

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.³ The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.⁵ On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt,⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?”⁸ Moses also said, “You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD.”

⁹ Then Moses told Aaron, “Say to the entire Israelite community, ‘Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’ ”

¹⁰ While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud.

¹¹ The LORD said to Moses,¹² “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’ ”

¹³ That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.¹⁶ This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.’ ”

¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little.¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.

¹⁹ Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.”

²⁰ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them. (Exodus 16:2-20)

God Tests our Faith

This week, I read about something called “the Turing test.” It’s a test that tries to determine if a computer program is answering questions like a real person would. It’s a big part of the theory behind artificial intelligence, which really isn’t my field, so if you want to know more about it, you should talk to my wife. But I thought the concept was interesting because of what it measures. The man who first proposed it, Alan Turing, was trying to answer the question, “Can computers think?” But he couldn’t measure that, so he came up with a question that you could measure. I don’t want to get into the debate about the Turing test. My point is that tests measure something. When a teacher gives a test, they’re trying to measure how well the student has learned something. It can be facts, like dates and names, or abilities, like long division, or concepts, like how slavery affected the history of the American south. But a good test tells the teacher how well the student has mastered those things.

God tests our faith. What is he measuring? Like the Turing test, he’s measuring something that we have trouble defining and explaining, so we have some trouble wrapping our heads around the test. God is measuring the strength and the impact of our faith on our life. Now, God knows exactly what the state of our faith is. But he also knows that we need the test. We need to see our weaknesses. We need to have our lack of trust exposed. And we need to know how much God does for us and loves us. For all those reasons, our Old Testament lesson for today shows us that **God tests our faith.**

I.

One way that he does that doesn't really surprise us: **God tests our faith with challenges.** For the children of Israel, the challenge was being hungry. The incident we have before us took place very soon after they crossed the Red Sea. Remember the story? After God sent ten devastating plagues on Egypt, Pharaoh had to let his slaves go free. But then he changed his mind, and chased them to the shore of the Red Sea, where he had them cornered. But God opened up the Red Sea and the people marched through on dry land. When the Egyptian army followed, God closed the waters over their heads and drowned them. After celebrating this incredible victory, the children of Israel came back down to earth and discovered that their new life of freedom still had challenges. The big challenge was food. Around two million people marched out of Egypt. How could so many people find food in the desert? It's not like God didn't realize this problem was coming. But he let them feel the pinch of hunger to test their faith.

Sadly, they failed the test. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron, the guys who led them out of Egypt. They said, **"If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."** They were saying that it was better to be slaves in Egypt, to have task masters drive them to build cities, to have Pharaoh throw their babies into the Nile – that was better than being out in the desert with Moses and Aaron.

Have you ever made a nasty, whiny comment like that? What challenges do you face? How does God test your faith? Not very many of us face hunger like they did. But sometimes, we do have members lose their jobs, lose their houses, struggle to make ends meet. So there may be times when some of us wonder if we'll be able to put food on the table. But there are other challenges we face. I spend a lot of time visiting members with serious health problems. I know that some families among us are broken and the relationship between husband and wife or parents and child is the source of stress and sadness. Some of us have bosses who are ogres. Some of us feel lonely and unloved. All of us struggle with something at least some times.

Those struggles are tests of our faith. They are crosses that God calls us to bear to exercise our faith. How we respond to them tells us a great deal about the state of our hearts. Do we grumble and complain? Do we whine and throw temper tantrums and feel sorry for ourselves? Do we act like no one else ever had it as bad as we do? In short, do we act like the children of Israel did when they blamed Moses and Aaron for what God was doing in their lives? If so, notice what God said: Moses and Aaron were nobody. It was God that had brought them out into the desert. When they complained about Moses, they were really complaining about the way that God was taking care of them. It's no different for us. God has brought us out into the desert, too. Now, our desert might look like a hospital room or an empty bank account. But God is taking care of us. Do we trust him when life is tough or do we complain about the job he's doing? Sadly, all too often, we have to admit that we are guilty of criticizing God's care of our lives. That sin deserves his punishment in hell forever.

But that sin is not the last word, just as it wasn't the last word for Israel. God rebuked them but he also solved their problem – even when they were whining and complaining. No matter how weak our faith is, no matter how much whining and criticism intrudes into our prayers, God still loves us. He hears those prayers as the prayers believers should pray, because he hears Jesus praying them. Jesus knew what it was like to have nothing. His parents had nothing. Throughout his ministry, he lived on the charity of others. And many, many people hated him. They told lies about him. They conspired and finally killed him. But through it all, he trusted perfectly in his Father in heaven. He was more than just a model of the right words and actions. He was perfect in our place. So now, God hears the kinds of prayers Jesus prayed when we pray. God hears the words that he spoke when we speak, even when we whine and complain. God calls us perfect because Jesus was.

And he sees Jesus' blood washing away all our criticism and complaining, all the weakness and sin of our lives. He sees Jesus dying in our place and paying for all that sin. He sees Jesus rising and declaring that it's gone forever. So he listens when we pour out our hearts and our hurt to him. He hears and he answers, and when it's best, he frees us from whatever hurts. How do you know that's true? Because you know Jesus and his love. God loved you so much that he sent his Son to die for you. He will not abandon you when life hurts. God loved you so much that he sent his Son to rise for you, to destroy the power of death and pain forever. You will win with him. You will reach heaven where sin can't hurt you anymore. You will live there in joy forever. Knowing that now gives you strength from God to face the challenges, to pass the tests, to trust in Christ and find healing and life in a world full of death.

II.

Now, it's good to hear all that, but it's not particularly new. But there is something about testing in this reading that may surprise us. After the people complained about not having food, God said, **"I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions."** God was going to give them exactly what they asked for – and that was also going to be a test for their faith. That's kind of surprising, isn't it? We can all understand how challenges test our faith. But blessings? Answers to prayer? Miracles that fulfill our need? How can that be? But that's exactly what God says here and it's true for you and me. **God tests our faith with blessings.**

In the case of Israel, the blessing was manna, bread from heaven. The people went out and they saw what looked like frost on the ground. It was thin layers of bread. God did a miracle and he kept it up for forty years! But God tested them through the miracle by giving them instructions about how to use his blessing. They were to gather a very specific amount for each person in their tent. It didn't matter if it was an adult or a child, a great big fat guy or someone who weighed ninety pounds soaking wet. They were to gather the same amount. They were not to keep any for the next day. They were supposed to trust that God would send it again the next day – except on Friday, when they were supposed to gather twice as much, because no manna would come on the Sabbath.

When the children of Israel kept manna overnight, it stank and was full of worms. God wanted to bless them. But he wanted them to trust him and do what he said with their blessings. God gives us many, many blessings. But he tells us how to use those blessings. Do we have the faith to trust God and obey what he tells us? That's the test. When we don't listen to him, we often lose part or even all of the benefit.

What blessings does God give us? There are so many. What about time? How many days and hours will God give us on this earth? Our life is a gift from God. But what you do with it matters. If you spend your life chasing money or popularity, if you just can't find the time to come to church, to fellowship with other Christians, to serve God through his church, to help other people, my friends, you are not using your time as God commands. Instead, you're making money or comfort or popularity into a false God. No real blessing will come from that, even when it looks like you're getting ahead here.

God gives us all our physical possessions. But when our money and our possessions are so important to us that we cannot bring a generous offering and our congregation is reduced to begging for money to pay its bills, we are not doing what God tells us to do. We've changed blessings that God wants us to have and enjoy into that false God again. That brings only spiritual hurt and sorrow.

God gives us even more. Our marriages are gifts from God. Our children are gifts from God. How do we treat those blessings? Do we love and honor our spouse and put him or her ahead of ourselves? Sometimes, we don't want to do that. But when we're selfish, we're abusing those gifts God gave us. When our children are a burden instead of joy, when we refuse to discipline them because it's no fun being the bad guy, when we fail to bring them here and teach them how important this is, we are destroying the gift God gave us in our family. It's even possible to neglect our spouses and children because we spend so much time working at church. That lack of balance is not what God calls us to, either.

Obviously, I could go on and on. But the point is clear. Sin twists God's gifts into curses. If we don't manage our time, and our money, and our families, the way he tells us to, we will convert those things into pain and sorrow and God will let it happen to call us to repent. If we fail to see our sin and then trust in our Savior, our faith will die and we will spend eternity in hell.

How guilty have we been? You alone can answer the question for yourself. But my guess is that we all find something here which condemns us and twists like a knife in our heart. But my friends, this is why Jesus came. This is why he washed our sins away in baptism. This is why he proclaims to us week after week that our sins are forgiven in his blood. This is why he gives us his body and blood in communion. This is why he sends pastors to hear our confession and announce the grace of God to us. Jesus has taken all that sin away. The fact that we forget his instructions and misuse his gifts and inflict pain and sorrow on our own lives just underlines how much we need that grace. It is yours. Jesus died and paid for you. Jesus rose and he announced that you are forgiven now and forever. Jesus claimed you in baptism and his covenant can never fail. Jesus loves you and no sin can change that. You are his now and forever.

Rejoice in that love! Treasure it. Hear God announce it. It is the power and the reason to live a life that uses all his gifts the way God calls you to. Trust God enough to follow what he says in every area of your life. He will bless you here. And because you have that faith, he will bring you home to heaven. Amen.