

Take Heed, Lest You Fall

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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¹ For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil 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 rose up to play." ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

When I read the Apostle Paul's New Testament letters and see him dealing with the variety of problems that come up, it often seems to me that Paul acts very much like a doctor. First, he examines his patient (in this case, the Corinthian church). Then, he diagnoses their illness. And finally, he prescribes a cure.

We are, by now, well versed in the Corinthian's spiritual illnesses: division, sexual immorality, lawsuits, idolatry, a discernable lack of love toward one another, confusion over marriage, disorder in worship, denials of Christ's resurrection... we could go on.

In this passage, as Paul deals with a variety of these problems at once, he prescribes a cure for them in two parts. First, they must heed his warning, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). And second, they must embrace a gospel promise by remembering, "God is faithful" (v. 13).

Our study of this passage will focus on these two aspects of Paul's prescription for the Corinthians: the warning and the promise. And, as we examine Paul's work here, we have a very important role to play in this "medical" drama unfolding between Doctor Paul and the Corinthians. We must be willing today to sit as a patient under the healing hand of God's Word, allowing it to examine us, diagnose our illness, and prescribe its cure for us. That is to say, we are not merely distant observers of something that happened 2,000 years ago. This isn't like watching a medical drama on TV. Like the Corinthians, we too are the patients, sick in sin, and in need of divine healing from the Word of God.

So, not just this morning, but every Sunday (morning and evening) as we gather to hear God's Word, and every time we open God's Word to read it, study it, and meditate upon it, we come as patients in need of a savior.

Now, consider this. We know that when we go to a doctor or hospital, the first thing that happens is we have to take off our clothes and put on a less-than-desirable hospital gown that doesn't cover everything we'd like it to cover. So, we're basically naked, and then we're poked and prodded by all manners of instruments. It's not fun, but it is necessary for the doctor to do his job, for true healing to take place. And, this experience of visiting a doctor is analogous to the reality of our situation as we sit under the authority of God's Word, totally exposed and in need of divine healing.

The author of Hebrews captures the sense of how God's Word "operates" upon us:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of souls and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account (Heb. 4:12-13).

So, as we devote ourselves to God's Word today, we must not sit as some mere distant observer. Instead, we are patients, and the Word of God is our only source of healing, salvation, and eternal life.

Take Heed

To the Corinthians, and to you and me, God's Word offers us this warning today, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). Let's walk through these first twelve verses as Paul lays the groundwork for this particular warning.

In v. 1, Paul begins, "For I want you to know brothers..." (ESV). While the ESV generally reflects the meaning of what Paul says here, a more literal translation would read, "For I do not want you not to know," or, "For I do not want you to be ignorant." The first part of Paul's diagnosis of the Corinthians is that they apparently do not know something that they should know. They are ignorant of some very important truths, and their ignorance is proving deadly to them.

Today the general consensus is that Christians simply do not know their Bibles like they used to. And in our passage we see that ignorance of God's Word is not a trivial matter, instead it is a matter of life and death. Paul shows us, not that ignorance is bliss, but that ignorance is deadly. So we must strive to be students of God's Word. We must read it, study it, memorize it, meditate upon it, love it, and have an insatiable appetite for it.

We do not want to be Christians that are in danger because of our ignorance, like the Corinthians. What we do want is to be dangerous Christians, dangerous to Satan and to sin. James says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (4:7), and one of the best ways to resist Satan is to know God's Word. The Word of God is the offensive weapon we wield against Satan. It is the sword we take up in our wrestling against "the spiritual forces of evil" (Eph. 6). And we want to be dangerous Christians, wielding that very

powerful sword of God's word with deftness and skill. We don't want to be found unarmed and in danger.

One of the true hallmarks of a dangerous, growing, thriving Christian is that they really do have an insatiable appetite for God's Word. They don't want to be ignorant. They are full of question after question, constantly asking, "What does this passage mean? What is its significance for my life and for our church? How might I change my life to come into conformity with God's Word? How does this passage relate to the larger story of redemption? How can this passage show me a grander picture of God?"

Dangerous Christians are not bored by God's Word. They don't yawn off it. They live off it. They know they would perish without it. They feel the truth of Deuteronomy 8:3 in their bones, "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Our very lives depend on knowing God's Word. Knowledge of God's Word is the fuel for our sanctification and worship. So Paul says, "Brothers, I don't want you to be ignorant."

He continues in vv. 2-4, basically saying, "Remember the Israelites? Remember what God's Word says about them?" In these verses Paul's basic thrust is to exhibit to the Corinthians that they are part of the same church as the Israelites, the same church we are also a part of today.

The Israelites were baptized at the Red Sea. They were set apart as God's people through that baptism. And today we experience the same thing, being likewise set apart as the people of God by baptism. Also, the Israelites fed on Christ, just like we feed on Christ today. Paul says they ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. Paul refers to the manna they ate in the wilderness, and how God provided water for them from a rock, and he says that Rock was Christ. Today, we also feed on Christ at the Lord's Supper.

The whole thrust of Paul's teaching here is that Israel and the church are one and the same. The Israelites belong to the same church we belong to today. There is only one people of God. We both were baptized into the same body and we both feed on Christ. Friends, this is so important for us to see. This is exactly what Paul does not want us to be ignorant of.

Many Christians today teach that the church is a distinct body, apart from Israel, perhaps a kind of parenthesis in God's plan for Israel. But the apostle Paul does not hold to that view, or else his analogy here would fall apart. In fact, the view that Israel is distinct from the church is exactly what Paul is arguing against here in chapter 10. The great error of the Corinthians is that they think they are different from Israel. Paul shows them otherwise.

In Romans, Paul says, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him" (10:12). In Ephesians, Paul tells the Gentile believers that at one time they were separate from Christ, "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel..." (2:12), and he goes on to say that now, through Christ, "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (2:19). The idea Paul consistently teaches in the New Testament is that there is only one household of God, composed of Jew and Gentile together. For the Corinthians, this meant that they were susceptible to the same error that many of the Israelites fell into. Just as the Old Testament promises to

Israel are ultimately promises for the entire church, so too are the Old Testament warnings and judgments applicable to us today.

In vv. 5-11, Paul basically says, "If you think you are different than Israel, think again. You can fall just like most of them fell in the wilderness." In v. 5, he says, "Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness."

Paul now lists five things (vv. 6-10) that the Israelites did that led to God's judgment over them. Here is where we really do need to approach this passage as a patient, sitting in our proverbial hospital gowns, naked and exposed to God's Word, allowing it to penetrate us and, where necessary, transform us.

God baptized Israel. He fed them spiritual food. They fed on Christ. They drank from Christ. Yet Paul says most of them were overthrown. Their bodies were scattered about the wilderness by the hand of God. Ultimately they did not believe God.

We likewise have been baptized. We eat spiritual food each week in the Lord's Supper. But it is possible that, like so many of the Israelites, we may ultimately show ourselves to be unbelievers even though we are members in good standing in the church.

Here are the five things Paul says the Israelites did that led to their destruction.

First, they desired evil (v. 6). Paul probably had a number of things in mind here. I think of the mind-boggling reality that when Israel finally left Mt. Sinai en route to the Promised Land, having received the law of God and very clear divine indications of their favored status as God's people, having the ark of the Lord before them and the cloud of the Lord leading them, the very first thing that happens is that they complain about their misfortunes. Numbers 11:1 says, "And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp."

After that, amazingly, they start to complain about their food. Their desire is to return to Egypt. So God strikes them with a plague that kills all who craved the food of Egypt (Num. 11:33-34). Instead of desiring the promises of God, they desired slavery in Egypt. They desired evil.

Second, they were idolaters (v. 7). Here Paul refers to the time they built the golden calf in Exodus 32.

Third, they indulged in sexual immorality (v. 8). Here Paul refers to the specific incident in Numbers 25 when, in the words of the Bible, "Israel yoked himself to Baal" (Num. 25:3). As the Israelites pursued sexual relations with pagans, God's anger burned against them and more than 23,000 were struck down that day.

Fourth, they put Christ to the test (v. 9). They tried to see how far they could push God before he pushed back. Paul cites the incident in Numbers 21. When the Israelites complain, "we loathe this worthless food" (Num. 21:5), God sends "fiery serpents" to bite them, and many more die that day.

And then fifth, they grumbled against God (v. 10). As we've already seen, this grumbling and complaining against God was one of the chief characteristics of Israel throughout their existence in the Old Testament. The most serious example was perhaps Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16. Korah led some of the Israelites against Moses and ultimately against the Lord. In that single chapter, God brought judgment by fire, earthquake, and plague. Thousands of people died.

The thrust of Paul's words to the Corinthians (and to us) is this... if you think you are different than the Israelites, if you think you have been saved just because you've been baptized, just because you eat spiritual food at the Lord's Table, just because you are a member of God's church, if you think you are, unlike Israel, exempt from the judgments of God, think again.

Here is Paul's warning, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who things that he stands take heed lest he fall" (vv. 11-12).

Friends, the Israelites received many special privileges as God's people, yet they rejected God, they desired evil, they grumbled, and they pursued idolatry and sexual immorality. They trampled the grace of God underfoot, putting the Lord to the test. The Corinthians were now doing the same. They were stretching God's grace to the breaking point, taking advantage of every liberty they could, indulging in everything from sexual immorality to idolatry. So he reminds them that if they think they are standing, they ought instead to take heed, lest they fall.

We are reminded here that a life truly touched by the grace of God will not be characterized by grumbling, sin, division, sexual immorality, and idolatry. The Corinthians still loved their old way of life, and Paul shows them that if they really do love their old ways, they may indeed not be Christians in the first place. Paul isn't saying that to become a Christian you must stop sinning. But he is saying that the Christian life ought to be characterized by an ever-growing hatred of sin because of the fact that we are new creations in Christ.

Now, as we sit here in our hospital gowns, naked and exposed to God's Word, we must ask, do we still long for our old ways? Do we still like sin just as much as we used to? Do we indulge in sexual immorality without any concern for holiness? Do we grumble against God? Do we have idols that we cling to and refuse to give up? Do we put Christ to the test, stretching God's grace as far as we think it will go?

One of the most important questions we must ask in light of this passage is, "Do we sin *because* we believe we are saved?" That is, do we presume upon God's grace? If so, we must take heed lest we fall while thinking we stand.

1 John 3:10 says, "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." Thousands and thousands of Israelites gave evidence that, in spite of their privileged status, having been baptized and fed spiritual food in the wilderness, they were nonetheless still children of the devil. The Bible knows nothing of a carnal Christian. There is no such thing as a Christian who refuses to grow, or a Christian who continually cherishes sin, or a Christian who never pursues righteousness. So Paul's warning must be heard by all, if we think we stand, take heed, lest we fall.

God Is Faithful

Now, even as Paul warns the Corinthians, he also offers them a gospel promise. For the sin-sick Christian who does not know where to turn, Paul has some very good news. He writes, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (v. 13).

The meaning here is most significant. Christians will not ultimately be consumed by sin. We will be tempted, but because God is faithful he will not abandon us to temptation. We will be tried, but because God is faithful he will arm us, through the gospel, with the ability to escape temptation. As Paul says in Philippians, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6).

God is faithful. These are words for weary, troubled, sin-sick Christians to dwell on, to rest in. We need to know that our salvation does not depend on us, it depends on God, and God is faithful. We may think back to the opening words of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In spite of all their sin and division and trouble, Paul rejoices over them and thanks God for them because, “God is faithful” (1:9). So, if you are weighed down by discouragement and doubt, if the Christian life seems too much for you, if you are burdened and wearied and you feel like every day is more defeat than victory, if you feel like you can’t resist sin and that Satan just may ultimately overwhelm you... remember, God is faithful!

As patients under the healing care of God’s Word we need both prescriptions offered here. We need words of warning. We need to take heed lest we boast in ourselves or presume upon the grace of God. And we need to hear the gospel promises of God, that God is truly faithful, that God provides for us even in the midst of temptation.

This good news of the gospel runs counter to our intuition. When we face temptation and trials, when we stumble as Christians, we want to be the ones to provide for ourselves, we want to fight sin and Satan on our own strength, we want to be the hero of the story. But the good news is we are not. God is. Amen, amen, amen!