

“The Rock Was Christ”

The Sixteenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Numbers 14:1-12

The issue facing many in the Corinthian congregation is a serious one. Can we profess our faith in Christ, go to church on Sunday, but still part participate in pagan practices or ceremonies outside of church life? How do we as Christians interact with pagan religions and pagan ceremonies? What are we to learn from the account of Israel’s time in the wilderness, when YHWH was visibly present with his people, provided them with his word and means of grace, and yet the Israelites grumbled about God’s prohibition against their participation in pagan ceremonies? In what way is Israel an example to us?

We now make our way into chapter 10—the heart of Paul’s discussion of idolatry. Paul has already spoken of his great concern for the weak in this congregation, those people who cannot separate the eating of meat from idolatry, and who think that if they eat meat which has been used in a pagan sacrifice, they are somehow endorsing or participating in the same paganism they are striving to leave behind. As we have seen, Paul has gone to great lengths to defend his apostolic office and to make clear that he practices what he preaches. Paul has even voluntarily given up that to which he is entitled for the sake of the gospel. It is Paul’s purpose to become all things to all men for the sake of the gospel, so by all means, some might come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In typical Pauline fashion, Paul now introduces an illustration from redemptive history to bolster this point about the damage done when the people of God continue to engage in idolatrous practices—turning from the true and living God to worship and serve created things, all the while professing faith in Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel experienced countless blessings from God (including spiritual baptism, spiritual food and drink) only to have fallen into idolatry even when YHWH was visibly present among the people. The result—that generation of Israelites stumbled badly and did not obtain the promised inheritance. Countless Israelites died in the wilderness of the Sinai. Against the backdrop of Israel’s own history, Paul’s point is crystal clear. If, like Israel, the Corinthians continue to make peace with idolatry, they too may suffer the same fate and come under God’s judgment.

As we turn to our text (the first 14 verses of chapter 10), Paul will discuss Israel’s history and then make application to the current struggles facing the Corinthians.

What follows is, in one sense, a powerful warning. Professing members of the Corinthian church may indeed find themselves coming under the judgment of God. Whenever Paul states that he wants his readers to know something, this means the apostle is about to introduce something of great significance.¹ In verse 1, Paul reminds the Corinthians of one of the most amazing episodes in all of redemptive history. “*For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea.*” When YHWH led Israel out of captivity in Egypt through the Red Sea on dry ground he not only delivered his people from bondage, he did so by leading the people through visible means—the cloud and pillar of fire. This event speaks to how the Corinthians are to understand their own place in redemptive history. They have been rescued from their bondage to sin by the death of Christ, and like Israel, they

¹ Cf. Romans 1:13; 11:25; 1 Corinthians 12:1; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

must resist the temptation to live like their pagan neighbors.

Although he is about to warn them in no uncertain terms, Paul addresses the congregation as his brothers. No doubt, Paul is hoping that the warning of God's judgment will be heeded. Although he is writing to a largely Gentile congregation, Paul speaks of "our forefathers" in such a way as to indicate that Paul sees the church as the true Israel—Israel's forefathers are the forerunners of a Gentile church.² The word "all" appears five times in this section, indicating that all Israel, without exception, in some sense participated in these blessings from God, now enumerated by Paul. While not all members of the Sinai covenant were elect, all of those who were members of the covenant did receive blessing—even if only externally.

As we read in Exodus 13:21-22, all Israel (our fathers) passed through the cloud at the time the people passed through the sea as recounted in Exodus 14. Looking back at this event through the lens of Christ's fulfilling the promises and types of the Old Testament, Paul informs us that it was Jesus himself who lead his people through the waters of judgment, safely delivering them from their enemies through the same water which was poured out in judgment on Pharaoh's army. When that happened, "*all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.*" This act of passing through the sea, Paul says, baptized all Israel into Moses—a rather striking assertion.

The best way to understand Paul's point is that Moses was the mediator of the Sinaitic covenant and that he represented the people of Israel before God. Moses therefore served as a type of Christ. Even though all Israel passed through the sea on dry ground and were "baptized," Paul's point is that while the people of Israel are said to be "baptized," they didn't get wet. Obviously, this is a problematic assertion for our Baptist friends, who argue that the essence of baptism is "immersion in water." Although the Israelites shared a common baptism into Moses by passing through the sea following the glory-Spirit (the cloud), Paul's point is that this remarkable event rescued Israel from the clutches of Pharaoh, but did not prevent those within Israel who did not believe God's promises from eventually coming under God's judgment.

Likewise, as all the Israelites were baptized, they all ate the same spiritual food, i.e. the manna. "*And all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*" Israel ate spiritual food and drank the spiritual water—therefore, in some sense Israel possessed the equivalents of the two Christian sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). Together, the Israelites drank the same spiritual drink (the water from the rock—Exodus 17:1-7, Numbers 20:2-13), which should have pointed the Israelites to the reality symbolized by that water, none other than Jesus Christ (the living water), who was present with them all along. It is noteworthy that Paul speaks of Christ as the "rock," affirming his pre-existence and using a term which was elsewhere applied to YHWH in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:15; Psalm 18:2). This is done with the sacraments of the New Testament, when the sign (water and bread and wine) can be spoken of as though it were the thing signified (the washing of regeneration, or Christ's body and blood).

In verse 5, Paul reminds us of the outcome of Israel's time in the wilderness. "*Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.*" This is a very sad and tragic assertion and refers to accounts like that of Numbers 14:1-14 and Numbers 25. Despite Israel's possession of spiritual baptism and spiritual food and drink, nevertheless, during the forty-years in the wilderness the people of Israel came under God's curse because of their propensity to grumble and engage in idolatry—in fact, of all the men of Israel who left Egypt, only two of their leaders (Joshua and

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 138.

Caleb) entered Canaan, as the rest died in the desert of Sinai, as a result of God's judgment.³

In making this point, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of one of the saddest episodes in the history of Israel. Paul does not do this as a mere history lesson, but as a warning to this congregation. Like the Israelites, the Corinthians enjoy the same spiritual food and drink that Israel did (Christ), and the same covenant signs and seals (baptism and the Lord's Supper) that Israel enjoyed, but only in their fullness. Because of these blessings, Christianity is not in any sense compatible with idolatry nor pagan rituals and feasting. To make peace with paganism, as some in the Corinthian church have done by participating in pagan feasting and rituals even while they participate in the spiritual food and drink given them by Christ, may lead to the same consequences which came upon Israel in the Sinai-God's judgement.

In verse 6, Paul now ties the example of Israel to the current situation facing this congregation. "*Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.*" Like the Israelites of old, some of the Corinthians were grumbling—not against God *per se*, but against the prohibitions from Paul (and perhaps others like Apollos) about their on-going participation in paganism.⁴ In this, the Israelites serve as an example to the Corinthians. The word "example" also can be used in the sense of a serious warning.⁵ Paul is putting the Corinthians on notice to break all ties with their pagan past.

The events that Paul recounts from Israel's history prefigure the realities that have now dawned in the messianic age.⁶ God did these things during Israel's journey through the wilderness to ensure that his purposes would ultimately be accomplished and that redemptive history would reach its ultimate goal—the coming of the Messiah. These things happened then to keep the people of Israel from setting their hearts upon evil things (the idolatrous rites of paganism). Awareness of this fact is intended to remind the Corinthians of the danger of likewise setting their hearts upon evil things as some in their midst were already doing. It is a serious thing to profess Christ but still participate in paganism.

This is why Paul issues the following warning through four specific instances where Israel had done exactly the same thing. In verse 7, he writes, "*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.'*" To make his point, Paul cites the incident of Israel and the golden calf in Exodus 32:6: "*And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.*" In the Exodus passage, eating and drinking are connected to pagan festivities, which, after the consumption of adult beverages frequently degenerated into debauchery, just as it did in at Sinai.

Based upon Paul's warning, there is every indication that some of the Corinthians were doing exactly the same thing as the Israelites had done.⁷ It is important to remember that Paul does not condemn the eating of meat *per se*. He has just said that eating certain foods and abstaining from other foods does not

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 140.

⁴ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 451.

⁵ Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 223.

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 140.

⁷ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 453-454.

commend us nor condemn us before God. What Paul does condemn is the eating of certain foods in so far as they are connected to idolatry.⁸ Therefore, the Corinthians are to carefully consider the experience of Israel—who even in the midst of their own participation in God’s mighty acts of redemption—were still prone to fall into pagan practices and idolatry. Paul’s warning is absolutely clear. Do not be idolaters by engaging in pagan feasting, debauchery and temple prostitution. Stay out of pagan temples!

This is not a matter of whether or not Christians are free to eat certain meats or consume certain beverages, it is about the absolute necessity that Christians not participate in any idolatrous practices. To do so risks the judgment of God. This was true of those Israelites who had walked through the sea on dry ground behind the pillar and cloud, and who saw God’s presence on Mount Sinai, and yet who despite all that, still engaged in an orgy at the foot of Mount Sinai so loud Moses could hear it coming down off the mountain. It is also true of the Corinthians who have witnessed Christ’s work in their midst through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, but who think nothing of participating in pagan rituals going on in the pagan temples in Corinth.

Paul spells out what exactly he means in verse 8, “*we must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.*” That Paul’s warning concerns sexual immorality should not come as a surprise since this was an issue which was a serious problem facing this congregation. Corinth was a city filled with pagan temples, and those temples were filled with prostitutes. Again, Paul turns to the Old Testament for an example of the point, this time the account in Numbers 25:1-9 in which some twenty thousand people died. Even as Israelite men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women and were soon engaging in the worship of Baal only to find themselves under the direct judgment of God, so too, Paul warns the Corinthians of the necessity of avoiding sexual immorality, especially since sexual immorality is so often connected to idolatry.⁹ This connection was found in Corinth as it is found in pop culture in America.

The broader application to be drawn by Paul is found in verse 9. “*We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents.*” This refers to the account of the Israelites grumbling against God and Moses because they were tired of manna! The verb “to test” has a secondary meaning of “to tempt.”¹⁰ Paul’s words then have the sense of pointing out the futility of testing God to see how far a sinner can go before coming under God’s judgment, in this case, testing God by grumbling about the spiritual food and drink God had provided, which meant they could no longer participate in pagan feasting. Many of the Corinthians were asking how far they could go in engaging in idolatrous practices, while still professing faith in Christ. This is classic antinomian behavior. Where is the line, so I can go right up to it without coming under judgment?

Paul’s warning to the Corinthians makes plain that this is not an acceptable response, and that the Christian risks facing the same situation as that faced by the Israelites as described in Numbers 21:5-6: “*And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die*

⁸ Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 225.

⁹ Cf. the discussion in Morris, 1 Corinthians, 141. The Numbers passage speaks of 24,000, while Paul cites the total as 23,000. The explanation is as simple as the fact that Paul may be allowing for those killed by the judges (cf. Numbers 25:5).

¹⁰ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 141.

in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.” Just as Israel tested God and came under his judgment, so too the Corinthians need to be very careful about their own conduct. We need to remember that such divine restrictions do not come about because God is seeking to keep us from enjoying ourselves, but rather to protect us from ourselves.¹¹ Our God is a jealous God in that he zealously demands our absolute allegiance because he has saved us from our sins.

Paul’s litany continues in the next verse when he tells the Corinthians not to “*grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.*” Paul is addressing the Corinthians directly.¹² The verb “to grumble” is a word which appears throughout the LXX whenever the Israelites grumbled against God and it is likely that anyone who read the Old Testament in Greek would have immediately picked up on Paul’s point. Each time the Israelites grumbled (even after God had delivered them from Egypt and provided for all of their needs during the Exodus), God’s judgment came upon them. It should not be missed that the opposite of grumbling is gratitude.

Paul’s reference to the destroyer—this term occurs nowhere else in the Greek New Testament—probably refers to the judgment which upon the company of Korah as recounted in Numbers 16. Some believe that Paul’s reference to the destroyer might be a reference to the Angel of Death (cf. Exodus 12:23; 2 Samuel 24:16; Isaiah 37:36), but this is probably a stretch. That said, we should not miss the obvious point that Paul is making: “Grumbling about God calls down divine punishment.”¹³

In verse 11, Paul now gives us the reason as to why these events are recorded in redemptive history, and helps to explain in part, how we are to read and understand redemptive history (especially the Old Testament). “*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.*” The events cited by Paul are types of what is to come. While, ultimately all of these events point to Christ’s Second Advent, in the meantime they serve as warnings to us. We must not take these important events out of their redemptive historical context and treat them as timeless principles or like Aesop’s fables—that living the Christian life is merely avoiding the bad things people did in the past. Rather, we must view all of these events through the lens of the blessing/curse principle of covenant theology. In reminding the Corinthians of these events, Paul sets this down as the principle by which subsequent generations of Christians should seek to understand these events. Having saved us from our sins, we should be grateful to God because of what he has done.

When Paul speaks of Christ as that one upon whom the end of the ages has come, his point is that Christ is that one upon whom all of history centers. Paul is no millennialist. He sees history as the course of two eschatological ages, which hinge upon the person of Jesus Christ. Our Lord’s first advent is the culmination of all that has gone before. Jesus has brought the ends of ages (the *telos* of what has gone before) to fulfillment (cf 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:2).¹⁴ But we must also consider that his second coming will be the consummation of everything promised which has not yet been fully realized. Jesus is the Lord

¹¹ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 226.

¹² Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 226.

¹³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 141.

¹⁴ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 458-459.

of history, he is the one who will bring about everything promised by God.

A more pointed warning is given in verse 12. *“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”* The problem in the Corinthian church has been and continues to be their “pride.” The Corinthians are viewing things from the perspective of this present evil age instead of the prism of the age to come. But the fate of countless Israelites, who likewise were overconfident and filled with pride, should serve as a warning to the Corinthians. Whenever Israelites engaged in idolatry they came under God’s judgment. God did this to protect the covenant line to ensure the birth of the Messiah.

So too, the Corinthians have been duly warned. God will purify his church as the means of presenting his son with a spotless bride. Therefore, the self-confident need to be careful. The first person who falls into such sin is the proud person who boasts they will never fall into sin. The second person who falls is the careless person who ignores the fact that such temptations inevitably will come, and yet who makes no effort to be on the lookout for such temptations and preparing a way of escape.

Ever the shepherd of his flock, Paul now tempers his pointed warning with an important word of pastoral 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 are not under some unique and extraordinary form of trial. Such things have been (and will continue to be) common to the people of God (indeed common to humanity in general). To be identified with Christ and his church is to be identified with the scorn which comes upon the people of God, as well as to face the ever-present temptation to return to pagan ways of thinking and doing.

But Paul’s main point is that God is always faithful to his people when they struggle with those temptations common to the lot of humanity. God will not allow his people to be tempted beyond what they can bear, and he will always provide a way of escape. It is interesting to note that the word for “escape” is a word which means “a mountain pass,” a word of picturesque imagery to people familiar with Greek military history. God will always provide a means of escape, even when temptation seems as threatening and inevitable as does a defeat at the hands of a much larger army. Thus God is always faithful to us, his people, especially when we must endure temptation.

What, then, is the application for us?

Paul appeals to the history of Israel to make two important points. The first is that just as God called the Israelites out of Egypt and provided them with the means of grace, God has done the same for the Corinthians—and for us. The same Lord who has washed, justified and sanctified his people in Corinth was with Israel in type and shadow—the rock was Christ who followed them. The benefits that Israel enjoyed (still hidden in type and shadow) pointed forward to the very realities that we as the people of God now enjoy in all their fullness. That which was promised to Israel is now a reality for us. Christ was the rock—although he was hidden. But for us, he is the crucified one, now risen and ascended on high, that blessed savior who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us through his word, and who gives himself to us in the sacraments (the means of grace) which sustain that faith created in us through the gospel.

The second point Paul makes is that Israel coming under the judgment of God serves as an example of us that our God is a jealous God. Jesus is no longer hidden in type and shadow. We profess that we trust his death to save us from our sins. We see in Jesus the wisdom and righteousness of God. How then can

we in any sense profess faith and Christ yet still participate in non-Christian religious ceremonies or practices? We cannot. Since Jesus Christ has purchased us with his own blood, he will not share us with occult practitioners (like fortune-tellers or astrologists), with false religions (Islam or Buddhism), with heretical sects like Mormonism or Jehovah's witnesses, or with religious hucksters like Depak Chopra.

Beloved, we are Christ's. He has bought us with his shed blood, he has given to us his righteousness through faith, he has provided us with the means of grace, and he is even now preparing us to be his bride. Jesus will never give us more than we can bear and he will always provide us with a way of escape. And because all of this is ours—our inheritance In Christ—paganism has nothing for us.