

Testing Times are Training Times

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

- [0 : 00] Well, pleased to have a seat and a very good morning to everyone. Just so good. I just found it so refreshing to sing songs about the glorious gospel, about God's provision, about his goodness and his kindness.
- And as we'll see, I'm so fitting for what we're about to look at. But let's just still ourselves for just a moment and let's pray. Father God, we thank you so much for the truths we've been singing.
- And Father, we ask that you would come and that you would abide with us. Thank you for our time together this morning. Help us now as we turn to your words to fix our hearts upon you and to fix our eyes upon your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.
- Amen. Well, I wonder just by show of hands, who here has done a marathon? Wow. Okay, there's about five. Robert, what marathon have you done?
- Edinburgh. Paris. Yeah. There's a hand over here. Did I imagine that? Fiona. A little bit of a marathon.
- [1 : 10] Excellent. So did anyone watch the London marathon last week? Bits of it. It was on during church, so I hope you got the highlights. But I noticed this guy called Rob Young.
- Did anybody hear about him in the news this week? So Rob Young, last week at the London marathon, broke a world record. Now, does anybody know why or how? So since last year's London marathon, he decided that for every single day until this year's London marathon, he would run a marathon.
- 365 marathons he ran. Just imagine the blisters on that. 365 marathons.
- I hate the thought of doing a marathon. Do you know why I hate the thought of doing a marathon? Because I was a short sprinter at school. I reckon you give me 100 meters, I could do that all day long.
- But a marathon, that's going to massively expose just how unfit I really am. I wonder if you feel like that with the thought of a marathon.
- [2 : 17] That's what we're going to see about Israel this morning. They are tried. They are tested. They are put through their paces. And they are found to be massively unfit.
- Now, left our series in Exodus a few weeks ago. If you were here with the people of Israel at the other side of the Red Sea. So God had rescued them out of Egypt.
- And he delivered them in the most dramatic way possible as he leads them through the Red Sea. Halfway through chapter 15, Miriam and the girls, they get the tambourines out.
- Not enough tambourines in church these days. I think you'll agree. And we get this glorious song of Moses in the first part of chapter 15 where people were singing praises to God. So here they are, a rescued people at the other side of the Red Sea.
- So, what happens next? Because I imagine if you're like all of us, the bit before is probably the bit that we know, isn't it? We know the story up until this point.
- [3 : 23] And we're probably unfamiliar with what happens next. We see God hasn't rescued them and then waved cheerio to them.

He hasn't rescued them and left them to fend for themselves. He knows where he is taking them. Big picture plan as they head for Canaan.

But also step by step along the journey. This middle section of this book of Exodus will end with them at Mount Sinai. You see it in the screen.

And today we'll see that journey from the other side of the Red Sea to just short of Mount Sinai. Now who remembers Sesame Street? Okay, today this sermon is brought to you by the word test.

Okay? Test. God is putting Israel to the test. He's training them. He's teaching them. He's molding them.

[4 : 21] And he's going to teach Israel truths about themselves. And he's going to teach Israel truths about himself. Because this is the thing. If God is going to give this land to this people, his people, then he needs to teach them what it means to be his people as they live in the land.

So the big idea this morning is that testing time is training time. Testing time is training time. And there's three stages to this testing that Israel are about to go on.

And at each state of the testing, something about Israel, their unfitness, is going to be exposed. And something about God is going to be revealed. And each step of the journey, each stage, the question we've got to be asking as the audience looking in on this, as the readers, is when Israel are tested, how will they react?

Are they going to learn to trust God? At each stage, are they growing in their faith and their love for God? Are they developing a true picture of who he really is?

So here at verses 15, 22 to 15, 27, we see stage one, test one, Marah. So Moses leads the people into the wilderness only for them to find no water.

[5 : 44] Problem. They are thirsty. So how are Israel going to react? Well, verse 21 of chapter 5, if you've got it there, like we said, this is what they say.

They sing, Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. They've seen God at work. And then three days and three verses later, grumbling.

What is exposed about Israel? Israel are forgetful. And this is going to be one of the big tests for Israel in the wilderness. Will they remember rightly?

Will they learn to trust God and to trust that he will provide for them in the day-to-day and in the tough times on the basis of what they've already seen him do in their lives?

Put it another way, will they live by faith or will they live by sight? And I guess there's not an awful lot wrong with the request.

[6 : 45] It seems pretty reasonable. If you're thirsty, you want a drink. But it's the manner and it's the tone in which they ask it that's the issue. They moan, they complain, they murmur.

The point is, it's not just the water that's bitter. Their attitudes and their hearts are bitter as well. How quickly Israel forgets. And how quickly we forget.

Don't we? Now I wonder how we're doing at remembering rightly. How are we doing at remembering rightly? How are we doing at cultivating a heart attitude that remembers and gives thanks to God for his goodness and his grace to us?

And this is what we do, don't we, when we pray together, whether it's in small groups or whether it's the prayer meeting. We've got plenty of prayer requests. But how often, friends, do we not stop to thank God for the ways that he's been at work in our lives?

Because the fact of the matter is that Israel don't remember rightly and because they don't remember rightly, it causes them to grumble. And grumbling is a heart thing.

[7 : 58] Paul Tripp, he calls the heart the steering wheel of every single human being. You know, Alex and I, we went down to Bath a few weekends ago. We took the tram.

Love the tram, by the way. But do you remember that whole hoo-ha with the tram when it was here? Yeah? And if nothing else, did that not expose that as a people and as a city and as a nation, we love to grumble, don't we?

We love a moan. We love a rant. I was watching with Chloe up the other night. I was watching, have I got news for you? Slating the politicians that are standing for election in a few days' time.

Slating them. We live in a nation that loves to grumble. Friends, can I suggest that this is one of the key ways in which we as the people of God can stand out and be distinct from this country and this people that we live in?

That we don't grumble. That we don't moan. That we don't complain just like everyone else. Would that not be an amazing testimony to the transforming power of the gospel and of God in our lives?

[9 : 05] Would that not be an amazing testimony to a transformed heart? That we don't grumble. And instead of grumbling, let's pray. When you catch yourself grumbling, whether it's in the church, whether it's in here about stuff, whether it's in the world, check your heart.

what's going on deep down? Israel forgets. What is God revealing about himself? He is a God who leads.

You see, this plays itself out in a few ways. God leads Moses towards the piece of wood, throws it in the water, water becomes fit to drink. God leads the people by his words.

Do you see that? That God desires obedience from his people. And you'll notice that that word test comes up. This is what God is doing to his people. What will they do with his words?

Will they obey it? Will they listen to it? Or will they reject it? And this is what God says. This isn't something that Israel have to figure out for themselves, what he wants them to do. Look at the words that he uses.

[10 : 13] Listen carefully. Do what is right. Pay attention. Keep it. And so the tension at this section is, will they do it? See how that plays out in a second.

God leads them by his word. God leads Moses to the staff in the water. Sorry, rock in the water. And he leads them to Elam. A place of refreshment.

A place of joy. Do you see what Moses is trying to tell us there? God knows his people. God knows what they need. God knows where he is taking them.

What amazing grace God shows to this grumbling people. That's the lesson of Marah. That Israel is faithless, but God is faithful.

Like what we were singing earlier. Israel forgets. God leads. Testing times are training times. And so they travel from Elam, chapter 16.

[11 : 18] We find them in the desert of sin. I'll be honest, it sounds like a place none of us should really want to go to. Desert of sin. The question is, are they learning? Are they growing in their faith in God?

Are they learning to trust Him? Well, the way they behave, absolutely they are not. You notice there's a downward trajectory to these stories.

Now, would you notice as well that the grumbling has now spread to this whole community? That's what grumbling does. It's infectious. A little warning for us there.

Let's not be the one who spreads the grumbling. What is exposed here about Israel? They are a denying people. And you see in this episode, they deny two things.

Firstly, they deny the past. Verse 3, 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.

[12 : 17] But you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death. Now, is that really what Egypt was like? Now, we looked at it, didn't we, a few weeks ago?

Remember the words that were coming up? The images, slave masters, harsh labor, death. And not to mention that small matter of a genocide attempt on all the baby boys.

Remember that? And what are these guys interpreting it as? Oh, we had all the meat that we wanted. We had food aplenty back there. We were in, we were in paradise.

So they're rewriting the past. They're harking on about the good old days. The good old days that weren't good old days. So why are they calling them good old days? Why are they exaggerating the past?

Well, they exaggerate the past because they are discontent with where God has them in the present. They doubt God's purposes and his goodness here and now.

[13 : 23] Is this not the grass is always greener syndrome? I wonder if you see that in your own life. We do it all the time, do we not? That we compare, that we doubt God's goodness.

What is at the heart of that when you find yourself doing it? It's a heart that denies the goodness and the purposes of God for your life in the present.

Israel deny the past and Israel also deny the sufficiency of God. You see how God supplies them with an abundant supply of manna.

The way it was described here, wasn't it? That it's language at verse 18, you see it, that they had their fill, they had enough, no one was short, no one was hungry. This was an abundant supply of manna. Two tests of obedience here for Israel.

Both the same thing, really. Will they trust and will they obey God's words? Firstly, God says to the people through Moses, don't keep the bread until morning.

[14 : 29] Eat it all, don't keep it for the next day. Now what's that all about? Would it not teach them that they wake up every day with nothing?

And so their first thought is not, what am I going to have for breakfast? And they look to the corner of wherever they're sleeping and there's the bread, that's what I'm going to have for breakfast. They wake up with nothing.

It's not going to teach them to wake up and instead of looking over here, they look up to God for their daily provision. Lord, I am wholly dependent on you today to provide what I need.

That's what he's teaching them. He is to be there everything. And isn't that a great lesson for God's people to learn? It's the first line of the Lord's prayer, isn't it?

Give us today our daily bread. You know, Tim Keller would say that the gospel isn't the ABC of the Christian life, it's the A to Z of the Christian life.

[15 : 29] We need God every moment of every day. There's a reason Johnny picked that song to sing, Abide With Me. Lord, I need you every hour. Our dependency on God, this is how it works out in our own lives, is not to be a mere afterthought with your eleventh in the busyness of life, okay?

It's to be an every moment of every day thing. It is absolutely central. You know, it was said of William Wilberforce that he used to walk around with a small stone in his shoe and every time he felt that small stone it would remind him to pray.

It would remind him that he is a dependent being. Love that illustration. Don't know if I'll go for that one but it's a good point, isn't it? He is a dependent being. So will the Israelites obey God's words?

Well, kind of. Some of them do. Some of them don't. Verse 20. See, it's not just the bread that stinks, the obedience does as well.

Second test. God tells them to gather bread for five days. Why? Because on the sixth day they'll gather twice as much because on the seventh day they'll be resting. It's a Sabbath rest.

[16 : 43] Again, are the people going to trust God? Are they going to obey his words? Well, some of them do and some of them don't. Verse 27. See what's going on here.

Israel disobey because they deny God's goodness. Israel don't trust because they deny God's sufficiency.

Now, I wonder if that's a lesson for us here this morning. Is there some area of our lives where we're not obeying what God has said? And behind it is because we don't trust him. We don't know his goodness.

Well, into this situation, what is God revealing about himself? He is a God who sustains. He gives them manna.

Verse 31. You see how Moses describes this? This is wafers with honey. So this isn't kind of Tesco's saver's beans that he's given them here.

[17 : 43] This is the good stuff he's given them. This was nice to eat. That's what Moses wants us to know. Again, do you see God's goodness? And this wasn't a one-off provision.

Verse 35. God provided manna every day until they are in the land, until they're in Canaan and they're living off the produce there. You know, there's that lovely little snippet in the book of Joshua.

Joshua 5, verse 12. He tells us that the manna stopped falling the day after the day they ate from the produce of the land. God's sustaining provision.

God's everyday provision. Do you see his protection here for his people? Do you see his love and his care and his concern for their well-being? God didn't leave them to fend for themselves.

He provided every step along the way. everything that they needed. Alex and I went for a meal on Wednesday night, I think.

[18 : 44] First night, we'd been out without Chloe. Weird. Looking at your watch every five minutes, wondering, should we go back? Anyway, we had baked camembert. Oh, amazing. Cooked cheese.

I think it might be my new thing. Incredible. The tastes were amazing. But two hours later, my stomach, completely forgotten about it.

Where's the cereal? I need some cereal. This is what's happening here. Israel, they eat this manna day on day. They go hungry again. And Jesus, picking up on this imagery in John 6, he says, I am the bread from heaven.

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry. And whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Now, we live in a Mick Jagger world, don't we?

I can't get no satisfaction. A world where we chase all sorts of things looking for lasting joy. But what do we find? We find bubbles, bubbles, don't we?

[19 : 54] They fly so high they reach the sky and like my dreams, they fade and die. Jesus truly satisfies the cravings of our hearts.

This is what he's saying. Jesus gives us life and he gives us life to the full. Do you know the bread of life? Do you know what it means to have Jesus satisfy that inner craving?

Do you know what it means for your restless heart to find purpose and to find contentment and to find identity in him? You know, Moses also tells us here that they put some of it in the tabernacle.

Tabernacle that would journey with them, God's presence with them to the promised land. Now, what's that about? they put it in the tabernacle so that future generations would know that God provided for them.

God provides because this message needs to be passed on. And I wonder how we're doing it passing on the message of God's goodness and his provision in our lives.

[21 : 12] You know, are we, as a people, are we sharing stories? Are we in each other's lives so that we know that God is at work? Are we telling each other testimonies about how God has been at work?

You know, I love hearing stories. We heard the Camerons were up here a couple of months ago telling us about how God was at work in their lives, in their day-to-day lives. How is God at work?

Are we passing this message on? God gives. God is gracious. That's the lesson of the manner. Israel denies, but God gives.

Because testing time is training time. Now from the desert of sin, they eventually come to Rephidim. And there we see the third and the final test. And I think it's probably the climax of this section.

And I wonder if you watched the BBC interview with Lance Armstrong a few months ago. I only watched about ten minutes of it. I think there was a massive thing. It was Dan Rowan, BBC correspondent, and he put this question to Lance Armstrong, really simple, a question that the world wanted to know.

[22 : 22] Lance, if you had your chance again, would you do it differently? He said this. He said, if I was racing in 2015, no, I wouldn't do it again because I don't think you need to do it again.

But if you take me back to 1995, when doping was completely pervasive, I think I would probably do it again. There's a man who hasn't learned from his previous failure.

Here we are, Israel, again, they're in a place with no water. Seen this before? Just happened, didn't it, a few verses ago?

Is the test not? Have they learned from their previous failure? earlier? Previously, they grumbled and they doubted, so what are they going to do this time? Well, they do exactly the same and worse.

I wonder, just pausing there for a minute, I wonder if that's true sometimes in our Christian lives as well. Do you find that the same stuff, the same lessons are coming up again and again and again? And I wonder if we're learning the lessons that God is trying to teach us.

[23 : 37] What is exposed here about Israel? They are a hardened people. They quarreled. Now, that's not some kind of friendly fight amongst brothers.

Okay? It's got aggressive undertones to it. They are disputing with one another. And what they're doing is they're bringing a charge against God. They're putting God in the dock.

You see, it's quite accusatory, isn't it, what they say? Quite demanding. They say, give us water to drink. And what's behind it is a hard heart and callous hearts that have turned away from God.

They are bitter. And behind the demand lies doubts. Do you see how that finishes at 17.7 with the question, is God really among us or not?

Is God really with us? Does he really care? That's what's behind the demand. How do we know that God is for us and God is not against us? That's the question.

[24 : 39] I'm reading this great book just now on public speeches. It's by a guy called Phil Collins. Not calling in the air tonight, Phil Collins. The guy who used to be Tony Blair's speechwriter.

And what he's doing is he's analysing famous speeches from history. And I read this the other night. He talks about the Martin Luther King moment. We all know what the Martin Luther King moment is, don't we?

In four words. I have a dream. That's all he needed to say. The Martin Luther King moment. Now if you're American, especially, that is a moment that defines something of your nation's history, isn't it?

A legendary moment in the life of a nation. Well Israel, as a nation, they have a moment to look back on. It's not a Martin Luther King moment.

It's a Massa and Meribah moment. And this episode right here becomes synonymous not so much with liberty, but with loathing. Because the people, there is a deep distrust of God in them.

[25 : 47] Moses picks up on this in Deuteronomy. The psalmist picks up on this in Psalm 95. The writer to the Hebrews picks up on this at Hebrews chapter 3. All with the same warning to their respective generations, learn the lesson.

Hebrews 3. If you can see that on the screen, then if you can't, let me just read it out. This is what the writer to the Hebrews says to his generation. So as the Holy Spirit says, quoting Psalm 95, today, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion during the time of testing in the wilderness where your ancestors tested and tried me, though for 40 years they saw what I did.

That is why I was angry with that generation. I said, their hearts are always going astray and they have not known my way. So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.

Then the writer to the Hebrews, to his generation, he goes on and he says, see to it brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, but encourage one another daily as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Do you see what he's saying? He's telling his generation of God's people, don't make the same mistakes that the Israelites made in the desert. Learn the lesson.

[27 : 17] Don't have for yourself a Massa and Meribah moment. Don't have hearts that are hard and callous, that fail to believe in the purposes and the goodness and the plans and the promises of God.

Wash your heart. And that's a lesson for our generation as well today. I wonder if some of us this morning, deep down, are asking that question in our hearts.

is God really among us or not? Are we slipping into unbelief? Maybe you're here and you're not a Christian this morning and actually your question is, how do I know that God loves me?

How do I know, how do I know that he's for me? We'll see what God reveals about himself. He is a God who provides.

Now see, if this was me and Israel were moaning again and again and again, if this was my child, I think I'd be tempted to leave them, would you not?

[28 : 20] I wouldn't leave her if she'd. But do you see how God is so gracious with his people? Do you see how he's so patient with his people?

They ask, is the Lord really among us or not? It's almost as if God says, to answer that question, look to the rock.

This is what happens. Moses goes to the rock and he strikes it and out comes life giving water to have people who are going to die if they don't drink.

That's how you know I'm for you. It's almost what God is saying. And Paul picks up on this in 1 Corinthians 10 and he says that the rock is Christ.

that rock was Jesus. Now how on earth has he got to that conclusion? It's an inspired word, it must be right. So how has he got there? We see Moses strikes the rock and out comes life-giving water.

[29 : 27] Jesus struck, killed, and John records for us in chapter 1, I think it's chapter 19 I've written one, that as Jesus was struck and as he was pierced, out came blood and water.

His point, John's point, Paul's point, that through the death of Jesus, through the striking of Jesus, we have life. That is the wonderful news of the gospel.

How do I know that God is for me? How do I know that God cares for me? How do I know that he loves me? God would say to that generation, God says to this generation, look to the rock.

The question for us is, have we drunk from the rock and have we received life from its life-giving water? Paul writes in Romans 9, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also give us all things?

Romans chapter 9. We mustn't doubt the sufficiency and the goodness of God. How do we know that he loves us? We look to the rock.

[30 : 45] You see, testing time is training time. Just as we bring a few of these things together as we close, to see how God takes us, his people, through afflictions, to help us see our own helplessness, to help us bring our own self-confidence to an end, and to teach us to exclusively trust in him alone.

That he doesn't beam us up magically from the trials and the pressures of life, but he uses them to demonstrate our complete inadequacy and his complete dependability.

You know, I wonder as we've looked at his word this morning, what has been exposed about your life? What areas are you unfit in? Maybe you've got a lack of patience.

Maybe you're going through that just now. You lack trust in God's perfect and good timing. Maybe you've got misplaced identity in a job or a relationship that's let you down.

Maybe you need to learn and understand and grasp your identity in Jesus Christ. What has God revealed to you about himself?

[31 : 57] from his words, his unfailing provision, his purposes, his goodness. What is God teaching us this morning? I hate marathons.

I hate being put through my paces, but I know it's good for me. Let's pray together. And maybe let's just have a moment quiet.

just if there's some business that we need to do with God, this opportunity now to confess and get right with him, to ask him that you truly abide with us.

God, let's hear it. And so, Father, we just close with the words of that hymn that we sang earlier and declare that great is your faithfulness.

Oh, God, my Father, there is no shadow of turning with you. You change not, your compassions, they fail not. As you have been, you will forever will be.

[33 : 05] Lord, help us by your spirit to trust you more, to know you more intimately this week, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.