



TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE

WILDERNESS TESTING

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

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Introduction

I have with me this morning John Calvin's magisterial two volume *Institutes*. I was first turned on to the *Institutes* as a sophomore in college; so much so that I began reading them, alongside my Bible, for my devotions every morning.

Some of you may be wondering whether that makes me a 'Calvinist.' I won't address that particular question this morning, but would be happy to share a warm cup of coffee and my views on these matters at the Starbucks on Lake Street, should you so desire.

Well, from all appearances, and from the title, and from the sheer weight of these two hefty tomes, you might think reading these would be the quickest way to kill a warm devotional life! Truth be told, these are not at all dry and dusty doctrine. These two volumes are actually all about the life of faith, the life of wisdom, the life of obedience and how it is to live the Christian life.

Great books tend to have great opening lines. So, too, Calvin's *Institutes*—an opening line that really captures the essence of the book as a whole and sets forth its principal aim and central theme. Here's the opening line: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

Wisdom, knowledge for right living, is knowledge of two things: knowledge of God, and knowledge of ourselves. To live rightly, we must understand something about who God is and what he's up to in the world, and who we are and what we're to be about in the world.

This twofold knowledge of God and man as the source of a life of wisdom, a life of obedience, is also what this passage from Deuteronomy 8 is all about. The whole book of Deuteronomy is a kind of sermon, or series of sermons, delivered by Moses just on the brink of Israel's entrance into the land of Promise. The forty years of wandering in the wilderness is now behind them, and they're about to come into possession of that which God's has promised: the land of Canaan, the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey.

And Moses' central concern is to impress upon the Israelites the need for faithful obedience to the Lord as they enter into the Land; if you will, their need to live *wisely* as they cross over the Jordan into the land of Promise.

We see this clear emphasis upon obedience or wisdom, right living, throughout our passage this morning. Right there in v.1: "*The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers.*" The same applies in v. 6 and v. 11 and at the close of the chapter, in v. 20.

Like the opening to Calvin's *Institutes*, the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy emphasizes that obedience or wise living comes through a twofold knowledge: knowledge of God and of

ourselves. In fact, our passage is all about knowledge. You see the verb “to know” in v. 2, v. 3, and v. 5. Knowledge is a prominent theme in this passage.

So why, then, you may be wondering, did you entitle your sermon: “Wilderness Testing”? If this is a passage all about right living and knowledge, why not: “Knowing God and Self: How to Live Happy and Holy Lives in the Land of Promise.” (Perhaps it sounds too much like a book, or perhaps a Hallmark card!). Perhaps a better title would be: “Know This!” (keying in on v. 5). This is a passage about knowledge. But, you wonder to yourself, you’ve got in your title something about testing. Why?!

Well, my answer to that question is to ask another question: When do we tend to learn most about God and about ourselves? When in your life have you found yourself coming to know most about yourself and about God himself? If we’re honest, I think most of us in this room would have the same answer: “During times of testing.” Ah! There is one of the great, tough truths of the Christian faith: *times of testing are times of teaching*.

Last week we saw that *life is full of transitions*. And we reflected together upon how it is that God led the Israelites through their great time of wilderness transition; and how he leads us, whether as individuals or as a church, through times of wilderness transition. God’s leading is sometimes counterintuitive, but always merciful. It’s good to carry bones—tokens of God’s faithfulness—during times of wilderness transition. And God is always with us and, indeed, goes before us during times of wilderness transition.

That was last week. This week the big idea is this: *times of transition are times of testing*. Regardless of the kind of transition it is, whether in your home, in your church, in your organization, in your own personal life, times of change, times of transition, are often times of testing. When things are in flux and transition, it is an opportune time for God to test you.

This morning’s passage helps us better understand Israel’s experience of wilderness testing and thus the wilderness testing that we *all* experience. It does so by unfolding for us, first, God’s *aim* in wilderness testing; second, God’s *method* of testing, how it is that he tests us. And, third, the *result* of God’s testing us.

And so my desire for us this morning is to shed some light from God’s word upon your situation of testing, whether you’re in it right now, just coming out of it, or about to enter into a time of intense testing. You need to be prepared, bolstered up by God’s word and truth. And this passage will help.

The Aim of Wilderness Testing (8:2)

So, on to our first point: God’s aim in wilderness testing. What is God’s goal in testing? What is he up to, so to speak? Why did he lead them those forty long, hard years in the wilderness? What was his aim? Why all that wandering around eating manna and looking for water.

Look at v. 2 with me. “And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.” So what is God’s aim in times of wilderness testing: to humble his people, testing them [here it is] *to know what was in their hearts*, whether they would keep his commandments or not.

To know what was in their hearts. Notice, first of all, that humility comes by testing. God humbles the Israelites by testing them in the wilderness. Notice, secondly, that testing reveals

something. Like a math test that reveals whether you learned your fractions or not, so God's wilderness test reveals whether the Israelites would obey or not.

But you may be wondering: why does God need to know what was in their hearts? Doesn't he already know all things? Doesn't he know whether they'd keep his commandments or not?

Let me suggest that God did not test the Israelites so that God could know what was in their hearts. God tested the Israelites so that *the Israelites* would know what was in their hearts.

Why? To humble them. It's all too easy to think more of yourself until you're confronted with a test. Tests have a way of cutting us down to size, humbling us in our own eyes, drawing us to the end of our own resources, revealing our limitations.

As some of you know, Katie and I lived for three years in Cambridge, England. For those who have not been to Cambridge, it can be a pretty heady place. This is, after all, a university that's been around for 800 years. It's where Isaac Newton discovered gravity, Erasmus first translated the Greek NT to spark the Reformation, Crick and Watson unraveled DNA. A pretty heady place, especially for a PhD student in his mid-twenties! Talk about developing an exalted view of the self.

You may not be surprised to realize that our time in Cambridge, particularly those first several months, were some of the most intense and challenging times of wilderness testing. Katie was newly pregnant and struggling with chronic headaches and morning sickness; we were struggling with homesickness and a new culture; we had a very active toddler in a very small living space; and I had the anxieties of a student's budget and doctoral studies.

This was truly a time of wilderness transition and wilderness testing. All these challenges were tests designed to humble me, that I might know what was in my heart. Frankly, I thought I would have done much better in that time of wilderness testing. Instead, I looked an awful lot like Israel: grumbling, disaffection, frustration with God.

You see, what makes times of wilderness testing in our lives hard is not only the challenging circumstances in our lives, but the feeling of being brought to the end of our rope physically or emotional or even spiritually, and being brought down or laid low, with our faces in the dirt, realizing that we're really nothing.

And that is exactly where God wants us. Wisdom, as Calvin noted, consists of knowledge of God *and of ourselves*. And we cannot possibly know God for who he is—or ourselves for who we are—until we are humbled in our own eyes. For it is inconceivable how self-exalting we can be, which in turn distorts our understanding of who we are and ultimately who God is. Therefore, God tests us, to humble us, to reveal to us who we are, that we might in turn know who he is.

The Method of Wilderness Testing (8:3)

But how does God do it? He humbled them, he tested them. But how? Verse 3 explains: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know." How did he test the Israelites? The text says: he *let them hunger*, and then fed them. Now the phrase "let them hunger" could also be translated as: *made them hunger* or indeed *caused them to hunger*. A more active, less passive sense.

So how did God test them in the wilderness? *He exposed their need*. Now I chose those words carefully. God did not create their need; the need was already there. God created a *sense* of their need. How does he do it? By withholding something they need and thus letting them, or

indeed causing them, to hunger. God tests the Israelites, and God tests us, by withholding from us what we need so that we have an *increased sense* of our need.

Knowing this will help you understand if and where God is testing you. Where do you feel an acute sense of need? Money. Relationships. Security. Affirmation. Peace. Rest. Or, let me ask you, how would you answer the following question: “I really need more _____ ? And if I just had more of _____, then I would be satisfied.” This may be precisely where God is testing you.

God tested the Israelites by exposing their need. But that’s not all. He exposes their sense of need by causing them to hunger, but then, as the text says, he “fed them with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know.” God creates the sense of need, and then, as only God can do, he meets the need in a supernatural way.

For the Israelites it was a sense of physical hunger, and then a miraculous supply of manna from heaven. What is it for you? This is God’s strategy with testing, God’s pastoral strategy with the Israelites, as he shepherded them in the wilderness. What is his strategy with you right now in your life?

Regrettably, however, we often fail these tests because we become impatient with God’s timing in meeting our needs. And we instead seek to meet our needs on our timing and in our own way. This is exactly what the Israelites did. We can’t wait till the Sabbath is over before we gather up more manna. We’ll just gather up a little on the side. This is why faith is everything, trusting God in the midst of testing is everything. You’ve got to believe that supernatural resources are coming, they’re coming, and you’ll wait till the end for them to get to you.

The Result of Wilderness Testing (8:5)

Well, teachers when designing their courses and writing their syllabi will sometimes talk about “learning outcomes”: what new knowledge or skills will students have as a result of their successful completion of this class?

From God’s standpoint, what was the “learning outcome” of Israel’s forty years in the wilderness. What was the result of their wilderness testing? What was the one thing he wanted them to learn? It can be captured in a single word: wisdom. The cultivation of wisdom was the intended outcome of Israel’s wilderness testing. When they’d gotten through with their course of wilderness testing, they were supposed to then know how to live wisely, obediently, in the Land of Promise.

But if you look in this passage, you won’t see anything explicit about wisdom. But it’s there. It’s there in the way Calvin defined it: wisdom as knowledge of God and of ourselves. Take a look at v. 3b. “[God let you hunger and fed you with manna] that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

That’s the lesson of the wilderness. God wanted the Israelites to know, *above all things*, that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

You see, *wilderness testing teaches us that bread is not enough – the things of this life are not enough*. As good and as necessary as bread is, bread alone is not sufficient. If bread is all you’ve got, your belly may be full, but your soul may be dead. Bread is not enough. The things of this

life are not sufficient. You and I were made for more than bread; we were made for relationship with God; we were made to feed upon every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.

And the frank truth is that it is very difficult for us fallen creatures ever to learn that bread alone is not sufficient unless we've been through times of wilderness testing. It is only during times of wilderness testing that we realize that we can live without bread; what we cannot live without is every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

I remember a number of years ago visiting a small country church with my wife and her parents. And singing the hymn *He is All I need*. Pouring my heart out on the refrain. got to the end of the song and mother-in-law says in quite tone, as though to herself, "You know Jesus is all you need, when Jesus is all you got."

Conclusion

Some of you may find yourselves right now in the midst of some rather intense wilderness testing. And you're perhaps finding the whole idea that your difficult circumstances are, by God's sovereign design, intended to test you as rather hard to swallow. Because God's testing in your life feels more like Him toying with you.

Perhaps you want to be married and the Lord is not providing you with a spouse. Perhaps you're trying to conceive and the Lord is not providing you with children. Perhaps you're trying to make ends meet financially and the Lord is not providing you with the money. Or perhaps you're trying to do the right thing at work and the Lord is not making it very easy for you to get on with your boss or your colleagues. And it's gone on and on and on. And it seems like nothing you do is making a wit of difference! This can feel, after a while, like toying, rather than testing.

It probably felt like that for the Israelites at times, as well. Forty years in the wilderness! Forty years of wanderings. Forty years of manna and quail. Forty years of hot days and cold nights. Forty years of wild beasts and no water. Forty years and no promised land.

If God has you in a time of wilderness testing, it is to teach you something about who you are. "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." We gain this wisdom, this knowledge, through times of wilderness testing.

Want to know something very interesting about the Old Testament? Of all the stages of Israel's life as a nation, which do you think is used by the biblical authors to illustrate the tender father-son relationship God has with Israel? During their time in the land of promise? During their time in Egypt? During their time of kingship under David? No. It was during their time in the wilderness. There they learned something, not only about who they are, but about who God is. There they learned that God is a Father to them.

Verse 5: "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you." That's the image to get in our heads. As a Father tenderly, lovingly, disciplines his own son, so too the Lord disciplines you. Not toying with you, baiting you only to frustrate you and not to bless you. That's not the Father's purpose with us during times of wilderness testing. Not at all! Rather, he is acting like a dad—like a godly, principled, compassionate, and loving dad.

As we read earlier in Deuteronomy:

The LORD your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, ³¹ and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place.

Let us take encouragement from scripture and encourage one another to embrace times of testing as fatherly discipline. The Lord is testing us, the Lord is carrying us.