

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Introduction

Now Paul uses Old Testament history for further support on the importance of being watchful and self-controlled. When Oliver Cromwell was planning to educate his son, Richard, he said, “I would have him learn a little history”. How often the Bible teaches lessons via history. We cannot understand the present without knowing the past. We will make many mistakes in the future unless we remember the lessons of the past.

Ignorance of the Bible, and then of history, has a devastating effect on churches at present. The Old Testament is not just ancient history, but the story of God’s people. It is recorded for us to learn from it. We are people of great privileges, but how we sometimes squander our privileges.

Learning from the past

Paul gives us a brief glance at Israel’s history. People of tremendous privileges. Delivered by God from slavery in Egypt. Led by pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. They passed safely through the Red Sea as they escaped from the Egyptians. **They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea** (1 Corinthians 10:2). The events of Exodus brought them under the leadership of Moses, as by baptism Christians show they are under Christ’s leadership.

All ate the same spiritual meat – manna. All drank from same spiritual drink. All drank from smitten rock, **and that Rock was Christ** (1 Corinthians 10:4). The Son of God, in a pre-existent form before incarnation, accompanied them. The “Rock” is divine because “Rock” is one of God’s titles. He was source of all blessings as they journeyed.

But despite the privileges which were shared by all, God was not pleased with them. Indeed, all but two, Joshua and Caleb, perished in the wilderness – either by natural death or by violence. They did not get to the Promised Land. This is not a reference to eternal punishment.

This is an example and type for us, a warning light. It tells us not to make same mistakes that they did. They were guilty of idolatry with the Midianites and Moabites – 23,000 fell as a result. They tempted and tested God by complaining about food, and they were killed by snakes as a result. They grumbled, and therefore, as with Korah and his company, they were destroyed. Privileged people, but they became idolatrous, immoral, presuming and complaining – yet God had done so much for them.

The message is for us. Idolatry? That is not just idol worship, but anything which takes God’s place in life – my self, my possessions, my status, my reputation. Fornication? Can we pretend this does not go on among Christians? Grumbling and trying God too far? Consider how far we push Him and get away with it. We trade on His mercy. We say, “It does not matter, He will forgive me.” Whining and

murmuring? Life is too often one big list of complaints – health, family, house, job, holiday. And why should others have all that money, successful children, and wonderful privileges? How mean of God to treat me like He does.

God was provoked, and Israel suffered at His hands. Enjoyment of privileges is not security from temptation. We may have had wonderful experiences of the Lord in the past, but they are no safeguard against temptation and failure in the future. We are privileged people in material and physical terms in this country. We also enjoy spiritual blessing – the Gospel is known in our land, and we have enjoyed its blessings. Beware lest we despise these privileges and grieve the Lord and therefore are chastised.

Folly of presumption

At once Paul’s readers would have reacted to such suggestions. “This does not apply to us. We are foolproof. You can pass your warnings onto others.” Likewise we can say, “I have been a believer for years, I have a Christian background, I am a leader and preacher and a counsellor, I am looked up to, my advice is sought by others. If you heard my sermons, my testimony, the way I pray in public, you would know how highly I am thought of. It would be impossible for me to fail in idolatry, sexual weakness, and discontent.”

Paul warns, **if you think you are standing firm, then be careful that you don’t fall** (1 Corinthians 10:12). Beware of self-confidence and presumption. Those who have gone before us made great progress in Christian things, suffered for the Gospel, gave their testimony, preached in the church and in the open air, led people to the Lord – but because of confidence in themselves, they fell, they spoiled themselves, ruined their testimony, and people now speak of them in hushed tones “Haven’t you heard...” You will never reach the stage where you no longer need to be careful and watchful.

None are in so much danger as those who think they are above failure, because they assume they are strong and safe. How easy to forget ourselves and our weak points. Inflated with sense of strength and pride, success, experience and position, we can become careless, and take our eyes off the Lord. We underestimate the enemy and the treachery within our own hearts. Suddenly from nowhere we are overtaken by temptation. It is too much for us, and soon we are covered in shame. Sometimes there is irreparable damage to the cause of Christ as well as to ourselves.

*“I want a godly fear,
A quick discerning eye
That looks to Thee when sin is near
And sees the tempter fly”
(Charles Wesley)*

There are plenty of “has beens” around on the edges of the Christian world. If it happened to others, it could happen to us. Consider how Peter avowed, “Though all fall away, I will not” (Matthew 26:33), and yet at the words of a servant girl he toppled to the ground. How often a fortress is taken because the defenders thought it was impregnable so did not set a guard.

C.f. Sardis, built on a sheer rock, thought to be totally safe, but the besieging army of Cyrus found a way when they saw a soldier retrieving a helmet that had fallen over the battlement. He took a path that the besiegers did not know about, but he was seen. That night the city was captured with ease, the soldiers did not even have to kill a sentry because there was none posted – such was the confidence of the citizens of Sardis.

It is the same old story. Once self replaces the Lord as the ground of confidence, especially at a moment of euphoria, trouble is round the next corner.

Promise of protection

But on the other hand, for those who are not confident in themselves and who are careful, watchful, with eyes on the Lord, there is safety. Temptation is sure to come. We are not unique when tempted. We are not unique in the kind of temptation we face. (We often imagine our temptation is peculiar to us. We are shocked by the power and kind of temptation we face, and yet the person sitting next to us faced the same thing yesterday – if only we knew.) All temptations are common to man, in every area of the life – greed, dishonesty, sex, materialism, pride, laziness, and unkindness. If you have not met up with the devil yet, it is because you and he are going in the same direction. Turn around, and you will meet him head on!

We are not lonely travellers along this road. C.f. the biographies of many great men of God. Blasphemous and the foulest thoughts can flood into a man's mind when he starts to pray or preach. There is a battle within not to express the words that are pounding in the mind. What we go through, others have gone through before. And by grace they endured and conquered.

God is faithful (1 Corinthians 10:13). He knows how much we can stand. He does not remove temptation, but it is measured out according to our fibre. It will not go on longer or be more severe than we can take. Always with temptation, God provides an escape route. The picture here is of an army surrounded by a mountain pass. Every way is hedged up. Caught whichever way they take. Then suddenly there opens up an escape route from an impossible situation, through a narrow ravine. The two things always go together. With temptation goes a way out. God arranges this. We may fail – but we need not. Because of God's faithfulness, we are never in a position where we must succumb. The important thing is that our confidence is totally in the Lord and not in selves. It is also important that we do not court temptation and encourage it and make allowance for it.

Therefore if we fall, it need not have happened. Man in temptation will confess this. But if he lingers too long, a point is reached where fall is inevitable. There is an escape route if we want it and will choose it and use it. N.B. *πειρασμος* – more than “temptation” in narrow sense of solicitation to do wrong, it has a wider meaning of trials and testings, all the pressures of life. Persecution, heartbreaks, problems of life. Permitted in our lives, but there is a way of escape so that we are not overwhelmed. God will not allow His children to be in a situation for which He has not provided an emergency exit. Every temptation and trial has a door marked “exit”. The Duke of Wellington said, “The best general is he who knows best how to conduct a retreat.”

Conclusion

Take nothing for granted. Learn lessons from the past. Never be overconfident. There is protection if you keep your eyes on the Lord. **Sin shall not be your master** (Romans 6:14). But we are safe only when Christ is in control. When self is in the driving seat we can expect an accident any minute. Christ has to be in total control within and without. His power will triumph in us only when yielded to Him in everything. If we have Christ in His power within us, then we must know Christ in His righteousness over us.