

Given that any hardship may come from a variety and multitude of sources, how can we find the reason why we suffer? The answer is that we can't, short a revelation of God's specific intent, as in the case of Job.

There are two exceptions where God's purpose to test should be fairly plain. The first would be when God calls us to a place to be tested or where we know we will face difficulties. Matthew puts Jesus' experience in the wilderness in strong terms: the sole purpose was to be tested by the devil³. This parallels the Exodus, where the entire Hebrew nation was forced to rely on God for raw physical survival.

More frequently this type of test is mission-related. When a prophet warned the apostle Paul that he would be treated in Jerusalem the way his Lord was, most assumed God was warning him to stay away⁴. Paul, however, felt his mission lay beyond that test⁵, and indeed it so happened that because of the arrest, Paul was able to appear before kings⁶ and probably the emperor Caesar himself with the message of the Gospel⁷.

What was the point of God sending Agabus with discouraging details if Paul was already doing what God told him to do? Firstly, it was a degree of information that Paul apparently did not have yet⁸. Secondly, it put the faiths of all the believers to the test. Beyond the usual reasons for the test, Paul in passing it set an example for all the others,

³ Matthew 4:1.

⁴ Acts 21:10ff.

⁵ Acts 20:22.

⁶ Acts 26.

⁷ Acts 26:32, Philippians 1:12–13.

⁸ Acts 20:22.

who didn't. Finally, I think that God was giving Paul a genuine choice: embark on a suicide mission to Jerusalem and Rome or to put in more years planting churches in the provinces. One mission may have been closer to God's heart than the other, but there was not a hint in Agabus' message that God would condemn one choice, at least not more than the blame one accrues from falling short of perfect faith to start with. For what could be the reason that Jesus bid people count the cost of discipleship⁹ if not to allow them genuine decisions in matters requiring faith?

My experience has been that the more a mission is worth doing, the more difficulty it entails and faith it requires. (Example)

The other exception where God's purpose to test should be plain is what I call "pure testing." Some unlikely event occurs that has no agency other than dumb accident and that puts one's faith on the line.

Once my old car was having electrical issues and wouldn't start. Just then my neighbor was heading out from her garage, so naturally I asked her for a jump. "Well, just so long as you know how to do it," she said.

"Of course," I replied, the way men always do when they don't know they're about to be completely humiliated.

Her car did not have the usual battery hookup, but I improvised easily enough as the hot connections were still coded red. The jump went fine, I unhooked the cables, and she drove off as far as the end of the alley before her car started having problems of its own.

⁹ Luke 14:28–33.

She turned around and drove halfway back to her garage before it conked out entirely. Nothing would coax her motor back on, and we ended up having to call a tow truck after all.

It turned out that her car has a special post to jump from, and I had fried the computer. Of course, no one could explain why the intervening fuse did not blow or how the car managed to function afterward, but there it was: an \$800 jumpstart! My neighbors, good people that they are, were reluctant to pass along the bad news, and indeed I was reluctant to hear it. But then I thought, “My God shall supply all my needs, according to his riches in glory. Guess I didn’t really need that \$800.” Realizing that this was all a test, I started laughing. My neighbors didn’t know what to think of my cheery disposition as I handed them a check to cover all their expenses, with gratitude and apologies for inconveniencing them.

Pure tests like this don’t in and of themselves affect what is being tested. A spelling test does not help or ruin one’s orthography, for example, and an experiment, to be scientific, is supposed to not influence its findings. In my story, I either had the faith to easily part with such a sum of money or I didn’t *before* I left my back door that morning. Similarly, a pure test will neither grow nor decrease faith.

Often, I think, we believe a test causes the weakness of our faith that is displayed by that test. In fact, the weaknesses are already there, but unrevealed until tests make them manifest. After all, as I will show in the next couple of chapters, that’s precisely what tests are for.

James makes the point somewhat unclearly early on in the collection of his instructions. “His blessing to the man who endures temptation, for when he is tested he will receive a crown of life...Not should say a man when he is tempted, from God am tempted

I...but each man from his desire is tempted...”¹⁰ I like the Aramaic source here, not just because it is the language James probably taught in, but because it more clearly shows James is speaking about two interrelated but different things: testing and temptation. Until our faith is perfect, we will *always* be tempted when tested; tempted basically to not trust God but take matters into our own hands. James is saying that we must realize that the temptation is coming from our carnal tradition of distrust and not from the test that is revealing that tradition. This is important, lest we start blaming God and becoming bitter against him for what is, after all, our own shortcomings. To blame God for the temptation we experience during a test would be like blaming the electric utility for how a light bulb shows all the dirt on a white kitchen floor. How can we ever grow in our faith unless we see where it falls short? How can we see where it falls short unless testing pushes those weaknesses into something perceptible? How else could God possibly help us here, other than providing the tests at a level that he thinks we can withstand?

¹⁰ Portions of James 1:12–14, as translated by Glen David Bauscher in *The Peshitta Aramaic-English New Testament: An Interlinear Translation*.