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God's Tests

By David Servant

SIX

Jesus Tests the Sick

Once we begin to understand the subject of God's tests, we soon notice many other biblical examples of people whom He tested. Jesus, for example, sometimes tested the faith of people whom He healed.

I admit that I'm just as baffled as anyone why some people are chronically afflicted with sickness while others are not. But I do find a lot of encouragement in God's Word for those who need healing. There are plenty of heartening healing promises and stories of people whom God healed. There are, however, also stories of sick people whose faith was tested before they were healed. It is inescapable.

Why would Jesus test someone's faith? I suppose because there are counterfeits to authentic faith. What appears to be faith must be tested to determine if it is, in fact, authentic faith. In order for faith to be proved true, it *must* be tested.

Let's consider a few incidents when Jesus clearly tested people's faith.

Five Faith-Filled Fellows

We'll begin with the well-known story of the four men who lowered their paralyzed friend through a roof. Their determined faith is inspiring.

As I'm sure you remember, those four men couldn't find a way to get their paralyzed friend into a home where Jesus was teaching. The house was apparently packed with people. That didn't stop them, however. They made their own way inside by digging through the roof (see Mark 2:4), which would have been flat and probably accessible by exterior stairs.

Now let's think about what they did. Who owned that house that they dug through? If it didn't belong to one of them, they must have realized that the person who owned it would be upset with their remodeling of the roof. Someone would have to repair it. Perhaps they

assumed that once their friend was healed, the owner of the house would likely show them some mercy.

In any case, they began digging through the hardened clay as well as cutting through whatever was supporting that clay. Can you imagine the scene inside the house? Digging a hole through a hardened, clay roof is something that can't be done cleanly and quietly. Imagine the thud of rocks or the scraping sound of some digging tools echoing through the house as the work progressed. Imagine small chunks of dried clay falling from the ceiling and landing on people's heads. Surely the air in the house became choked with dust, perhaps to the point of people coughing and wiping it from their eyes. Surely there was a commotion, and certainly someone went outside to yell at the men who were destroying the roof! If so, they didn't listen.

Finally the four friends created a small opening, and a shaft of light would have stretched from the ceiling to the floor---easily seen because of all the dust particles in the air.

Next they began tearing away at the edges of their hole to enlarge it to fit their friend's stretcher. That would entail more noise and dust, as well as additional coughing and wiping dirt from eyes. By the time those four men peered over the edges of their hole to see if they were on target (above Jesus), I suspect they would have discovered a fairly hostile crowd staring back up at them! Beyond that, they knew full well that they were about to disrupt the whole meeting to an even greater degree when they lowered their friend into the room. Talk about stealing the show!

Jesus' Reaction

What was Jesus doing all this time? The Bible doesn't say, so we can't be certain. I find it hard to believe, however, that He continued preaching during the commotion. One thing we know He didn't do: He didn't stop the men from digging a big hole in the ceiling.

No record in any of the Gospels mentions that Jesus told someone to stop the men from digging their hole, or that He Himself yelled up at the men once their hole was big enough for His voice to be carried to the roof. The Bible simply says that Jesus "saw their faith" (Mark 2:5). That's all we know of Jesus' reaction---He observed their faith.

Why didn't Jesus stop the men from digging? Because in that clay, which stood between Jesus and their friend, was the *proof* of their faith. Every piece of clay that was torn from that roof was a testimony to the faith of those persistent men.

If the devil was the same then as he is today, then those men's minds were assailed with doubts and discouragement as they dug: "Can't you hear all the people coughing and choking in the room below you? Are you crazy? What if your friend isn't healed? Then you'll really feel stupid for this stunt!" But they would not be denied. Their faith persevered.

I like to imagine Jesus folding His arms, leaning up against the wall, and watching that hole in the ceiling grow larger and larger, as a smile grew larger and larger on His face. There is no record of Him becoming angry over the matter.

Finally, the four men succeeded in lowering their paralyzed friend on a stretcher by ropes in front of Jesus---a difficult task in itself. They believed if they could get their friend to Jesus, He would heal him. And He did.

What would have happened if, when they brought their friend to that house and found no entry, they had said, "Surely if it was God's will for our friend to be healed, God would have made a way for us to get to Jesus"?

Had they adopted such reasoning, their friend would not have been healed, even though we know (from reading the story as it turned out) that it *was* Jesus' will for the paralyzed man to be healed.

In the end, I'm sure they were all glad that they persevered, passing a difficult test.

Blind Bartimaeus

He ought to be called "Believing Bartimaeus," in light of his tenacity to be healed.

Bartimaeus was sitting on a road outside Jericho, begging as he did every day. He heard a crowd passing by and, upon inquiry, discovered that it was Jesus who was leading the people. He must have heard about Jesus healing people, and so he immediately "began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' " (Mark 10:47).

Jesus, however, didn't immediately stop or apparently take any notice. Perhaps Jesus didn't hear him at first. I suspect, however, that Jesus must have heard him because Bartimaeus was making such a disturbance that "many were sternly telling him to be quiet" (Mark 10:48).

If Jesus did hear him, then why didn't He immediately respond? It couldn't have been because Jesus didn't want to heal him, because Jesus ultimately did heal him. The only reason I can think of is because the man's faith had to be proved, and if it was going to be proved, it had to be tested.

Bartimaeus had plenty of opportunity to be discouraged and quit. Again, the Bible says that many were *sternly* telling him to be quiet. For most people, such rebukes would have discouraged them enough to stop shouting for Jesus. Bartimaeus, however, would not be discouraged. Scripture says, "He kept crying out *all the more*, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' " (Mark 10:48, emphasis added). He would not be denied!

Have you ever felt like Jesus was ignoring you? I have. Maybe, however, we were not being ignored. Maybe we were being tested.

The Reward of Persevering Faith

Finally, Jesus stopped and called for Bartimaeus to come to Him. Note that Jesus didn't walk over to Bartimaeus; He expected Bartimaeus to walk to Him---even though he was blind. Jesus must have been testing his faith. If Bartimaeus really believed that he'd receive his sight, he'd make it to Jesus no matter how many times he stumbled in the process.

Beyond this, Scripture tells us that when Bartimaeus realized that Jesus was calling for him, he cast aside his cloak and "jumped up" (Mark 10:50). I don't know if it is true or not, but I've heard that in Jesus' day, blind people wore a certain cloak that identified them in public as being blind. If that is true, Bartimaeus certainly demonstrated his faith when he cast aside his cloak. He knew he soon wouldn't be needing it any longer! Also take note that he "jumped up." That indicates that he was excited. People who have faith are excited because they are expecting good things.

Then came the final test. Bartimaeus stood in front of the One whom He believed would restore his sight. Jesus asked him what seemed to be a ridiculous question: "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51). Surely Jesus knew that a blind man would want to see. He was once more testing Bartimaeus' faith. When people possess genuine faith, you can always tell by what they say.

Thankfully, Bartimaeus did not respond with, "Jesus, I humbly accept that it is Your will for me to be blind!" Rather, he said, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!" (Mark 10:51). There was no doubt in his heart that Jesus could *and* would heal him. And Jesus did.

We can rejoice in Bartimaeus' healing, but I wonder how many other sick people cried out to Jesus at some time or another, and became discouraged when He didn't immediately respond. I wonder how many yielded, unlike Bartimaeus, to the rebuke of bystanders?

Like Bartimaeus, we may also need to persevere in faith and pass the test of patience once we have prayed for something that God has promised us in His Word. Additionally, we can be sure that God is listening to *our* words to see if we really believe *His* words.

Ten Tenacious Lepers

Luke tells us about a time when Jesus entered a certain village, and ten leprous men cried out to Him from a distance, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (Luke 17:13). They likely stood at a distance because, under Mosaic Law, they were not permitted to mingle with non-leprous people, lest others be infected.

When Jesus took notice of them, He shouted back, "Go show yourselves to the priests" (Luke 17:14). Again, according to Mosaic Law, a leper who was cleansed had to be examined by a priest. If the priest declared him to be clean, he could re-enter society. Those ten lepers definitely had their faith tested. They had to believe that, by the time they got to the priests, their leprosy would be gone.

Interestingly, if we look closely at the story, we realize that Jesus instructed those ten men to journey as many as fifty miles to be examined by the priests, who would have been in Jerusalem (see Luke 17:11). In other words, Jesus said to them in essence, "You want to be healed? Okay. Take a fifty-mile hike!" Only someone who truly believed would have obeyed Jesus' instructions. Praise God that all of them believed, and they were "healed as they went" (Luke 17:14). Delay did not mean denial, and Jesus told the former leper who returned to Him that his faith had made him well. His was a faith proved true by passing a test.

The Syrophenician Woman

I personally can't think of anyone with whom Jesus dealt who had more faith than the Syrophenician woman. Jesus Himself told her that her faith was great (see Matt. 15:28). Her faith, however, was severely tested.

She followed Jesus for some time, crying out, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed" (Matt. 15:22).

Jesus heard her but completely ignored her. The Bible plainly says so: "But He did not answer her a word" (Matt. 15:23).

Apparently, she continued following and crying out to Jesus, because His disciples asked several times that He would send her away. They told Him that she was bothering them with all her shouting (Matt. 15:23). She would not, however, be discouraged.

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus escaped to a house, but this woman came into the house, and bowed in front of Him, desperately crying, "Lord, help me!" (Matt. 15:25; Mark 7:24-25).

Jesus' reply to her seems cruel: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:26). That is why I told you that in my opinion, this woman had greater faith than anyone else with whom Jesus dealt. It's one thing when bystanders try to discourage you---but it's another thing when Jesus Himself discourages you!

It is quite possible, in my opinion, that Jesus ignored her, not only to test her faith, but for the same reason that God ignores the prayers of many people. He ignores their prayers because they have no claim on Him---because they've never believed and repented. By their sinful lifestyles, they send a message all day to God that says, "I hate You!", but then they ask Him to do things for them!

The New Testament teaches that "the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Pet. 3:12). God's ears are not open to the prayers of the unrepentant, and perhaps that is why Jesus initially ignored the Syrophenician woman's cries. He did, however, grant her request once she was at His feet admitting that she was, indeed, a "dog," and a "dog" who was requesting crumbs from the table of her *master*. It appears that a sinner was making Jesus her Master, passing the first test that God is waiting for everyone to pass. Jesus then said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish." We next read that "her daughter was healed at once" (Matt. 15:28). She passed Jesus' test.

We could, of course, consider other similar healing stories, such as the healing of the Nobleman's son, the Centurion's servant, the woman with the issue of blood, or Jairus' daughter. All of the primary characters in those stories had to believe in spite of contrary doubts and discouragement. All had their faith tested, and all passed their tests, receiving what they believed. All of them serve as examples for us!