

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY LIMITED BY A CONCERN FOR SELF

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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You do not have to be around me very long to notice my love for history, particularly American history. I am ever amazed when I read the history of the founding of our nation during the revolution and the era of the Civil War. These two great events served as the foundation for the country we live in today. The list of great leaders in both of these periods is too long to mention. If it were not for the sacrificial efforts of many, even to the point of death, we would not stand today as one of the most blessed countries in all of human history. Our freedoms are dedicated to those that went before us and established a nation that is built on the rights of man and to those who continue to protect those freedoms today.

However, there is always a price that comes with freedom. Not only must there be sacrifice to gain freedom, but once freedom is established, there is a responsibility to cherish those freedoms and not abuse them. Our history provides numerous examples of those that have attempted to use freedom for their own benefit, contrary to the passions and dreams of our forefathers. Such abuses are often fraught with disaster. I suppose one of the greatest dangers we have as a nation today is to presume upon these freedoms and our wealth and success as a nation to the point of believing that we are somehow above history. You have heard the quip, “History often repeats itself.” But many Americans think that somehow, because we are America, things will be different. For instance, some today lift up socialism as the answer to poverty and class distinctions. They ignore the fact that historically no nation has survived a socialistic agenda. We have the fall and tragic effects of communism in recent history to show the dangers inherent in socialism. And yet, there are those who continue to think that somehow socialism would be different in the United States. Because of who we are, the outcome would be different.

But this phenomenon of presumption did not begin in our country. Ever since sin entered the world through our first parents, it has been man’s nature to presume upon the goodness of God, to take for granted the freedoms we have in Christ and live as if somehow things will be different regardless of our actions. The result of this presumption is that we often learn nothing from history and perhaps ignore it altogether. I have learned that my passion for history is born out the mistakes that were made in the past and how some of the same tendencies that led to failure in the past exist in our culture today. We can and should learn from history.

Over the past few weeks we have seen Paul’s personal testimony in relation to giving up certain rights for the sake of the gospel. In our text this morning, Paul turns to the history of Israel as an example of how freedom can lead to disaster when God’s goodness is taken for granted or presumed upon.

I. The Blessings of Liberty (10:1-4)

In these opening verses Paul reminds the Corinthians of the blessings granted to Israel as God’s chosen nation. “**For I do not want you to be unaware,**” reflects back to the end of chapter 9 and Paul’s teaching on running the race to win. His purpose in running in such a way is so that he would not be disqualified. Here he gives the history of Israel as a reminder of those who did not finish the race and why.

1. Deliverance from Egypt (v. 1)

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea.” Paul admonishes the Corinthians to remember the day of Israel’s deliverance from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. If you are reading your Bible through on a yearly plan, you will have read this story of the Exodus at some point over the past few weeks. As I reread this account, I was reminded of the stubbornness of Pharaoh and the Egyptians and God’s sovereignty in delivering the Israelites. I was reminded that God called all the shots. Israel did not wake up one day and decide to deliver themselves from bondage. It was God’s decision. He was intricately involved in all of the details, from the calling of Moses (against his wishes, I might add) to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. The ten plagues served to show God’s power in delivering His people and the promise that He would be what He would be for his people. He delivered them and He would protect them. It was bound up in His Name, Yahweh.

Paul writes that they were **“all under the cloud.”** This is a reference to the Shekinah glory cloud of God that led the people on their way out of Egypt. “The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (Exodus 13:21). Further, they **“all passed through the sea,”** a reference to their coming out of Egypt as the waters of the Red Sea were rolled back and the nation of Israel came across on dry ground. “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD swept the sea *back* by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided. The sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters *were like* a wall to them on their right hand and on their left” (Exodus 14:21-22).

Notice Paul’s use of the word **“all”** in these verses. **“All”** of them were delivered through the sea on dry land. We must be careful to recognize that this event in Israel’s history did not represent their *spiritual* salvation. Salvation has always been by faith, individual faith. While some came to faith in Egypt or while in the desert wanderings and were saved spiritually, as we will see in a moment, many were not saved. Israel was never saved spiritually *as a nation*, but their national deliverance from the bondage of Egypt serves as a *picture* of God’s intervening in the life of an individual and delivering His chosen people from the bondage of sin under the New Covenant.

2. Baptism into Moses (v. 2)

Paul continues this picture in v. 2, **“and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”** Again, we must be careful we do not take this picture too far. Some look at this event, this baptism into Moses, as a water baptism that is often symbolic of cleansing of sin in Scripture. Their conclusion is that this shows that these who **“were baptized into Moses”** were in fact spiritually saved through this deliverance. However, this presses the picture too far.

First of all, as we have mentioned, this **“cloud”** was the Shekinah cloud of the glory of God, showing His presence and guidance. As we read in Exodus 13:21, it was a “pillar of cloud by day” and “a pillar of fire by night.” It was not a cloud of water at all. Further, as we have seen in Exodus 14:22, they walked across on “dry land.” The waters did not cover them.

So what is Paul alluding to here? This is where a right understanding of baptism is important. While baptism often symbolizes cleansing of sin and purification in Scripture, that is not always the case. Baptism is also a symbol of identification. When a believer is baptized, it is an outward expression of and inward change. It is their profession that they are putting off the

old and putting on the new. It is their identification with Christ who now has their allegiance. This is the picture that Paul gives here. These in Israel **“were baptized into Moses,”** they were identified with him on that day, making a break with the old days of Egypt and pressing on in the new way to the Promised Land. There was nothing salvific in this baptism. It simply served to show their identification with Moses, and more importantly, God, under the Old Covenant. Water baptism in Scripture serves the same purpose for those under the New Covenant. It identifies the believer with Christ. There is no saving quality in water baptism. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. Baptism simply serves as an expression of our faith in Christ.

3. Nutrition from the Rock (vv. 3-4)

A third area concerning Israel in this illustration is their source of nourishment. Paul writes, **“and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink.”**

Exodus 16:12-15 – “I have heard the grumbings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”¹³ So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.¹⁴ When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground.¹⁵ When the sons of Israel saw *it*, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.”

Exodus 17:1-6 – Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink.² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water that we may 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 they grumbled against Moses and said, “Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.”⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your 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 will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.

So we see the **“spiritual food”** that **“all ate”** and **“spiritual drink”** that **“all drank.”** Again notice the emphasis by Paul on **“all.”** As was the case with baptism, we must be careful that we do not misinterpret Paul’s use of the word **“spiritual”** in describing this food and drink. Paul is not saying that they were all saved. They did not receive this food because they were spiritual. **“Spiritual”** simply denotes that it was provided by God. As John MacArthur notes, “Paul is speaking of the source, not the type, of sustenance” [*1 Corinthians*, 220]. In other words, the Israelites did not receive this nourishment because they were spiritual, but it was physical nourishment provided according to the common goodness and mercy of God. Their provisions were from a divine source rather than a natural source.

Paul further describes this divine source as a rock, **“a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.”** According to Jewish legend, the rock that Moses struck Horeb followed the Israelites throughout their wanderings in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, providing water wherever they went. Paul obviously refers to this legend in v. 4. Paul turns his thought from the physical nourishment of food and water to the true spiritual source, Jesus Christ. Yes, there was a Rock that followed them throughout their journeys, but that Rock was not physical, but the spirit of Christ Himself, the Rock. That physical rock at Horeb was a type of Christ, who was spiritually present with them continuously.

So Paul gives this example of Israel’s physical deliverance from bondage in Egypt and all of the blessings associated with it as a picture of the blessings and privileges of those who profess Christ. The situation at Corinth was similar to these Old Testament pictures in Israel. There were those in the church that had professed faith in Christ, been baptized, and were partaking of the Lord’s Supper, **“spiritual food”** and **“spiritual drink.”** They were living as if they were in communion with God and their **“rock was Christ.”** However, there is more to the story of Israel.

II. The Misuse of Liberty (10:5-10)

“Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.” As John MacArthur correctly points out, **“most of them”** is an understatement [*1 Corinthians*, 221]. Of the entire multitude that left Egypt, only two men over twenty years of age, Joshua and Caleb, were allowed to enter the Promised Land. To help put this in perspective, notice this from one writer:

Funerals were the order of the day, and when pestilence struck, thousands perished (Num. 16:40; 25:9). Taking the total number of men who were twenty years and older, 603,550 (Num. 1:46), and assuming that there were an equal number of women, we divide the total, 1,207,100 by 38 years (the years Israel spent in the desert after the curse [Num. 14:23]). We calculate an average of about 90 deaths per day for that entire period. A grim and daily reminder of God’s anger! [Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 325]

The entire nation, save two men over twenty, were **“laid low in the wilderness,”** literally, “scattered in the wilderness” as judgment from God. What went wrong? Why was God not pleased with them? Paul mentions four specific sins that led to Israel’s judgment.

1. Idolatry (v. 7)

“Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY.” In each of these instances, Paul is very specific in describing the particular sin event in Israel’s history so that there could be no misunderstanding by the Corinthians as to what he was referring to.

Exodus 32:1-6 – Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”² Aaron said to them, “Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me.”³ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron.⁴ He took *this* from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving

tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”⁵ Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the LORD.”⁶ So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

The result of this incident was that around three thousand Israelites were put to death (Ex. 32:28)

2. Sexual immorality (v. 8)

“Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.”

Numbers 25:1-9 – While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.² For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.³ So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.⁴ The LORD said to Moses, “Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.”⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor.”⁶ Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting.⁷ When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand,⁸ and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked.⁹ Those who died by the plague were 24,000.

3. Testing God (v. 9)

“Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.”

Numbers 21:5-6 – The people spoke against God and 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 miserable food.”⁶ The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

Here we see the outright abuse of freedom. As we saw earlier, God provided manna and water for them, but here we see the people were not satisfied. As one writer put it, “They displayed impatience, blasphemed God, denounced Moses, loathed manna, and clamored for more water” [Kistemaker, 330]. They wanted more variety, something off of the five-star menu as opposed to what they were receiving by the goodness of God. “They had no concern for pleasing God, only for His pleasing themselves. They did not use their freedom to serve Him better but to demand that He serve them better” [MacArthur, 224]. Do you see a pattern developing here? Israel’s judgment was rooted in their continued misuse of the liberties and freedoms that God had given to them as His chosen people. They kept pushing God to the limit, seeing how much they could continue to live for themselves and continue to receive the blessings from God.

4. Whining (v. 10)

“Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.”

Numbers 16:41-50 – But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’S people.”⁴² It came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared.⁴³ Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting,⁴⁴ and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,⁴⁵ “Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.” Then they fell on their faces.⁴⁶ Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar, and lay incense *on it*; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the LORD, the plague has begun!”⁴⁷ Then Aaron took *it* as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put *on* the incense and made atonement for the people.⁴⁸ He took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked.⁴⁹ But those who died by the plague were 14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah.⁵⁰ Then Aaron returned to Moses at the doorway of the tent of meeting, for the plague had been checked.

What is Paul’s purpose in sharing this with the Corinthians? **“Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved”** (v. 6). The Israelites had become disqualified because of their sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, and whining. Paul shares their history as an example not to follow if one wants to finish the race. It serves as a warning against abusing and misusing the rights and privileges granted by the goodness and grace of God and taking these blessings for granted.

III. The Lessons of Liberty (10:11-13)

Reiterating the fact that these things happened as an example, he continues, **“and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”** This does not mean that the only reason that these things happened to Israel was to provide an example to those at Corinth and later Christians, but it does mean that it was a part of God’s providence, so much so that, as we have seen, they were written down and included in the inspired Word of God. They were written down and preserved in His Word for the instruction of the church. Christians are always in danger of taking their experiences of grace as a license to live however they please (Rom. 6:1). This is Paul’s point throughout chapters 8-10. And the same danger that existed in the church at Corinth still exists today.

Paul then uses a bit of an unusual phrase to further describe whom these things were written to, **“upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”** This phrase refers to Christians living at the end of the age, or New Testament believers. While all that Paul has shared with them comes from the Old Testament history of Israel, his point in concluding his argument is that the New Testament believer has the greater responsibility to guard his heart in these things, and the greater guilt for presuming upon God’s goodness and not running the race to receive the prize. In other words, if Israel was disqualified, then those that abuse the mercies of Christ will most certainly be disqualified as well. How is one to guard themselves and run as to not be disqualified?

1. Humble realism (v. 12)

Paul's conclusion derives from the fact that these Old Testament stories are examples for Christians. Paul shares these stories to show the great dangers of overconfidence and presumption in the believer's life. **"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall."** The key to running the race to win is humility. Paul understood Solomon's wisdom in Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling." Pride is the seedbed for all of our sin. At its very root pride seeks to usurp the authority of God and be our own god. It is, as Paul warned in Romans 12:3, "to think more highly of himself than he ought to think." Pride leads to overconfidence, and overconfidence leads to great danger of falling away. John MacArthur shares the subtlety and the danger in overconfidence,

It is easy to substitute confidence in ourselves for confidence in the Lord—accepting His guidance and blessing and then taking credit for the work He does through us. It is also easy to become so enamored of our freedom in Christ that we forget we are His, bought with a price and called to obedience to His Word and service. [*1 Corinthians*, 226]

So the first step to **"not crave evil things"** (v. 6) and fall into idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God, or whining is to humbly serve the Lord, loving the Blessor more than the blessings themselves. It is to keep Him high and lifted up, honor and glorifying Him in all things at all times.

2. Divine optimism (v. 13)

One of the dangers of overconfidence is to think you can overcome temptation on your own. It is a sure sign of presumption and overconfidence when one sees how close to the line of sin they can get and not cross it. They are setting themselves up for a fall. The believer is to flee immorality (1 Cor. 6:18) and flee idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14) and flee all appearance of evil. Fleeing is the sign of a humble heart.

Paul ends with a great encouragement regarding temptation for those who are humble, who understand their absolute dependence of God. **"No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."** "Temptation" here is the word used for "testing" or "trying." It is not the word used for temptation to sin. There are a few things to notice about these trials.

First, they are **"common to man."** There is no trial or test the believer goes through that is unique to them. Others have been through the same fire. This is both an encouragement and a warning. It is good to know that others have been through similar circumstances, whether it be to test their faith or divine discipline from a loving Father. But we often neglect this encouragement and keep everything bottled up and try to go it alone. This can lead to frustration and despair, especially when one thinks more highly of his spiritual well-being than he ought.

Second, **"God is faithful."** In the midst of these trials, which often come from God Himself, we can rest assured that it is for our own benefit because He is faithful and true. There is no shadow of change with God. Paul describes His faithfulness in two ways. First, He **"will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able."** While we might think more of our spiritual capabilities than we should, God knows us perfectly. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can handle. This might also refer to temptations from without by which He is

faithful to protect us, building a hedge of protection around us that Satan and the world cannot penetrate. Paul also says that God **“will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”** With the test or trial comes both the way of release and the strength to endure. Because **“God is faithful.”**

Conclusion

The warning in our text is clear. The Israelites, the chosen people of God, who were baptized into Moses and partook of the goodness of God’s provisions, fell away from Him and did not enter the Promise Land. It serves as a warning to those today who have professed faith in Christ, but do not truly possess Christ, they are not in Him. They may have even been baptized and partake of the Lord’s Supper and accept the blessings of God – but they are without Christ. They will not see the Promised Land for the same reason the Israelites could not, they think they are spiritual when they are not. May you heed this warning today, and examine your heart and plead with God to show you the truth about your spiritual condition.