

This Is a Test

In the name of him who showed God's love by dying for us when we were still sinners, dear friends in Christ: I don't imagine there's any of us here who can say that they really enjoy taking tests. We didn't like them when we were in school. And I can pretty much guarantee that those who are currently in school don't like them either. Of course, besides the academic type there are other kinds of tests. There are driving tests, for example, in which you must prove such things as you always look in the mirror before stepping on the brakes—every time without fail. I wonder how many of us would pass that test today. When I was in the Army, we had to take a physical fitness test twice a year. That wasn't much fun either. And then there're medical tests. Tell the truth now: who here enjoyed their last colonoscopy? Or mammogram? Or ... well, I won't ask. I think I've made my point: we just don't like tests.

But as much as we don't like them, we have to agree that they're necessary. Everyone knows that in school if there's no test, there's no motivation for the students to buckle down and study. To be sure, a good teacher knows to space out a number of tests over the timeframe of a course in order to force the students to learn the material throughout rather than try to cram it all in the last couple of days before the final – in which case the retention rate is negligible. And testing serves a number of other good purposes. A test tells those being tested where they stand, how much they know, and how much they've learned or improved (or not). A test can be a tool of learning too. I mean, if you get an answer wrong, when the test comes back you learn what the right answer was; and hopefully you never make that mistake again. The physical fitness test I mentioned before reveals the limits of your endurance – it tells you how strong or weak you are and what kind of shape you're in. And of course medical tests can reveal all kinds of potential problems that you may not know you had. Likewise, if you're suffering symptoms, tests may also tell you what can be ruled out as a cause. So, even though we hate taking tests, we have to admit that they're pretty important. We need to be tested.

And so it is also on the spiritual side of our lives. We need to be tested – for precisely all the same reasons I've already mentioned as well as for a few that I haven't. And even though we may not like tests, the Lord knows that we need them. And so in his wisdom and mercy, he sends them to us. That's what we see going on in this morning's Old Testament lesson. It's a test. Actually, it's one of a whole series of tests that the Lord gives to his people Israel. Apparently he too sees the value of giving many tests over a period of time rather than just one big final at the end of the course. Anyway, to understand what's going on, let's get the background of this story.

It happens around five weeks after the beginning of the Exodus from Egypt. Recall that the Israelites spent some four hundred years in the land of the Pharaohs; and toward the end of that time – maybe the last hundred years or so – they were slaves. The Egyptians abused them terribly. They were also helpless; completely powerless to free themselves. Then the Lord called Moses to deliver his people from their servitude. He told Moses to go to the Pharaoh and demand that he let the people go. The Pharaoh was less than cooperative, shall we say? After all, why should he release all that valuable free labor? Well, you know what happened: ten devastating plagues later, his country in ruins and his people begging to him to let the Israelites go before the Lord destroyed them all, the Pharaoh finally agreed. The Lord's people were set free. And off they marched on their journey toward the Promised Land.

And, as it turns out, toward their first test. It came on the shore of the Red Sea. What happened was that the Pharaoh changed his mind. He decided to try to recapture his renegade labor pool, and so he sent his army in hot pursuit of the Israelites – who were now apparently stuck: the Sea before them and the Pharaoh’s war chariots behind them, closing fast. This was a test for the Israelites. They had, over the last several months, repeatedly witnessed to what great lengths the Lord was willing to go to rescue them from the Egyptians. They had seen the Lord’s mighty arm in action on their behalf inflicting a horrendous series of supernatural disasters on their enemies. At this point there should have been no doubt about the Lord’s power to save them and his faithfulness in keeping his Word to bring them safely out of Egypt to the Promised Land. And that was the one question on the Lord’s test: in light of what you now see, an ocean in front of you and a hostile army behind you, will you trust me to save you?

The answer was no. The people failed the test – miserably. They turned on Moses. They said, “What? Were there no graves in Egypt that you had to bring us here to be slaughtered? Why, oh why were we so stupid as to follow you?” Fortunately for them, the Lord is faithful even when his people are not. With one hand the Lord opened a path through the sea for them and with the other he held the Pharaoh’s army at bay until his people were safely on the other side. Then he lifted the hand holding back the enemy’s chariots; and a bit later, when they were in between the standing walls of water in their pursuit of Israel, he lifted the other. And the might of Egypt disappeared beneath the waves. Gone. All drowned. God’s people watched this, and if you’ll allow me a paraphrase, they said, “Wow. The Lord really is awesome. I guess *we can* trust him to do for us what he said he would.”

And that sets them up for the next test, which comes a few days later. They’re in the desert now, on their way to Mount Sinai. This time the water supply is running low. And hey, they’re in a desert, which by definition is a place where there’s not a lot of water. The people are beginning to worry. They’re getting thirsty. Finally, they come upon an oasis where there is a pool of water. They all run up hoping to drink and refill their canteens – only to discover that the water is alkaline. It’s brackish. They can’t drink it. And this is the test. The Lord’s one question for them is: in light of what you now see, your water supply is gone and the only water available is unfit to drink; will you trust me to take care of you?”

Again, they fail the test. They turn on Moses. He’s obviously incompetent. How dumb can he be to lead us to an oasis where the water’s no good? Who put this idiot in charge? Moses cries out to the Lord, who responds by showing him a tree trunk which, when thrown into the pool, miraculously “heals” the water and makes it sweet and potable. The people drink and are satisfied. And the Lord tells them, “Trust me. Keep my Word. Believe it. And I will heal you too.” That sounds good, they decide. We really can trust the Lord.

And that means it’s time for the next test. This one comes a couple weeks later when the food supply runs out. The people are hungry. Their bellies are growling. Their kids are crying. The question the Lord is still asking is, “Will you trust me to take care of you now?” The answer, as you might have guessed, is *nooooo*. They turn on Moses, “Oh, what a pity the Lord didn’t kill us in Egypt”, they say, “at least then we would have died with full stomachs. Yes, good old Egypt; how we miss it. There we had nothing to do but lazily sit around stuffing our faces with rich, savory stews of meat with tons of hearty bread to sop up the gravy. But like fools we followed you, Moses, out here – where it was your wicked plan all along to kill us by starvation.” Now, at his point I have to feel sorry for Moses. He had a tough job. But I really have to commend the Israelites for their creativity, if nothing else. I mean, here they are suffering from hunger and still they have the ability to come up with a fictional account of their former lives that would be really funny under different circumstances. Imagine: slaves with

nothing to do but take it easy and live off the fat of the land. Sounds like the good life – a perpetual luxury cruise. I don't know, maybe they were so hungry they were having hallucinations of memory, if that's possible. The bottom line, though, is that they flunked the test. They failed to trust the Lord. So once again the Lord proved to them that he could be trusted. He gave them bread from heaven – not just this once; but every day thereafter. Each morning when they got up, there was a new layer of it on the ground. It was like the Lord saying, "See, I'm taking care of you today too. You can trust me. I saved you from bondage and I will see you safely to the Promised Land. You can count on me no matter what happens."

And what I want you to see is that these tests were designed by the Lord to teach that lesson. The Lord deliberately put his people in troublesome situations. He allowed them to suffer, to feel hunger and thirst, to see the draw swords of the enemy threatening them, to be disappointed when what they thought would be the solution to their problem wasn't. He was trying to teach them that in every situation, no matter how dire or desperate, he has things well under control and that they have nothing to worry about. And it was vital that they learn this lesson. I mean, if they didn't learn to trust the Lord to preserve their earthly lives, and to see to their day to day needs, and bring them safely to the Promised Land – a temporal piece of real estate, how in the world would they ever learn to trust him to preserve their eternal souls, to provide for the spiritual needs, and to bring them safely to the *heavenly* home he'd promised them?

The same is true of us. We've been rescued from our bondage to Satan. We're on the way to the Promised Land. But if you can't trust the Lord for the present and the comparatively small concerns of this life, how can you say that you trust him for the big things that matter forever? And this is why the Lord sends us tests too. So that we'll learn to trust him in both the little and big things.

Because this is true, far from thinking of the tests that the Lord sends as something bad, something that we want to avoid, we should actually celebrate them. The Lord accomplishes good for us through them. And that's exactly what Paul is saying in today's Epistle. "We rejoice in our sufferings". Hear that? "Whoo-hoo! This really hurts! I'm in pain! My heart's broken over this loss. Thank you, Lord!" Now, on the surface that doesn't sound right. But the heart trained by such tests to trust the Lord knows better. It trusts the Lord's wisdom and perfect will, knowing that suffering is a good thing because by it the Lord produces in us a faith that endures, and faith that endures produces real Christian character, and real Christian character produces in us absolute confidence that cannot be shaken.

Confidence in what – or rather, in whom? In Jesus Christ, of course. And that's what we see in the test described in today's reading from Exodus. The Israelites are getting close to Mount Sinai now. In fact, it's already in sight. That's where the Lord will hand down his holy Law. And the Law of God is a frightful thing. It condemns sinners. It says that no sinner may stand in the Lord's presence and live. It says that sinners must die. But between God's people and terrifying Mount Sinai stands the Rock of Horeb. It juts out of the desert floor in the valley they are following to approach the holy mountain. And it just happens that this is where, once again, the people run out of water of all things. It's another test. They've run out of water before, and the Lord took care of them. Now he's asking, "Will you trust me to take care of you now?"

We heard what happened. The people turned on Moses again. They accused him of bringing them here to die of thirst. It seems they've learned nothing. They still don't trust the Lord. And this time they threaten Moses' life. He's very much afraid that they'll stone him to

death. Again he cries out to the Lord, "What am I supposed to do with these folks? Now they're trying to kill me." So the Lord tells Moses what to do. "Take the staff you used to strike the Nile – the one that changed the water to blood and brought my judgment down upon the Egyptians; take it and stand before the people and strike the Rock of Horeb. Hit it good and hard. Water will flow from it, and the people will drink." Moses does that, and sure enough, water flows from the Rock allowing the people to drink. Their lives are spared – even here, in the shadow of Mount Sinai. Their trust in the Lord is restored.

Okay, but what's that got to do with Jesus, you ask? Everything. St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that the Rock is Christ – a picture of him. He's the one who stands like a Rock in between us and the Lord's absolute holiness manifested on Mount Sinai – the Lord's holiness that would destroy us because we're sinners. And now Moses – the lawgiver – whose name later becomes synonymous with the Law of God, is to take the instrument of God's judgment on his enemies, the staff, and use it to strike the Christ figure. It's a picture of how Christ suffers for us on the cross – how he bears the curse of the Law for us and endures the wrath of God because of our sin. And then from the stricken Rock flows the spring that is life for us. It's the never ending stream of God's forgiveness in Jesus and the Holy Spirit that allows us to receive and trust in it. This is what enables us to stand before God and live in his presence: holy and righteous in his sight.

And this realization – this faith – comes to us through the Lord's testing. First in his testing of Israel; that is, we can learn from their example and what the Lord was trying to teach them through the tests he gave them. And hopefully one of the things we learn is not be like them. Every time they had a test, they failed. We are to learn from their mistakes so that when our own times of testing come – and they will, because the Lord loves us and wants us to learn too – we will look at things differently. With Paul, we will learn to rejoice in the tests the Lord gives us, knowing that by them our heavenly Father is building us up in faith, endurance, character, and Christian hope, that we may learn to trust him with supreme confidence and know for certain that he who gave his Son to die for us will also give us all that we need for this life and the next. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!