

# The Lord Among Us: A Sermon on Testing and Quarreling

Bible Verses Referenced: Exodus 3-17, Deuteronomy 6:16, Matthew 21:23-27, Malachi 3:10, Luke 4:1-12

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Word, where You challenge us to be faithful to You. We ask that our hearts would not be so inclined that we question Your authority in our lives, but that we have humble and open hearts that are submissive to Your will and seeking after what Your Word would have for us to do.

And so we ask that the ministry and preaching of Your Word would be Your Word for the sake and glory of Your Son, Jesus, in His name we pray. Amen. Is the Lord among us or not? That's the question that the Israelites are asking of God. They're testing the Lord.

And so the story that we have today is named after two words, Mariba and Masa, which mean testing and quarreling. Testing and quarreling. So I want to reflect with you a little bit about both of those ideas of testing the Lord, or the Lord testing us, maybe we should turn that around.

And then the other side of that is the quarreling that we often do with God and spiritual leadership. My daughter, Ashton, has a huge dog. It's a Great Pyrenees. And my daughter loves animals. She always has. We've had all kinds of animals from guinea pigs to geckos to I mean, you name the animal, we've had it.

But when she got on her own, she went to the rescue center and she sent, we got this picture of this sad-looking Great Pyrenees, and he needs me, Dad. He needs me. And so she adopted the Great Pyrenees. And so one of the things that happens, she lives in Birmingham, Alabama. She loves to take the dog, Annie, out for a walk. This dog is huge. I mean, it's like this tall.

And the dog goes where it wants to go. If it wants to go, it can take you where it wants to go. If it wants to stop and just sit, I have a lot of pictures on my phone of Ashton just waiting for Annie to want to move again. And a lot of times people will come up to her and they'll ask a question. Who's walking who? You ever heard that one?

Probably have said it to some people before. Who's walking who here? Well, this is the question of the Israelites being led by God in the wilderness. Who's walking who? And the Israelites are being led by the Lord. This is the way that it says it in the text. "All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of sin by stages according to the commandment of the Lord." It literally is in the Hebrew according to the word or the mouth of the Lord.

The Lord is telling them where to go through His Ambassador Moses. And yet, the problem is, is they don't like where he's telling them to go. And this is one of these episodes where they don't like it. They're sitting down into saying, "We don't want to go there." This is called Rephadin.

There was no water for the people to drink. Therefore, the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" Now we're going to get to the quarreling in a minute, but I want to first start by reflecting on this idea of testing the Lord.

Part of what we have in this whole section of the Book of Exodus is the first phase of Exodus was all about getting Israel out of Egypt. So the Lord delivered them, He redeemed them, He saved them from the Israelites or from the Egyptians. The second part of this, while he's leading them through the wilderness, is really all about getting Egypt out of Israel.

They have got a dependency and slave mentality in their being, and a real nostalgia to go back to Egypt. So what the Lord is doing is bringing them out into places of testing where they have to depend on the Lord alone. It was our passage from last week where they had no food, and they were complaining, and they were grumbling, and the Lord provided manna and quail.

Before that, it was no water again, and the Lord brings him to this pool of bitter water, and they couldn't drink it. And so Moses puts a branch in and he turns the bitter water into sweet water. All of these are creating situations where the Israelites have a decision to make, and it's a real test of their loyalties and their faithfulness and their trust. Do we trust God or not?

Do we allow Him to lead us and recognize that where He's leading us, He will be providing for us. And we all wrestle with this. Every single one of us. There are times in our life where God puts us through wilderness places where we have the refine moments. And we wonder, "God, I think I trust you, but I'm not sure about where you've led me today, and I'm not sure if you're there."

Are you on my team or not on my team, God? Are you with me or for me or not?" And so the Israelites are questioning and they're testing the Lord, but really it's the Lord testing them. There's a subtle thing that happens when we test God. I love this quote from a theologian Gerald Jansen who's reflecting on this moment in the life of the Israelites.

To test God is to pose an ultimatum in which we decide what shall count as evidence of God's presence. And then we get to decide on God's presence or absence on the basis of whether God has met the test which we have posed. In other words, we give the hoops and we say, "God, if you do this and you allow this, well, then I'll trust you. Then I'll put my faith in you."

Then I'll love you." And that's what the Israelites have done is they've shifted the sovereignty to themselves by doing that. Who's walking who? Well, we want to be in control of the relationship. And so we want to tell you, God, where you need to be leading us and where you want, where we want to go.

One of the challenges in the Christian life is we have God's instruction book. And the hard thing is, is that our lives don't always line up with what God's instructions are for our lives. And the relationship of the Christian life is often in butting our heads up against this.

There's a temptation to say, well, there are parts of this that I don't like. I don't like where you've told me to do this or to do that. So testing the Lord. It's actually in the Scriptures, it's a uniform no-no. Putting the Lord your God to the test.

Jesus said this when he was being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and Satan said, "You know, if you just say to the rocks, 'become bread, God will do it for you.'" And Jesus, recalling these moments of wandering through the Exodus, quotes the book of Deuteronomy and says, "Thou shalt not put the Lord your God to the test." Now there's one exception to that in the entirety of the Scripture, and you find it in the book of Malachi, which is the Italian prophet, Malachi, right?

Come on now, I'm throwing these softballs out for you. Malachi, I'm sorry for the microphone. So Malachi says of the tithing, that this is the one place where you can test the Lord.

In giving of 10% back to the Lord, see, he says, "See if the Lord doesn't bless you and open up the floodgates." That's the only place in all of Scripture where Scripture says, "You can test the Lord." So, do not put the Lord your God to the test. The second word here, we have Mariba, which is testing, and we have Masa, which is quarreling.

And the quarreling is fascinating here because Moses is truly between a rock and a hard place. On the one side, he's in this desert land and all he's surrounded by rocks. There's no water. And the Israelites en masse are desperately thirsty. And I see this as triangulation, which happens all the time in church.

So-and-so, let's say person A has a problem with Person B, so they involve Person C in the process. That's triangulation. So, Person A here are the Israelites. Person B is Yahweh, and there's a testing of that relationship between God and the Israelites. And so what they do is they bring Person C, Moses into the middle of the quarrel.

We're not happy with where God's leading us, but you happen to be His spiritual ambassador, so we're going to take it out on you. Now in this particular section, this is more than just murmuring and grumbling. They aren't just complaining, "Oh, why'd you bring us out here to kill us in the wilderness?"

Or, "Boy, we had better things to eat back in Egypt." No, this is like a PTA meeting where the parents are coming up to the microphone for blood at the school board.

This is the kind of quarreling, you brought us out into this wilderness to kill us. And then they make it personal to kill my son and my family. Can you just hear a parent saying that at a school board meeting? You made this policy to destroy our children. My son, my family is impacted by this.

The elders of Israel are making this a personal fight with Moses. And the Hebrew word is "rebe," which is the word that's used throughout the Old Testament for a lawsuit. So Moses is literally fearing for his life that mob violence is about to break out. And he goes to the Lord in prayer, and he says, "These people are about to stone me." Now, I don't think that was just hyperbole.

I think they were ready to stone him. And this is the second, this is one of two places where Moses is almost stoned by the Israelites. The second place is when he brought them to the threshold of the Promised Land itself, and they sent this bias into the promised land, and they come back and they say, "Well, it's a great land, it's flowing with milk and honey, but there are giants in that land, and we look like little tiny grasshoppers compared to them.

You have brought us here to kill us." And at that moment, it says, "Moses and Aaron fall on their faces and the Israelites pick up stones to stone them." Sometimes being a spiritual leader is hard. And there are moments where Moses and all of the leaders of the Bible face this between a rock and a hard place kind of moment.

One such is our gospel passage actually with Jesus. Jesus Himself faced this. Here are the religious leaders, and they come to Him and they say, "By what authority are you doing these things?" And Jesus questions their heart attitude and their mindset. He says, "Well, what do you think about John the Baptist?" Was he from God or was he just a guy doing deep thoughts by John the Baptist? What do you say?

And they're now having the tables turned on them. They have to wrestle with that. Well, if we say he's from God, well then Jesus is going to say, "Well, why didn't you believe Him when He pointed to me and say, "Here's the Lord." Or if we say He's just a guy with deep thoughts by John the Baptist, well then we know all the people really love John and they think he's a prophet and then we'll have problem with the people. So what do they do?

They come to Jesus and say, "Well, we don't know the answer to that." They claim agnosticism. We all have these moments where the spiritual authorities in our life are challenging us to be faithful to the Lord and to be faithful to His Word. And we come up against not only wrestling with God, but we also then wrestle with God's ambassadors in our life.

I read an article recently about a pastor who quit the ministry, and one of the reasons that he gave for quitting the ministry was because he had a thousand bosses. And as soon as I read that, I said, "No wonder he quit the ministry." Because he thought he was working for a thousand different people. You're never going to please all the people in your congregation.

You know, I struggle with people pleasing as much as anybody. I'll admit it, but I've also got a healthy fear of the Lord. And I want you all to know this about my spiritual leadership. I actually am more afraid of God than I am of you. I really am. And you can threaten me and you can, you know, cajole me and complain to me and I want to make you happy.

I had when I first became a priest, one of my people in my life said to me, "You know, that's such a great profession because you get to stand up every single Sunday morning and make people feel good about themselves." And I kind of scratched my head and I'm like, "I don't think that's my job." My job is to be faithful to the Word of God, and to help you understand it, and to help convey that to you in such a way that you can hear the Word of God and practically apply it to your life.

That's my job. That's William's job. It's all the spiritual leadership's job. That's the vestire's job. Whoever's in spiritual leadership in the life of this church, our job is to be underneath the authority of

God's Word, underneath the authority of the Lord, trying to figure out and prayerfully discern what He is calling us to and faithfully lead the flock, the people of God, in this place, in this time.

And there will be times in which the, be it because the culture is at odds with the Word of God, or because, you know, things don't seem to make the best sense in the world, that we will question spiritual authorities and spiritual leadership. And on one level, that's healthy because I'm a sinner. The Vestry members are sinners. William's a sinner, not as much a sinner as me, but we all have our issues and our problems.

And sometimes I need you to question me and say, "You know, are you really discerning God? Did you pray about this? I don't see where this lines up with Scripture." That's fine. But to the degree that we are being led by the Lord, we have to trust the spiritual authorities in our life, but it's a wrestling match. It's a quarreling match. Now let me flip the script on you.

You, as the people of God, are called to be the spiritual leaders of this world. Your job is actually to faithfully represent the Word of God, and as Jesus said of you, to be the salt and the light of the world.

And so, there will be times, and you know this if you've ever parented young children, or had a business where you had employees, there will be times where the culture in this world will push back on your spiritual authority. But you are the kingdom of priests called by the Lord Jesus Christ to be the divine ambassadors to a world that is lost.

And so, to the degree that you manifest spiritual authority, the world will grumble and quarrel, and at times, even seek to pick up stones and persecute you.

And so part of my job, and William's job, and part of the job of the Scriptures, is to instill in you, actually, that same thing that I said of myself, a healthy fear of the Lord, so that you not only fear Him, but you actually trust Him. Is the Lord among us or not? That's the question from today's Scripture.

What do you say about that? Do you believe that the Lord is with you, and among you, and working in your life, and communicating His will and His Word to you? And if you do, do you trust it? Do you trust it so much that you're willing to stand with backbone in a leadership toxic environment and be the salt and light that God has called you to be?

Testing and quarreling. That's our nature, but the Lord is calling us to be the spiritual leaders for our age.