

All of Life is a Test 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Last Sunday we looked at Abraham's great test of faith in offering Isaac as a burnt offering. We know it was a test from God because that is how the story started—*Some time later, God tested Abraham*. I used the illustration of the Emergency Broadcast System that used to interrupt your favorite TV program. That is usually how we think of tests in our lives. We walk through life and when we least expect it, a test is thrown across our path just as suddenly as the Emergency Broadcast System breaks into our TV program. We think of tests and trials as separate events that enter our lives over time. Life is like this arrow with tests punctuating our lives over the years. But I don't think that is an accurate way to understand life's tests. Do you know when life's tests begin—when we wake in the morning and rub the sleep out of our eyes. Right then at that precise moment the tests of the day begin. And when do they end? The test ends when we go back to sleep. Life is not punctuated by a series of tests but rather all of life is a test.



We don't have to wait for Abraham and Isaac type of tests to come our way. Every day and nearly every moment of every day is a test of faith, whether big or small. That is why most Christians cling to verses like 1 Cor. 10:13.

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

This is a powerful, hope-giving verse, but like all of Scripture, if we misinterpret this one, we could end up in more trouble than when we started. I have heard Christians say something like this. "Well, if this is true, God must not know me very well, because I passed my limit of endurance a long time ago." Others have wondered about the elusiveness of the promised escape hatch. Many times we can feel trapped by trials and temptations and not see any way of escape. We look around us and see that other believers seem to have a way out, but not us. Either one trial is so large that it weighs us down all by itself or else the accumulation of smaller tests have had the same effect. "I can't bear any more and I don't see a way out." What we often do with this verse is take it out of context, and a promise ripped from its context can be more dangerous than no promise at all. So first, let's read the context of this promise.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.³ They all ate the same spiritual food⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.” ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! ¹³ No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

First, let’s start with verse thirteen and then work our way backward into the context. Verse thirteen has five parts to it.

1. No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.
2. And God is faithful;
3. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.
4. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out
5. So that you can stand up under it.

Let’s start with the first point—No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. If you are going through a difficult trial, does it help if someone says to you, “Ya know, the same thing happened to my sister-in-law last year.” Is that a helpful comment? It certainly can be, depending on the way it was communicated, but this phrase is more than just knowing that others have faced similar trials. Paul wants us to understand the incredible commonality of trials and temptations. In this passage, he listed four temptations the Israelites faced in the wilderness.

The is the temptation of idolatry described in verse seven. *Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.”* Here Paul quoted from Ex. 32:6 reminding his readers what happened when Moses was on Mt Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from the finger of God. The people couldn’t wait for Moses to return so Aaron fashioned a golden calf and the people bowed down in worship to it. The result of their idolatry was that 3,000 were killed by the sword of the Levites. The terrible irony of this example is due to the fact that the first commandment that Moses never had a chance to deliver to the people is—*You shall have no other gods before me.* The people broke the Law before it was officially given to them.

I have never been tempted to bow down to a golden calf, but I do have constant temptations to commit idolatry. Idolatry is simply desiring something more than you desire Christ. The sneakiest kind of idols of the heart are the good things in our lives. For young families, well-behaved children can become an idol. Some parents will do whatever it takes to keep their children under control. Some will apply lots of pressure and oppressive rules to make them obey. Others try to keep the peace by just giving their kids what they want. It’s tough enough being a parent, but being a Christian parent probably lends itself to more family idolatry than in non-Christian homes. After all, Christian parents are supposed to train their children to be good Christians, right? Pastors and church leaders have a particular temptation in this area. If our kids

don't behave and we don't manage our homes well, then the people in church might start to think that maybe we shouldn't be in leadership. If you love well-behaved children more than you love your children (do you see the difference?), then you have family idolatry in your heart.

The second temptation from this passage is described in verse eight. *We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.* The OT example that Paul used was from Numbers 25 which explained what happened when the Israelites were led astray by the gods of Moab. In this case, sexual immorality and idolatry were a combined sin. Similar to the worship of the golden calf, I doubt any of us are presently being led astray to worship foreign gods mixed with sexual immorality, but we are continually tempted with the secret sin of lust. Lust is sexual immorality that never gets caught. Many sins are secret sins, but lust is among the most secretive. And don't make the mistake of thinking this is only a problem for guys. Guys like to look at immodestly dressed women, but why do women dress immodestly? Because they so desperately want guys to like them that they are willing to show too much skin and too many curves. They lust to be admired. They lust to be accepted. I think we all know how this temptation is common to man.

The next two temptations in verses nine and ten go hand in hand. *We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes.* ¹⁰ *And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.* Verse nine describes the events of Numbers chapter 21 where the people complained, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt?" Verse ten is taken from Numbers 14 where the Israelites grumbled, "Why is the Lord bringing us to this land?" The first sin is labeled testing the Lord and the second is called grumbling, but they are very similar, are they not? In the first example, many people died from poisonous snakes and in the second, about two million died over forty years in the desert.

If lust is one of the most secretive sins, grumbling has to be one of the most common. Sometimes grumbling is disguised as a prayer request. It goes like this—I spend five minutes and as long as an hour dumping all of my problems and complaints on you and then I spiritualize my grumbling by asking you to pray about it. I am not suggesting that we return to the stoicism of our German and Scandinavian parents and grandparents. We need to be real with people and vulnerability is a necessary component to spiritual growth. Another common type of grumbling is anger. Unless it is a righteous anger, which is possible, but quite rare, our anger is nothing but a more emotional complaint. If I am angry, it is because I feel that I have been cheated or slighted in some way. I didn't get what I deserve. Somehow or another, my comfort has been trifled with. My space has been encroached upon. My feelings have been stepped on. My desires have been unfulfilled. A lack of contentment is the seeds of grumbling and grumbling often leads to anger. Not all grumbling leads to anger, but almost all anger is a form of grumbling.

Idolatry, sexual immorality, testing the Lord and grumbling—all of these examples of trials that Paul used in this passage—are they examples of temptation or of testing. We know that Abraham was tested, but these look like temptations, especially since verse thirteen says that *no temptation has seized you except what is common to man.* Are these temptations or are they tests? What is the difference? We really need to know the difference, but it's a little tricky because the Greek word for "test" and "temptation" are exactly the same. So how do you know the difference?

Let me list a few ways that we can be tested in life.

- other sinners
- circumstances
- Direct test from God (how common? Abraham, Job)

The difference between a test and a temptation is the source and the purpose. Only God tests us, either directly, like he did with Abraham, or indirectly, through other people and life's circumstances. I don't think that God has to direct a series of difficult tests our way because life is inherently difficult by itself. Every day offers about 16 hours of tests. When God tests through these means his purpose is to develop perseverance and a maturing faith in us.

By comparison, here are the various ways we can be tempted.

- other sinners
 - circumstances
- } = the world

Notice that these are the same things that God can use to test us. These first two combined would be equivalent to what the Bible calls 'the world.' Adding to this we are tempted by our flesh and the devil.

- Our flesh (James 1.13)
- Satan, the Tempter (Matt 4.3)

Our flesh hates God and is opposed to all that he is and does.
Satan hates God and is opposed to all that he is and does.

God will test us, but never tempt us. His tests are for our maturity. In contrast, temptation comes from Satan, our flesh and the world and has the purpose of destroying our faith. But do you see the problem here? The very same thing can be used in our lives either as a test for our spiritual growth or as a temptation for our spiritual destruction. If we bump into another sinner (has this happened to anyone this past week? In the past hour?), a conflict, that is, we don't know if their intent is to knock down our faith or not. But we do know this much—God wants to use that conflict to strengthen our faith and Satan wants to use it to destroy our faith. It's not likely that one or two such trials will make or break our faith, but the accumulation of them day after day will make the difference. Sometimes we will know that the world is offering us a clear cut temptation. But in regard to most of the trials and bumps that come our way throughout the day, the way we respond makes the difference between a test and a temptation. We can start to understand why *test* and *temptation* come from the same Greek word. Their meaning is at times nearly indistinguishable.

Going back to verse thirteen, we see the next part of the process—*And God is faithful*.

This is what got Abraham through his test. Abraham recognized the perfect faithfulness of God in the trial. He knew that God had promised to build his people through Isaac and he also knew that God commanded him to offer his only son as a burnt offering. The only thing that could rectify those two seemingly irreconcilable conditions was God's faithfulness. I can't emphasize this enough—it is not the size of our faith that matters, but rather the size of his faithfulness.

The third part of the promise is the one that we gravitate toward—He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. No matter what comes our way, it will never be beyond what we can handle. Once again, we see this in the life of Abraham. God did not promise him a son and in the

same breath command that he sacrifice him as a burnt offering. On the joyous day of Isaac's birth, God did not interrupt the celebration to ask that Isaac be sacrificed on the altar. My point is that God had prepared Abraham over several decades before he presented him with that great test. By that time, God fully knew how much Abraham could bear and he did not test him beyond that point.

But if Abraham had been prepared that much and God knew that he was ready, why is it so often true that we don't feel like we can bear the load? Why does it feel like the temptation or testing is too great for us? If God always provides a way of escape, why does it seem we are so often trapped in our trials and temptations? If we really could escape them, wouldn't that be much easier? Wouldn't it be easier if we could simply press the "escape" button and be done with our trials? I think we tend to think that this is what a "way of escape" is all about, but if that is our take on this passage, then we have missed the meaning altogether.

Let me show you how the last three parts of this verse hang together, but this time I will use the ESV.

3. *and he will not let you be tempted beyond your **ability**,*
4. *but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,*
5. *that you may be **able** to endure it.*

We need to key in on the words *ability* and *able*. God promises that he will not allow temptations and trials beyond our ability. I want you to picture temptation and trials as a large weight placed on your shoulders that you are holding up. We have all been crushed by this weight at times, so we know what its weight feels like to us. It feels like the weight is beyond our ability—and it is! This is why God provides a way of escape so that we will have the ability carry the weight, to endure it.

Notice two very important facts. First, what happens when we take the way of escape? We are enabled to endure the weight of the temptation. A way of escape is not a way out of the temptation or trial, but it is a way to endure it. We would rather have a way out of the problem completely. We would much prefer to escape the trial as if escaping meant that the problem was removed and no longer troubling us. But that is not what we have been promised. We have been promised the ability to endure the temptations and trials. We have already determined that the weight is too heavy for us. We are not able to bear the weight on our own. But the way of escape gives us the ability to carry the weight. We don't drop the weight off of our shoulders but rather the Lord comes along and bears some of the weight so that we can carry it, so that we can endure its heavy load. As the NIV puts it, *so that you can stand up under it*. Do you see, the weight is still over us. We are still under it, but instead of crushing us under the ten thousand pound burden, God enables us to bear the load.

Second, we must realize that if we do not take the way of escape, we will not be able to endure the load of temptation. If it feels like you cannot endure your temptations and trials, it is because you have not taken the way of escape. But we have seen this promise as an unconditional promise instead of a conditional promise. We have focused in on the third phrase of this verse like a laser guided missile—*he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability*. We take this as an

unconditional promise, that is, God promises that the burden will not be too great no matter what. There are no conditions on the promise because God does all of the work. Scripture is filled with all kinds of unconditional promises, but this is not one of them. With the temptation, God always offers a way of escape so that we can endure the trial, but if we do not take the way of escape, we will not be able to endure the trial. The ability to endure the trial is conditioned upon our choosing the way of escape. God provides the way of escape but we must choose that path.

By this time you should be wondering, “OK then, what is this way of escape so that I can endure my trial? Please tell me because the weight of this thing is crushing me!” Let’s go back to Abraham to answer this question. Abraham was stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. God had promised that he would build his nation of people through Isaac, but he had also commanded that Abraham offer Isaac as a burnt offering. It is very unlikely that you and I will ever face a test of this magnitude. So tell me, what was the way of escape for Abraham? How did he endure this test of faith? The way of escape was obedience. Obeying the Lord’s command was scary and filled with questions, but it was the only way out. Abraham obeyed the Lord and was thereby enabled to endure the test.

Let me give you another example that Paul used in this chapter. In verse ten he referred back to what happened in Numbers. God had defeated Pharaoh and his army and had led them to the very edge of the Promised Land. The people were already grumbling about life in the desert. They complained about not having enough food and water. They were under constant temptation to grumble and complain and they always seemed to choose the path of grumbling. But now the Lord had deposited them on the doorstep of the Promised Land. Go in, he said, and take possession of the land I have given you. It is a land filled with milk and honey and this will be your new home. Do you recall why they did not immediately take possession of the land? Because there were giants in the land. The inhabitants of the land were large and frightening. Never mind that God had promised them that their enemies would be defeated, they chose not to enter the land.

Had the Israelites entered the land at that time, would it have been easy going? No, because they still would have faced their enemies. But had they entered the land, it would have been their “way of escape.” The way of escape is always the path of obedience. If we do not choose this way of escape, we will be crushed under the weight of the temptation and trial. God’s perfect faithfulness assures us that there will always be a choice of obedience. We may not always be faced with two obvious choices like Abraham. He had the choice of obeying the Lord and sacrificing Isaac or disobeying. Temptations will always have a clear choice attached to them—either I obey or I disobey. But trials and tests may not have such obvious choices. Oftentimes the choice of obedience is simply not to grumble about your circumstances. What does the book of James say about trials? “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds.” Joy in trials is the way of escape. Joy is a form of obedience. If grumbling is sin, then joy is obedience. Joy is not just for the superspiritual Christian—joy is the way of escape for every believer.

I witnessed an example of this on Wednesday night when I ran into Deb Larrington at Walmart. I wondered why she was driving Brian’s jeep and she told me the bad news that the transmission

on their van had gone out earlier that day. I told her how sorry I was because I knew this was usually a several thousand dollar repair. Without hesitation, Deb began to recount several reasons for being joyful in this trial. (I asked Deb for permission to share this story)

- It happened in La Crosse, where they were close to a recommended mechanic
- It happened while they were in a parking lot and not in the middle of a busy street.
- It happened while Brian was around and not out of town as had had been recently.
- There were already opportunities for extra income to cover some of the expense
- They had never sold Brian's truck, so they still had two cars.
- The still owned a second vehicle that was large enough to transport entire family

Do you see what Deb was doing in this situation? She was taking the way of escape and counting all things as joy. Did Deb only experience pure joy at all times during this trial? Did she have any moments of frustration? I am guessing that she did, but the point is that by the time she ran into me, she was literally counting her blessings. And she wasn't doing it to impress the pastor or to make a good sermon illustration. It was sincere and real and it made a genuine impact on me.

Does your trial or temptation seem too heavy for you to bear?
Have you been tempted to blame God for allowing this to happen?
Is it possible you have missed your way of escape, perhaps multiple times?
Are you living a grumble-free life, thankful for God's provisions?
Do you see joy as the way of escape?

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