

Tested and Testing

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

[Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16](#)

[Philippians 2:1-13](#)

[Matthew 21:23-32](#)

Do you have a watershed moment? A day you can point to and say: after that, I understood something about God, or about myself, that I didn't understand before? A moment that changed what you knew or how you lived? Most of us have experienced something like that. And most of us also know the strange thing about watershed moments is that they don't stay settled. We cross the water once, and before too much time passes, we're standing at the edge of something new wondering if any of it was real.

That is where we find Israel this morning. The Exodus itself was their watershed moment: the sea was split, Pharaoh's army was gone, freedom was finally real, and they were feeling it for the first time. And yet here they are, a few chapters and a few weeks later, camped at a place with no water, asking, "Is the LORD among us or not?" The big moment wasn't the end of the story. In fact, it was just the beginning of learning who this God actually is.

We should be gentle with their question, because it's an honest one. This is a people who had gone generations without God actively showing up in their lives. The only stories they had were about three patriarchs given promises they never lived to see fulfilled. So when the water runs out at Rephidim, a place, we're told, they arrived at because they were following the LORD's own instructions, their panic isn't entirely about water. It's about whether the God who told them to come here is actually still with them.

Moses calls what they're doing "testing the Lord." The Hebrew word is *nasah*: to test, to try, to put to proof. And here's what's easy to miss: this isn't the first testing in this story. Just one chapter earlier, God is the one doing the testing, through the manna, to see whether the people would trust enough to gather only what they needed for the day. Now the roles

have flipped, and the people are testing God right back. This isn't rebellion for its own sake. It's two parties, feeling each other out, in the earliest and rawest stages of relationship development. And notice: even though their question was, as Moses admits, out of line, God still provides water from the rock. The relationship isn't built by the Israelites only asking correct questions or only in the right way. God proves faithful anyway. But the text itself won't let us leave this moment fully vindicated, either. Moses names that place Massah and Meribah: testing and quarreling. The word for quarreling is the language of open conflict and contention, not honest curiosity. Later generations remembered it that way too. The Psalms will go on to warn worshipers not to harden their hearts "as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness." So this story does double duty. It defends the honesty of the question, and it warns us about what a question can become if we let it curdle. There is a real difference between asking God, in real pain, are you here?, and turning that question into a nasty grievance against the very people trying to lead us into freedom. Israel's question was heard. But Meribah is remembered as a cautionary name, not their finest hour; a place worth learning from rather than a pattern worthy of repeating.

If Exodus asks, "Who is this God, and is God even here?" Philippians gives us the answer, in an unexpected shape. Paul writes that Christ, "though he existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to grasp, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave". That word matters. It isn't "servant," it's slave, the lowest, meanest rung a person could occupy in the Roman world, a status beneath contempt. Paul is telling us that when God finally shows up in a human body, this is what God looks like: not power claimed, but power set down. Divine identity, expressed through self-emptying. If Israel wanted proof God was among them, Philippians says: this is what "among them" looks like. Not thunder from a mountain, but a slave's form, walking among us.

By the time we reach Matthew, we've moved from people who are honestly unsure to people who are wrongly certain. The religious leaders confront Jesus in the temple. These are the people who should have recognized God most easily. They spent their lives studying the scriptures to understand God. And God was walking around in plain sight. Jesus asks them one question first: was John's baptism from heaven, or of merely human origin? They won't answer. Not because they don't know what they think, but because either answer costs them something. So they refuse.

Then Jesus tells them a story about two sons. One says yes to his father and never goes to work. The other says no and then goes anyway. Jesus asks them which one did the father's will, and they answer correctly, obviously the second one. And that's when the trap closes: “the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him.” John is the hinge holding both scenes together. These leaders just refused to answer honestly about John's authority, and the parable answers the question for them anyway, using their own words against them. Religious credentials and correct vocabulary said yes to God. Their actual lives said no. Meanwhile, the people with a long, visible record of saying no to God turned around and went the moment John called.

We don't often grumble at wells in the wilderness anymore. We ask better-dressed versions of the same question. We come to church every week, say all the right words, believe all the right doctrines about grace and love. But it costs us something to ask honestly whether our lives are actually moving in the direction our mouths are moving. That's not a swipe at anyone in this room. It's the same trap the temple leaders walked into. It's the same curdling Meribah warns us about. Have our hearts hardened not through open doubt, but through the much quieter, much more comfortable habit of saying yes but never actually going.

So what do we do with this? Paul tells the Philippians, right after describing Christ's self-emptying: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you.” That phrase “work out” literally means to bring something to completion, to carry it all the way through. This is not the language of earning. It's collaborative language: God is already at work in us; our job is to participate in what's already moving. Even the will to do it, Paul says, is itself God's gift. Grace doesn't replace our effort. Grace is the ground our effort stands on.

Exodus shows us what that participation looks like in practice. God tells Moses to strike the rock, but Moses still had to pick up the staff. Knowing God could provide the water wasn't enough; he had to act. And the people had to follow him there, show up, and actually drink, not stand with arms crossed, waiting to be convinced first. Grace provided the water. Participation quenched their thirst.

And notice, in Paul's Greek, “work out your salvation” is plural. “Your” is like the Texan y'all, all of you, together. This was never meant to be a private transaction between an individual soul and God. The psalmist knew that too: “we will recount to generations to come the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the Lord.” Salvation, in Scripture, isn't a ladder we climb alone toward some private reward. It's a way of life we learn together, out loud, by telling each other the truth about what God has actually done: by recounting together our watershed moments, by remembering together the relationship of trust we have developed with God.

In a few minutes, we'll come to this table, the same way Israel came to that rock. We can't just know the sacrament is here. We have to come. We have to put out our open, empty hands. We have to receive Christ into ourselves before we can carry him back out of this space. That's the whole pattern of the gospel: God empties himself for us; we open ourselves to receive; and then, together, we work it out.

May we be a people whose openhearted questioning leads us deeper into fellowship with God. And as we work out our faith with one another, may what we see in Jesus teach us how to live God's life back out into the world.