

Testing Spiritual Character

How Trials Describe Character

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As we draw to the close of "man's calendar year" I hope everyone has had a year that has been a character building year—with all the trials, tribulations, and testing that everybody has been through. I hope you have had a very successful year.

We live in a society that thrives on illusions. Many [who are devoid of the truth] are beginning to ask, "What is reality anyway?" This self-deception includes how we perceive ourselves, and those around us. How does God know what we are really like? And how does He let us know where we stand in relation to Him? The answer: by constantly testing our *spiritual character*.

I am going to quote from the book, *People of the Lie*, by Dr. M. Scott Peck. The account is about one of Dr. Peck's patients (a lady in her thirties) who lives her life in such a way that she is *a law unto herself*. I hope you will bear with me for the next few minutes as I read this, because I want to get the whole context of what he went through. So here it is:

In the beginning there was nothing to mark Charlene as particularly unusual. She came to me, at age thirty-five, with a complaint of depression following a break up with her boyfriend. Her depression did not seem severe. . . .

By now, Charlene's willfulness had become evident. Yet the depths of that willfulness still did not become clear until the third year of her therapy, when I realized that Charlene was actually autistic.

Let me break in here. This is not the "autism" or "autistic" that you are usually thinking of. I will go on, as he defines it.

Mental health requires that the human will submit itself to something higher than itself. To function decently in this world, we must submit ourselves to some principle that takes precedence over what we might want at any given moment. For the religious this principle is God; and so they will say, "Thy will, not mine, be done." But if they are sane, even the non-religious submit themselves, whether they know it or not, to some "higher power"—be it truth, or love, the needs of others, or the demands of reality. As I defined it in *The Road Less Traveled*, "Mental health is an ongoing process of dedication to

reality at all costs."

The utter failure to submit oneself to reality is called autism. The word comes from the Greek root 'auto,' meaning "self." The person who is autistic is oblivious to certain essential dimensions of reality. Such people literally live "in a world of their own" in which the self reigns supreme.

When I asked Charlene why she wanted sex with me [earlier on, he had discussed this], her answer was always perfectly simple: "Because I love you." Although I repeatedly raised the issue of its genuineness, to Charlene the reality of her "love" was unquestionable. To me, however, it was autistic. When she gave me a different check each month, she thought she was doing so for me. In her mind there was some connection between me and the particular pattern of that month's check. But the connection was all in her mind. The reality was—not only that I couldn't have cared less which pattern she used—but also that her selection had nothing to do with the reality of me.

Keep in mind that this is the author speaking, who is a psychiatrist.

As far as she was concerned, Charlene loved everyone. The cult [to which she belonged] espoused as its principal doctrine the love of mankind. Charlene saw herself proceeding through the world spreading gifts and gentle kindness wherever she walked. My own experience of her love, however, was that it invariably excluded the reality of me. One winter evening, for instance, a few minutes after we had completed a session, I made myself a martini and went into the living room—ready to settle down by the fire for a rather rare time of relaxation in which I could get caught up with my mail. I heard the grinding noise of someone repeatedly attempting to start a car. I went outside. It was Charlene.

"I don't know what's wrong," she said. "I can't get it started."

"You're not out of gas, are you?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't think that could be it," she replied.

"You don't think? What does the gas gauge read?"

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"Oh, that reads empty," Charlene answered gaily.

I might have laughed if I'd not been annoyed. "Since your gauge reads empty, what makes you think you're not out of gas?"

"Oh, it always reads empty."

"What do you mean;" I asked, "It always reads empty? Is it broken?"

"No. At least I don't think so. You see, I never buy more than a couple of gallons at a time. That way I'll be sure not to waste any. Besides, it's fun to guess when I need some more. I'm pretty good at it."

"How often do you guess wrong and run out?" I asked in amazement at the discovery of this new, extraordinary ritual.

"Oh, not often. Maybe three or four times a year."

"And I don't suppose it's possible this could be one of those times?" I said with an edge of sarcasm. "What are you going to do now?"

"If I can come in and use your phone, I'll call AAA."

"Charlene, it's nine o'clock at night and we're way out in the country. What do you think they're going to do about it?"

"Well, sometimes they come out at night. The only other thing I could do is borrow some gas from you."

"I'm afraid I don't have any extra gas lying around," I replied.

"We could siphon some out of your car, couldn't we?" Charlene asked.

"I suppose so," I acknowledged, "except I don't think we have anything to siphon with."

"Oh, I have a siphon tube," Charlene answered brightly. "I keep it in the trunk. I always like to be prepared."

So I searched for a pail and a funnel. Then I used her siphon tube, getting a

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mouthful of gasoline in order to initiate the suction. I gave her a gallon. Her car started right up and she drove off. I was very cold when I came in. My martini was warm and diluted. I couldn't taste it for the gasoline. I couldn't taste anything for the rest of the evening except gasoline—the bad taste she had literally left in my mouth.

Two days later Charlene came in for her next session. She mentioned nothing of the debacle following her previous one. Finally I asked her how she'd felt about what had happened.

"Oh, I thought it was neat," she replied. "I really enjoyed it."

"You enjoyed it?" I queried.

"Sure. It was exciting. It was kind of like an adventure, figuring out how to siphon the gasoline and get the car started. And we shared it together. Do you know, that's the first time we've ever actually done anything together? It was fun working with you out there in the dark."

"How do you think I felt about it?" I asked.

"I don't know. I assume you enjoyed it too."

"Why do you assume that?"

"I don't know why. Didn't you enjoy it?"

"Charlene," I asked, "did the thought ever cross your mind that I might have had something else to do the other evening rather than help you start your car, something I might have wanted to do more?"

"No. I thought people liked to help other people. At least I do. Don't you?"

"Charlene," I asked again, "Were you at any time during the incident uncomfortable or embarrassed? Did you feel bad at all about having to use my help to get out of a mess that you were responsible for?"

"Oh, it wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't?"

"No," Charlene stated flatly. "The car had less gas in it than I thought. That's not my fault. I suppose you might say that I should have estimated better, but on the whole I do pretty well. As I told you, I only run out three or four times a year. That's a pretty good average."

"Charlene," I said, "I've been driving three times as long as you and I've never run out of gas."

"Well, apparently not running out of gas is a big deal to you. I mean, you're really uptight about it. It's not my fault you're so uptight about it."

I gave up. For the moment I was just too tired of batting my head against the impregnable walls of Charlene's obliviousness. As far as she was concerned, my feelings did not really exist.

So there you have an example of several things—of someone living a life of total illusion, out of reality totally. The fruit being borne from it was not good fruit. Here, from an observer's point of view, Charlene was actually a very nice person who loved everyone and could not help everybody enough. But that was only on the surface. Dr. Peck's patient, Charlene, had created a life of illusion for herself. Everything revolved around her! In her own mind, she changed the laws of *reality* (which we can also call *the truth*) into an *illusion* (which we can also call *the lie*).

Ask yourself, "Am I living an illusion? Do I see myself as I really am?" The character we display outwardly must be more than an illusion. Elbert Hubbard said, "Many a man's reputation would not know his character if they met on the street." *An illusion is a deception to give an impression of reality.* In developing our personalities, we have all resorted to some illusion to disguise unwanted scenes and make others like something we are not. When people look at us, do they see us as we really are? Or do they see a well-orchestrated facade?

Many of us have an image that is not really what we are. Maybe we like people to think of us as sports jocks, or debonair and sophisticated men (or, women)? Or maybe we put on the cool, calm, and collected image? Or how about a liberated woman who acts so smug she scares men away? Or maybe you are a guy who has the all-together macho image that comes across to the ladies as arrogant and cocky? Or maybe you put on the image of a kind old lady who would not hurt a fly, but you just came to services having shaken your fist and yelled unkind words to a guy who just cut you off in traffic?

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In fact, we may have become so good at our illusions that even we are deceived. We know that "all have sinned;" yet some seem to think they are sinless, totally without guilt—as we saw Charlene saying there. "It wasn't my fault," she said over and over again.

I John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

The apostle Paul warns us not to be deceived into thinking that the wisdom of this human age is sufficient for obtaining salvation and for building up the church. If we think of ourselves as wise by this world's standards, we have to renounce dependence on this wisdom of the world so that we may receive God's wisdom. The two forms of wisdom—the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God—do not mix!

I Corinthians 3:18-20 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness [deceit, illusions]." And again, "The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

In one way or another, we may have become skilled illusionists; but our lives were not meant to be fake or unreal. Of course, they were meant to be genuine. If we consider ourselves to be true Christians, our lives have a vital purpose; and they must be used for that purpose. We all know what that purpose is. That purpose is to build character similar to Jesus Christ's.

A Christian's life is a time of "reality building"—not a time of illusion! There is no room for the pretense and false fronts of the illusion that we have so carefully built to obscure the truth about our true selves. God has promised to rebuild us until we have holy righteous character. His goal is to help us become "a perfect man" with "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"—not just a convincing illusion, but **a genuine reality**.

There is not necessarily anything wrong in using "illusions" or what are called "special effects" in the film industry. In many cases, they have to because, if they do not, things just will not appear to be realistic. In that situation, we understand what is going on. But when it comes to our own individual character, to live an illusion is literally *sin*.

But have you noticed how people who spend all their time in a fantasy world become so

accustomed to falseness and deceit that they no longer seem to be able to distinguish true from false, and right from wrong? Many actors and movie stars have deluded themselves—accelerated by the illusion they portray, through the characters they play—acting out personalities [who are adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, murderers, or other wicked behaviors]. As they play these parts year after year, it becomes part of that character. That illusion actually becomes what they are.

Throughout history, even whole cities have tried to portray the illusion of a modern, tolerant, and advanced people. In reality, they have come to represent, through their actions, cities of perversion. A city that jumps to my mind today is San Francisco. It is known for being a homosexual haven of degenerates.

During the time of the apostles, the ancient city of Corinth was like that. Corinth was a seaport; and, because of its position, it had become rich through trade. The people of many nations converged on this city and mingled. Therefore, it became an extremely liberal city with a very liberal and tolerant approach to life. "To corinthianize" became a synonym for a lifestyle of wickedness.

The attitude permeated Corinthian society and even affected the members of God's church, which the apostle Paul had raised up there. They became so liberal and so tolerant in their thinking that, when a member of the church became involved in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother, the other members were not shocked and seemed to openly be proud of the situation and their tolerance of it.

Paul wrote those brethren a stern letter. He was horrified that God's chosen people had become so tolerant of a situation that would have appalled normal, decent, unconverted people elsewhere. Paul credits their intellectual pride and vanity for thinking too highly of themselves. That is, that they "knew better" than Paul—or than God knew—in instructing them.

I Corinthians 5:1-2 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.

So Paul confronted them with their tolerant attitude towards serious sin and the hypocritical illusion they portrayed of Christianity. He commanded the Corinthians to disfellowship the sinning member until the time that he learned his lesson and

repented—and that "the illusion of Christianity" was no longer being portrayed by that sinful member.

This was not just a fit of prudishness, on Paul's part. He knew that, if this lackadaisical approach to immorality continued, it would not be long before the entire church was affected. Just as one rotten apple will spoil the whole bushel, so also will sin spoil the whole church eventually—if it is allowed. And, of course, this is speaking of flagrant sin.

Paul used another analogy, one that was easily understood by the Corinthians.

I Corinthians 5:6-8 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Someone who is portraying an illusion of a certain individual is **not** a person of *sincerity* and *truth*.

Paul used this simple analogy of the action of a leavening agent in bread making to show the effects of sin on Christian life. The Corinthians eventually got the point, and they did what Paul commanded. The man repented of his sins, Paul instructed that he be restored to full fellowship—and so good came out of this. Good came out of following the commands of God, as of course, it always does. But the Corinthians initially thought they knew better. And so they had to go through a test and a trial, to get this worked out.

It was also a test for Paul to see if he would uphold God's instruction for dealing with flagrant sin. Giving "the illusion of obeying God" is a far cry from the Christian character that is necessary for God's completion of us. God must continually test us to see where we stand, to see if our beliefs are *preferences* or *convictions*. It also tells us where we are weak or strong in the areas of our character. So testing is good for us; and it is good for God, in that it shows Him where we stand in accordance with Him. It helps Him to get to know us better.

The Bible is a collection of test narratives. The view of life that emerges is that life is continuous testing—where events draw out responses that, at the same time, define that person's character. The special vocabulary of testing occurs more than 200 times in the English versions of the Bible. In stories of testing, the link between *action* (that is, the

plot) and *character* is very close. And so when we are speaking about "spiritual character" in the Bible, we are speaking about "action" and we are speaking about "character." **Action is character! Character is action!** That is, in the way that it comes out and is exposed.

When God tested Abraham by commanding him to offer his son, Isaac, Abraham's prompt and decisive obedience demonstrated his character in which faith was the dominant ingredient. When, on an earlier occasion, Abraham and Sarah found themselves sojourners in a potentially hostile foreign land, their response of fear that promoted expediency was a manifestation of their flawed character at their moment of choice. And when Jacob arrived at his uncle's home for an extended stay, his ability to establish himself as an adult underwent an extensive test—a test in which Jacob's responses demonstrated his character.

Because character is determined by responses to tests, we remember many biblical characters especially for their heroism or their humiliation in isolated moments of specific testing. For example, Adam and Eve are famous mainly for failing the test posed to them by the serpent in the Garden. We remember Abraham for passing the test of loyalty and faith when he offered up Isaac; Joseph for resisting sexual sin; David for giving in to sexual sin; Daniel for praying when the lions' den loomed; Ruth for remaining loyal to her mother-in-law; Esther for being loyal to her nation.

These were all tests that these people went through; they either came out "failed" or "passed." When they came out failed, further testing in that area was necessary. Jesus Christ's sterling character and personality emerges in the way He handled the continuous testing posed by people and circumstances during His public years. And those tests that He passed became excellent examples for us today, to be able to follow.

The *test* theme in the Bible is so central to the stories themselves that it becomes virtually impossible to classify the things that test a person. All of life tests us—every minute of every day. The external world of nature and weather test us. Specific people, as well as the entire social environment, test us. Personal relationships test our identities and loyalties, bringing our character traits out in the process.

The Bible tends to show characters in extraordinary or unusual situations that test them. A journey, for example, instead of a routine day at home or a controversial encounter with a personal enemy. A journey, can end up being a severe test, just in how it ends up. Still, the Bible's thoroughgoing realism helps us to understand that our essential identity consists of *our responses* to the events that make up our lives in the world.

If there is anything distinctive to the test pattern of the Bible, it is the testing that transpires between God and people. In keeping with the providential assumption of the Bible—that all events in a person's life are ultimately arranged by God—we find the theme of God's testing. While this is explicitly stated only a dozen times, it is impossible to read the stories of the Bible without interpreting the events [that test the human characters] are from God, to determine their characters' moral and spiritual standing.

I Corinthians 10:1-6 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted.

They continued through continuous testing as they went through the wilderness.

I Corinthians 10:7-8 And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell.

That many people *failed* the test.

I Corinthians 10:9-10 Nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

We do not often think of our complaining as being a test for us, but it is. We are being tested to see what our attitudes are.

I Corinthians 10:11-12 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

We could also say, "Let he who lives an illusion take heed, lest that illusion be exposed."

I Corinthians 10:13 No temptation [or, test] has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted [or, tested] beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

This verse informs us of two essential truths. One is that the testings that each person undergoes are not unique, but are "common" to men. And the second essential truth is that God will not allow us to be tested beyond our strength; but with the test will also provide the way of escape, that we may be able to endure it. So with those two things we are able to handle any test that comes by—because God is in full control.

Much the same as we see today, the Corinthians were so busy demanding proof that Christ was speaking through Paul, they forgot they ought to be examining and testing themselves.

II Corinthians 13:5-7 Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. [Or, as the NIV has it, "unless. . .you fail the test."] But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified [or, have not failed the test]. Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved [or, give the illusion of being in God's church], but that you should do ["Do" is action. Remember that action equals character and character equals action.] what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified.

The word translated "yourselves" is, in each case, emphatic by position. There is no doubt who Paul is talking to there. He is basically saying: "Do you know yourselves sufficiently well enough to recognize that Christ lives within each of you, and therefore you are in the faith?" By testing themselves the Corinthians would avoid God having to test them. Testing faith produces patience and perseverance, whether it is God who is testing us, or we ourselves.

James 1:2-4 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

James explained that trials are reasons for rejoicing because of the wholesome effects that they produce. The Greek word for trials here describes things that put a person to the test. They may be difficulties that come from without (such as persecution), or they may be inner moral tests (such as temptations to sin).

The outward trial, rather than being a reason for unhappiness, can be a catalyst for pure joy. The expression in verse 2 speaks of "full and complete joy." And it is not merely the coming of a single trial that is described. James speaks of the experience of trials of many kinds. And I am sure every single one of us in the church can look back over this last year and see that there are many different trials and things that have tested us. Sometimes they came at the same time, and seemed to be heaped upon each other.

James uses the term "fall into" as if one were to fall into the midst of people, objects, or circumstances, such as trials (as mentioned there in verse 2) or robbers (as mentioned in Luke 10:30). The picture is that of being surrounded by trials of many kinds, or, as the primary meaning of the original Greek has it, many colored. So we go through tests of "many colors," many types, and sometimes at the same time.

In verse 3, the Greek word *hypomonen* is translated patience in the King James and the New King James; but it is a much more active and forceful word. It speaks of *tenacity* and *stick-to-itiveness*. So patience does not quite fully express it. But William Barclay, in his book, *New Testament Words*, explains that it is not the patience that passively endures. Instead, it is the quality that enables us to stand on our feet facing a storm. It is in struggling against difficulty and opposition that ***spiritual stamina*** is developed.

The goal in verse 4 is that we may become *spiritually mature* and *complete*. And the Greek word translated perfect there can mean *perfect*, *complete*, or *mature*. You have heard that many times, and it is absolutely accurate. The word "perfect" here refers to maturity, because Scripture does not indicate that we will reach perfection in this physical life.

Patience and perseverance develops maturity of character and a balance of all the refinement and strengths needed in our Christian lives. An obvious reason that trials should be considered catalysts for joy is that they are capable of developing *patience* (or, as some translations have, *perseverance*). They put our faith to the test, and this experience produces the desired result. The question answered by the testing of faith is whether or not faith will persevere in patience. If it is genuine faith, testing serves to develop faith's persistence. And by that testing both God, and we ourselves, see how dedicated we really are.

Verse 4 tells us that patience and perseverance have a work to do, and this can be accomplished only by persistence in trials. If patience is to have "its perfect work" or, perseverance is to "finish its work," faith must not falter or give up. Trials enable us to *improve* and *prove* our faith. Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who grew strong in his faith as he went through the test of waiting twenty-five years for the birth of his son, Isaac.

Romans 4:16-22 Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (As it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations"), in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness.

So we see the results of Abraham passing that test. The essence of Abraham's faith was that he believed that *God could make the impossible possible*. True faith in God always triumphs in trial, or tests. As long as we believe that everything depends on our efforts, we are bound to be pessimists—because experience has taught the unforgiving lesson that our own efforts can achieve very little. When we realize that it is not our effort, but God's grace and power that matter, then we become optimists—because we are bound to believe that [with God] nothing is impossible. And from this optimism comes joy!

James continues the theme of patience and perseverance in James 5. In the beginning verses, James warned the oppressing rich of coming judgment. In the latter section, he encouraged the oppressed poor to be patient. The exhortation concerning patience and perseverance, in James 5, is built around 3 illustrations: the farmer (in verses 7-9), the prophets (in verse 10), and Job (in verse 11).

James 5:7-9 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.

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See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

So there is an area that we are being tested in every day. That is, the grumbling that we have for each other, at times.

James 5:10-11 My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

The first illustration of patience and perseverance is that of *the farmer* who waits patiently "for the early and latter rains." In Palestine, the early rains came in October and November, soon after the grain was sown through the farmer's perseverance; the latter rains came in April and May, as the grain was maturing. Both rainy seasons were necessary for a successful crop. Knowing this, the farmer was willing to wait patiently until both rains came and provided the needed moisture. And, of course, it is similar with our own character development.

The second illustration of patience and perseverance is that of *the prophets* who spoke in the name of the Lord. In their position they experienced affliction and responded to it with long-suffering patience. Although James refers to the prophets as a group, Jeremiah certainly stands out as one who endured mistreatment [with patience and with perseverance]. He was put in the stocks, thrown in prison, and lowered into a miry dungeon—yet he persisted in his ministry without bitterness or recrimination. That testing was severe for him, but he came out passing the test.

The third illustration of patience and perseverance is that of *Job*. Those who have endured are considered blessed. In verses 7-10, James' plea is for patience, which is the self-restraint that does not retaliate. But here, in verse 11, James' plea is for perseverance, which is perseverance in difficult circumstances. So though we often hear of "the patience of Job," in the original Greek it is more closely "the perseverance of Job."

It is significant that James does not speak of Job's patience, since, despite the popular phrase "the patience of Job," he hardly ever exemplified the quality of patience. [Some examples of that are Job 12:2; Job 13:3-4; and Job 16:2.] However, he was an outstanding example of perseverance in the most trying situations. You are very familiar with the story of his life. [And you will find examples of that in Job 1:21-22 and also Job 19:25-27.]

Job's experience was also proof that God is full of compassion and mercy, as we see in what God finally brought about for him. Because of Job's perseverance, God gave him twice as much as he had before. In fact, a comparison of the number of Job's livestock at the end of the story with the number at the beginning, verifies that the number is doubled. This is a story of the passing of a test, being rewarded and prosperity not only restored—but also magnified. Out of sorrow and tragedy, God chose to bring increase and blessing. Job's perseverance was developed through testing, and his character was strengthened in the meantime.

So *testing* (1) produces character and (2) shows us where we stand with our character in relationship to God. To sum up, in James 5:7-11, James urges us not to fight back but to exercise long-suffering patience toward those who oppress us; he is calling for stouthearted perseverance in the trying circumstances that confront us.

The book of Hebrews is addressed to Christians enduring persecution. It likewise stresses endurance, or holding fast, as the virtues required to pass a test.

Hebrews 3:6 But Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

Jesus Christ knows our human condition. It is not something He has heard about, but something He knows since He, too, was a man in the flesh. We may approach Him confidently because He knows and understands our weaknesses.

Hebrews 4:14-16 Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted [or, tested] as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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Though Jesus did not sin, we must not infer that life was easy for Him. Many times, we give in before the temptation has fully spent itself; but Christ did not do that. In a sense, He earned the sinlessness as He gained victory after victory while He was on earth. The sinless One knows the force of temptation in a way that—we who sin—do not. Many times we give in before that temptation is fully spent. Only he who does not yield knows its full force—because a person giving into temptation is blind to the consequences.

So if we fail the test, or we do not overcome the temptation, we have not really and truly seen all the lessons to be learned in that temptation that we failed. But Jesus Christ, who was so perfect and passed every test, saw the true impact and consequences of the temptations and the tests that came His way.

The goal of life itself is linked to the test theme found in James 1:12 which says:

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Romans 5 catalogs in ladder-like sequence the specific virtues produced by suffering through tests.

Romans 5:3-5 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations [or, tests], knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us.

Trouble produces perseverance. The word Paul uses for *tribulation* in verse 3 literally means *pressure*. That is exactly what we feel when we are being tested. We feel pressure. Even at a physical level when we are going through school and we are tested we are sitting there and laboring over that test and we feel the pressure at that point. It is similar in our spiritual lives.

All kinds of things weigh heavily upon us—desire, sorrow, persecution, unpopularity, and loneliness. All that pressure produces *fortitude*, or produces perseverance. And the word Paul uses here for *perseverance* is the same word he used in James 1:3 and James 5:11. It means more than endurance. It means the spirit that can overcome the world. It means the spirit that does not passively endure but that actively overcomes the

trials and tribulations of life.

A seventeenth century Englishman, named Lord Chesterfield, is quoted as saying: "Aim at perfection in everything, though in most things it is unattainable; however, they who aim at it, and persevere, will come much nearer to it than those whose laziness and despondency make them give it up as unattainable."

"Perseverance," Paul goes on, "produces character." The word he uses for *character* is used to describe metal that has been passed through the fire so that everything base has been purged out of it. It is used to describe coinage, as in sterling silver. When affliction is met with perseverance, out of the battle we emerge stronger, purer, better, and nearer to God. There is much to be joyous about in trials.

"Character," Paul continues, "produces hope." Two people can meet the same situation. It can drive one of them to despair. And it can spur the other on to triumphant action. The same trial! To the one it can be the end of hope. To the other it can be a challenge to greatness. The difference corresponds to the difference in the character of the people involved.

Henry Miller, author of *The Books in My Life*, relates the following lesson that he learned: "In this age, which believes that there is a short cut to everything, the greatest lesson to be learned is that the most difficult way is, in the long run, the easiest." Of course, he is talking about the trials and tribulations that we go through in life. If we have let ourselves become weak, flabby, and lazy; if we have allowed our circumstances to beat us; if we have allowed ourselves to whine and grovel under affliction—then we have made ourselves such that, when the challenge of the crisis comes, we lose hope.

On the other hand, if we insist on meeting life with determination, if we have always faced tests, and by facing them, conquered things—then, when the challenge comes, we meet it with eyes aflame. We meet it with a force that can overcome anything—just as Abraham learned after twenty-five years of waiting for a son. The character that has endured the test always emerges in hope. Our hope never proves to be an illusion because it is founded on the love of God.

I would like to quote from the book, *Man of Steel and Velvet*, by Aubrey Andelin, regarding the rewards of a worthy character:

The special reward to those who attain a worthy character is peace of mind or inner happiness. A most fundamental principle of truth is, "the good life promises the happy life." This is not necessarily a life free of problems, nor

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one of ease and comfort, but it is a life free of inner turmoil and emotional disturbances.

Spiritual growth means mental health. These two parallel one another. Only as we overcome, only as we lose self-centeredness and self-indulgence and grow in the grace of a noble character can we gain peace of mind. This truth is supported in the most advanced knowledge of mental health.

I would like to . . . refer to the statement by Dr. Max Levine, psychiatrist, "There cannot be mental health in the absence of high moral standards and a sense of social responsibility."

This is a carnal man speaking about what the science of psychiatry has come to find [in just observing people who are mentally ill].

Let us take somewhat of a change of direction here. How else does God evaluate the depth and quality of our character? Let us ask a more fundamental question. Ultimately, how does God know we love Him and are deeply loyal to Him? Jesus Christ summarized the answer when He said in John 15:

John 15:8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

Just as creation produces both good and bad fruit, so humans can produce fruit that *may* or *may not* be acceptable to God. And God wants us to bear good fruit!

Matthew 7:16-20 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

Now, a person can live an illusion in their life that "fakes out" other people. But, when you look at the fruit that they bear, it is going to bear *bad fruit*—thereby exposing them.

Christ Himself used many examples from agriculture and nature to emphasize the need for Christian growth, for spiritual character building. Here are just a few:

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1. John 15:5 says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."
2. God inspired David to write in Psalm 1:3, "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper."
3. Paul tells us in II Corinthians 9:10 "Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness." So, we see there the Source of us bearing fruit.
4. Christ also used the term "good works," similar to the term "good fruit," to express the importance of spiritual growth. A *good work* is the manifestation of righteousness. Matthew 5:16 says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Obviously then, God desires that we do good works and bear holy, righteous fruit in order that we might glorify Him. If we are not glorifying Him, we are living the life of a "Christian" as an illusion—and not as a true Christian.

Before it is fully ripe, a peach is tart, green, and inedible. In order for it to become ripe and ready for use, it must go through a lengthy process of development. Our goal must be to become perfect. Remember, earlier, that we mentioned that becoming perfect is to become mature.

Matthew 5:48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Becoming perfect, mature, and complete is a lifelong process. It takes a *lifelong testing of our character*. It may take years from the moment we are regenerated until we are fully mature and ready for the Kingdom. However, in order to attain this high calling, we must become more mature a little each day. And one of the ways that this is done is by the testing, trials, and tribulations that we go through. This means our fruits of righteousness are not just one-time acts. The fruits of God's Spirit are to be expressed again and again in our daily lives—until we actually take on God's likeness. So then, as we continue to allow God's Spirit to motivate our behavior, we will take on, little by little, "the fullness of God."

Ephesians 3:14-19 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

True righteousness is not attained quickly. It involves intense effort and a long period of time, with many, many trials and tests. Out of those trials and tests, we can become an optimist or we can be a pessimist.

The tares in God's church show only the appearance—or give the illusion—of a healthy tree; but they have never borne fruit. Others produce blossoms and buds but, through neglect, allow the flow of the Holy Spirit to stop; and the fruit withers and drops off. Still others let the cares of this world, or persecution, drain their strength so that they become barren and fruitless. Jesus Christ warned about these conditions. In one instance, He cursed an unproductive fig tree to show this principle.

Mark 11:12-14 Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.

Mark 11:20 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots.

Now quickly, flip over to John 15; and let us look at another caution by Jesus.

John 15:1-2 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

That fig tree was not bearing any fruit. So it was useless; and it was cut away, so to

speak.

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

It would be wise for us to examine our lives daily to be sure that we are connected to the Vine—tied to Jesus Christ and God the Father in a vital relationship of love—so that we will have the continual strength to produce the rich and abundant crop of spiritual character that God desires. And in the process, He is testing us. He is building that character and developing it in us. The true test of our spiritual character and our right standing with God is that we bear good fruit, not the illusion of fruit, but truly good fruit.

Just as an example, you can look at any of the mainstream Christian churches; and you will see many people serving others. That is, doing what appears to be the right thing. They may be verbally against killing people, or they may be out serving more than anyone could possibly have normal time for. But that is "an illusion" of fruit. That is all we are seeing there.

And that is what a tare in the church does. A tare in the church shows the illusion of fruit, but it is not necessarily true fruit. I was speaking with about four individuals from one of the churches of God. We were talking about protection, and every one of them had a gun in their house, and was willing to shoot anybody that came into their house. They had "an illusion" of the character of a Christian; but it was not truly the character of a Christian. It was the character of a tare. It was an illusion.

True Christians do not live illusions. We have the truth, and with truth comes reality. The way we perceive ourselves, and those around us, reflects our spiritual character. God spends our lives training us and getting to know what we are really like. He lets us know where we stand in relation to Him by constantly testing our spiritual character. The final test of our character is *our fruits*—how we live, what we say, what we do. It involves the totality of our being!

We will end by reading Jesus Christ's admonition to the church in Philadelphia, recorded by the apostle John. The testing that faced the Philadelphians was not the same as that facing the unbelieving earth dwellers. Loyal disciples must face one type of conflict; the world with its earth dwellers quite another. And if we pass the test as Christians, when the world receives its greatest test, we will be protected and preserved from that.

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Revelation 3:10-11 Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.