

Forty—The Number of Probation

Opening Hymn: #310 — “Triumphant Zion”

Bible students know that numbers in Scripture have both a literal and symbolic significance. The number **7** is the most frequent number in scripture. It is the number of spiritual perfection or completeness. In the first chapter of Genesis we have the seven “days” of creation; at the end of Revelation there are seven angels with their vials containing the last plagues.

What is the second most frequent number in scripture? According to McClintock & Strong (vol. VII, p. 218) it is the number **40**. Here is the first occurrence of 40 in the Bible:

Genesis 7:4 For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth **forty** days and **forty** nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth.

The Companion Bible suggests that “40 is the number of probation.” Probation is defined as “A process or period in which a person's fitness, as for membership in a working or social group, is tested.” The 40-day rain certainly tested those in the ark. It was more like a judgment upon those outside the ark.

Luke 4:1,2 [NIV] Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for **forty** days he was tempted by the devil.

This time immediately following his baptism by John in the Jordan was a testing time for Jesus during which he was tempted by the devil. The prophet Elijah had a similar 40-day experience (1 Kings 19:8). And of course so did Moses:

Exodus 24:18 And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and into the mount: and Moses was in the mount **forty** days and **forty** nights.

This long absence was not so much a test of Moses, as it was of those who were left behind and did not know what was happening. It was a test they failed:

Exodus 32:7,8 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for **thy** people, which **thou** broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto.

You would think after such a serious failure Israel would be very careful and not allow a lack of faith to interfere with their relationship to God again. But soon afterward we have the incident of the 12 spies who looked over the land:

Numbers 13:25 They returned from searching of the land after **forty** days.

Again the people failed this test of faith:

Numbers 14:6ff And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh ... spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land, which we passed through to search it, is an exceeding good land. If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and

give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. ... But all the congregation bade stone them with stones.

To punish the people for such terrible behavior God invoked another 40:

Numbers 14:32-34 [RSV] As for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.

At the time of Israel's first king, there was great tension between the Philistines and Israel. Each had stationed its armed soldiers opposite one another. Every day the same drama was performed:

1 Samuel 17:16 And [Goliath] drew near morning and evening, and presented himself **forty** days. Here is the number 40 again, and again it is a test—but a test of whom? It was a test of Saul and he failed it miserably. Goliath was “head and shoulders” taller than any other Philistine. Whom did he expect would fight him? Why the one who was “head and shoulders” taller than all the other Israelites and that man was Saul (see 1 Sam. 9:2). But Saul did not want to die at Goliath's hands so he stayed in his tent. The people were terrified.

How long did Saul reign? Exactly the same number of years as David and as Solomon. Because you know the title of this discourse, you know it has to be 40 years. I very much appreciate a thought from Bro. Donald Holliday of England who suggested that each of these kings pictures the events of the world's three major ages. In fact, Bro. Holliday sees even the first dispensation shown in another period of 40 years.

The World That Was

Judges 13:1 And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines **forty** years.

Adam and Eve were placed in the garden and given a simple test: obey and live. But they disobeyed; they did that which was evil in the sight of God and they were delivered into the hands of their enemies including the devil, the great adversary of God. Even the earth itself was cursed. The greatest punishment of all was death:

Romans 5:14 Death reigned from Adam to Moses even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression.

The Jewish Age

Acts 13:21 And afterward they desired a king: and God gave unto them Saul ... by the space of **forty** years.

At the very beginning of Saul's reign he showed great promise. At a wonderful victory over the Ammonites Saul correctly said, “The Lord has wrought salvation in Israel” (1 Sam. 11:13). Likewise the Israelites initially started off well. They celebrated the passover, left Egyptian slavery, passed

through the Red Sea, and agreed to all the things that God had commanded through Moses. But their continued experiences as God's chosen people put them on trial and, as we have seen, they did not do well. Saul, picturing those of the Jewish Age, started well but he quickly changed.

Why didn't God supernaturally drive out all of Israel's enemies from the land for them?

Judges 3:1,4,7 Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to prove Israel by them ... to know whether they would hearken unto the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God.

It is only the second year of Saul's reign when the events of 1 Samuel 13 take place. Saul takes 2000 men and goes one place and does nothing; his son Jonathan takes 1000 men and attacks a Philistine garrison. This enrages the Philistines and we read:

1 Sam. 13:5,6 And the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the sea shore in multitude ... When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait (for the people were distressed), then the people did hide themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in high places, and in pits.

This abandonment of faith in God on the part of the people and Saul so soon after they had embraced him mirrors the abandonment of faith by the Jews in the time of Moses. This was when Saul made a key error:

1 Sam. 13:8-14 [Saul] tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed: but Samuel came not to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. And Saul said, Bring hither a burnt offering to me, and peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering. And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might salute him. And Samuel said, What hast thou done? And Saul said, Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that thou camest not within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash; Therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the LORD: I forced myself therefore [!] and offered a burnt offering. And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee.

Who was this "man after God's own heart" that was destined to be "captain over God's people"? It was David of course. But the incredible thing is that David would not be born until eight years later. Similarly the period of the unfaithfulness of the Jews would end when the "greater than David" would appear though that was a long time in the future when things looked so bleak.

The unfaithfulness of Saul stands in marked contrast to the faithfulness of his son Jonathan. The Philistines were so much in control that if Israel wanted something made of iron, they had to go to the Philistines to get it. In all of Israel only Saul and Jonathan possessed an iron sword! The weapons of Israel must have been bows and arrows, and slings (which of course David later used to slay Goliath). Saul appears to have no interest in using his sword. But it is different with Jonathan. He decides that God can save by a few as easily as by many so he and his armor bearer go boldly to the Philistine camp. They slay the first soldiers they meet, 20 in all. Panic seizes the enemy which appears to have been partially induced by an earthquake. Soon the Philistines are slaying each other. It was a wonderful display of faith on Jonathan's part. Of course he will be numbered among those we call the ancient worthies. In fact in this picture of the Jewish Age, Jonathan pictures the entire class of faithful ancient worthies. Although Jonathan was at least twice David's age when he died, he had a wonderful respect and love for the one he knew God had chosen to lead the people.

Saul and Jonathan died at the same time. Absolutely nothing had been accomplished. The land was still under the hand of an oppressive foe. Likewise the Jewish Age brought no real benefit to anyone. Sin and death continued to reign and oppress mankind.

The Gospel Age

2 Sam. 5:4 David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned **forty** years.

This brings us to the age when God's son—the greater than David—and the church (spiritual Israel) are on trial. David had the same faith as Jonathan. The animosity Saul had for David illustrates the hatred the Jewish leaders had for the antitypical David. When the Pharisees [who are pictured by Saul] were confronted with “one after God's own heart,” they killed him. But we read that the “soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:1).

In Acts we read of a 40-day period following the resurrection of Jesus:

Acts 1:3 To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them **forty** days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

Perhaps this was a kind of testing and training period for the disciples to see if their faith in God would remain strong.

Under King David the grip of Israel's enemies was finally broken. But it is interesting that the actual construction of the temple, the symbol of God's presence with the people, was not done during David's reign. That work was left for the next king under whom Israel enjoyed the most peaceful and prosperous period in their history.

The Millennial Age

1 Kings 11:42 The time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was **forty** years.

Solomon's reign pictures the Millennial Age, a time of peace and great blessing for the people. This is when the Lord's house will be built:

1 Kings 5:3-5 (RSV) [Solomon writes to Hiram] You know that David my father could not build a house for the name of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune. And so I purpose to build a house for the name of the Lord my God.

Even though the kingdom age is a time of blessing, resurrected mankind will still be on probationary trial for life. They must learn and practice righteousness. At the very end of the Bible we read what happens to those who learn their lessons well:

Rev. 22:14 Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

Those who fail their “probation” will not be rewarded with everlasting life. In fact they will be destroyed with the devil and his followers:

Rev. 20:9 And ... fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.

Our 40 Years

How long do brethren live today? To some extent it depends upon where one lives. In Russia the average life expectancy of a male today is only 58 years. That is less than many countries, but it was not too long ago that this was a typical life span. If someone consecrated himself to the Lord in his twenties, he might have at most a 40-year walk in the narrow way. This would be his period of education, testing, and probation. True some today may have more, some less, but we would not be far wrong to say that typically we have 40 years for our testing and development as new creatures. What progress are we making in our walk along the narrow way so far?

We are in the school of Christ. When we go to school, we are expected to learn. Paul in his second letter to Timothy said there were some, “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (2 Tim. 3:7) Have we grown in faith and trust, or have we allowed something [or someone] to distract us from the special relationship God has permitted us to enjoy? Those in school are always tested to determine how much they have learned. Our consecrated life is a life of probation—“A process in which a person's fitness, as for membership in a group, is tested.”

The calling we have received from God will never be repeated in a future age for anyone else. Let us learn our lessons well so that when we are tested, we, as good stewards, will be found faithful. (1 Cor. 4:2)

2 Sam. 22:1-3 And David spake unto the LORD the words of this song in the day that the LORD had delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies, and out of the hand of Saul: And he said, The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; the God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, my refuge, my saviour ...

[the song continues through subsequent verses]

At the end of our life, may we like David, sing this song of victory knowing full well that the victories we have enjoyed have been given to us by the Lord.

Closing Hymn: #333 — “God Is With Thee”

[First given at the Detroit Convention, March 1999]