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## God's Tests

By David Servant

# THREE

## Midnight Praise

*For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink....Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. And do not be idolaters, as some of them were....Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction... (1 Cor. 10:1-11).*

It's not up for debate. According to Paul, the biblical stories about the Israelites have been preserved for our benefit, that we might not follow their poor example. The "congregation in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38) failed test after test, and when they ultimately believed the reports of ten doubt-filled spies, God gave them up as hopeless. Because of their unbelief, they failed to enter the Promised Land (see Heb. 3:19). It is a tragic story indeed.

I often think of the wandering Israelites when I hear someone say, "Well, if God wants me to have something, He'll just give it to me." That is obviously an untrue conclusion. God wanted the Israelites to possess the land of Canaan, but they didn't. Whether or not they possessed their inheritance ultimately depended on them, not God. But they never did learn to trust Him. Rather, they always "leaned on their own understanding." Consequently, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years—where the majority eventually died. Then God began working with the new generation. (And they were obviously tested themselves, for example, at Jericho.)

You and I certainly don't want to follow the poor example of that first generation of Israelites, but unfortunately, too many of us are. We're always grumbling and complaining about the problems we face even though our Bibles tell us that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His

purpose” (Rom. 8:28). We don’t trust God in the midst of difficulties even though we know He loves us dearly. Our faith falters. As a result, we also fail to enter our “Promised Land,” never experiencing the Lord’s fullest blessing on our lives, and never becoming the ministers of His blessings to others that He desires for us.

Through the apostle James, our Lord admonishes us:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (Jas. 1:2-4).

One translation of this verse says that when we encounter difficulties, we should “welcome them as friends.” How many of us are doing that? When a trial comes knocking at our doors, do we say, “Praise the Lord! HELLO, MR. TRIAL! You arrive as an opportunity for me to prove God’s promises are true, and once you’re gone, I’ll be a better person for having had you around! My faith will be even stronger; I’ll have a good testimony to share with others; and I’ll be even closer to being ‘perfect and complete, lacking in nothing!’?”

Difficulties assail us all, but it is only those who have faith in God who receive the reward of their faith. Just ask any Israelite. The person who doesn’t trust the promises of God may never find deliverance from his situation—just like the Israelites who died in the desert.

### **The Majority is Not Always Right**

The people of Israel essentially failed every test they faced in the wilderness, culminating with their refusal to enter the Promised Land because they feared the Canaanites. They’d heard that there were “giants in the land,” and they felt like grasshoppers.

What they should have done, however, was to look not at the size of a few overgrown Canaanites but at the size of God. The Canaanites would then have looked like ants. Because the Israelites embraced the wrong perspective, they all eventually perished in the wilderness. Everyone, that is, except Joshua and Caleb, the only two men who believed that God’s promise was more trustworthy than their circumstances. Eventually, they possessed the land. The lesson, written for our benefit, is so obvious that only a theologian could miss it! Believers are blessed! Doubters aren’t.

“I don’t like that kind of teaching!” some will say. The reason is because they don’t want to take responsibility for their failures. They would rather live the lie that it is God’s will for them to remain in the wilderness.

Sometimes those of us who are disregarding our circumstances and trusting God’s Word feel like we are in a minority, and we are. Think about Joshua and Caleb. They were the only two out of more than a million others. Personally, however, I’d rather be classified with the minority who are living in the land that flows with milk and honey than with the majority whose bones are six feet under!

### **Paul and Silas Under Fire**

Prayers of grumbling and complaint rarely receive a favorable answer, but there is something about rejoicing and praising that catches God’s attention. Why is that? Because God responds to faith, and faith is expressed through joy. A wonderful example of this principle is found in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. Allow me to recount the story.

Paul and Silas were doing their best to determine God's leading during their second missionary journey when Paul received a vision one night. In that vision he saw a man in Macedonia (modern Greece) calling out to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). So he and Silas set sail for Macedonia, and upon their arrival first preached the gospel in a city named Philippi.

Everything went well at first—a woman named Lydia was saved, and a young girl was dramatically delivered from a demon. Then trouble began. Paul and Silas soon found themselves in chains, in prison, after having been beaten with rods by the local Roman authorities.

Now before we continue with the story, let's ask ourselves some questions.

First question: Who was it that led Paul and Silas to Philippi?

Answer: It was God Himself.

Second question: Did God know beforehand that Paul and Silas would be beaten and incarcerated?

Answer: Of course He did. Therefore, Paul and Silas could rest in God's guidance and His sovereignty. They knew they were in God's perfect will. (It's a little different when you are out of God's will and find yourself in jail. Then the first thing you need to do is repent.)

Third question: What was Paul and Silas' response to their adversity?

Answer: At midnight, they were praying and singing hymns of praise to God!

Fourth and final question: What happened then?

Answer: Suddenly there was a great earthquake, and every prisoner's chains were unfastened. The unsaved jailer almost committed suicide, but he was gloriously saved along with his whole family. A few hours later, that newly born-again jailer was serving Paul and Silas a hot meal in his own home. Glory be!

I'm afraid that many of us, had we been Paul and Silas, might have acted differently, and the story might have had a different ending. Instead of praising God, we'd be grumbling to the jailer about the room temperature and the food. The jailer would have concluded that Christians are no different than anyone else. During our prayers, we'd be asking God why He didn't love us anymore.

Paul and Silas, however, had faith in God.

Did they have faith that God was going to deliver them from prison? No, they couldn't have faith for that because God has never promised us that we will always be delivered from the persecution we suffer. They could, however, at least believe that "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28), because they knew they were in the center of God's will and that He loved them.

We should follow their good example. It was while incarcerated that Paul wrote the famous words, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4).

### **Faith that Overcomes**

Before we close this chapter I'd like to consider one final example of a man who knew what to do when trouble arose. He didn't have a last name, but his first name was David, and he authored numerous psalms during tough times. We could look at many examples of his faith during trials, but let's just survey Psalm 3. David wrote it when he was running for his life from his own son, Absalom. (Talk about having a bad day!)

O Lord, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me. Many are saying of my soul, "There is no deliverance for him in God" (Ps. 3:1-2).

So there you have the problem stated. Many of us would have ended our prayer right there with, "In Jesus' name, Amen." David, however, knew better.

But [that means there is something else to consider besides the problem] Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me [that means those folks who are out to get me aren't going to get me], my glory, and the One who lifts my head. I was crying to the Lord with my voice, and He answered me [Notice he didn't say, "I sure do *hope* He heard me"] from His holy mountain. I lay down and slept [There's no sense staying awake all night and fretting]; I awoke, for the Lord sustains me [My adversaries didn't get me while I was sleeping because God was watching over me]. I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about [Why should I be afraid of all of them if God is on my side?]. Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God! For Thou hast smitten all my enemies on the cheek [My faith is strong because I've seen you deliver me from my enemies before]; Thou hast shattered the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord; and blessing be upon Thy people! (Ps. 3:3-8).

Take note that there are no lines in Psalm 3 that read, "God, I know that Thou art sovereign, and so I accept this trouble as from Thine dear hand. I do not understand whyest Thou wouldest wantest a rebellious teenager to kill me and take my throne, but Your ways are higher than my ways. So I humbly accept this cross that Thou must want me to bear." (Always beware when you hear a "*King James* prayer.") It's always easier to be a fatalist than a believer.

David was no fatalist. He trusted God for his deliverance. And he *was* delivered, as we know from reading about the very trial he was facing in 2 Samuel 15.

If you want the kind of results that David enjoyed, you'll have to trust God like he did. So don't forget: *Doubters are stressed; believers are blessed. Doubts pout, but faith shouts!*