

Try Me in This Malachi 3:8-10

Introduction

Once there was a man who had two young sons. One day, the sons found their father had left a note and two strawberries for them. In the note, he told them to enjoy the strawberries, but to save a corner of the strawberry for him. If they did this, he would give them many, many more strawberries. Naturally, the sons first went to the fridge to see where those many other strawberries were. But they were not there. They scoured the whole kitchen and pantry, but all they could find were the two strawberries with the note. "How is he going to give us more strawberries if there are only two?" the first boy asked. "I don't know," said the second, "but I'm gonna find out. He said he would." The first son took his strawberry and was so hungry that he decided to eat the whole strawberry. He hoped his father would understand. The second son took care to save a piece for his father. When their father came home, he was angry with the first son for his disobedience. So, the first son received nothing. However, he was very pleased with the second son for obeying his instructions. He took the piece of strawberry, took out the seeds, and planted a row of strawberries. That summer, he gave to this second son all the strawberries from the row.

The Text

The book of Malachi was written in the time when the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon and rebuilt the temple. The book is primarily the Lord relating a dialogue between Himself and His people. Throughout, the Lord accuses the people (with an emphasis on the priests, the Levites) of defiling His altar and bringing contemptible sacrifices before Him. Fundamentally, they do not honor their Father (1:6). In our passage, the Lord accuses the people of robbing Him of tithes and offerings, and because of this, they are cursed (3:8-9). The Lord then commands the people to bring their tithes to Him. In doing so, He challenges them to test Him and see if He does not overwhelm them with a flood of blessings (3:10). In other words, the Lord challenges the people to test Him by obeying Him.

On the face of it, though, it seems strange for God to say, "Test Me!" Compare this with what Malachi relates a few verses later. The people say it is useless to serve God, to obey Him (3:14). They look over at those who live wickedly and seem to be successful. "They even tempt God and go free" (3:15). Some English translations use the same phrase in v. 10 and v. 15 ("put to the test"), and this accurately reflects the Hebrew. One is a righteous testing of God and the other is wicked. So is it right to test God?

Do Not Test God

How do we square God's invitation to test Him with Jesus' rebuke of the devil: "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (Matt. 4:7)? Or with Paul's exhortation: "Nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents" (1 Cor. 10:9). These statements refer to two similar instances when the people of Israel tested or tempted God. The first is found in Exodus 17:1-7. Moses says the people tempted God by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Similarly, Paul says the children of Israel tempted God another time when they complained about not having food or drink in the wilderness in Number 21. Because they again doubted God's ability and desire to provide for them, God smote them with a plague of deadly, fiery serpents. In both stories, they tempted God by complaining, forgetting what He had done, and doubting Him.

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Test God

What does God say? He calls on the people in Malachi's day to obey Him by bringing the tithes to His house. In God's law, tithing is not an option (e.g., Deut. 14:22). So refusing to bring them in was simple disobedience and robbing God. God's call to the people is to obey Him, and in doing so to test Him. Why do God's people decide not to tithe? Most often, we rationalize it by looking at it from a purely pragmatic perspective. We see that we have more month left than money in the account. Sometimes it is because we have been foolish or selfish with our money and gotten into debt. Sometimes it is because of really good things: a new baby, education for kids, providing a home for your family, putting food on the table. These things add up and it's easy to budget for them, forgetting or ignoring that God has also called us to give back to Him from our increase. God calls His people to walk in obedience, bring in the tithe, regardless of circumstances, trusting (and testing) Him to overwhelm and saturate us with a flood of blessings. We are to give to God from the increase of our wealth. You cannot outgive God. And He challenges you to try.

This is no different, though, than following Christ in anything. In everything, we walk by faith, obeying God even when we can't see what's ahead. Think of all the heroes of the faith who have done exactly this (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Gideon, missionaries). They knew what God desired of them; they knew what His promises were; and so they walked by faith, proving God to be faithful to His promises. The ultimate example of this, of course, is our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He pleaded with His Father to let the cup of God's wrath pass by, sweating blood as He prayed. Yet, He submitted Himself to the Father's will and set His eyes on the promises His Father had given to Him (Ps. 2:7-8, Heb. 12:1-2). Jesus trusted the Father and proved Him steadfast in His promises by obediently going to the cross. Because of this obedience, the Father gave Him everything (Matt. 28:18).

We walk by faith, not by sight. We know and have experienced that it often looks like God has forgotten His people. It is in those circumstances that we must try Him by our obedience. And He will prove faithful. This testing of God is trusting Him. This is different than testing God like Israel did by doubting whether He is with us.

Conclusion

So what is God calling you to? Where do you need to walk in obedience? Where do you need to try God and test His promises by obeying Him? In whatever situation God has placed you, He has also set before you a path to walk in (Eph. 2:10). He has given you the circumstances, He has given you the path to walk through them, and He has given you the promise that His grace is sufficient and bountiful. He promises that by walking in His way, He will fill you up until you can hold no more, until you can say with Paul that you have found contentment in any and every circumstance (Phil. 4:11-13). So try your heavenly Father in this. Test Him. Prove Him. He is faithful. Test God by walking in obedience.