

“Testing God”

a sermon by

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Text: “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7).

One of the books that has had a remarkable impact on my life is William Manchester’s magnificent biography of Winston Churchill entitled *The Last Lion: William Spencer Churchill: Alone (1932-1940)*. In this book Manchester describes those years when Churchill was the single voice in the House of Commons who tried to warn his country against the impending threat of Nazi Germany. He begged his fellow citizens to arm their country and to prepare for what he knew would be a German takeover of Europe.

Churchill later referred to these years as the “Wilderness Years.” He was alone. He was jeered, made fun of, and ridiculed in every imaginable fashion. For eight long years he was a lone voice in the wilderness, urging his people to wake up to the evil that surrounded them on every side.

But in that terrible spring of 1940, when the Low Countries fell to the German Wehrmacht and France finally collapsed in defeat as well, the King of England, George VI, turned to Winston Churchill as the one person in England who had the power to unite his people. He was the one person who had warned England of what would happen under Hitler. On May 10th Churchill was summoned to Buckingham Palace and invited by the king to form a coalition government. On his way from the palace back to his home Churchill commented to his driver that he believed that every event in his life had prepared him for this moment: every disappointment, every heartache, every ridicule, every set back had prepared him for the task that was now before him.

I.

There is something very powerful about the image of the “Wilderness.” In Israel’s account of its origins as the “people of God,” there are five themes that constitute her early history: The story of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph), the Exodus from

Egypt, the Wilderness Wanderings, the receiving of the Law of God at Mount Sinai, and the Conquest of the Promised Land.

In many ways, the stories the Wilderness Wanderings are some of the most difficult stories in the Old Testament to understand. The Wilderness years were the years from the time of the Exodus from Egypt and the delivery at the Red Sea to the conquest of the land that is described in the Book of Joshua and Judges. Because Israel had rebelled against God at Mount Sinai and built a golden calf to worship, God punished the people by condemning them to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Gerhard Von Rad, in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, points out that there were two very different ways of viewing this time of wandering. The first way was to view the wilderness as the time when the relationship between God and Israel was at its prime (e.g. Jeremiah 2:1-3). The prophet Jeremiah compares the relationship between Israel and God to the love of a bride and a groom. The people had just been delivered from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. There were no judges or kings. It was like a “honeymoon” period when Israel was closest to God. God provided leadership, food and water, and delivered Israel from every imaginable pestilence. In this view of the wilderness there were no distractions from Israel’s relationship to God.

The second view of the wilderness years is quite different. Deuteronomy speaks of the “great and terrible” wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:15-18). It was a rugged and violent place, where life was menaced by drought, hunger, serpents and scorpions. Jeremiah echoes this same sentiment when he calls it a land of “pits, of thirst and darkness where none passes through and one dwells”(Jeremiah 2:6).

During the time of the “Wilderness Wanderings” we read that the people rebelled against Moses, their leader, and against God as well. The story of God’s providing of the water at Horeb is one of these stories. According to the Book of Exodus, the people were thirsty. The wilderness was a desert and there was no water. So they turn in rebellion against Moses. They want to know if this is why he led them from the safety of Egypt, so they, their children, and their livestock might die of thirst.

Moses, in desperation, turns to God, who commands Moses to strike the rock with his rod. And when Moses did so, fresh water flowed from the rock and the people drank. Then we read that Moses called the place “Massah” and “Meribah,” which means “place of testing” and “place of quarrelling.”

The story is generally viewed as one of the rebellion stories where Israel rebels against its leader Moses. But it is more than that. It is not a story about the rebellion of a people against their leader; it is a story about their rebellion against God. That insight is clear in the last verse of this narrative where the people raise the question: “Is the Lord on our side or not?”(Exodus 17:7).

You see, it is one thing for God to test us. The Old and New Testament are filled with stories of God testing people: Abraham on Mount Moriah; Daniel and his friends bowing before an idol; Jesus in Gethsemane; Paul, struck blind on the road to Damascus.

But testing God is a different matter. Testing God is a role reversal when we demand of God that he do what we want, that he heal our illness, improve our marriage, and secure a promotion for us. Testing God, as our Scripture attests, is a very serious matter indeed and it is one that demands our attention and thought in a number of ways.

II.

In the Reformed or Presbyterian faith we have always held that there is a radical distinction between the Creator and the creature. God is the creator and we are the creature. God is infinite and we are finite. That means that “God’s ways are not our ways and his thoughts not our thoughts.”

In St Augustine’s great work *The Confessions*, there is a remarkable passage that bears witness to the magnificent way that works in human life. Augustine noted that as a young man he was very rebellious and led a profligate life. This way of life had become a great source of sorrow to his mother, Monica, who was a devout Christian. She wanted more than anything for her son to become a Christian. On one occasion he went to his mother to tell her that he was leaving their home in North Africa to go on a journey to Italy. It almost broke his mother’s heart. Italy was a notoriously pagan country and his worried mother was fearful of the temptations that her son would face on such a journey. She begged her son not to go on that journey. For an entire night Augustine’s mother prayed in the small chapel in Hippo that her son would not take this journey, but even as she prayed, her son set sail to Italy.

Something, however, very remarkable happened to Augustine in Italy. During his travels he came to the city of Milan. There was a great Christian teacher in Milan by the name of Ambrose, and Augustine was drawn to his teaching. In a remarkable turn of events, Ambrose converted Augustine to Christianity.

In his *Confessions* Augustine observed that he was converted to Christianity in the very place that he would not have ever visited had his mother’s prayers been answered. Augustine concluded that God had denied his mother’s prayer that he not go to Milan in order to answer her deepest prayer, that her son become a Christian.

III.

There is another dimension to this whole matter of “testing God” and it is that God never provides us more than we need for the moment. One of the greatest frustrations of the people of Israel was that God would never give them a large supply of bread and water in the wilderness. Each morning there was manna (bread) given to them and in the evening there was quail. But God never provided more than “daily bread.”

That is a familiar story for us. We pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” but most of us want more than that. One of the ways that we test God is by demanding that God secure our future, when in reality God always gives us what we need for the present time.

There are essentially two kinds of faith. One is determined by the word “If.” If everything goes well for me, if my life goes as planned, if my wishes are granted and things go my way, then I will believe and trust in God.

The other kind of faith is determined by words like “But if not,” “Nevertheless,” and “Even though.” I want to succeed, but if not; I want to get well but if not; I want my children to succeed, but if not. God save me from that tragic possibility, but if not... nevertheless..... I will believe and trust Him.

That is a kind of faith that is found throughout Scripture:

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.”

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

“Though the waters roar and are troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof...The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

In those dark days of 1939, King George VI of England spoke these words in his Christmas radio address:

“I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,

‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’

And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

Amen.