

**SERMON: God's Testing Of Us - Job 38, Psalm 107, 2 Corinthians 6.1-13, Mark 4.35-41**

Dear Father, may we weather the storms of life with you by our side. Guide us through troubled waters and lead us to your promised kingdom. Amen

Have you ever been in the middle of a raging storm? I remember one when I was about 12 years old. I was at our small local shopping centre getting milk for our breakfast when wild winds sprang up. Then came torrential rain and loud thunder. Lightning lit up the sky. I was terrified but decided to make the short dash home. Just as I ran out from the cover of the shops a lightning bolt hit the roof where I had been sheltering. I've never run faster in my life!

Each of our readings today use the powerful imagery of storms to tell us much about how God uses the stormy periods in our life to teach and bless us.

**Job 38**

With that theme in mind, the story of Job is worthy of deep reflection. God has allowed Job to be sorely tested by Satan. After much loss and suffering God finally answers the desperate pleas of Job. But to begin with He doesn't do so with gentle, caring words. Rather He challenges Job. Speaking from out of a raging wind he demands that Job answer a series of questions. This first set in verses 4 to 11 forces Job to realise that his knowledge and his power is nothing compared with the knowledge and power of God our Creator. He humbles himself before his Lord. As the rest of Job testifies, this humility leads to repentance and surrender which leads to great blessing being bestowed by God upon Jacob. This pattern seems a very familiar one to followers of Jesus: testing, humility, repentance, surrender, blessing.

I am not suggesting that every difficult thing that happens in our life is a test from God. But equally, I can't deny that the bible and our own life experiences confirm that our God does indeed test us and uses that testing to help us to grow closer to Him.

Charles Swindoll suggests that there are three key messages to be learnt from Job's response:

*"The first: If God's ways are higher than mine, then whatever He allows I bow before Him in submission. The result of that attitude is true humility..."*

*The second: If God is in full control, then however He directs my steps, I follow in obedience. What relief that brings! Finally – I can relax, since I'm not in charge.*

*The third: If God has answers I lack, then whenever He speaks, I listen in silence. In the process of listening, I learn. Learning requires our slowing down, patiently waiting for God to work, staying ready to listen as He instructs us in His ways.”*

### **Psalm 107.1-3, 107.23-32**

This theme continues in Psalm 107. This is a poem of thanksgiving. The Jewish people suffered greatly in exile but God has now returned them to Jerusalem. Once again, the imagery of a stormy, raging wind is used to describe God’s action. This imagery has both a literal element to it, as the high waves threaten the lives of the sailors, and a metaphoric one, where it can be understood as a symbol for the trials and tribulations of all our lives.

Verses 24 and 25 make it clear that God has caused the sailors to face perilous waters: *“24 They have seen the works of God: and his wonders in the deep. 25 For he spoke, and raised the storm-wind: and it lifted high the waves of the sea”*. So once more we have a situation where people are tested. As is so often the case when faced with situations beyond our control, we become desperate and cry out for God’s help. The sailors did just that and God calmed the stormy seas and brought them to the safe-haven they longed for. The illusion that we are in control of our lives can be a powerful aphrodisiac. And yet it is so easily shattered when something happens that can’t be tamed by our own skills and abilities. When we humbly turn to God, repent and acknowledge that He and only He is in control, then we are able to listen to and learn whatever lesson He wants to give us. And through that learning God is able to bless us.

### **2 Corinthians 6.1-13**

In some respects that is the key message from our 2 Corinthians text. Paul makes a passionate plea to the Corinthian church members to open their hearts to him and his fellow disciples. In doing so, his defence of his ministry gives us a clear insight into the tests and challenges they faced. Verses 3 to 5 tell us: *“<sup>3</sup> We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry,<sup>4</sup> but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities,<sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger;”* Paul and his disciple’s faith journey was unimaginably hard. They were tested greatly and suffered much. Yet they kept going and through their endurance verses 6 and 7 explain that they were blessed: *“<sup>6</sup> by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love,<sup>7</sup> truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;”*

## **Mark 4.35-41**

This endurance despite all adversity seems remarkable in light of our gospel reading from Mark 4. While sailing to the other side of sea of Galilee with his disciples, a violent storm brews up. Jesus is sound asleep but the disciples are fearful for their lives. They wake him and accuse him of not caring whether they live or die! What follows is instructive in two key ways.

First, verse 39 tells us that Jesus immediately used His authority to calm the wind and the sea. There is a direct comparison with our Psalm, where it was the power of God that calmed the stormy seas. Here, that same divine power is used by Jesus.

Second, in verse 40 Jesus then asks the disciples: *“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”* At this point in Jesus’ ministry the disciples were being tested in order to deepen their faith and understanding of who Jesus was. This experience filled them with awe and helped them grow in their faith. By the time Paul and the other disciples with him arrived in Corinth, their lesson had been learnt and passed on to other followers. They knew exactly that Jesus is the living Son of God and that their role was in helping Jesus to fulfil his mission of building God’s kingdom on earth. After weathering many storms, they had truly been blessed by the power of God through the Holy Spirit to spread the good news of the world’s salvation through Jesus.

### **What storms have we endured?**

I have no doubt that each of you will have had experiences in your life where you have felt tested by God. In our Share and Prayer time you may like to tell us about one such experience. For me, the issue of control has been a recurring lesson. Only when I finally rejected the lie that I was in control of my life was I able to accept Jesus as my Saviour. And ever since He has continued testing me on this point, helping me to understand more and more deeply just what surrendering to Him really means and is supposed to look like in my life. I certainly haven’t got it right yet, but that’s ok, God just wants us to keep plugging away. No matter what storms we may face in our faith journey God promises to guide, teach, protect and bless us. This is told to us many times throughout the bible and is beautifully expressed in Numbers 6: 22-27. This is known as the “Priestly Blessing” or sometimes the “Aaronic Benediction.” There are seven requests made in this prayer.

1. God is asked to bless us, which means to “provide favour or benefit.”
2. God is asked to “keep” us which means to “watch, guard, defend.” This is a prayer for protection.

3. God is asked to “make his face shine upon us” which means for Him to be present in our lives.
4. God is asked to “be gracious to us” which means to give us what we don’t deserve.
5. God is asked to “turn his face toward us”. This is a request for us to a close relationship with Him.
6. God is asked to “give us peace” which comes from “shalom and means “completeness, wholeness, and contentment.”
7. God is asked to” put His name on us” This is a request to identify and mark us as His children.

So as we reflect on how our Lord has, is and always will care for us through the storms of our life, I can think of no better way to conclude than with the Priestly Blessing:

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: "'The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.'" "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." AMEN.