

For Our Instruction

Text: 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Hymn: "What Is the World to Me" (*LSB* 730)

This morning we're dropped right in the middle of a section in which Paul is admonishing the Corinthian Christians to grow in discipline, to persevere, to live always with the goal of their salvation in mind. And so he begins the chapter with these words:

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 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, Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Then comes today's reading, in which Paul tells us that these things happened to the people of the Old Testament as an example. It was a lesson to them. But they were written down for our instruction "to whom the end of the ages has come." In other words, the entire revelation of God's will, including the history of God's people in the Old Testament, took place as preparation for the end of the ages. When's the end of the ages? Answer: We're now living in it! The Old Testament was written, in other words, so that we who live in the final stage of world history and, above all, the final stage of salvation history, might be instructed, warned, and guided by things that took place while the people were still being prepared, so we don't fall into the same traps.

But how does this translate into our lives in Christ? That's the key question. Let's apply it here. What was the problem with the people of Israel? The problem was not what they were or where they were. They *all* equally and alike, the famous Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and all those countless others, not important enough to be remembered by name—they *all* received the same gifts of God. They were *all*

members of the Hebrew people, descendants of Abraham, to whom the promises of God had been given, to whom God had sent a deliverer, Moses, who came to deliver every one of them—the ones who were pleased and the ones who grumbled.

They *all* received the same promises. They were *all* under the same cloud which led them by day. They were *all* brought through the Red Sea and were baptized into Moses, which is to say, they were consecrated for exactly the same purpose, to leave slavery, to leave Egypt, to travel to the Promised Land, and on the way to be formed as God's people by the giving of God's law. Every one of them. No exceptions.

Yet, in what may qualify as the biggest understatement in all the Bible, Paul says that *not all* of them made it. "With most of them God was not pleased." How many made it? Two. Two (and their families, I suppose). Something like 99.9% came under God's displeasure at the end. (There's a case fatality rate for you!)

What was the difference? None of the difference was at God's end. The difference was at their end. They fell into temptation and stayed down. The temptations that overtook them were different at different times, but in each case those who succumbed to temptation and stayed down failed to reach the promises.

Now when we think of temptation, we tend to think of it in terms of the concrete action to which we are being drawn. It's a temptation to eat or drink too much, a temptation to watch the wrong kinds of television, a temptation to spend money on something we shouldn't, a temptation to speak in a particular way or listen to the wrong things. But that's not what temptation here or in the rest of Scripture means. It's not disembodied from the actions but it's not restricted or limited simply to what we do. Take, for example, the temptation in the wilderness to indulge in sexual immorality.

Those 23,000 were not the only ones among the whole people of Israel who had ever broken the sixth commandment. If the Israelites were anything like you and me, they probably broke the sixth commandment at least in their thoughts, on a weekly, if not a daily basis. The sexual immorality into which they fell was not merely a lapse into inappropriate behavior but a deliberate and conscious rejection of what God had called them to be and the adoption of a pagan way of life.

Likewise, their grumbling. Have you ever grumbled? Have you ever been displeased with the lot that God has given you and wondered why has God has given me this but not that? Maybe some of you are feeling that right now. Should you also expect to be struck down as they were, because you are grumbling? The issue was not only at the things that they were displeased with, but their grumbling was a rejection of God's leading and guiding them in the first place. "Why has He brought us out here? Take us back to Egypt! There we had meat and onions. If this is the kind of God you are, give me the devil instead." That's what their grumbling amounted to. A rejection of God's goodness because they wanted something different and they knew better.

The nature of temptation—the thing that the devil and the world and your flesh wants to accomplish—is not merely to commit certain acts you shouldn't or fail to commit other acts that you should. It's to drive a wedge between you and God. It's to take your trust in God away and replace it with self-will or with the doubting of God's goodness. It's to take your eyes away from God's promises and direct them to what you think and what your assessment of the situation is. And you'll take your hand out of the heavenly Father's and begin to walk your own way, either in shame or despair: "I'm not good enough for this." Or in anger and self-will: "I want to go this way not that way!"

This is why the way we speak is vitally important, as well as the thoughts we allow ourselves to entertain, the things we look at, the way we spend our time and money, the way we use our bodies, the company we keep. All those things, none of which can save us at all, even if we got our life to the point that self-help books were written based on it. None of those things can save us, because none of those things can eradicate the sin in us. But the way we speak, the thoughts we allow yourself to think, all those other things will either work *with* the will of God for the renewing of our minds or they will fight *against* it.

And as our Lord Jesus makes clear, “You cannot serve two masters.” God doesn’t do divided affections. That would suggest He has a rival, which is blasphemy. If God is God, then we as the children of God are called to live our lives with God as God. That doesn’t work unless God is our God. But once we’ve received the grace of God, once we’ve been baptized into Christ and received the promises of God, God takes us by the hand, as He did the Hebrews in Egypt, and says, “Come with Me. The end of all things is prepared. Walk with me and I will give them to you.”

And when the final end is revealed, there will be only two destinations for everyone who is born into this world. You will either go with God or away from Him. The way we live our lives now will play a very important part in that, because if we walk with God, if we follow our Lord Jesus Christ, we will go where He is. You don’t have to download google maps onto your iPhone to know this: If you follow a person, you end up in the same place as that person. And if you walk away from Him, you end up somewhere else. If we decide to go our own way, we will go somewhere else.

And so we are called daily to repentance. We are called daily to examine our lives. Become self-aware, because sin has a knack for creeping into our lives. It's like the answer to the old question, How you do boil a frog alive? You raise the temperature very slowly. First we just dip a toe into sin, then a second, and, four years later, we're in full-scale rebellion against God and we have no idea exactly when it happened. A satirical website had the headline several years ago: "Parents Shocked to Discover Son No Longer Goes to Church Despite Regular, Quarterly Attendance."

It breaks God's heart to see His children gradually abandon Him. Habits matter. And so God calls us to repentance. He calls us to recognize sin in ourselves and when we see it to hand it over to Him. "God, forgive me. God, keep my consciences tender and sensitive, so that I might receive Your mercy and be renewed and strengthened in faith so that my affection for You through Jesus Christ might grow." In short, God calls us to recognize sin and by His grace also to dislike it.

And none of this is a project to make us good enough for God. If that were the case, we would all fail and have no hope. But it's His gift. He doesn't throw us into the world and say, "Good luck, report to me at the end of your life." He calls us back again and again: "Come back, prodigal son. Come back, prodigal daughter. Let me heal you. Let me restore you."

And what comfort it is to know that every temptation that we experience has been experienced countless times before. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. You are not that special. You are flesh and blood like the rest of us. God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.

When you're being tempted, cry out to God. Martin Luther once said very wisely that there are times when we are so racked by temptation that we have no words left to cry out but "Lead us not into temptation." But the moment we call God into our temptation, however weakly, and even when we fall into it, we are no longer alone in sin, but we are with Jesus. And that's all right, because Jesus knows what to do with it. He takes it to the Cross and leaves it there. Jesus will not you be tempted beyond your ability. And He will not leave you alone with your sin.

Seek the Lord where He may be found. Seek Him when it is still the time and day of salvation. And today is August 9, 2020. Here you are. With Jesus. You are in God's presence. Here you are hearing His Word to be strengthened and nourished and instructed and guided. Above all, to be comforted and inspired by the fact that we are in the end times. All that things that Jesus won for us on the Cross, seek them! Take hold of them! Don't let go of them! Especially when you are weak and tempted. Take comfort: Jesus sympathizes with you. He too was tempted but without sin. And because He was tempted and without sin He has already dealt with the sin of your temptation. God is gracious. May He keep you in the true faith and make you faithful also so that you might receive all those things that come at the end of the road you're already on, following the Lord Jesus, who loved you and gave Himself for you.

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