

The Imperfect Church – 18
The Worshiping Church
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Introduction

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 - I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. ² In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. ³ All of them ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶ These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did, ⁷ or worship idols as some of them did. As the Scriptures say, "The people celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry." ⁸ And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day.

⁹ Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snakebites. ¹⁰ And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.

¹² If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. ¹³ The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

In his 1905 book, *Reason in Common Sense*, philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Any student of history knows this to be true. Human history is littered with examples of those who failed to learn from past examples. The Japanese initiated a surprise attack on the main Russian naval base to start the Russo-Japanese War. Perhaps if someone had paid more attention to that, Pearl Harbor would not have been such a blindsiding disaster. One of the most famous examples of this phenomenon revolves around two of the most infamous men in history.

In June 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte decided to invade Moscow. He sent 600,000 men into Russia, only to be greeted by Typhus-carrying lice, who began to take a toll on his forces. Despite all that, a weakened

French army reached Moscow on Sept. 14, declaring victory in the largely vacated city. It was the return trip, however, that did Napoleon's men in. [PIC] On the way back to France, temperatures plummeted to -22 degrees Fahrenheit, freezing the soldiers' lips together and killing thousands of horses. As few as 10,000 men ultimately made it back home.

Fast-forward to 1941 as Hitler's army began its own June invasion of Russia, Operation Barbarossa. Believing victory would take only a few months — and despite owning several books about Napoleon — the Nazi leader sent his troops across Europe and into battle. [PIC] Once again, the foreign force was ill-prepared for the brutal Russian winter. Plummeting temperatures and a lack of warm coats and hats took a toll on Germany's forces, and many men returned home without ears, noses, fingers and even eyelids.

TS - Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. That truth is the driving force behind Paul's words to the Corinthian Christians in the first half of chapter 10. Before we walk through the text, let's remind ourselves of the context.

Here is how Richard Hays sums up where we are: "As we begin reading 1 Corinthians 10, it is important to recall the situation that Paul is addressing. The letter from the Corinthians has appealed for Paul's support of an enlightened understanding that idols are meaningless. Some of the Corinthians are attending meals and festivities in the temples of pagan gods, just as they had done before becoming Christians. In their view, this is merely a normal aspect of social life in their culture. Such activities entail no spiritual danger, they argue, because they have *knowledge*: knowledge that there is only one God, knowledge that sets them free from the petty rules and restrictions of ordinary religious life. Perhaps they are also arguing that, having participated in the mysteries of baptism and the Lord's Supper, they have passed into a zone of spiritual blessedness that makes them immune to any harm from associating with pagan worship."¹

For the last two chapters (and few weeks of sermons) we have seen Paul's initial response to them regarding how to handle this issue. His focus has been on how the "strong" can accommodate those with a "weaker" conscience, and ensure they do not unintentionally lead anyone astray and/or cause someone to stumble in their faith journey. Chapter 9 ended with a call to self-control and self-discipline to ensure no one falters before they cross the finish line.

¹ Richard B. Hays, [First Corinthians](#), Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 159.

As has been the case for all of the letter, Paul's concern is the Church. And we've seen that in how he instructs the strong to treat the weak. The Church needs to love and care for its own. But now he shifts gears a bit and addresses another side of the Church he has addressed before. Not how the Church treats each other, but how the Church is to live out the reality of being the Church, as God's called-out ones, striving to live holy lives in an unholy world. Now that he has focused on how the strong can help the weak, he turns his attention to those who consider themselves strong, who are participating in the pagan idol feasts, and brings a dire warning to them. As we walk through the text, we see 4 convicting truths (3 about us, 1 about God):

1. WE ARE LIKE THEM (V. 1-5)

v. 1-5 - I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. ² In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. ³ All of them ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

As Paul is wanting to bring some conviction to them, he draws a clear and sharp parallel between the Corinthian Christians and the OT Israelites wandering in the desert. Israel had been in slavery in Egypt for 430 years. God heard their cries and sent Moses to deliver them. After God unleashes a series of 10 devastating plagues on Egypt, Pharaoh let them go. God miraculously parted the Red Sea and the Israelites crossed on dry ground. Due to their unfaithfulness to the Lord in the desert, God condemned them to wander in the desert for 40 years, waiting for those who were over 20 years old at the time to die off. The Exodus and the events following it are the chief event of the entire OT. It shows us God's grace, his holiness, and his patience with rebellious children. In it, Paul sees us...people of faith today are no different than people of faith then.

"I don't want you to forget..." lit. not be ignorant about. "Our ancestors..." that's an important phrase. The vast majority of Christians in Corinth were not from a Jewish background. They have come from a pagan, Gentile background that had no knowledge or experience with ancient Judaism. Yet, Paul says, these are "our" ancestors. When you join the faith, as you are adopted into God's family, this heritage becomes your heritage. These OT Israelites are some of our spiritual ancestors. Their stories are our stories.

"Guided by the cloud..." When God rescued Israel from slavery, they had no way of knowing they were headed in the right direction towards the Promised Land. So during the day God guided them in the form of a physical cloud. At night, he guided them as a pillar of fire. When it would move, they moved. And this was a constant reminder of the very real presence of the God who had rescued them.

v. 2 – "In the cloud and the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses." Their experience was so closely tied to Moses, following the cloud, walking through the water into freedom, Paul rightly uses the word "baptized" to describe the relationship between Israel and its Deliverer.

They also ate the same food and drink. He is referring to the manna God provided for them to eat in the desert. There is an obvious food shortage when you are talking about a couple million people in a desert. So God miraculously provided a kind of bread for them to eat. It appeared on the ground each day...all they had to do was walk outside, fall facedown, and chew. He rightly called both the food and water "spiritual," identifying its source as being from God. As with a food shortage, water is in pretty short supply in the desert. But God again miraculously provided water in the desert, oddly enough, from a rock.

Bookending the wilderness journey of the Israelites, beginning in Exodus 17 and ending in Numbers 20, there are these two odd stories about water. They were all in a place without water, the Israelites start grumbling against Moses and against God for bringing them out of slavery, only to end up dying of thirst in the desert. On both occasions, Moses hit a rock with his staff and water flowed out like a river. Here, Paul makes this odd comment that this rock traveled with them, and that it was Christ. That's a weird statement. Likely Paul is referring to a rabbinic tradition among the Jewish scholars that, since the wilderness journey is bookended by these stories with the rock, that it was the same rock and that it has miraculously traveled with them throughout the desert to provide water (which is why the issue of no water in the desert did not come up in the 40 years between these two stories). He calls that Rock to be Christ because it is God, in Christ, who would have gone with them and sustained them in the desert.

So here is the parallel between ancient Israelites, the Christians in Corinth, and us today: We have been lovingly, mercifully saved out of spiritual bondage/slavery by God and he has set us free. We have been baptized, not into Moses, but into Christ, our Redeemer and Deliverer. We participate in the Lord's Supper, a physical meal that provides spiritual sustenance. And as

we journey between deliverance and the eternal promised land of Heaven, we are called to remain faithful to the Lord. Israel journeyed from deliverance to the Promised Land with a call to remain faithful to the Lord. Yet the sin that continually tripped them up, as remains today, is idolatry. Though Israel experienced a very real salvation by God, and lived daily with his overwhelming provision and blessings, sin still dominated them. V. 5 – Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.”

David Garland writes, “Israel was set apart to God by their baptism under the cloud and through the sea. They were divinely blessed in the time of the wilderness, but those blessings did not automatically exempt them from God’s judgment when they brazenly disobeyed God’s commands and veered off into idolatry. What is important for Paul is that the Corinthians are in danger of backsliding and committing the *same sin*.”²

2. WE COMMIT THE SAME SINS (V. 6-11)

This next section is bracketed by statements about their sins being cautionary tales for us. V. 6 – “These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things like they did...” and v. 11 – “These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.” Remember, their stories are our stories. We have a spiritual history in the OT that we dare not neglect. There are stories of victory and triumph that we can emulate. And there are stories of horrific failures that we must learn from. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. These OT stories we are reminded of here are stories like the boy who cried wolf...we are told these stories to warn us, to remind us what is at stake.

Notice what he said in v. 6 - “...so that we would not crave evil things like they did.” They craved evil things, which in turn caused them to pursue and acquire those evil things in sinful ways. This really is the root of all the other sins. The NT book of James agrees. James 1:14-15 - ¹⁴ Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. ¹⁵ These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. This craving led to 4 specific sins Paul mentions here:

--Idolatry - v. 7 - ...Or worship idols as some of them did. As the Scriptures say, ‘The people celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in

² David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 452.

pagan revelry.” That is a direct quote from Exodus 32. Moses is up on Mt. Sinai getting the Ten Commandments and the law from God. The people are in the distance, watching as the cloud of God’s presence has descended on the mountain. The problem is that it is taking too long.

Exodus 32:1-6 - When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. “Come on,” they said, “make us some gods who can lead us. We don’t know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.”

² So Aaron said, “Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters, and bring them to me.”

³ All the people took the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. When the people saw it, they exclaimed, “O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

⁵ Aaron saw how excited the people were, so he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!”

⁶ The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry.

God is so angered by this that he declares he is going to kill them all and start over with Moses. But Moses lovingly intercedes for them and asks God to reconsider. Why are we told these stories in the Bible? So we don’t make the same stupid mistake! God’s people who have personally experienced his salvation and blessing, easily can fall into idolatry. It seems foolish to us when other people do it, but we defend it when we do it. Now notice what Paul has done by quoting this verse from Exodus 32. He did not quote verses about them offering sacrifices to a pagan idol. He quotes the verse about eating and drinking in the idol’s presence after the sacrifice has been made. The Corinthians aren’t personally offering sacrifices to these pagan idols. But they are eating and drinking in their temples after the sacrifices have been made. Eating with the idols is idolatry. If chapters 8 and 9 made it seem like Paul thought eating meat sacrificed to an idol wasn’t a big deal, he certainly clarifies that here. Participating in these pagan idol feasts is a problem. Yes, he agreed with them in chapter 8 that idols aren’t real and that there is only one God...and it is the God revealed in the OT who saves his people and does not condone his people dabbling with idolatry in any way whatsoever.

--Sexual immorality – v. 8 – **And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day.** This is referencing an event in Numbers 25. The Israelites are camped at Acacia Grove and commit the twin sins of sexual immorality and idolatry.

Numbers 25:1-3 - While the Israelites were camped at Acacia Grove, some of the men defiled themselves by having sexual relations with local Moabite women.² These women invited them to attend sacrifices to their gods, so the Israelites feasted with them and worshiped the gods of Moab. ³ In this way, Israel joined in the worship of Baal of Peor, causing the Lord's anger to blaze against his people.

Notice again the language the text uses, that Paul is intentionally calling to mind..."so the Israelites feasted with them and worshiped the gods of Moab." Eating in the temple of an idol is no small thing. Dabbling in any form of idolatry is dangerous and rouses God's anger.

--Testing God – v. 9 – Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snakebites. This is a great story in Numbers 21:4-9 - ⁴ Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, ⁵ and they began to speak against God and Moses. "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?" they complained. "There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!"

⁶ So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died. ⁷ Then the people came to Moses and cried out, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ Then the Lord told him, "Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!"⁹ So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

You can see why God would get so mad at this one. He has saved them, lovingly, generously provided all they need...but their reaction is to complain, to criticize, to test God's patience. We will come back to this one in a couple minutes.

--Grumble – v. 10 – And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. This isn't tied to one particular OT text per se, but refers to the general disposition of God's people...ungrateful, unhappy, critical.

Why has Paul referenced these stories? To warn us! To provide negative examples to learn from. As you go from your salvation to your eternal Promised Land, don't do these things! You are fully capable of doing all this and more. The Corinthians didn't think so. They were wise. They were elite.

They were superior and mature. They could mess around with sins like this and not fall. Paul's response clearly tells us...that is foolish.

3. WE CAN FALL (V. 12)

v. 12 – *If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall.* That is as Corinthian of a warning as I can imagine. They thought they were immune. And so do so many of us today. Our capability to justify our sin, to convince ourselves that we're fine, that we are strong enough to play with fire without getting burned, is overwhelming.

"Standing strong" is a military term used for holding the line. You don't budge. This is yet another of Paul's warnings...don't be self-deceived. If you play with fire, you will get burned. As you think about the moral gray areas in your life, the areas you think you are the strongest are the areas you are most vulnerable. The fact of the matter is that we can fall. We must be careful. Just because you have experienced salvation, continued blessings and provision from God, does not make you exempt from this potential. You are not immune. You can fall, meaning we must start thinking of the spiritual consequences of our choices.

When I was in college I worked with Middle School students at a church in the west suburbs of St. Louis. One year we took them on a trip to Colorado. We spent some time sightseeing and hiking around Colorado Springs. We went to Garden of the Gods, and hiked a bit at the base of Pikes Peak. When we were done, we were pretty hot and sweaty. One of the students and I were talking about how hot and thirsty we were while we were walking down these stairs that had a little guardrail (not a fence, just a rail that was easy to crawl under. Two feet on the other side of it was a little stream of ice cold mountain water. We looked at each other, crawled under the barrier, stuck our heads in and slurped. It was amazing. Best water I've ever tasted. While I was still wiping the water off my face, he said "uh oh." He was staring at a sign about 5 feet away that warned against drinking that stream water due to dangerous and deadly bacteria in it. Oops. Luckily we didn't get sick.

But here's the problem...we too easily make decisions on a whim for stuff that meets needs and looks good. And we rarely think of spiritual consequences with relationships, job changes, promotions...not all offers are good and not all decisions are equal. Paul's focus so far in this argument over these chapters has been to not get involved in anything that would cause another believer to stumble and fall. Now his counsel is to never get involved in anything that would cause YOU to stumble and fall.

4. GOD IS FAITHFUL (V. 13)

v. 13 - ¹³ The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.

When he talks about temptations here, it could just as easily be translated as “trials or tests.” It is the same root word as v. 9 putting Christ to the test. It is a word used to examine something to prove a fault. It is the same word used in...

1 Peter 1:6-7 – ⁶ So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

It is likely a combination of both outwardly-influenced testing (from pagan culture and pressure) and inwardly-influenced temptation. When temptation comes, when testing comes, it is examining your faith to see if it’s real. And what temptations/trials come into your life? None that everyone else isn’t familiar with too. Common, normal. The same temptations that your brothers and sisters in Christ face, the same temptations that Jesus faced. Many of them were faithful. Christ was faithful. You can be faithful too. Why?

Because God is faithful. He will never put you into a situation where you have to give in. That would make him responsible for your sin, and that can never be the case. Instead, he will provide a way out. The word for “way out” is used of finding the right trail through a mountain pass. He isn’t talking about some miraculous rescue that when you are tempted God will just teleport you somewhere else. He knows what you can handle and will ensure you can be faithful, because he is faithful. All of this to say, then, there is no excuse. These temptations are normal and God will help.

Conclusion

Back to the story from Numbers 21 and the snakes. God has Moses fashion a bronze snake to a pole. It was to be raised up over the crowd. Anyone who had sinned and been bitten by a poisonous snake only had to look up at the snake and be healed. That is mercy in the midst of judgment.

In John 3 Jesus is having a conversation with a Jewish leader named Nicodemus. Right before the most famous verse in the NT, Jesus says this to him:

John 3:14-16 - ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

At the cross, God pronounces judgment on our sin. It is deserving of death. But there is mercy in the midst of judgment. All we must do is look up to the Savior on the cross and find forgiveness. Look to him and live.