



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Examples for Us

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Jesus has given us new life and he expects us to live it. It's easy to fall back into old ways; it's easy to forget when the world, the flesh, and devil call us back to the very bondage from which Jesus freed us. But we need to live the new life we've been given and the Holy Spirit will help us do it, even when it seems impossible. Look at the cross, look at the empty tomb, look how the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us at Pentecost...consider it, reckon it, do the math and you have to conclude that the life Jesus gives is ours. We've been transformed. And knowing that reality makes all the difference in living that reality. And we need to be reminded of this — sometimes daily, maybe even hourly! And what we have in our Epistle today is another reminder. In fact, it's a reminder with a story. In the Bible I use for everyday reading Chapter 10 of First Corinthians begins with the heading: "Warnings from Israel's History".

We all know the old saying that people who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it. I was a history major and heard over and over again that those who *do* know history are doomed to watch those who don't, repeat it. But Paul wants to make sure neither happens. One of the problems at Corinth seems to have been that the people took their freedom in Christ and abused it as license to live in sin. Quite a bit of First Corinthians is aimed at correcting this problem and that's where today's lesson comes from. And so Paul takes them back to the history of Israel, much as we've seen him do in our study of Romans. He reminds them of the great story of redemption. And part of doing this is

so that he can remind them where they stand in that story—he wants to give them their spiritual bearings.

Paul once again takes them back to Israel's exodus from Egypt. This was the event that gave Israel her identity and forged her as a people. And his point to the Christians in Corinth is that they're now in a very similar position. Earlier in the book he talked about Jesus as the Passover Lamb. The Passover lambs sacrificed in Israel pointed to the final and once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus that would bring the true exodus for all humanity from our bondage to sin and death. And the point Paul makes now is that if Jesus is the true Passover lamb, then that makes us—all of us who are in him by faith—that makes us the true Passover people. Think about that as we look again at 1 Corinthians 10:1-5.

For I do not want you to be unaware, 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.

The story of Israel's exodus should be pretty fresh in our minds as it's been part of the lessons from Romans we've looked at the last several weeks. The people Paul was writing to in Corinth knew the story well too. Many of them were Jews. But he puts our attention on two things in particular that happened during the exodus and during Israel's time in the wilderness. The *first* is the cloud and the sea, the *second* is the spiritual food and drink.

First the cloud and the sea. When the Israelites left Egypt they didn't choose their own route. The fastest way out of Egypt was the road along the coast, but the Lord manifested himself in a

pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night and he led them straight into the swamps and marshes and lakes further south—the area where the Suez Canal is today. As a place to hide this might have made some sense, but not as an escape route. The people could look up and see that cloud or that flame and they knew—just as Moses knew when he saw the burning bush and took off his shoes in fearful awe—they knew that the Lord was with them. They could look at the cloud or the flame and know that God was present, that he had spoken, that he had freed them, and that he was leading and caring for them. The cloud and the flame led them to the sea, it led them miraculously through the water and had just as miraculously drowned the Egyptian army. They owed their freedom and deliverance to the God manifest in the cloud and they had every reason to trust in faith that he would continue to be with them, guide them, and protect them in the wilderness. And as he met them at Sinai and gave them his law, as he called them to be a holy people and his witness to call the nations back to him, the Lord's lovingkindness gave Israel the motivation to serve and to be the people he had freed them to be.

And Paul describes it this way. He says that by the leading of the cloud and in the waters of the Red Sea the Israelites were *baptised* into Moses. Jews didn't usually think of the crossing of the Red Sea in terms of baptism, or at least they hadn't until John the Baptist and Jesus came along. They used this imagery of the exodus too and made the connection with baptism. In John's Gospel Jesus talks about being born of water and the Spirit, for example, just as Israel was born there in the exodus by the leading of the cloud and passing through the sea. Paul is telling the Corinthians that the cloud and the sea were for Israel something like what the Holy Spirit and baptism are for us as Christians. Israel's story points to our story. As Israel was born in the exodus led by Moses, so we are born as the New Israel in the exodus led by Jesus.

And, Paul stresses, there's a reason for this. Remember that it's all part of one big story. That first exodus from Egypt established Israel—those descendants of Abraham and probably a host of other peoples leaving Egypt with them—it established them as the Lord's people and in a miraculous and amazing way that we can still look back to with awe and wonder it demonstrates and proves the faithfulness of the Lord in keeping his promises. Israel's story through the exodus and the conquest of Canaan, through the time of the judges and the kings, through her exile and her return, all of that story of Israel as the Lord's people and of the Lord proving his faithfulness then leads us to the culmination of Israel's history in the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus is the great demonstration of the Lord's faithfulness and Jesus himself fulfils Israel's story in his person and in his death and resurrection. And this is how we—most of us gentiles—can through faith in Jesus be grafted into the living tree. It's how we can be as much a part of Israel as those people who were led through the Red Sea and the wilderness to the promised land. Israel's story and God's promises are now being worked out through us. This is what Paul is stressing to the Corinthians. Their problem, though, was that they'd forgotten their part in the story.

So as the Israelites were—as Paul puts it to make his point—as they were “baptised into Moses”—so Christians are baptised into Jesus. The cloud and the sea made the Israelites Moses' people—people of the old covenant—as the Holy Spirit and baptism now make us Jesus' people—people of the new covenant. And now Paul brings in the third and fourth elements of the exodus story. In the wilderness they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. When Paul calls them “spiritual” food and drink what he's referring to is the way they were supernaturally provided by

the Holy Spirit. There was nothing but sand and rocks and scrub in the wilderness—nothing to eat and in many places no water to drink, but the Lord provided manna for the people to eat. They didn't know what it was—“manna” literally translates as “What is it?”—but it miraculously appeared every morning. Just enough for the day would keep without spoiling, and somehow a double portion would miraculously keep over the Sabbath so that they could rest that day instead of gathering it. And, at least twice, the Lord miraculously provided water from a rock when there was no water. Paul's point is that the Lord did not lead his people into the wilderness without providing sustenance.

And, Brothers and Sisters, the same goes for us. Like Israel, we have a long way to travel in the wilderness before we arrive at the inheritance we have in Jesus, but he has provided for our sustenance. He gives us spiritual food and spiritual drink in the Lord's Supper. There's no reason to give up and there's no reason to go back to our old life of bondage just because life in the wilderness is hard or because it seems like we'll never reach the promised land. The Lord is with us. Jesus sustains us.

And this is why Paul warns them, again going back to the Israelites. The Lord sustained Israel in the wilderness and that's why he was so displeased with most of them. The Israelites presumed on the Lord's grace and so had many of the Corinthians. Life in the wilderness was hard. When they got to the promised land they saw the armed giants guarding it and they were afraid. In between they grumbled against Moses and they grumbled against the Lord. They whined about what they'd left behind in Egypt and more than once they fell into idolatry. And a lot of this was a picture of what was happening in Corinth. Members of the Church were living in sexual sin and some were taking part in the pagan festivals in the temples—and

they thought it was all fine because they had been baptised into Jesus, the Holy Spirit had been poured into them, and because they ate the bread and drank the wine in the Lord's Supper. They thought they'd reached the pinnacle of Christian maturity. They even called themselves the “spiritual” people. But they had stopped pressing on, they had stopped striving for holiness and for growth in Jesus. The wilderness pressured them. The world, the flesh, and the devil called them back to their old lives...and they gave in.

Now, Paul really is saying that baptism does in fact transfer you from one kingdom into another—it really does incorporate you into Jesus and into the Lord's covenant and into the New Israel. And the Lord's Supper really does mean that we participate in the life of Jesus who died and was raised. But the sacraments Jesus gave us don't work like magic. They don't automatically confer redemption. Faith is required and real faith transforms our character and our way of living. Baptism and the Lord's Supper bring us into the Lord's covenant and covenants have obligations. Yes, it's a privilege to be part of that covenant. This is why we ask, in the baptism liturgy, for God to grant what the candidate cannot have by nature. We are enemies of God by nature. It is only by grace that we can be restored to God's fellowship. It is only through the sacrificial death of God himself in Jesus and by his resurrection that we can be forgiven and made alive again in God's presence. But this is precisely why St. Paul urges the Corinthians and urges us that there is a responsibility in all of this. We have been crucified with Christ. Our old selves are dead and we have risen with him to new life. And so having been set free we cannot use our freedom for license or for sin—the very things from which we have been freed—any more than the Israelites freed from their Egyptian slavery could go back to bondage.

We can live in assurance that the Lord will never let us be snatched from his hand, but that doesn't mean we can't turn from him and be lost. Most of the Israelites lost out on their promised inheritance because they refused to live out their end of the covenant in faith. They died in the wilderness. And so those Christians who turn from the renewing and regenerating grace of God in the name of "rights" or "freedom" may fall back into their pagan or pre-Christians ways and forfeit their inheritance in Jesus. In the previous chapter Paul talks about pummeling himself as if he were a boxer fighting a round against his old, unredeemed self, lest he fall away and be disqualified. If that was true of Paul, the great apostle who spread the Good News of Jesus and his kingdom across the Roman Empire, how much more was it true of the Corinthians and how much more true is it for us. This is why Paul says in verse 7:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

In the verses that follow he goes on to list the ways in which Israel failed in the wilderness: idolatry, sexual immorality, grumbling against God and putting him to the test. We can add to the list the sins we struggle with ourselves. We can add all the ways in which we trust in things and people instead of trusting in Jesus. And when we think of the ways we cave in to sin and the ways we fail to trust Jesus we can feel the weight pressing down. In last week's lesson from Romans Paul talked about being debtors and sometimes we feel that weight in a negative way, but Paul's point is that we are *not* debtors to the flesh, we are *not* debtors to sin. We are debtors to Jesus who died for us and has raised us with himself to new life. He has freed us and he has laid on us an obligation to holiness. And the good news is that he has equipped us to lead this new life. Paul goes on, saying:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

We've all heard the old cliché that God won't give you anything you can't handle. Brothers and Sisters, that's not true. God gives us all sorts of things we can't handle. The point is that Jesus has poured his Holy Spirit into us to transform our hearts and minds. He's filled us with his grace to strengthen us to make us holy and in *his*—not our own power—in *his* power we can face the world, the flesh, and the devil and endure, overcome, and escape their temptation. *We* can't. But *he* can and he never ceases to be with us.

Brothers and Sisters, think on that as we come to his Table this morning. That's what the bread and wine here are for. They remind us that Jesus has given his body and blood for us as the true Passover lamb and here at his Table he calls us to be and reminds us that we are the true Passover people, freed from the bondage of sin and death to walk in holiness and to bear the fruit of the Spirit—to be light to a dark world. Here at the Table Jesus reminds us that he is Lord and he sends us out to proclaim his lordship and his kingdom. But here he also reminds us that he does not send us out unequipped. He sends us out full of grace having fed us with the spiritual food of his body and blood.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we acknowledged in today's Collect, we can do nothing good without you. We ask you to fill us each day with your Spirit that we might live according to your will and remind us especially as we come to your Table this morning, that it is only through your Son, Jesus, that we have forgiveness and life. Let

us take the strength and sustenance you give us here into the world that we might bring light and life to the darkness. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.