

Two Ways to Learn: Don't Choose the Hard Way

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

For I do not want you to be unaware, 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, ESV

The Reason for the Stern Warning

Loving parents sometimes have good reason for giving stern, even harsh-sounding warnings to their children. If your child is reaching for a hot stove or wanting to run across a busy street or is about to stick a metal knife in an electrical outlet, you would have good reason for being very quick, clear, and stern in your warning.

The Apostle Paul loved the Corinthians. He had planted this church himself, and he had labored in ministry in Corinth for over a year and a half, at times working hard as a leatherworker and tent-maker and at times taking support from other churches, including the church at Philippi, so he could focus more time and energy on sharing the Gospel and teaching the young disciples of Jesus in the church.

And now, after he had been away from Corinth for a few years, he heard troubling reports from some members of Chloe's household who visited him in Ephesus. Since Paul left Corinth and settled in Ephesus, the Corinthian church was becoming divided into personality cults, and that division struck at the heart of the Gospel. Further, some Corinthian believers were apparently suing others in court, further fracturing the church and deeply damaging their witness before a watching world. Other believers were testing the boundaries of their freedom in Christ in ways that were defiling the consciences of their brothers and sisters in Christ by going to Pagan Temples (Corinth had many of them) and eating there, socializing there, and perhaps even doing other explicitly immoral things there, all in the name of their "Christian freedom." In short, they were putting themselves and the body of Christ in Corinth in real danger.

Paul's strongest warnings here in chapter 10 actually begin with a very humble admission that even he, an Apostle, preacher of the Gospel, and the planter of their church, did not see himself as beyond being able to fall. At the end of chapter 9, right before this passage, Paul had said, "*I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*" (9:27)

The word Paul uses for “disqualified” is *adokimos*, meaning found to be fraudulent or not genuine. Some have said he means “disqualified for the rewards of a faithful steward” and some have said he means “disqualified from Gospel ministry.” But I agree with those commentators who say that this word is too strong to mean anything less than disqualified from the heavenly prize, from eternal life in Christ, because he would have been shown to be a fraud, a false professor, not a genuine believer.

Now that is strong language, indeed, and Paul applies to himself in his own need to be vigilant before he turns to address the Corinthians’ need to be vigilant.

It’s vital to note also that the word Paul uses doesn’t indicate that he would lose his salvation, that he would have eternal life and true faith in Jesus and then lose it. When you test metal or coins and it fails the test and is disqualified, it doesn’t become unguenuine; it is shown to be what it always was. So, this is not about earning salvation or keeping yourself in saving grace. It’s a reference to being tested, being tried by fire, to expose the truth of what you really are – whether you are truly in Christ or whether you are still in your sin.

Here, in chapter 10, Paul builds a case, drawing from the Exodus generation of God’s people, to challenge the complacency and false notions of “Christian freedom” that some in the Corinthian church had. The argument builds from verse 1 to its climax in verse 12, where Paul reaches his conclusion, “*Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.*” Then, he gives some hope and encouragement in verse 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.*” The Corinthians must take heed, take their situation seriously and be on guard, but they must then rest their hopes on the faithfulness of God.

This morning, I’d like for us to walk through this passage together, seeing the lessons Paul draws from the Old Testament examples found in the Exodus generation, how he applies those lessons to the church in Corinth, and then how those lessons apply to us today.

I. The Old Testament Examples, vv. 1-6

For I do not want you to be unaware, 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.*

– vv. 1-6

As Paul turns the attention of the Corinthians back to the Exodus generation, his language is striking and teaches us some important truths:

First of all, Paul refers to the Exodus generation of Israelites as “*our fathers*,” as he addresses the Corinthian believers as “*brothers*.” We saw a couple of weeks ago that Paul didn’t really see himself as being truly an ethnic Jew in the core of his identity, because he said, “*to the Jews, I became as a Jew.*” Here, he is addressing a church mostly

comprised of Gentile believers, and he calls them “*brothers*” and refers to the Exodus Israelites as “*our fathers*.” This shows the essential covenantal unity of the people of God throughout all generations, across all ethnicities, and across the Old Testament, when the people of God on earth were identified with Israel, and now in the New Testament age, when the people of God are identified as the church. We are all one people of God, one covenant household, one family of God on earth.

And yet, belonging to this identifiable people of God on earth is no guarantee of salvation. The Exodus generation can rightly be called “*our fathers*” in the covenant line of God’s people, even though most of them were not true believers trusting in God’s promises. In Romans 9, Paul writes of “*my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh*,” meaning, of course, the Jewish people, and he says of them, “*They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.*

“*⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.*” – vv. 4-7

So, Paul can rightly refer to this generation as “*our fathers*,” even when speaking to a largely Gentile church.

Paul also uses distinctly sacramental language in describing this generation – language of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We have two sacraments in the church, baptism identifies us as belonging to the people of God, initiating us into the covenant household of God’s people and promises, and the Lord’s Supper nourishes and sustains us, as we share in the Table by faith. Some people see these sacraments, or ordinances, as being mere symbols, just rituals, and others see them as definitely imparting saving grace to all who receive them. Paul’s language here and later in chapter 10 and then in chapter 11 makes it clear that both of these views are wrong. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are so much more than just symbolic rituals, and yet they do not automatically save those who share in them.

So, Paul says the Exodus generation were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Why does he say they were baptized “*into Moses*”? Because, at that time, Moses was the anointed and appointed covenant mediator between God and His people and was their leader as a type of Christ.

I’ve used the word covenant several times now, so let me quickly define it: The covenant is the legal framework for the relationship God sets up with His people. Marriage is a covenant, a legally binding relationship. Covenantal relationships, like marriage and like God’s relationship with His people, are built on promises and contain obligations. God promises to be our God and to take us to Himself as His people. That is the central covenant promise: “*I will be your God, and you will be my people.*” He obligates Himself to save us through judgment by sacrifice; in the Exodus, He saved His people through the judgment of the plagues on Egypt and the judgment of drowning in the Red Sea, and He did so through the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. In this salvation, they were led by Moses, and thus they were “*baptized into Moses*,” placed by God under Moses’ covenant leadership as the covenant mediator, the one who stood between God and His people.

All of these things were types. A type is a mold or an impression that is later filled by the reality of the substance designed to go into the mold or impression. I’m in the midst of a season of dental work in my life right now, and I’m probably going to need a crown. The dentist will use a mold to form the crown properly. Goldsmiths and

silversmiths also use molds, which they fill with silver or gold. The point of the molds is not the mold itself but that which will fill it. And the point of a type of Christ is not the type itself but the Christ who fulfills it.

So, Christ is the true Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us, whose blood saves us from the judgment of God. And Christ is the true Captain of our Salvation, who leads us through the waters of death safely into eternal life. And so, the Israelites being “*baptized into Moses*” was a foreshadowing, a type, a mold or impression, of our being baptized into Christ, the true and gloriously perfect covenant mediator.

I would be remiss if I did not note that ALL of the people of God, including the youngest children, were ALL baptized. In fact, that baptism was most effective for the youngest of them, for it was the children under 20 years old at the time of the Red Sea parting who made it into the Promised Land. Of the adults, those 20 years old and older at the time of the Red Sea, only Joshua and Caleb stepped foot in the Promised Land.

But they were all baptized. And they all ate and drank of the same spiritual food and drink, the manna from heaven and the water which flowed from the Rock. This food and drink also pointed to Jesus, as Jesus said that He was the true bread which came down from heaven and Paul says that the Rock which followed them was Christ. Moses had to strike the Rock – only once, and then after that he only needed to speak – to get water to flow from the Rock. John 19:34 tells us of the crucifixion of Jesus: “*But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.*”

And so the Exodus generation were given to eat and drink these tokens of Christ, these types and foreshadowings of His sacrifice, of His body, which He would offer up freely for the life of His people, and of the water which flowed from His side when He was struck.

So, the Exodus generation was baptized, and they were given the spiritual food, manna from heaven, and the spiritual drink, water from the Rock of Christ. “*Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.*” Why is Paul telling the Corinthians these things, and why does God have us hearing these things this morning?

“*Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.*”

God is giving us fair warning. He wants us to learn from their poor example.

The title of our sermon today is “Two Ways to Learn: Don’t Choose the Hard Way.” That’s what Paul is saying to these Corinthians and what God is saying to us: Learn from the failures of those who have gone before, rather than insisting on learning only from your own failures. That may sound harsh, and it probably doesn’t look good on a bumper sticker, but I find I need more than Bumper Sticker Theology in the trenches of spiritual warfare, in the hard grind of real life in a fallen world. We can learn from mistakes two ways – learning from the mistakes of others who have gone before us and learning only from our own mistakes. Don’t choose the hard way.

II. The Corinthians, vv. 7-10

Paul is urging the Corinthians to learn from the mistakes of the Exodus generation because he sees them heading down some of the same roads, beginning to make some of the same mistakes, and so he clarifies, in verses 7-10:

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. – vv. 7-10, ESV

Paul mentions four specific sins: idolatry, sexual immorality, putting Christ to the test, and grumbling. Now, in our minds, grumbling may not seem as serious as the other three, but it is, as we'll see.

The Israelites became idolaters in Exodus 32 when they asked Aaron to make a golden calf for them because Moses had been away for too long on the mountain. They were actually trying to worship the Lord through the Golden Calf, as Aaron built an altar before the Golden Calf and called for a feast day to the Lord, to YaHWeH. But it was idolatry, and God judged them for it, and 3,000 fell in judgment before the Lord. The Golden Calf was a familiar image from Egyptian worship practices. But the worship of God is not according to our preferences or through images, but according to the Word of God, in spirit and in truth. I believe for the Corinthians, the danger was making their worship centered on eloquent speakers, celebrity pastors skilled in Rhetorical wisdom, and in engaging in gluttony and drunkenness at the Lord's Supper, as we'll see when we get to chapter 11.

The Israelites engaged in sexual immorality in Numbers 25 when they were led astray into Baal worship by the daughters of Moab – probably Temple prostitutes in service to Baal. This had strong significance for the Corinthians, whose city was dominated by Temples and Temple prostitutes. Some in the church thought it was no big deal to go and eat in these Pagan Temples. But when God's people worshiped Baal and engaged in sexual immorality with the daughters of Moab, God struck down 23,000 – 24,000 of them in judgment.

The people of Israel put Christ to the test in Number 21, when they declared that He was not enough for them. They to Moses, *“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”* They called manna from heaven, which the Bible calls *“the bread of angels”* in Psalm 78. Exodus 16 tells us *“the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.”* - worthless food. They were bored with it; they wanted more, and so they called the miraculously provided bread of heaven *“worthless food.”*

So God sent serpents among the people to bite them, until Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, and all those who looked to the Bronze Serpent were spared from death. This serpent, too, was a type of Christ. Jesus said in John 3:14-15, *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* The Corinthians were growing bored of Christ and wanting something more, too. The plain Gospel of Christ crucified was boring to them; it lacked the rhetorical wisdom so sought after in their culture, and it lacked the miraculous power some wanted to see. But Jesus is so sweet and all-sufficient to those who trust in Him!

The spirit of grumbling is really descriptive of the whole Exodus journey, but the first and clearest place we see it is in Exodus 17, when God first provides water from the Rock for the Israelites to drink –

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against

Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” – Exodus 17:1-6, ESV

Here, Christ was struck for the satisfaction of the thirst of these grumbling people. The staff of Moses that struck the Rock was a manifestation of the authority, judgment, and wrath of God. And the staff of God struck the Rock of Christ, and water flowed for the people.

And yet, even after water and manna was provided, the people grumbled still more, of course, as we read in Numbers 11:

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. ² Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. ³ So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

⁴ Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” – Numbers 11:1-16, ESV

Again, the grumbling is against Christ: “There is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” The grumbling is such a serious sin because it shows a profound lack of faith in God and a willingness to openly and loudly complain, even about His greatest provisions.

III. Us, vv. 11-13

And so, what about us?

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.

I’m going to save verse 13 until next week, as it has so much wonderful encouragement for us, and I don’t want to rush through it. This week, we get the warning. All of these things happened to them as an example and were written down for us.

“Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

Anyone means anyone. One of the deadliest sins in the Christian life is the sin of presumption. We presume upon the grace of God when we forget that the Christian life is a fight, a struggle, a wilderness journey, a life in which we are surrounded by enemies all around us and the most deadly enemy of all is the enemy within.

What do we need to beware? We need to beware the greener grass mentality that looks at the world with envy. We need to beware growing bored with Christ and the Gospel and thinking that surely there must be something

more, something besides this manna to look upon and eat. God has given us everything we need for life and godliness in the Gospel of His Son, for He has given us Himself and He is all-sufficient.

Christ the Rock was struck by the wrath of God on the cross. He bore our sins in His body on the tree. Blood and water flowed - blood to cleanse us of the guilt of our sin and water to cleanse us from the defilement and power of sin. He is the manna from heaven to satisfy our souls, and only with Him and Him alone can our souls be satisfied. If we think we need something in addition to Him, then we have reason to question whether we have really tasted of His goodness and grace with true and saving faith.

The people of the Exodus generation were baptized, and they ate the manna from heaven and drank the water from the Rock, but they did not do so with true and saving faith, and so they were not satisfied. They were never satisfied. The Golden Calf didn't satisfy them. The quail didn't satisfy. The sexual immorality of Baal worship didn't satisfy. Because ONLY Christ can satisfy, but He can only satisfy when we feed on Him in true and saving faith.

How do we feed on Christ? In worship. In the reading and preaching of His word. In the sacraments. In prayer. But always and only BY FAITH. Christ is present to our souls in these appointed means, but we are only satisfied in Him when we feast and drink by faith. Next week, Lord willing, we are planning to share in the Lord's Supper. This week, let's examine our hearts to ensure that we are sharing in the body and blood of Christ by true and saving faith in Him and Him alone!