

“Testing”

September 27, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Exodus 17: 1-7

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, “a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Remember Joseph was one of God’s people who shared insights from God that allowed Egypt to not only survive 7 years of drought, but become the most powerful nation in the world. Out of appreciation for his work, Joseph’s family was welcomed as royal guests in Egypt and given some of the best land for grazing their herds. But “a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,” and suddenly the people of God move from being Egypt’s guests to Egypt’s slaves. After generations of slavery, the people cried out to God, who heard their cries, and using Moses as His earthly mouthpiece and leader, freed God’s people from slavery. It was not an easy task. It took 10 plagues from God ranging from turning the Nile River to blood and being inundated with frogs and flies, to the destruction of Egyptian crops and livestock, to the death of the first born in every Egyptian household. Even after releasing God’s people, the Egyptian king changed his mind and sent the most powerful army in the world out to bring the slaves back. Trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, God parted the waters of the Sea, allowing God’s people to escape.

But when you, your parents, their parents, and their parents before them never knew anything but slavery, freedom is terrifying, because there are so many unknowns. So God began the long process of transforming the people from a mob of former slaves, into the people of God. God let them know they were not alone, leading them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God began a series of tests designed to teach that where God leads, God provides. You would think the mighty acts that freed them from Egypt would be enough, but they were on the move and they needed to know God was moving with them. After traveling 3 days in the desert, they camped at Marah, but the water there was bitter, undrinkable. The people complained and God showed them where God leads, God provides. Through Moses, God made the bitter water sweet. A little later, there was no food, and again, God used the opportunity to test and train the people. God provided manna in the morning and said gather as much as you need for today. Those who only gathered enough for breakfast went hungry the rest of the day. Those who gathered enough for days, watched it rot overnight. On Friday, the day before Sabbath rest, God said to collect two days’ worth. There was no manna on the Saturday, and those who listened ate on the Sabbath because the manna they collected the day before didn’t rot. Those who trusted their experience over God’s word went hungry that Sabbath. God was testing and training them. Helping them understand where God leads, God provides. Follow God, listen and obey. It is the key to life.

In today's reading, they have run out of water again, and in the desert heat, people traveling on foot cannot survive more than a couple days without water – 3 at the most. Nothing new. But the language changes here. Instead of God using this opportunity to test and train the people, the people are testing God. They asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" and Moses asked, "Why do you test the LORD?" This is dangerous territory. You might remember, before starting His public ministry, Jesus spent time fasting in the wilderness. While there, the devil took the opportunity to tempt Jesus, and one of those temptations was "If you really are the Son of God, jump off the pinnacle of the temple and God will catch You." Jesus replied, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus says do not test God, but in this passage from Exodus, the people test God and it all works out great. Let's explore why this is so dangerous.

The people are testing God. Basically saying, "God if you are with us, if you can be trusted, give us water to drink." If God responds positively to their request and supplies water for them, their children and their animals; then God is with them and is trustworthy. If not, God is not. In our reading God responded positively and supplied the needed water, but notice a few things. One, God was already committed to caring for the peoples' needs as they journeyed to the Promised Land. Supplying the water was already part of God's will. Two, notice the obedience. God tells Moses what to do and Moses does it to the letter. And when Moses invites the leaders to go with him to the rock that will supply the water, they all go. They find God right where God told them to go. The people have doubts – they are ready to stone Moses and give up on God – but they are still obeying and following. They are trusting God through Moses more than their own wits. They don't turn back toward Egypt. They follow Moses forward where it looks like there is nothing. In this case, because supplying the water was already in God's will and the people continued to obey, things worked out. But the reason testing God is so dangerous is it flips the relationship. If I say, "God if you are with us, if you can be trusted, give us water to drink." To pass the test, God must do what I request, which makes me the master and God the servant.

Several decades ago I was a counselor at middle school church camp. We were in the cabin on a stormy evening and the guys in my cabin were looking out at the lightning. One of them turned it into fortune telling time with God. He looked out the screen and said, "God, if you love me, show me a lightning bolt." Almost immediately, the sky lit up and the thunder boomed. Then another, "God, if you love me, show me a lightning bolt." After a short delay, the sky lit up again. Then it started getting silly, "God, if I ask Brook to the dance, will she go with me? Lightning means yes." "Will I fail algebra like my brother did?" "Will tomorrow's breakfast be better than today's?" and so on. It seemed silly, but some were really taking it seriously and reacting as if these were promises from God. I knew what they were doing was not faithful, but I wasn't sharp enough to recognize it as testing God – of making God submit to us. God, I will believe you love me if you make it lightning, if you supply water, if Brook goes to the dance with me, if I get into the college I want, if I don't get pregnant, if I do get pregnant, if I get to live on

the lake, if I become a millionaire, if I win the lottery, if... if... if... then God, I will know you are with me and that you can be trusted.

When we make our faith contingent on God answering our requests, then we have taken God out of God's role as God, as leader, as Lord, and put God into our role as obedient servant, and that is counterproductive because we get caught in the dessert. God gets so busy doing what we want that God cannot lead us out of danger and into peace and prosperity. So we end up either having no faith because God doesn't do what we ask, or we get stuck in the downward spiral of selfishville because God is just doing what we ask and can't lead us to the promise land of peace, joy, and contentment. That is why God doesn't play the game.

So where does this leave us? How can you tell if God is in our midst? Those recently freed slaves knew they could not make it without God in their midst. They would certainly perish. And I often find myself in the same boat. God I cannot do this alone. I need to know you are with me. But how can we know? How can we test it? Malachi 3:10 is helpful here. In it God begs the people to put God to the testing saying, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." God says, "put me to the test." But not by making an obstacle course for God to run through, but rather by letting God be God. God says follow My lead. Do what I ask. Be obedient to My laws. Follow my ways. And see what happens. See if you don't find the promise land of peace, joy and contentment. When God says worship me through Jesus, worship. When God says study and learn about Me and My ways, study. When God says serve one another, serve. When God says tithe, tithe. When God says share your faith with others in a way that makes them want to become Jesus followers, share. Love God, and show that love by loving God's children as you love yourself. Whether they are your family, friend, stranger, or enemy – love them in word and deed. Let God define right and wrong, not your political party or your feelings. Do these things. Test God. Do them and see if God will not bring you to the promise land.

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