

A History Lesson From God

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Introduction: In 1948 in a speech to the House of Commons, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously said, “those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.” The apostle Paul, no doubt, is in full agreement with Churchill’s warning as 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 makes clear. Twice he tells us that events in Israel’s past serve as “examples” (10:6, 11), warning us not to repeat their sinful behavior, behavior that had devastating consequences for the Hebrew people. Paul has challenged us to discipline ourselves so that we may win an imperishable crown and not suffer disqualification (9:24-27). Unfortunately, such determination and discipline “found no place in the lives of many of the Israelites who followed Moses out of Egypt (Vaughn, 1 Cor., 99). Though they made a good start, they failed to finish well. Paul wants us to learn from their tragic example so that we do not repeat their history.

I. Spiritual blessings do not guarantee us God’s pleasure 10:1-5

Paul gives us a history lesson in these verses drawing parallels and providing analogies between Israel (*CSB*, “our ancestors,” *ESV*, “our fathers”) and the church. He uses the event of the Exodus under Moses, recorded in Exodus through Deuteronomy, as his teaching lesson. Israel experienced, as have we,

extraordinary blessings and privileges from our God. This, however, did not guarantee their success in finishing the race (9:24).

1) We see God's guidance 10:1

We should never lose sight (“be unaware”) of the past blessings and kindnesses of God to His people. Take the great Exodus of God’s people out of Egyptian slavery. Note the repetition of the word “all.” Paul writes, our ancestors (or “fathers”) were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea.” The pillar of cloud (Ex. 13:21) guided them through the wilderness day and night. God was with them everyday and every step of the way (cf. Ps. 105:39). And, all passed through the sea” (Ex. 14). God delivered the Hebrews and crushed the Egyptians! God was their divine guide through the sea and in the wilderness.

2) We see God's deliverance 10:2

Paul draws an analogy between Moses (a type of Christ) and Christ, passing through the waters of the Red Sea to Christian baptism (Rom. 6:1-14).

Moses delivered the Hebrews out of Egyptian slavery. He was their savior. Trusting him and pledging their allegiance, they followed him in the cloud, and out of the waters of the sea. In a sense, they were baptized (identified) into Moses just as Christians are baptized (identified) into Christ. Wiersbe summarizes it nicely, “Israel had been delivered out of Egypt by the power

of God, just as the Christian believer has been redeemed from sin (In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul has already related Passover to salvation). Israel was identified with Moses in their Red Sea “baptism” just as the Corinthians had been identified with Christ in their Christian baptism” (*Be Wise*, 101).

3) We see God’s provisions

10:3-4

Paul now draws another analogy from Israel’s experience in the wilderness with the Christian ordinance of the Lord’s Supper or Communion. The Hebrews “all ate the same spiritual food.” They all ate the manna, “bread from heaven,” that God provided (Ex. 16). “And all drank the same spiritual drink (Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 20:2-13). Here, Paul adds a word of commentary that is very instructive, “For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ” (v. 4). Paul uses the word “spiritual” three times in verses 3-4. Kistemaker is right, “The material substance of food, drink, and rock points to a spiritual source. Through his Spirit, God actively engages in providing for the basic needs of his people” (*I Cor.* NTC, 324). And, who was the “who” not the “what” that gave them the water of life that sustained them? It was Christ! John MacArthur is very helpful in his comments here: “The source of their spiritual drink was a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Even at the time of the Exodus, the Messiah was with Israel providing for them! The Jews had a

popular legend, still known and believed by many in Paul's day, that the actual rock that Moses struck followed Israel throughout her wilderness travels, providing water wherever they went. I believe the apostle may have been alluding to this legend, saying, "Yes, a rock did follow Israel in the wilderness. But it was not a physical rock that provided merely physical water. It was a spiritual rock, the Messiah (the Hebrew term for Christ) whom you have long awaited, who was with our fathers even then." (1 Cor. 220).

4) We see God's wrath

10:5

Jim Hamilton writes in summarizing verses 1-5, "Paul's point is that no Corinthian claiming to be a Christian should think baptism and the Lord Supper prevent God's wrath on idolatry and sexual immorality" (*Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns*, 279). How right he is. Israel had experienced the equivalence of Christian graces. They followed Moses, went through baptism and enjoyed the sacramental blessings of food and drink. "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, since they were struck down (*ESV*, "overthrown," *NASV*, "their dead bodies were spread out") in the wilderness." God had blessed the Hebrews beyond measure. He delivered them, guided them daily and met their every need. How did they respond? Idolatry, sexual immorality and grumbling (10:7-

10). The result? Most died in the wilderness and never made it to the Promised Land (see Num. 14 for example). Leon Morris says “*Most of them* is a masterly understatement. Of all the host of Israel only two men [Joshua and Caleb] entered Canaan; the rest perished in the wilderness...the wilderness [was] strewn with bodies” (*I Cor.* TNTC, 140). Such a great beginning! Such a tragic ending!! This is Paul’s concern for the Corinthians. This is Paul’s concern for us. To begin well is no guarantee we will finish well. It seems in our own day the horror stories just keep coming. We must not presume on God’s blessings. There are too many spiritual corpses all around us for us to make that error.

II. Spiritual blessings do not insulate us from divine judgment 10:6-11

Paul’s history lesson continues with specific examples drawn mostly from the book of Numbers which catalogues much of the 40 years in the wilderness for Israel. It is not a pretty picture. Further, Paul will cite particular events and sins that are very relevant for the Corinthians and the vexing issue of food sacrificed to idols which he began addressing in chapter 8. Flirtation with the world is the way of the fool. These verses should leave no doubt of that truth.

1) God judges lust 10:6 (cf. Num. 11:34)

Verse 6 begins the record of 5 specific sins Israel committed in the wilderness, sins that the modern church too often gets cozy with. These

historical events are “examples for us so that we will not desire (*NIV*, “set our hearts” *AMP*, “crave”) evil things as they did.” This is an allusion to Numbers 11:4-34. The Hebrews whined and complained about only having manna to eat. They wanted (lusted for) meat and complained that they had it better back in Egypt. Obviously, God’s plan was not to their liking. God responded by giving them an abundance of quail (11:31-34). The people greedily gathered them and gorged themselves on the meat, only to have God judge them with a great plague for their lust and lack of trust in him (cf. Ps. 106:14). Evil desires will always lead to divine judgment. Don’t fail to learn from history.

2) God judges the sin of idolatry 10:7 (Ex. 32:1-6)

Israel continually danced with idolatry in violation of the 1st and 2nd commandments (Ex. 20:3-4; Deut. 5:7-8). They always paid a heavy price when they did. Paul warns, “Don’t become idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to party” (*NIV*, “indulge in revelry”). The verse is a quotation from Exodus 32:6 and the making and worshiping of a golden calf. Schreiner is right on target when he writes, “It is no accident that Paul selects the verse which describes Israel committing idolatry while eating and drinking. The warning to the Corinthians is clear: they too will be guilty of idolatry if they eat and drink

in an idol's temple. The words *indulge in revelry* in the citation, according to Paul, denote idolatry, and the Corinthians will be guilty of the same if they eat food offered to idols in temples" (*1 Cor.*, 203).

The word "party" or "play" may also indicate sexual immorality. God would command the death of 3,000 Hebrews who "instigated [their] idolatrous and immoral orgy at Sinai" (*MacArthur*, 222). The sin of idolatry always has a very high price tag.

3) God judges the sin of sexual immorality 10:8 (Num. 25:1-9)

Paul urges the Corinthians to "not commitment sexual immorality." He has already told them to "flee sexual immorality" in 6:18. How often it is that identity and sexual immorality are bed-fellows. How serious does God take this sin? Citing the story of Numbers 25:1-9 where Israel committed idolatry and sexual immorality with the women of Moab, he notes that God judged them "and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died."

Numbers 25:9 reveals a total of twenty-four thousand eventually died. The evil cravings and lust of the flesh (1 John 2:16) will not be ignored by God. Such sins always bring a bitter harvest.

4) God judges the sin of testing Him 10:9 (cf Num 21:4-9)

The 4th sin Paul raises is testing (or questioning) Christ. He admonishes the Corinthians to not "not test Christ, as some of them did— and were killed

(*ESV*, “destroyed”) by snakes. Israel tested Christ who was there with them on multiple occasions (Ex 17:2-7; Deut. 6:16). Paul’s high Christology is present once again. Here Paul specifically has in mind Num. 21:4-9 where the people became impatient in their journey in the wilderness and spoke against both God and Moses. God judged them by sending “venomous snakes” (*ESV*, “fiery serpents”) that bit them. The result was “many Israelites died” (Num 21:6). Once again, we see a food issue is present. Israel wanted to dine again in Egypt. The Corinthians wanted to dine in pagan temples. In both cases they dishonored God, ignored what was best for others, and accommodated themselves to idols, pagan gods. In both situations, they tested Christ (God!) and invited his swift and severe discipline. Compromise is not the way of Christ. Faithfulness to Christ means I will not consort with the world.

5) God judges the sin of grumbling 10:10 (cf. Num 16:41-50)

Paul’s 5th and final warning is against grumbling. He is direct and to the point, “And do not grumble” (pre. imp). The word means to murmur or complain. Learn a lesson from history. It will be most instructive. The Hebrews grumbled, at least “some of them did —and were killed by the destroying angel” (*ESV*, “Destroyer”). It is not easy to know specifically what OT passage Paul has in mind. The Hebrews grumbled all the time!

Schreiner is helpful when he notes: “Israel grumbled about lack of food (Exod. 16:1-3, 7, 8) and water (Exod. 15:24; 17:7), about the difficulty of travelling in the wilderness (Num. 11:1), about the leadership of Aaron (Num. 16:11), about the death of Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their families (Num. 16:41) and especially about the Lord’s promise that he would bring them into the land of promise (Num. 14:2, 27, 29, 36; Deut. 1:27; Ps. 106:24).” (p. 205).

I think it most likely Numbers 16:41-50 is in view. There Israel grumbled about the leadership of Moses and Aaron, and God killed 14,700 with a plague. It may be that the destroying angel (not mentioned directly in Numbers) is the same angel of judgement who also struck the Egyptians by means of a plague. If so, David Garland’s insight is worth our careful reflection, “If the destroying angel who killed the firstborn in Egypt (Exod. 12:23) is in view, it reveals a terrifying mystery that God’s instrument to liberate the people can return in boomerang fashion, to strike them dead for their disobedience.” (*1 Cor.*, BECNT, 464).

Why does Paul mention grumbling? Perhaps it is because the Corinthians continually complained about their prohibition to eat in pagan temples. Just as the Israelites complained about the leadership of Moses, the church at Corinth complained about the leadership of Paul. But remember and learn

from history. God gives us godly leaders for our good. Perhaps we should listen more and grumble less!

III. Spiritual blessings do not protect us from personal temptations 10:11-13

Paul does not want us to repeat the mistakes of the past. He wants us to learn from the examples of our ancestors and make better and wiser decisions in the present and in the future. Lessons from the past are good, but a strategy for the present provides a very helpful companion. This is exactly what Paul provides in verses 11-13.

1) Remember our susceptibility to evil 10:11-12

Paul again reminds us that, “These things [events in the OT] happened to them as examples.” Indeed, “they were written for our instruction.” What the Hebrews went through was not just theirs. It is ours too. They should have learned valuable lessons and so should we. However, there is something unique about our situation. Since the coming of Jesus Christ, a new age has dawned. We are those “on whom the end of the ages has come.” The last days has been inaugurated with the coming of Christ, though its consummation or climax awaits his return (Rev. 19:11-21). Gardner writes, “this is the age toward which all history and all God’s activities with his people have been leading” (p. 437). In that light, we need

to heed the warning of v. 12, “So, whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall.” *The Message* has a colorful paraphrase, “Don’t be so naïve and self-confident. You’re not exempt. You could fall on your face as easily as anyone else.” Pride is always a problem for the people of God. A know-it-all posture is foolish and dangerous. Be careful. Watch out! God is the one who keeps you standing. You are incapable of doing this yourself. Taylor notes, “In context, the meaning of “fall” is to die (10:8), which has already occurred in Corinth over abuses of the Lord’s supper (11:27-30). “Falling” may also be synonymous with standing before God “unapproved” (9:27). Both certainly entails God’s judgement (*I Cor.*, NAC, 236-37). So, remember Prov. 16:18, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

2) Remember God’s way of escape

10:13

Verse 12 contains a grave warning. Verse 13 contains a great promise. It is one of the most encouraging promises in all of the Bible. Let’s unwrap it phrase by phrase. “No temptation has come upon you except what is common to humanity.” Your temptations to not trust God are not new or unique. People everywhere and in every age have experienced the same thing. But now the promise! “God is faithful.” And, he is faithful in a very precise way. “He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are

able.” He places limits on how far the temptation can go. He will help you stand and not fall! How? “With the temptation he will also prove a way out (*ESV*, “way of escape”) so that you may be able to bear it (*ESV*, “endure it”). Leon Morris provides a beautiful illustration of this verse, “The imagery is that of an army trapped in rugged country, which manages to escape from an impossible situation through a mountain pass. The assurance of this verse is a permanent comfort and strength to believers. Our trust is in the faithfulness of God” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 142). He will not fail us. He never has. He never will.

Conclusion:

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

What a friend we have in Jesus

All our sins and griefs to bear

What a privilege to carry

Everything to God in prayer

Oh, what peace we often forfeit

Oh, what needless pain we bear

All because we do not carry

Everything to God in prayer

Have we trials and temptations?

Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged

Take it to the Lord in prayer

Can we find a friend so faithful

Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness

Take it to the Lord in prayer