

God will not test us more than we can endure

1 Corinthians 10.1-13

Once, in the course of my pastoral duties, I went to visit a woman who had experienced a terrible tragedy. She seemed pleased to see me and was surprisingly cheerful. We talked about this and that and then I asked her how she was feeling. She said she was feeling OK. And then she said, *'God doesn't test us more than we can stand.'* She was paraphrasing Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:13, *"God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."*

I was really impressed by this woman's faith. I was also grateful for it. Because of her faith, my role as comforter and encourager was made that much easier.

Coming away from her house, I let her words turn over and over in my mind. I reflected that this faith-based response to suffering was something that I would keep in my top pocket so that I too could be resilient in the face of suffering when my turn comes. Then I reflected that actually, in my own modest experiences of suffering, I have made it through with God's help. But I also reflected that I would hesitate to share this philosophy with other people in their suffering. There is such a thing, after all, as post-traumatic stress disorder. Maybe this is what happens when people are tested beyond their capacity to suffer.

But here we have Paul confidently sharing this insight with the church in Corinth. *"God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."*

Paul warns the church to avoid four sins. Three of them are idolatry, sexual immorality and complaining. The fourth sin, of putting Christ to the test is the one I want to explore in more depth.

Paul is drawing a parallel between the life of the church in Corinth and the wandering of the people of God in the wilderness after their liberation from slavery. The parallel works really well. After all, the church in Corinth has also been liberated from sin and is on its way to the promised land, the Kingdom of God.

Paul, therefore, sees a parallel between the rock that followed the people of God through the wilderness; the rock from which water gushed so the people would never be thirsty; and Christ. He makes the startling assertion that the rock in the wilderness was actually Jesus himself.

The story of God providing water out of a rock for his people to drink is firmly linked to this idea of it being sinful to test God (Numbers 20: 3). The people became angry with God, saying he was abandoning them to die in the desert and so God gave in and demonstrated his power to the satisfaction of the people by providing water while at the same time, expressing his disappointment that the people did not have more faith in him seeing as how he had delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

This story became woven into the memory of the relationship between God and his people so that for example in Psalm 95 we may read,

*O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,*

*when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.'
Therefore in my anger I swore,
'They shall not enter my rest.'*

In other words, our faith in God should be such that we do not require him to demonstrate his power and presence all the time. Our faith should be such that we remain faithful to him even in times of suffering and hardship.

There are forms of Christian worship and witness which imply very strongly that true faith in God will prompt him to intervene to end all our suffering. This is one side of the same coin of which the other side is the common atheist position that a loving and all powerful God cannot possibly exist because of the suffering that is allowed to happen in the world.

Against these two positions, Paul is saying that the story of the rock in the wilderness shows us that God is calling us to a different faith entirely. It is a faith that can survive suffering and, indeed, gives us the strength to endure suffering.

We are seeing plenty of suffering now. We are bracing ourselves for a further wave of unemployment, a winter in lockdown, a Christmas apart from our loved ones. We will all suffer and we will all be called to help others bear heavier burdens than our own.

A faith that God will make all this just go away is not a faith that will survive what is before us. What will help us is a faith that with God's help we can

endure what will happen to us and we can even help others to endure also. And a faith that helps us to survive is a faith worth sharing. So, let's not be afraid to say, *"God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."*

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