

“God’s Way Out”

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Every temptation is an opportunity to pass a test.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Simeon’s way

I rarely look back at sermons I’ve preached previously on the same text, and when I do, I usually don’t like them. This week was an exception on both counts. I found a sermon I preached on today’s theme in my first year at Corinth, and I still like it! I began with the following story about someone who lived 1600 years ago.

At age 13, Simeon was powerfully affected by the Beatitudes, and took up residence in a monastery. His commitment to self-denial was extreme. He disciplined himself to eat only once a week, on Sunday, and during Lent he ate nothing at all for the entire forty days.

He would intentionally inflict himself with pain. On one occasion he laced his body so tightly with cord that the cord pressed all the way to the bone. After that, the monastery dismissed him, and he spent some time as a hermit on a mountain, with an iron chain on his foot. Crowds visited and admired his total devotion to God.

None of this satisfied Simeon's quest for God's approval, and in the year 423 he invented a new kind of holiness. He erected a pillar nine feet high where he lived for four years, 24 hours a day, through every season. Then he erected another pillar twice as high, then a third thirty-three feet high, each new height an indication that he was nearer to heaven and to perfection. Finally, the people built at his request a pillar sixty feet high, three feet in diameter, and Simeon stayed on that one for twenty years until he died.

He could never lie or sit, only lean in exhaustion against the railing. His disciples brought him food up a ladder. He would bow from the waist many times a day. He could

touch his head to his feet. A spectator once counted 1244 genuflections in one day. People streamed from far places to see him and meet him. He preached repentance, healed the sick, arbitrated differences, and converted thousands of unbelievers to Christianity.

I'm guessing your strategy for dealing with temptation is different than Simeon's. How's it working for you?

Blessings for all

The Apostle Paul founded the church at Corinth. He affirms them as true saints who have been called into a relationship with God and each other through Jesus. But he has also heard from them and about them concerning a number of problem areas.

They quarrel and fight, especially about their different loyalties. "I like Beth Moore. "I follow John MacArthur. "I'd rather hear Tim Keller," and so on. Paul is one of the leaders Corinthians either adore or loathe, so he addresses that. He discusses some of the issues that divide them – church discipline, lawsuits, sex and marriage, and the tricky matter of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

As we come to chapter 10, Paul connects all of these issues to the only Bible any of them has – what we call the Old Testament. One reason these first 13 verses of chapter 10 are important is because Paul models for us how to read and apply the Scripture. Perhaps the most critical point he makes is that the Hebrew Bible is not just revelation to and instruction for the Jews. Paul is writing to a largely Gentile church, but you wouldn't know it by the way he handles the stories. When you embrace Jesus the Jewish Messiah, you also embrace this rich heritage as your own.

Verse 1 begins, "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact...." but it can be translated, "For I do not want you to ignore...." as in, to be "willfully ignorant." Paul is an ethnic and religious Jew, but he speaks to the Corinthians as "brothers and sisters" in that faith as well as faith in Jesus. These are "*our* ancestors" (emphasis added).

As Paul reviews the stories of Israel he used the word "all" four times. He doesn't give a lot of detail, seeming to assume they know the stories, as you probably do too.

- They were "all under the cloud" (1), a reference to the pillar of cloud (Numbers 9:15-23) that appeared over the Tent of Meeting. At night it became a pillar of fire, so it was always visible. When it stayed put, the children of Israel stayed put. When it moved, they packed up the camp and followed it until it stopped.
- They "all passed through the sea" (1, cf. Exodus 14), one of the best-known and loved stories of the Exodus.
- "They were all baptized into Moses" (2), a startling turn of phrase not employed in the Old Testament. One of my commentators (Sampley, TNIB) says Paul is "retrofitting" Christian baptism into the story of Moses.

Elsewhere Paul says we are “baptized into Christ” (Romans 6:3-4), meaning that we are completely identified with him, included in him.

- “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink” (3-4), which recalls the stories of miraculous provision of water and manna, two more of the stories we all know and love.

Before he finishes this section, Paul makes an even more explicit connection between those stories of Israel and the story of his readers – and by extension, us. He says “they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them” (4). Here again, the wording is unusual for Old or New Testament, and easy to miss. The idea of a “moving rock” is not in Exodus or Numbers, but Paul is cleverly applying the story.

Yes, there was a literal rock from which water poured out on two separate occasions in different places (Exodus 17 and Numbers 20) to meet a desperate need, but that was only symbolic of the strength and provision that never, ever abandoned them. “That rock was Christ,” Paul concludes in verse 4. Many Bible readers see in this and similar Bible stories and references what’s called a “pre-incarnate theophany” – the second person of the Trinity showing up in the Old Testament. Paul may be saying that, but he is definitely saying to the Corinthians that the spiritual blessings we remember and celebrate in baptism and communion are reminders that we *all* also have experienced God’s guidance and provision and blessing – just like our ancestors did.

We’re not ready to move on to verse 5 until we too consider our shared spiritual blessings – not so much the personalized blessings like homes and families and jobs, which are also too many to count and too great to ignore, but the provisions and guidance we can all name as ours: creation with all of its beauty and wonder, the spiritual heritage of the nation of Israel, preserved and restored, the Law and the Prophets, the coming of Jesus Christ and his life, death, resurrection, and session – sitting at the right hand of the Father where he advocates and intercedes for us, the forgiveness and hope of eternal life we have through him, the promise of justice and righteousness in his presence, the New Testament, including the stories of Jesus in the Gospels and the letters of Paul and others to explain the way of faith to us. To all this we can add the lives of women and men whose example across four thousand years we can emulate, some of whom sacrificed family and freedom and material gain and comfort to follow Jesus Christ, and some of whom gave up life itself.

I could go on and on, but we all can celebrate what God has done for us vicariously and personally. This is where Paul wants the Corinthians in verse 4. Sometimes we have so many blessings we become numb to them.

Four sins and four judgments

The blessings are what make verse 5 shocking. Those who are most blessed are not necessarily most holy. The Israelites may not have had all the blessings we’ve had, but they had what we often wish we had – direct interventions of the unmistakably

miraculous kind. God may not have done it in the way and time they wanted, but when he did show up visibly, it was dramatic and unforgettable – a cloud that moved, a sea that parted, a rock that gushed water, bread that fell from the sky.

The next word, the first word in verse 5, is “Nevertheless” in the NIV. I prefer plain old “But....” It’s a really big “But.” Look what it says: “But God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.” *All of them* experienced dramatic provision and guidance. *Most of them* displeased God and died before they could reach the Promised Land. That’s another story you know.

Paul continues with some details, framing four stories of judgment by twice saying that what happened to *them* is a warning for *us* (6, 11). Each of the stories is about a particular sin category, and each states explicitly or recalls judgment.

- *Idolatry (7)*. Remember the golden calf, which the Israelites fashioned under Aaron’s leadership when Moses was on the mountain so long receiving the Ten Commandments? The story is in Exodus 32, and Paul quotes the last part of verse 6: “They sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” We’re not just talking about a feast with some drinking and dancing that got out of control. This was an imitation of pagan ritual that was completely out of control and was in direct defiance of the first two commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” That day 3000 Israelites died by the sword and more from a plague.
- *Sexual immorality (8)*. This story is from Numbers 25 – toward the end of the forty years of wandering, when the men of Israel were enticed by Moabite women. It wasn’t just the sex; it was the accompanying worship of Moabite gods. Paul says 23,000 Israelites died in that plague.¹
- *Testing the Lord (9)*. Paul refers next to a story in Numbers where the sin was impatience (Numbers 21:4). The people said to Moses, “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert?” So God sent venomous snakes until they confessed their sin. Moses lifted a snake on a pole, which John compares to Jesus being lifted up on the cross (John 3:14).
- *Grumbling (10)*. This is the big one, in terms of Israelite unbelief and disobedience. Do you remember how the twelve spies came back and reported the impossible task ahead of the people? The people listened to the ten naysayers and decided to go back to Egypt – after all God had done! That was the straw that broke God’s back. That’s when he finally said, “Nobody over the age of 20, except the two faithful spies Joshua and Caleb, will see the Promised Land in person.”

¹ Numbers 25:9 says 24,000 died. Paul is following the Septuagint, the Greek text of the Old Testament. One explanation of the different numbers is that Numbers 25:4 seems to include a separate group of leaders who died. In other words, the total was 24,000 but 23,000 died together and the others earlier.

Paul says all these stories are warnings for us who live in a very different age. They were warnings to the first century Corinthians, and they are warnings to us. Each of the stories recalls a specific sin-category, and each of them results in death.

Do you see the connections he wants the Corinthians to make? They were risking the same result by engaging in the same behavior. You can be God's people, but you can also reject his life and face the consequences. At least some of the Corinthians were crossing from freedom to eat meat that had been offered to idols to actually sharing in the idol feasts – that's very different. At least some of them were snubbing their noses at sexual purity, and one notorious leader was openly committing incest. And complaining and grumbling? That's what their conflict amounted to.

Don't go there, Paul warns! It'll kill you. Once again, we want Paul to insert a little grace in there. There's a place for the gospel of grace, but not when what you're doing will destroy you and the church.

What Paul hopes they're now thinking is, "Please help us avoid that fate! We live in a culture that makes it so hard to do the right thing! Give us some hope, some help!" That is exactly where Paul ends this section in verses 12-13.

God's way out

If Paul were to end this passage with verse 11, it would be disheartening. Instead, he gives us his strategy for dealing with temptation. Perhaps before we go there, we need to name some of our own temptations. Where do you struggle? Is it one of the areas Paul names with the Israelites and Corinthians?

- Idolatry – covering your bases, spiritually speaking. Trusting God *and* luck or religion or money or hard work. Is there a rival to him in your life?
- Sexual immorality – transgressing the boundaries you know in your heart honor him and his intentions.
- Testing the Lord – Impatience with God's provision, his guidance, his timing. Presuming you could do God's job better than he could.
- Grumbling – This is more than just words. Are you in constant conflict, out loud or in your heart, because your way is the right way?
- Something else

Whatever your temptation is, run it through the grid of vv. 12-13.

1. *Watch out.* "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." The worst thing you can do is become overconfident.
2. *Look around.* "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind." You're not dealing with anything unique. God's not picking on you and letting everyone else off the hook.
3. *Look up.* "And God is faithful." The God of Israel, the God of Paul, the God of the Corinthians, he's your God. Still there, protecting, guiding, providing.

4. *Don't quit.* "He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." The problem with the popular saying, "God won't give you more than you can handle," is not usually with content, it's with timing. In the middle of it, nobody thinks they can last. But you will with his help, so don't quit.
5. *Choose the escape.* "But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." The word "way out" means egress, escape, the mountain pass. There's always a right choice. Choose it.

The best insight in that sermon 25 years ago on temptation was a borrowed one. Stuart Briscoe, retired pastor of Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin, had spoken on temptation during chapel at Columbia Bible College. I still had the cassette tape (remember them?). I might still have it somewhere in a box.

Briscoe noted something in the original languages of the Bible that you don't have to know Hebrew or Greek to notice. It's right there in the footnote of your *New International Version* – three times for verse 13 alone. They could have added the same footnote twice for verse 9. Both in Hebrew and Greek, the words for "test" and "tempt" are the same word. "Tempt" is an enticement to fail. "Test" is a chance to pass.

When Satan wants to tempt Job, God allows it because he knows Job will pass. Matthew tells us that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This is shocking to us that somehow God and Satan cooperate. And they do, in the Bible, with different motives. Satan wants to entice to wrong. God wants to prove there is a way out.

So my key sentence in that sermon in August 1993 was this: "Every temptation is an opportunity to pass a test." It was a paraphrase of this quote from Stuart Briscoe, with which I close the sermon –

Temptation is

...not only an opportunity to go wrong, but it's a lovely chance to do the right thing; not only the work of Satan, but also the will of God; not only a potential seduction, but also a possibility for strengthening; not only a means of exposing our weakness, but also of experiencing God's power; not only the devil's way of destroying us, but also God's way of developing us; not only the doorway to disaster, but also the gateway to discovery.

Amen!