

How to Respond to Testing

Dear Friend,

As Christians we will all undergo tests. They may come in many different forms: a crisis in our health or finance; a breakdown in a personal relationship; rejection or persecution because of our faith; some long dark tunnel with no light at the other end. In any time of testing it is important to bear in mind that God is more concerned with our character than our achievements.

How, then, shall we respond to testing?

First of all, we must distinguish between testing and chastening. All too often, as Christians, we fail to recognize God's chastening. As a result, we adopt a posture of resisting the devil when we should in fact be submitting to God. The root character problem that this exposes is PRIDE.

There is a prayer at the end of Psalm 19 that Ruth and I often repeat:

*Who can understand his errors?
Cleanse me from secret faults.
Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;
Let them not have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
And I shall be innocent of great transgression.¹*

I have come to see that *secret faults* are not secrets that we keep from other people—much less from God. They are secret to ourselves, faults in our own character that we do not recognize. David describes them as *presumptuous sins*—sins that we commit when we *presume* that our conduct is acceptable to God, when in fact it offends Him. Very often God will not reveal such sins to us until we deliberately choose to humble ourselves and invite God to search our character and to lay bare our inmost motives.

Once we are clear that what we are passing through really is a test from God, we need to make sure that “all our bases are covered” (to borrow a phrase from baseball).

Base No. 1: REPENTANCE

Repentance is perhaps the basic Christian doctrine which is least emphasized by contemporary preachers. “Only believe” is a sweet sounding message, but it is not scriptural. From the beginning to the end of the New Testament, the message is: *first repent, then believe*. When there is any sin in



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our lives, any kind of faith that does not proceed out of repentance is a humanistic counterfeit. It does not produce the results that proceed from genuine faith.

A simple illustration of true repentance is making a U-turn in a vehicle. You recognize that you have not been living the right way. You stop and make a U-turn. After that you proceed in the opposite direction. If you do not end up traveling in the opposite direction, you have not truly repented.

Base No. 2: COMMITMENT

According to Romans 10:9 there are two essential conditions for salvation: to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead; to confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord.

When you confess Jesus as Lord, you give Him unreserved control over your whole life—your time, your money, your talents, your priorities, your relationships. You cannot hold anything back. “If Jesus is not Lord of all”—someone has said—“then He is not Lord at all.”

Base No. 3: ATTITUDE TO SCRIPTURE

Satan brought about the downfall of our first parents when he enticed them into questioning the truth of God’s word: “*Has God indeed said . . . ?*”²

Jesus Himself set the seal of His divine authority upon the Scripture when He called it *the word of God* and added, “*the Scripture cannot be broken.*”³

Paul states categorically, *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.*⁴

To question the authority of Scripture is a luxury that none of us can afford. It is the path to disaster today just as surely as it was in the garden of Eden.

Base No. 4: RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

Right doctrine is the basis of the Christian faith. But right doctrine rightly applied will produce right relationships. Our personal relationships should reflect the doctrine that we profess.

Jesus Himself laid great emphasis on maintaining right relationships. He gave clear guidelines for dealing with a brother who sins against us.⁵ In the Sermon on the Mount He warns, “*Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him.*”⁶

He closed His model prayer with a solemn warning: “*But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*”⁷

In any time of testing we should be careful to check our attitudes and our relationships, to make sure that we are not harboring any bitterness or resentment or unforgiveness in our hearts.

We also need to bear in mind that we cannot have right relationships with the wrong people. *Do not be deceived*, Paul warns us, “*Evil company corrupts good manners.*”⁸ We cannot lead holy lives if we deliberately consort with unholy people. All such relationships must be cut off with the sharp sword of God’s word.

The Example of Jesus

The supreme example of right responses to testing is provided by Jesus Himself, who *was in all points tempted [tested] as we are, yet without sin.*⁹

To follow His example requires that we *lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher [perfecter] of our faith. . . .*¹⁰

It is not sufficient that we deal with things in our lives that are actually sinful. We must also eliminate *weights*—things that are not sinful in themselves, but yet would hinder us from concentrating every effort on our service for Christ.

A runner in a race strips down to the bare minimum. He does not carry one ounce of unnecessary weight. We must do the same. Here are some of the things that we may need to eliminate:

Social obligations that have no spiritual significance – sentimental attachments to people, places or pets – excessive concern with the stock market, sports or women’s fashions – window shopping – worries about money, health, family or politics.

Concerning each thing to which we devote time and attention, we need to ask two questions. Does it glorify Jesus? Does it build me up spiritually?

The Need for Endurance

One essential character requirement throughout Scripture is *endurance*. With many Christians, however, this is not a popular subject. If in my preaching I announce that my theme is to be *endurance*, I hear very few “Hallelujahs” in response. Sometimes I go on to say, “Let me tell you how to cultivate endurance.” People listen eagerly, anxious to learn the secret. “There is only one way to cultivate endurance,” I continue, “it is by enduring.” This is greeted by an almost audible collective sigh. Expressed in words, that sigh says, “You mean there isn’t any other easier way?”

No, there is no easier way! Endurance is an essential element of victorious Christian living, and it can only be cultivated by enduring. Once we accept this fact, we can begin to respond rightly to each test that comes our way. We can *count it all joy, knowing that the testing of our faith produces patience [endurance].*¹¹

But we are warned that we must *let patience [endurance] have its perfect work.*¹² In other words, we must continue to endure until God’s purpose has been fully worked out and He brings the test to an end.

Very seldom does God tell us in advance, “This test will last six months.” So it may happen that after 5½ months a person will say, “I can’t take any more of this; I give up!”

How sad! Another 15 days of enduring, and God’s purpose would have been accomplished. Yet now such a person will have to undergo another test, designed to deal with the same character defect. In fact, God will not withdraw His tests until His purpose has been accomplished. The sooner we learn to endure, the more rapid will be our spiritual progress.

In 1 Corinthians 9:25 Paul—like the writer of Hebrews—uses the example of an athlete: *And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate [exercises self-control] in all things.* Only if we cultivate self-control, will we have the strength to endure.

In 2 Peter 1:5–7 Peter lists seven successive “steps” that lead upward from the foundation of *faith* to the supreme completion of Christian character: *agape love*. These steps are:

virtue (moral excellence);

knowledge;

self-control;

perseverance (endurance);

godliness;

brotherly kindness;

love.

This makes it clear that self-control is an essential prerequisite for endurance. Every test of endurance is also a test of self-control. It will expose any weakness in any one of the various areas of our personality.

In the area of the emotions, the weakness may be fear or discouragement or depression. In our fleshly nature it may be unbridled lusts or appetites. In our personal relationships it may be anger or jealousy. In our spiritual development it may be pride or self-confidence.

Whatever the area of weakness may be, it will be exposed when we are confronted with the challenge to endure. It is a tragic fact that many Christians never overcome these two stages of self-control and endurance. Consequently, they never progress to the higher Christian virtues in the remaining three steps: *godliness, brotherly kindness, love*.

It seems appropriate to close this letter with the same Scripture that I closed my previous teaching letter with: *Blessed is the man who endures temptation [testing]; for when he has been proved [approved], he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*¹³

Yours in the Master’s service,



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¹ Psalm 19:12–13

² Genesis 3:1

³ John 10:35

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁵ Matthew 18:15–17

⁶ Matthew 5:25

⁷ Matthew 6:15

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:33

⁹ Hebrews 4:15

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:1–2

¹¹ James 1:2–3

¹² James 1:4

¹³ James 1:12