

## **MASSAH: IS THE LORD AMONG US OR NOT?**

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins  
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Exodus 17:1-9; Deuteronomy 6:10-16; Luke 4:8-13

Text: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah."

Deut. 6:16

In my private devotional time I came across this story in Exodus 17. Yes, I've read it before, but we can read something many times before it takes on meaning. Much has to do with the season of life we find ourselves in. My eyes see life differently than they did fifty years ago. Literature, biblical and secular, is often colored as much by the reader as it is by the writer. In biblical literature, the meaning is always there, but sometimes we can't see it or, worse, won't see it.

This biblical story is one that comes to us rather early in the Israelites' journey through the desert, that forty-year trek which eventually leads them to the Promised Land. They are freed from the bondage of Pharaoh, joyfully led across the Red Sea by the miracle of God, then once in the desert their joy dissipates. They become a whining, petulant people. If they have a mantra, it is "What, O God, have you done for us lately?"

Moses, their leader, is at wit's end, and actually implores God to take his life rather than oblige him to guide the people to the Land of Canaan. The people complain, "Why did you bring us out Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" God commands Moses to go with some elders ahead of the multitude and strike a rock with the same staff with which he had struck the Nile, and when he does, water comes gushing out.

Moses renamed the place Massah which means "test" in Hebrew. He also called it Meribah which means quarrel because "the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" (Exodus 17:7)

This is a very old story, and it's easy to dismiss it as having no relevance to our lives, but I wonder if we find ourselves living out a similar story in much of what we do in our relationship with God.

Massah for us is not a place, but it can become a mindset. Massah means test, and isn't it possible for us to test God, especially when God doesn't deliver the goods to our satisfaction?

In the Bible Massah is not a place where God is remembered for a life-giving miracle, producing water from a rock. It stands for a place where the Israelites got off track. They questioned the presence of the Lord by asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Some of you who attend our Sunday School Class have heard me say that for many years in my own spiritual journey I tended to find God's presence in retrospect rather than experience his presence in the here and now. In others words, as I looked back at those times when I least thought God was with me, in fact he was most powerfully influencing me. But I didn't know it!

I have come to my senses about that, which is another way of saying I have matured spiritually, but would it not have been a far richer journey for me to embrace God at the very moment he was embracing me, even though I didn't know it?

How do we find ourselves in the spiritual wasteland called Massah where we test God? Perhaps a key way is to run against the grain of creation. Do you realize how many human beings are fighting life, sometimes very aggressively? We test God when we mistreat our bodies, with drugs, with alcohol, with promiscuous sexual activity, by working too much or playing too much, by eating too much or worrying too much, all of which is simply a symptom of believing that we are in control, and God isn't. We beat ourselves up, mistreat ourselves, and all of that tests God-given life which means it tests God. We run against the grain of creation.

A second way to test God is by always wanting more. One of the most annoying advertisements on TV is the one where a guy is seated at the end of a children's table with four kids also around the table. He asks such questions as, "Is bigger better?" or "Is faster better?" The seemingly

obvious answer is “yes,” and of course that’s the answer the kids give him. But those are worldly lies. Smaller and slower are often better, but enough for so many of us is never enough. We always want more, and those desires put God to the test.

Years ago a distraught man phoned me. He was crying. I went immediately to his house. He informed me that his wife had just left him, and, as I recall, it was a second marriage for both of them. He was lost. He didn’t know what had gone wrong. He appeared to have no warning of her departure. She just left.

He told me how good he was to her and to prove it he took me into their bedroom where he showed me a closet full of new dresses --- 20 or 30, I would say --- all with the tags still on them. Not one of them had ever been worn. In her emptiness, she just kept buying. Enough was never enough.

When you live like that, you begin to test God. You move into the realm of Massah. Part of the problem is that when you spend too much on yourself, you have little, if anything, to give away --- to the Red Cross, to The Salvation Army, to your university or college, to your church, to Hebron Grace Home, or to any charitable organization. You have lived for yourself. That tests God.

Let me read once again the words of Deuteronomy 6, and give it some added emphases:

*When the Lord your God has brought you to the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you --- a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, and houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant --- and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (vs 10-12)*

Which leads me to my third point: We test God when we have a selective memory. We forget what we should remember. We remember what we should forget. Kids often do this with parents. They remember the hurts and slights but fail to remember all the wonderful, benevolent acts their parents did for them, sometimes sacrificially. We test God when we remember the times when we *think* God has disappointed us but fail to remember his wonderful and amazing grace, his love in action.