

Sermon for February 1st, 2026

SEPTUAGESIMA

READINGS

Exodus 17:1-7

1 All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. **2** Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" **3** But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" **4** So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." **5** And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. **6** Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. **7** And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Psalms 95

1 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
3 For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
7 For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
Today, if you hear his voice,
8 do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
9 when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
10 For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways."
11 Therefore I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter my rest."

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5

9:24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. **25** Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. **26** So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. **27** But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, **2** and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, **3** and all ate the same spiritual food, **4** and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. **5** Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Matthew 20:1-16

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, **4** and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ **5** So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. **6** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ **7** They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ **8** And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ **9** And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. **10** Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. **11** And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, **12** saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ **13** But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? **14** Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ **16** So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Our text for meditation this Septuagesima Sunday is on our Old Testament reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Testing From God

God tests us. When He told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac at Mount Moriah, it was explicitly a test of the patriarch's faith.¹ He tested Israel in the wilderness with the bread from Heaven, to see if they would obey His instructions.² After Israel conquered the Promised Land and started to fall into idolatry, God permitted the pagan peoples to remain in the land in order to *test* the loyalty of His people.³ By the time David and Solomon reigned, it was common knowledge that this was simply something God did to those who would be His.⁴ The Psalmists sing about this dynamic.⁵ The entirety of the Book of Job details one man's trial as God permits one of the most brutal tests of faith imaginable. This is something that He always does.

¹ Genesis 22

² Exodus 16:1-4

³ Judges 2:20-22, Judges 3:1-4

⁴ 1 Chronicles 29:17, Proverbs 17:3

⁵ Psalm 7:9, 11:4-5, 66:10, etc.

Truth be told, He does not *need* to test us. He already knows the hearts of men.⁶ But the fact is, with these tests He shows us who we really are. These are not temptations to *sin*, for God does not tempt anyone to sin;⁷ instead they are opportunities to show Him what we are truly made of. Either we are obedient and doing well, or there is sin already present in our heart that needs to be addressed. You see, salvation is a matter of the *heart*. If our hearts remain untested, then our relationship with Him is shallow at best and inauthentic at worst. For those who would follow God, such trials show us who we are and where we must improve so as to please Him.

I cannot stress enough that we need this sort of thing if we wish to grow as Christians. Fruit trees are pruned so they can bear more fruit. Athletes are made to endure harsh physical circumstances to make them winners. Christians are tested so as to have direction and spiritual growth. And no my friend, we cannot learn about ourselves in the deepest sense without it. A man does not know if he is a coward or brave until he has been put in a situation where he must be brave to make it through. A woman does not know how she will do in childbirth until she has been through it. Men and women do not know how truly good they would be as parents until they *are* parents. Sure, we can *prepare* for these things to some extent, but the only way to show our character is to be *tested*.

Testing God

The believer can expect to be tested occasionally throughout their entire lives. This is a part of our relationship with God, and it makes it *real*, as opposed to the therapeutic and shallow deism of most religious people. God treats you like you matter, precisely because you matter to Him and He wants to work with you. But over the course of this process, there is one very important rule: don't test God back. He can test you, you cannot test Him.

In our Old Testament reading, the quarreling and testing from the Israelites so offends God that the area is named after the ordeal.⁸ For that matter, this incident was cited in a later commandment: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah." Moses comments that this incident provoked great wrath in God – not once, but three times he brings it up!⁹ In our Psalm reading, the Psalmist cites it as the opening offense for the *forty years* of rebellion in the wilderness. Suffice it to say, our Lord hates being tested, especially when it's from the people that He is testing!

This might sound unfair. Why would God have such a double standard? First, allow me to say this: God *is* the standard. He is perfect, infinite, holy and good – and He *knows* it. For anyone who would believe in our Lord, they must believe that He is always faithful, always good, and that He has our best interests in mind. This is a central part of the faith – obedience to the First Commandment. Commenting on the words "You shall have no other gods before me," Luther writes:

Therefore it is the intent of this commandment to require true faith and trust of the heart which settles upon the only true God, and clings to Him alone. That is as much as to say: "See to it that you let Me alone be your God, and never seek another," i.e.: Whatever you lack of good things, expect it of Me, and look to Me for it, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, creep and cling to Me. I, yes, I, will give you enough and help you out of every need; only let not your heart cleave to or rest in any other.¹⁰

The Israelites saw God deliver them from slavery in Egypt. They saw Him give them manna from heaven. They saw all of His great power and the supernatural compassion which led them out of bondage. For them to turn around and test God and doubt Moses's words tells our Lord that they don't expect anything good from Him – they don't trust Him! It was not only insulting on account of their

6 Luke 16:14-15

7 James 1:13

8 "Massah" means "testing" or "trial."

9 Deuteronomy 6:16, 9:22, 33:8

10 <https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/ten-commandments/#:~:text=Therefore%20it%20is,in%20any%20other.>

ingratitude, it also demonstrated a lack of the trust that is so, so so important to having a relationship with God.

Without faith in the goodness of God, tests from Him appear like tyranny. If you don't trust God to have your best interests in mind, then when He tests you it will look like He is merely trying to harm for harm's sake. Since the Israelites did not trust in God's benevolence or count on the faithfulness that He showed with the Exodus, they truly thought that the lack of water was our Lord was trying to kill them in the desert for no reason. Just imagine how it would have went, if instead of berating Moses and quarreling with our Lord they had prayed! How much easier would the desert sojourn have gone if they were willing to simply tell Moses what they needed, but then immediately appeal to God. Then they would have passed the test and all would have been well.

Conclusion

Of course, we ought not judge the Israelites too harshly. They failed a test that day, and then turned around and sinned worse by testing God. Yet we all fail from time to time. That is only natural. On occasion, everyone fails a test. Every mother occasionally neglects her children when they might need her. Every man occasionally shirks his responsibilities or flees when he ought to stand his ground. We are presented with people in need or opportunities for evangelism, and instead of listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit we find ourselves ignoring these key moments and disappointing God. When we fail these tests, God desires that we should learn from the mistake, go to the Cross for forgiveness, and ask for helping doing better next time.

But most crucially, whether we pass or fail we must *trust*. I do not know what trial you are going through. Perhaps your mother just got a positive cancer diagnosis. Maybe you were just laid off at your job. Maybe life is just hard, and you are weathering the slings and arrows of life in this world. It may be that God is testing you, showing Him what you are truly like. It could be something else as well, whether that is discipline to help us stop sinning or merely being in the crossfire of a sinful world. But whether it is a test, in the midst of it, I implore you to have faith in Him, for He shall not disappoint – even if things get worse. He is the true God, the *good* God, and His generosity knows no bounds. Especially when, after you pass one of these tests, you find yourself blessed beyond measure as a reward.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.