may seem to us to be falling apart, never losing sight of the fact that our primary hope is in the resurrection through faith in Christ and the glorious future that awaits, a future so marvelous that it is not worthy to be compared to our present upheavals (Rm.8:18).

7. The Angels are Watching Us: For unknown eons of time, the universe existed without mankind. Satan's treachery and the cataclysmic judgment upon the earth which followed brought an end to angelic creation's unique position as God's only morally responsible creatures, as man was created to demonstrate to all the angels His power and His mercy. Our creation was, therefore, a response to angelic disobedience to God, and a brief overview of the implications of our relationship to these heavenly creatures will help us to view our earthly struggle from a broader viewpoint. For from our limited earthly perspective, we humans tend to develop spiritual myopia in the face of the challenges, confusion and testing of life. In fact, our existence and spiritual progress is of great concern to angelic kind.

Angels have existed in apparently unchanged form since before the Lord imparted Adam's first breath, and it is beyond all doubt that while in this body of flesh, we would do well to give angelic creation a wide, respectful berth (2Pet.2:10-11). Nevertheless, while mankind is starting out "a little lower than the angels" (Ps.8:5), in resurrection we shall "judge angels" (1Cor.6:3). We can garner from our Lord's question to Satan, "Have you considered my servant, Job?", that our existence is meant as a continuing example and response to the angelic rebellion led by the devil. God is utilizing mankind, at least in part, to make a point to His other creatures, a point that involves faith out of weakness (on our part) and mercy in spite of sin (on God's part through Jesus Christ).

Therefore, we should not forget that we are being watched – and not only by God: "there is more joy among the angels of God" when a sinner repents than for the continued fidelity of many righteous believers (Lk.15:10); women are encouraged to behave in a dignified way "because of the angels [who are watching]" (1Cor.11:10; the principle applies to men as well); angels are very desirous of knowing about the working out of God's plan in human history (1Pet.1:12); and Paul complained to the Corinthians that he had been made "a spectacle to men and angels" (1Cor.4:9).

Nor are the angels disinterested observers. Just as the devil and his minions are always trying to destroy our faith and drag us down into an unbelief and disobedience to God akin to their own (1Pet.5:8), so the elect angels are our compatriots: it is largely to help us that God makes "His angels like the wind and his servants like flames of fire" (Heb.1:7 with 1:14; cf. Dan.10:12-13); Christ tells us of small children that "their angels in heaven" constantly behold the face of God (Matt.18:10); and an angel stands guard over each of the seven churches of Revelation (Rev.1:20). "With such a cloud of witnesses" to our daily behavior here on earth, how shall we then flag in our faith (Heb.12:1)? When we remember that the galleries of heaven are filled to capacity by the angels, cheering us on, elated by our successes and disappointed by our setbacks, it should serve as an encouragement to take heart. The heart of Elisha's servant melted at the sight of the armies of Aram, but when God opened his eyes at Elisha's request, he saw clearly that "the mountain was filled with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2Kng. 6:17). In the same way, we need to open the eyes of our hearts to the reality that we are not alone. God is with us, and His messengers are watching us. No test, no trial, no struggle lacks its heavenly

spectators. Let us therefore "run with endurance the race set before us" (Heb.12:1), in full knowledge that our angelic brethren are cheering us on from heaven's sidelines.

Conclusion: Our Hope is an Eternal Hope: And so we persevere in our faith, enduring with patience the testing which it is our honor to receive as those who "share the sufferings of Christ" (1Pet.4:13), waiting expectantly for the time when that faith shall be "proven genuine in the crucible of life" (1Pet.1:7a), and shall then ultimately "result in praise, glory and honor for you at the glorious return of Jesus Christ" (1Pet.1:7b). Our faith remains strong, for we are confident in our hope, that is, in our expectation of ultimate deliverance, of ultimate triumph, of ultimate validation and reward far beyond anything we may have been called upon to endure in this short life. The children of Israel were similarly delivered from Egypt into a land "flowing with milk and honey", and, similarly, not without severe trial and temptation. Let us see clearly here and now with the eyes of faith our certain rescue and reward, that we may appreciate God's deliverance even before the fact. Let us rejoice at the parting of our own personal Red Sea even before the mighty waters have stirred, and know with unshaken confidence that God will bring us across dry-shod in His own good time. For it is with such an attitude that the "praise, glory and honor" of verse seven will indeed fall to our lot: praise from God (a hearty "well-done" from our Master), glory from God (when He makes our success manifest to all), and honor from God (the bestowing of tangible rewards enduring for all eternity). These blessings are surely not to be compared to the present heartaches and disappointments of life. Eternity is stretching out before us. Let us "run with endurance" this short race set before us in the full knowledge that God is both with us in the running of it, and stands at the finish line, ready to reward us for the building up and to the perseverance of our faith.