

Quality Control

Gene McAfee

Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

September 28, 2025

Deuteronomy 8:1-20

I had to drop out three times when I was in graduate school. I had to drop out of a course, I had to drop out of a seminar, and I had to drop out of the program. Obviously, I returned and I completed all three, but those were not, as the TV series of some years ago said, happy days for me.

I don't know of anyone who actually enjoys graduate school or professional school. It's too demanding, it's too grueling, it's too psychologically bruising. I'd never had to

withdraw from a course in order to keep from failing it, but my midterm exam in Akkadian 101 was so bad – and I knew it was going to be bad – that my professor didn't even put a grade on it; he simply wrote inside the front cover of the blue book, "Please come and see me."

I survived Akkadian when I took it a second time, and I survived the research seminar when I took that again, and I eventually survived the ten more years it took me after I returned to my doctoral program from a leave of absence. I returned because wanted to have the credential to allow me to be of service in both the academy and the church, and it was going to take work – and a lot of it – to make that happen. I did it, but happy days they were not.

And happy days were not Israel's experience in the

wilderness that we heard about in today's reading from Deuteronomy. The Israelites are encamped on the east side of the Jordan River, and they can literally look across and see the promised land, that land that has been the scene and cause of so much conflict and so much suffering. The eighth chapter of Deuteronomy is part of Moses' first series of sermons explaining to the chosen people the meaning of their chosenness and the consequences to them should they renege on their covenantal obligations. This particular section of Deuteronomy is an explanation of Israel's wilderness experience, a period of some forty years of deprivation and supply, terror and reassurance, toil and refreshment. And through it all, God provided for the Hebrew people, sometimes graciously – as when manna covered the ground and quail fell

from heaven and water flowed from rock – and sometimes with that awful grace that none of us wants, and none of us asks for and yet all of us need.

Why? Because, as God told the Israelites through Moses, “to humble you and to test you and, in the end, to do you good.”

In other words, what Israel resisted and what God knew Israel needed was quality control.

The goodness that awaited God’s people was far more than a land flowing with milk and honey. That good and abundant land mattered, of course – matter always matters – but the matter had a purpose beyond itself, which was to supply the basic needs of the Israelites in abundance so that they could spend a certain percent of their one wild and

precious lifetimes on the task of being the blessing to the world that God called them to be and which they had agreed to be. The trials and the tribulations of the “great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions,” that place, which Israel did not want and where Israel did so much complaining, resisting, and rebelling – that place was the place of testing to see if Israel was truly up to the task of being Israel, the one who struggles with God.

In the prophetic imagination that would serve as Israel’s conscience for centuries to come, the wilderness, far from being simply a trial to be endured or a curse for punishment, was also a blessing – a great blessing and a necessary blessing to test Israel’s awareness of its utter dependence on its one true leader, God. There was an immediacy to Israel’s

relationship with God in the wilderness that Israel's subsequent wealth and power obliterated, and over time, bit by bit, Israel replaced God's role in Israel's life with kings, priests, temples, palaces, armies, and the mighty of the land, the very things that Moses warned would lead the Israelites to say to themselves, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." In other words, that they were self-made people.

The prophet Hosea speaks of God alluring Israel back to the wilderness and speaking tenderly to Israel there, so that Israel will respond to God directly and sincerely and fully, as in the youthful days of Israel's experience, fresh into freedom and utterly dependent on God for survival.

Israel's wilderness experience, lasting two whole

generations, was God's version of quality control, and we all need someone, somewhere, somehow exercising quality control in our lives.

Why? So that we can be trusted and so that we can trust others. That's what quality control is for: it provides trustworthiness, whether that be in the safety of foods, medicines, or ground water, or whether it be in the competence of nurses, airplane pilots, or pastors. We want to know that the people in whom we trust are up to the task they have agreed to fulfill, and the best way we have found so far to do that is by subjecting people to a wilderness experience – the tests and trials of things like programs of study and training. We believe, rightly, that those programs of study and training, as well as supervised experience, equip people, over time, with expertise.

If I couldn't learn Akkadian, a challenging Semitic language related to Biblical Hebrew, then to call myself a professor of the Hebrew Bible would have been false. And if my physician couldn't or wouldn't learn biochemistry, then I wouldn't be able to trust that person with matters of health that depend on my body's chemistry.

There are very good reasons for us to be subjected to things that we don't want and don't like so that, as God told Israel, in the end God may do us good and we may extend that good to others.

In a few minutes, we'll be heading into lunch with the Mission Study Committee so that they will have an opportunity to listen to what all of you have to say about this church, its future, and its future pastoral leaders. The MSC has already



asked us to fill out surveys – if you haven’t yet, it’s not too late – and they may ask us for even more input into the data that they must collect to produce the profile of this church that will be circulated among those trained for pastoral leadership.

Dwelling on the sidelines during this process is not helpful.

When I rowed intramural crew, the only team sport I’ve ever participated in, when the coxswain said, “All in,” he meant it: all eight oars had to hit the water at the same time, with the blades of the oars angled at the same degree and at the same depth in the water, and all eight of us pulling in the same direction at the same rate. Otherwise, the shell would not move as it was designed to do and we could not be the best we could be, regardless of whether we came in first, second, third, or tenth in the race. The competition that mattered most was

against ourselves – seeing how good we could make ourselves before the river froze over.

The Mission Study Committee, appointed by Session on your behalf, is tasked with assembling the best Mission Study Report it can compile, and to do that, it needs your help. Please prepare to inconvenience yourself occasionally, sacrifice some precious free time for what may at times feel tedious, and step outside your comfort zone to speak up, and thus take on for yourself some of the quality control that will make this church's Mission Study Report better than simply done.

Before we go to lunch, however, we will sing, as we do every Sunday at the conclusion of worship here, these words: "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary. Pure and holy, tried and true." How many of us sing past that little word "tried"? Have

you brought the trials of your faith to bear on your witness in this place and in every place? Have you had not only the experience, but also understood the meaning of those trials? Have your heart and mind been purified of the dross of the trivial, the tangential, the unfocused, and the unbeautiful? Are you ready to be a sanctuary for our Mission Study Committee and the conversation about to unfold?

If so, then God is waiting, as God always waits, to do us good.

Hymn 317, "In Christ There Is No East or West"