

Welcome

How did you learn to ride a bicycle?

I had a bicycle with training wheels - the kind that attached loosely, and would often lift off the ground after a minute or two of riding. I loved riding with training wheels - I would zip around all over my neighborhood.

And I still remember vividly the day my dad took my training wheels off my bicycle. I threw a fit and refused to ride. I couldn't!, I insisted. I would fall off for sure. I wasn't ready yet. But my dad insisted. I'd been using training wheels for far too long, in his opinion.

Now, I'm nothing if not stubborn. I was not going to get on that bike without training wheels. My dad argued and pleaded with me for a while, but I dug my heels in.

So he turned to my sister.

My little sister.

My younger-than-me-by-a-year-and-a-half-sister.

Dad told her to give it a try. So she hopped up on the bike and took off. Without training wheels. I was livid. There's no way my kid sister is going to ride a bike before me! (Except she did.) When she got back, I hopped on the bike and took off. No training wheels. And I flew down the street.

I actually did fall at the other end of the street when I was turning around. But it didn't even phase me. I hopped back on and came tearing back. No way I was going to walk the bike back in front of my sister!

Dad put the training wheels away.

Now, there's a lot there for my therapist and me to unpack, but I want to focus on my dad's wisdom. He knew I was ready to ride without training wheels. He also knew that I was the only one who could get over myself and ride. He knew that falling wouldn't kill me. What at the time I perceived as a cruelty - taking away my training wheels was actually a loving test from my dad. He knew the time had come for me to ride.

Today, I want to ask a similar question of our relationship with God: do we trust that God is a loving parent who knows us far better than we know ourselves? Do we trust that God isn't going to put us in situations that will destroy us?

These questions become real when we're soaring down the street of life - because none of us gets training wheels. So what does faith look like when life is hard?

Message

This is the third Sunday of Lent. Lent is our six week journey toward celebrating Jesus' resurrection at Easter. We prepare by walking with Jesus toward the cross - Lent is a season of introspection, confession and repentance. We root out sin in our spirits, our families, our church and our world. We confess them to God and ask for God's help to live lives of justice and flourishing for everyone.

This year, our Lent series is "Bad Deal". We're exploring the nature of sin and temptation. Our English translations use a couple of different words for the same idea: testing and tempting. We think of temptation as always bad, but in the Bible, the idea of temptation is more neutral, like the word test (I know, I know - you folks in school still think of testing as bad). But tests are not in and of themselves bad. Tests reveal the state of our lives. They're an opportunity for us to see the truth of our lives. Do we really trust God? Or are we trusting something or someone else?

We began last week with our most basic test: natural cravings. To be human is to have desires. Our desires can be beautiful and they can be poison. How do we know which is which? God created our physical desires to draw us into relationship. Too often, though, those desires rule us instead of connect us. Jesus showed us that we don't live by bread alone, but by seeking out connection with the "bread of Heaven".

Today, we explore another major test of our faith: our desire for certainty. This test is actually sort of a reverse test, because at its heart, we're testing God's character. We've all done this - God, if you're real, then please do X, give me Y or take care of Z. There are a couple of different assumptions mixed up in this sort of faith. First is that God is a sort of on-demand deity, something like a genie who is committed first and foremost to our pleasure and happiness.

The other is a deep insecurity about God's love for us. We wonder whether God is really faithful or not. Particularly when things don't go our way, we wonder - is God really there? Does God really love us? So, like an insecure lover, we demand proofs of God's affections for us. Remember: the whole point of a test is that they reveal inner state, what we call character. So what we're doing when we test God is asking, "Is God really faithful like God claims to be?"

A lot of churches have strong thoughts on doubts. Some say that doubts are evidence of weak faith, that any sorts of questions are the enemy of faith. Other churches insist doubt is good, that questions are our path toward the heart of faith. If you've been around Catalyst, you know we lean toward this latter position. We love asking questions and wrestling with the God who is ultimately beyond our comprehension but who made Godself known and knowable to us in the person of Jesus.

With all that said, then, I'd like to introduce some nuance into this question about questioning, specifically as it relates to testing God. We'll see in the Scriptures today that testing God is a sign of immature faith. It's not necessarily bad... unless it persists. If we do not grow in our faith, however, that immaturity will eventually poison our faith and lead us away from the God who calls us to life.

Turn with us to Exodus 17.

This story follows on the heels of the one we began this series with - where Israel needed food. To review: God has liberated them from slavery in Egypt and is leading them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. They're currently headed to Mt. Sinai, where they're going to enter into a covenant with God - sort of the divine equivalent of a marriage ceremony.

And now they're thirsty (they are in a desert, after all). We're going to hear Maddie Boehm read this scripture for us, so please enjoy Maddie's take on this story in Exodus:

At the Lord's command, the whole community of Israel left the wilderness of Sin and moved from place to place. Eventually they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there for the people to drink. So once more the people complained against Moses. "Give us water to drink!" they demanded.

"Quiet!" Moses replied. "Why are you complaining against me? And why are you testing the Lord?"

But tormented by thirst, they continued to argue with Moses. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Are you trying to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What should I do with these people? They are ready to stone me!"

The Lord said to Moses, "Walk out in front of the people. Take your staff, the one you used when you struck the water of the Nile, and call some of the elders of Israel to join you. I will stand before you on the rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink." So Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on.

Moses named the place Massah (which means "test") and Meribah (which means "arguing") because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord here with us or not?" -- Exodus 17:1-7 NLT

Why are you testing the LORD? It's a reasonable question, and one that echoes the question of manna. After all, what have these people witnessed so far? 10 plagues. The parting of the Red Sea. And then that manna! Why are they still testing God? Why do they still struggle to believe?

But here's the really fascinating thing to me: God doesn't punish them. Same as with the manna. Moses is frustrated, but God says, "Here, give them some water."

Turn with us to Deuteronomy 6.

But now hop over to Deuteronomy. As we saw last week, this is the end of the wilderness journey. God has spent 40 years in the wilderness with Israel, providing them food and water. And, actually, a really fun detail: that rock gets mentioned again in Numbers 20, which is near the end of the 40 years. But they're in a totally different place. So a number of rabbis concluded that when God made water come from the rock, there was more to that miracle. They decided the rock must have followed Israel around in the wilderness, becoming a sort of portable water supply for them. Weird, right? Just wait. File that nugget away for a few minutes. Anyway, back to Deuteronomy. Look at what Moses tells the people, reflecting on that day they tested God about the water:

You must not test the Lord your God as you did when you complained at Massah. You must diligently obey the commands of the Lord your God—all the laws and decrees he has given you.
-- Deuteronomy 6:16–17 NLT

What's the difference between Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 6? 40 years of faithfulness. It's pretty amazing that God doesn't hold Israel's mistrust against them. But then, they're young in their relationship with God. They've only been following God at this point for a few months. And if you know anything about ancient mythologies, you know that gods had a reputation for being fickle. So it's not actually that crazy that Israel would be afraid God would get them out in the desert and change God's mind.

In fact, that's why many later interpreters look back to Israel's wilderness period as a time when God was wooing Israel, teaching Israel who God is and how trustworthy God is. Imagine: the first day you get magic food and water, pretty spectacular. The twelve thousandth day you get magic food and water? Well it doesn't seem so magical anymore. It seems... normal. Ordinary. Trustworthy. Israel learned through their time in the wilderness that they could rely on God. So when they get to the edge of the Promised Land, Moses reminds them: Look: y'all know God can be trusted. So be sure, as you move into this new reality, that you don't test God like you did all those years ago.

That desire to test God, to see if God really loves us, if God is trustworthy - according to the long witness of Scripture, it's evidence of an immature faith.

And that's not necessarily a bad thing. We don't get mad at babies for screaming when they want food. Because that's all they know how to do. I like to tease the girls in my house when they're bothering their mom about when dinner is going to be ready. I say, "Has your mother ever not fed you?" They glare at me and admit that no, she has not. Because she's a good mother who can be trusted to provide for her kids.

And that's what this desire to test God really comes down to: trust. Do we believe God is faithful or not?

It's understandable to not trust God early in our faith. That's how every relationship goes. The whole process of relationship is growing in trust. That's true for romantic relationships, friendships, business partnerships, even parent-child (eventually that kid learns that their parents are going to feed them). So God gives us grace early in our faith - space to doubt, to question, to test.

But have you ever had a relationship where after years with that other person (maybe a romantic partner or a friend) they still question you? They still don't believe you love them, that you want the best for them? If you have, you know that's a hurtful relationship. That lack of trust is poison (particularly if it's undeserved).

So too, God expects us to grow in our faith. To trust God more and more and more. Not because God is constantly whisking us away from pain and problems... but precisely because God journeys through those difficult places with us.

Turn with us to 1 Corinthians 10.

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at this passage. Paul is advising the Corinthian church a divisive issue - whether or not they should eat meat that's been sacrificed to an idol.

Those who say it's off limits warn that eating that meat is the same as worshipping an idol. You might remember that Paul disagreed, but warned them all that when our cravings (for food, in this case) get in the way of our relationships, they become sinful.

I want to read further because Paul continues on in this meditation on food and cravings and idols. And he does so with that rock from Meribah (remember that fact I told you to file away - about the rock following them around like a portable water fountain?). Let's read together:

I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. All of them ate the same spiritual food, and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did, or worship idols as some of them did. As the Scriptures say, "The people celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry." And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day.

Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snakebites. And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.

If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

So, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. -- 1 Corinthians 10:1–14 NLT

Paul takes his listeners through a whirlwind tour of the wilderness wandering, including the rock fountain, the golden calf, the bronze snake and more. But I want to highlight two points he makes.

First is that he identifies the rock that followed Israel through the wilderness as Jesus. Now, this is an astonishing claim for a number of reasons, but the most important bit here for us is that Paul insists that Jesus travels the wilderness with us. When we're in those difficult places, when we face tests of our faith, Jesus is present with us, helping us to pass with flying colors.

That verse there - that God won't test us beyond what we can stand - that's not a claim that we're super strong, or that God dumbs down our tests. It's that the one who tests is also present with us, taking the test with us. It's like the teacher sitting next to us, taking the test with us, during the exam.

The other bit is Paul's warning there at the end: Friends, keep away from idols. It reminds us that this whole conversation has been about worshipping idols.

And Paul has done something extraordinary: he took a debate about whether it's okay to eat food (what we would call a rule or a law) and flipped it around. He said, "The real danger of idols is not that they'll trick you into eating some meat here or there, but that they'll poison you against each other, and against God."

An immature faith, one that tests God over and over, ignores that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Because here's the truth friends: God does not promise us a wilderness-free life. In fact, quite the opposite. God is the God who leads us into the wilderness. Because that's often the only place we can learn to love well.

So if we're the kind of people who follow God to be wealthy and healthy, we're going to be let down. We're going to be constantly testing God, kicking and screaming and raging at the heavens, asking why God has left us down here to suffer.

And we'll miss the reality that God is here, with us.

Friends, what is your wilderness right now? Is it this pandemic? Can you believe that God hasn't left us to suffer this alone?

Is it a job circumstance? A lack of job or a job that's overwhelming or a boss or coworkers you can't stand? Can you believe God is present in those spaces with you?

What is your struggle? Can you believe God is with us? Hurting with us. Suffering with us. Walking with us.

Idols promise us easy answers and quick fixes that never deliver.

Only God promises not a quick fix, but to walk with us as we grow.

Communion + Examen

Jesus sets a table and eats with us in the midst of our struggles.

1. When in the last week have I sensed God with me?
2. When in the last week have I tested God?
3. When in the next week might I want to test God's faithfulness to me?
4. How can I choose to trust God is with me?

Assignment + Blessing

Fasting!