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God's Tests

By David Servant

TWO

In the Wilderness

This month I'm continuing to publish God's Tests, a book I wrote seventeen years ago. What follows is chapter 2, entitled "In the Wilderness." It is one of the longer chapters of the book, so if you intend to read it, give yourself enough time. As always, I appreciate your feedback and do read it all, but I often find it difficult to find enough time to respond to everyone who writes to me. Please forgive me for that. --- David

As we considered (in the previous chapter) two preliminary examples of God's tests (those of Adam and Abraham), we gained some understanding of the divine purpose behind them: God wants to know what is in people's hearts. Adam and Abraham's tests are not the only illustrations of that truth. Scripture says, for example, of King Hezekiah: "God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart" (2 Chron. 32:31, emphasis added).

Scriptures like these often raise the eyebrows of thoughtful Christians. If God already knows everything, they ask, how can He then learn what is in someone's heart?

The answer to that question is really quite simple. God certainly knows all there is to know. Until free moral agents are tested, however, there is nothing to know. Only after they are tested and react to their tests is there something to know.

Certainly in eternity past, God could look ahead in time and see the reactions of free moral agents to their tests. Unless, however, those free moral agents are tested at some point in time, there would be nothing for God to look ahead in time and see. Thus, in order for God to foreknow the outcome of someone's test, that person must be tested at some point in time. And that is why God can say after someone's test (as He did after Abraham's test), "Now I know." The test reveals the outcome, and once there is an outcome, there is something for God to foreknow. Without the test and the outcome, there is nothing for God to know or foreknow. Foreknowledge of an event presupposes an event to foreknow!

Israel's Tests

Let's consider some further examples of biblical people whom God tested. In this chapter, we'll journey with the ancient Israelites to the Promised Land as they encountered some God-ordained tests. Along the way, we'll find application for our own lives.

The story of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Canaan is not only a historical account, but is also symbolic of our own spiritual journey as we grow in Christ. For example, the Israelites were delivered from the destroying angel by applying the blood of the Passover lamb to their doorposts (see Ex. 12:7-13). Similarly, we have been delivered from the wrath of God by the blood of Christ, who is referred to as "our Passover" and "the Lamb of God" in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 5:7; John 1:29).

The Israelites were delivered out of slavery and an evil kingdom, just as we have been delivered from slavery to sin, Satan, spiritual death, and the kingdom of darkness.

The people of Israel passed through the Red Sea, which the New Testament teaches corresponds to our baptism in water (see 1 Cor. 10:2).

When the Israelites stood on the far side of the Red Sea and saw the dead bodies of Pharaoh's soldiers washing up on the shore, they knew that the power of their former oppressor had been broken. So should we realize that Satan's power and authority over our lives has been annulled.

Those are a few of the similarities between the "church in the wilderness" (see Acts 7:38, KJV) and the church today. And because God never changes, we can learn something about how He will work in our lives by studying His dealings with the people of Israel. God is still testing His people as they journey to their "promised land."

He Took Them Out to Bring Them In

God not only took Israel *out* of Egypt, His intention was to take them *to* a destination—the promised land of Canaan. Take note, however, that Canaan is not symbolic of heaven to new covenant believers because there will be no battles to fight in heaven. There are no "giants in the land" there. Canaan's land thus better represents our growing in faith and coming into full maturity in Christ. So don't be satisfied with just getting out of Egypt—like those dear old saints who sometimes testify, "I was saved thirty-five years ago! What a great day that was! Y'all pray for me that I'll hold out to the end."

God delivered us *out* of something to bring us *into* something. Let's grow up in Christ and walk in the good works that He has prepared for us (see Eph. 2:10). Our goal is to become like Jesus and be ready to stand before Him one day.

God's Plan

As we follow the people of Israel from Egypt to Canaan, take note that Moses didn't use a GPS to find the best route to the Promised Land. God Himself led His people according to His divine route, and there was no doubt in anyone's mind about it:

And the Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people (Ex. 13:21-22).

Also take note that the Lord had at least one good reason for the specific route on which He led the Israelites:

Now it came about when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, "Lest

the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt” (Ex. 13:17).

God knew that the Israelites were not yet ready to face anyone in battle. But was it because they didn’t have regimented troops or sufficient weaponry? No, because in later battles, God would make it very clear to His people that He could give them victory over their enemies against all odds. In fact, He sometimes even *increased* the odds against His people (as in the story of Gideon).

The simple reason that the Israelites were not ready to fight the Philistines was because their faith in God was too small. Seeing an army of Philistines would have filled them with fear. So God led His people of little faith on a route that prevented them from facing the Philistines.

The Lord knew, however, that if His people were to ultimately possess the Promised Land, they would need to grow in faith, because they would face formidable foes in Canaan. *All their battles would have to be won by faith.* When the Israelites finally did possess Canaan, it was not through their own strength but by trusting in God:

For by their own sword they did not possess the land; and their own arm did not save them; but Thy right hand, and Thine arm, and the light of Thy presence, for Thou didst favor them (Ps. 44:3).

God’s Method for Building Faith

So put yourself in God’s shoes. If you were Him, and you had a group of three million people whom you wanted to grow in faith, how would you do it?

You know exactly what you’d do. You’d lead them into some minor difficulty where they would have an opportunity to trust you. Then you would deliver them from their problem, and hopefully their faith in you would grow.

And that is what God did shortly after Israel’s exodus. He led His people to the shore of the Red Sea where they were trapped. They had no escape from Pharaoh’s advancing army, and it appeared as if they would be massacred.

It is quite interesting to view the Red Sea drama from both God’s and Israel’s standpoints. Notice first of all that there is no doubt that God directed the Israelites to the precise place He wanted them to camp by the Red Sea:

Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Tell the sons of Israel to turn back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp in front of Baal-zephon, opposite it, by the sea” (Ex. 14:1-2).

There is also no dispute that God’s purpose in giving those specific instructions was to bait Pharaoh. He wanted the Egyptian despot to think the Israelites were confused, lost in the wilderness, and strategically vulnerable to attack. In the very next verse of Exodus, God says:

For Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel, “They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.” Thus I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord (Ex. 14:3-4).

So there we have God's bird's-eye view of the entire situation. He put the people of Israel into a difficult situation for the express purpose of performing a delivering miracle on their behalf and bringing glory to His name.

So let's test ourselves through Israel's Red Sea test. If you had been in Israel's situation, what would you have done? Would you have rejoiced when you saw Pharaoh's advancing army, trusting that God was about to work a miracle on your behalf? Or would you have reacted as the Israelites did when they considered their predicament:

And as Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and so they became very frightened....Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?...it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (Ex. 14:10-12).

So the Israelites didn't exactly pass their initial test. Still, in spite of the fact that they all expected to die that day, God split the Red Sea and they walked through on dry land. Of course, even that took some faith on their part, as Hebrews 11:29 tells us: "By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing on dry land."

Walking by Faith, Literally

Can you imagine walking to the bottom of the Red Sea, and on either side of you, walls of water are piled up, and somehow the water is not falling back on you? I always picture two Israelites walking single file through that rift with one wondrously saying to the other, "Wow! Do you have any idea how that water is being held back?" The other one behind him responding, "I don't know, buddy, but would you mind walking a little faster?"

Here's an interesting question: Why did God split the Red Sea rather than build an instant bridge over it? Or why didn't He simply fly Israel across to the other side? Surely God could have done either. So why didn't He? I suspect it was an effort on His part to build their faith. He wanted them to trust Him as they walked to the other shore, believing He would not allow the waters to fall back on them.

After an experience like that, the Israelites should have had a little more faith in God, realizing that nothing is too difficult for Him. They should have learned that His word can be trusted no matter how impossible the circumstances may seem.

Can you see how this applies to us? It is very possible that God may lead us into situations where it seems as if we're trapped, with no human way of escape. The Lord doesn't want us to question Him or complain—He wants us to trust Him and rejoice, believing that He will deliver us through His power.

The Bible tells us that without faith it is *impossible* to please God (see Heb. 11:6). What does it mean to have faith? It means to take God at His word, trusting Him regardless of the testimony of anyone or anything else. We must keep in mind, however, that if there were no tests and trials, there would be no need for faith. Most miracles in the Bible began as problems.

Are you a "grumbling Israelite?" Your cure is found in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

When we grumble, we reveal a lack of faith. If God permits difficulties to come our way as He did with His people at the Red Sea, from His standpoint, it is only so that He can

work a miracle on our behalf. These present difficulties are wonderful opportunities for miracles, one of which is our spiritual growth.

If You Don't Pass the First Test...

The people of Israel obviously failed their first test along the shore of the Red Sea. Psalm 106:7 comments: "Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Thy wonders; they did not remember Thine abundant kindnesses, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea."

God is not one to give up easily. One Bible chapter and just three days later, He led the Israelites to a new place where they would have another opportunity to trust Him. The cloud led them into the desert, and after three days, their water supplies were exhausted:

And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah. So the people grumbled at Moses saying, "What shall we drink?" Then he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there *He tested them* (Ex. 15:22b-25, emphasis added).

Have you ever been thirsty with no way to quench your thirst? Quite possibly you haven't because most of us have plenty of readily-available water or beverages. Imagine, however, being one of the Israelites after their water supplies were exhausted. Your mouth is parched, and there is no water in sight. In every direction all you can see is sand and stones. You are weary from walking. Your children keep complaining for water. The desert sun is hot.

Suddenly someone spots a patch of green on the horizon. Is it a mirage or an oasis? Everyone's pace quickens, especially when they notice that God's cloud is heading in the direction of that distant green haze. Soon three million hopeful people are racing with you to what *surely* must be an oasis. The leader of the pack shouts, "A pond!" and a crescendo of joy rises from the huffing and puffing multitude. The first man to the water's edge puts his lips to the surface with an expression of dream-like anticipation—but he immediately spits out his drink with a grimace. The water is putrid, undrinkable. With questioning eyes, a mass of panting people look heavenward.

We must not overlook the fact that it was *God* who led His people to those waters, which He knew were undrinkable before the Israelites arrived. So why did He lead them to the *bitter* waters of Marah?

We've already read the answer to that question in verse 25. God was testing them.¹ God wanted to know, "Are My people going to trust Me in this situation? Will they lift their hands and praise Me, believing they are about to witness another miracle of My provision, or will they doubt, complaining and grumbling once again? Are they ready to take possession of the Promised Land?"

¹ I realize that the *King James Version* doesn't say that God *tested* Israel, but that God *proved* Israel. I can honestly say that the *King James* is the only version I know of that translates it *prove* rather than *test*. Every modern version says *test*, including the *New King James Version*. It is my understanding that the word *test* did not exist in the English language four hundred years ago when the *King James Bible* was translated, and that the word *prove* had a meaning that was somewhat equivalent to our modern word *test*. So that is why you don't find the word *test* anywhere in the *King James Version*. But I can assure you, after many hours of research of the original Hebrew, that *test* is without a doubt the most accurate rendering here and in the other Bible references which I will quote. If you have any doubts, I encourage you to see the Appendix.

It is quite obvious that Israel failed this test; but still, God mercifully made the bitter waters sweet.

The Hyper-Sovereignists and the Non-Sovereignists

This is a good place to mention a little something about God's sovereignty—a subject we will consider in more detail later on.

Some Christians, had they been in Moses' place during this incident of the bitter waters of Marah, would have stood up and proclaimed, "We know that God is in control, and so this has happened for a reason. Let us not question God, but let us trust Him; He has some unknown reason why He wants us to drink these bitter waters. Why He wants us all to become ill or die is beyond our understanding, but we must not question Him. His ways are higher than our ways." Then they would have piously drunk the bitter waters and become deathly ill.

Other Christians would have reacted by leaning towards a different extreme. One of their spokesmen would have stood and proclaimed, "We know that God is always good to His people. The Bible says that He is love. And so there is no way that it could have been God who led us to this place! It must have been the devil! We've been deceived, so let's rebuke the devil and backtrack to where we were when we were certain it was God who was leading us!"

I think you can see how both viewpoints are partially right, but also partially wrong. The first group, the "hyper-sovereignists," are correct in seeing God's sovereign control over their circumstances. They are wrong, however, in believing that everything that happens is God's final and ordained will for them.

The second group, the "non-sovereignists," are correct in believing that God loves them and wants them to be blessed. They are wrong, however, in not seeing God's sovereign plan being worked out in their trials. To them, anything that brings any difficulty has no divine purpose. There is a balance here, and I hope by the end of this book you have a good grasp of that balance.

If God *brings* us to difficult places or *allows* difficulties to come our way, it doesn't mean that He doesn't love us. Furthermore, it doesn't mean that He wants us to humbly accept those difficulties as our lot in life. He wants us to confidently trust His revealed will in the midst of the trial, believing that He will keep His promises. He wants us to use those difficulties as steppingstones to greater faith and spiritual maturity.

Test Three

If we fail one of God's tests, it usually means that we'll have an opportunity to take the test over again. That process may well be repeated until we finally pass or we prove ourselves to be hopeless cases.

If we pass one of God's tests, however, it usually means we'll be promoted to a position of greater blessing and fruitfulness.

As we just read, the people of Israel failed their second test in the wilderness, and God mercifully gave them yet another opportunity to trust Him. Just a few verses after the incident at the bitter waters of Marah, God tested His people again. This time His test was not centered around allowing His people to become thirsty—this time He allowed them to become a little hungry:

And the whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the sons of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex. 16:2-3).

Sadly, theirs was another display of faithlessness, and in the very next verse, we read that God responded by devising another test, giving the Israelites yet another opportunity to trust Him:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, *that I may test them*, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. And it will come about on the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily” (Ex. 16:4-5, emphasis added).

Did the people of Israel pass this test? Sadly, no, because the very first day there were those who gathered too much and those who gathered too little. Still each person’s portion miraculously (and mercifully) turned into exactly one “omerful”—the portion that God said each should gather (see Ex. 16:17-18).

God had also instructed that no person should “leave any portion of it until morning,” but some did. As a result, it bred worms and became foul just as God had warned. Obviously, the person who gathered more than what God had commanded, or who tried to keep some for the next day, was demonstrating that he doubted God would provide every day.

There have been a few times in the past when I’ve had to trust God for daily provision. He was always faithful. Once, during a lean time about twenty years ago, someone whom I hardly knew stopped by and gave my wife and me two gift certificates from a local grocery store worth fifty dollars. God provided. “Give us this day our daily bread” became a prayer to which we could relate.

That was a precious time in my walk with God. I learned to trust God, and my faith grew. If you trust God, trials are times to see miracles.

Back to the Israelites

The people of Israel should not have doubted that it was God’s will for them to have food and water. In both situations, instead of grumbling, they should have begun to praise God, trusting that He would provide.

Looking back forty years at the incidents which we have just read about, Moses wrote the following divinely-inspired and very interesting commentary:

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, *that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart*, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And *He humbled you and let you be hungry*, and fed you manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:2-3, emphasis added).

God wanted the people of Israel to learn to depend on Him for everything. They, however, were very much like some of us—self-sufficient and proud. As a result, God has to teach us the very same lesson by allowing circumstances in our lives that force us to look to Him.

All of these humbling situations are an indication that God is working to bring us to full maturity—to make us like Jesus. He was full of faith and fully dependent upon His Father, and so should we be.

Moses ended his discourse with these very significant words:

In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you, and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end (Deut. 8:16).

God's purpose in testing His people was to do good to them in the end, which, of course, is His purpose in testing us.

How can God's tests result in good from Him in the end? There are several ways.

First, the person who trusts God in the midst of adversity is the person whom God can trust with greater blessings, because that person reveals that He knows God is his source.

Let me apply this truth in the area of money since the Bible tells us that all our wealth is a stewardship from God. A believer who prospers without realizing that God is the one who enabled him to prosper is a believer whose money may very well draw him away from God. That is exactly what Moses warned of during the very next sentence of the discourse that we've been reading:

Otherwise, you may say in your heart, "My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth." But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth" (Deut. 8:17-18a).

The person who knows that God is the source of his wealth is a person whom God can trust with wealth—because he will be a better steward of that which has been entrusted to him, laying up treasure in heaven rather than on earth.

Moreover, the person who trusts God when under trial is also the person whom God can trust with greater responsibilities. If we can't overcome the tiny challenges that would keep us from doing tiny things for God, how can we ever expect to overcome the bigger obstacles that Satan sends when God calls us to do even more for Him? As has been said, "Great faith is a product of great fights. Great testimonies are the outcome of great tests. Great triumphs can only come after great trials."

So let us strive to be found faithful, trusting God in our trials, and He will promote us to a place of greater fruitfulness. Our faith will continually grow as we feed it with God's Word and exercise it in the midst of challenges.