

The Final Exam

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Exodus 17: 1-7

Phil. 2: 1-13

Matthew 21: 23-32

Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16

Summary: If God seems absent in our time, as He seemed at the Cross, it is not His test, but ours. Do not “strike the rock,” the Rock is cleft for you.

Here is a TV moment I will bet most of you remember. There you are, watching the end of a show and the next program is coming up: a new one meant to compete with “The Twilight Zone,” and called, “The Outer Limits.” Suddenly, your screen starts rolling wildly and wavy lines obscure the set’s image. An announcer intones: “Do not adjust your set. We control the horizontal; we control the vertical.”

Of course, adjusting the set is the first thing people think to do as soon as things get wonky. This was the reaction of the nation of Israel almost every time things got difficult, uncomfortable, or dangerous. “Where is God?” they complain. “Why did He send us away from slavery in Egypt just to kill us with . . . thirst, hunger, giant enemies, etc.” And the next demand would be for Moses or Aaron to do something about this. Maybe whacking a rock, maybe making a golden calf we can see to pray to instead of a God who is unseen, or maybe just giving up and running away. This puts the real God to the test.

The thing is: what was going on was not God's test, it was theirs, and their constant failures were the main reason that they wandered for forty years and an entire generation missed out on entering the Promised Land. To try to prevent this from happening to the church, which was urgently waiting for Christ's return, Paul tries to get everyone to be of the same mind; namely, the mind of trust which goes beyond looking out for our own interests.

Paul's example, our example, is Jesus, whose attitude was so trusting that, even though divine, He was obedient even unto death on the Cross. He did not try to adjust things, even when mocked and a thief next to Him demands that He appeal to God to get Him off. Paul goes on to say, "If you obeyed in my presence, do so also in my absence."

I submit to you the possibility that the church's failure to take Paul's advice while he was in prison and trust God, even though both God and Jesus are unseen, may be the main reason that Christ's return has now been delayed two thousand years! We keep trying to "adjust our set" and put God to the test to see if God is there and can be trusted. These dark days are not God's test, they are our test. In fact, I am going so far as to suggest that we are all taking the final exam.

The Gospel lesson deals with the question of Jesus' authority, which He does not answer directly. Then, Jesus tells the story of two sons, one initially

refusing but eventually obedient and another who sounded compliant but was not. He makes the point refer to John the Baptist, who does obey and whom even the worst sinners came to trust and sought baptism.

However, there is Jesus telling this parable: A Son who said “Yes” and never wavered. He adjusted nothing, but obeyed God’s plan, even when God seemed to have forsaken Him. He is the only one, so far, who has passed the final exam.

And here we are in a time of disease, natural disasters, war, fear, violence, and hatred. People are trying to rewrite history and erase each other. Here I stand in a can walker that I paid \$150 to own because my insurance does not think a diabetic ulcer is important enough to cover. If I lose my toe or foot thanks to that ulcer, that insurance will face a much larger surgery and rehab bill, but this apparently is their gamble to manipulate their profits.

This is not God’s test; it is mine, and maybe also the test of the insurance people. There are so many other things that we struggle to adjust, vote in or out, learn remotely, or otherwise control. We are, once again. “striking the rock.” If God seems absent in our time, as He seemed at the Cross, it is not His test, but ours. Do not “strike the rock,” the Rock, Jesus, is cleft for you. Let us trust in God. Amen.