

Study 13: 1st Corinthians Chapter 10

Introduction

Chapter 10 continues the discussion on personal sacrifice, before Paul moves back to that on meat sacrificed to idols. Some things are not wrong in and of themselves, yet our observance or participation in them can cause other people to stumble. The key is how do others “read” our practice? Paul concludes the chapter with some practical instruction on how to behave.

Body of the Study

The example of the forefathers

What caused them to fall?

Why did these things happen?

What do we need to do?

The Communion

Practical advice for food sacrificed to idols

Conclusions on liberty

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *How have you put into practice the characteristics that Paul calls us to have? Think through some instances where you have refrained from doing something because of a weaker brother or sister.*
- *What are some practical examples from your own life that has mirrored the rejection of God like the Israelites?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read Chapter 11 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 13: Chapter 10

Introduction

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Body of the Study

The example of the forefathers

Israel are presented as an example of the lack of self restraint. Several examples are given to illustrate the point. Paul begins with a strong parallel between Israel leaving the land of Egypt and our walk with God. As the Israelites fled the land of Egypt (metaphorically from captivity / bondage in sin) they were *effectively* baptised – immersed as they left Egypt and began their journey towards the Promised Land. The water was on both sides, and the cloud was overhead – the water surrounded them. There is a very strong metaphor in the story for our walk with God, as we shall see.

The point that Paul makes, however, is that *all* of the Israelites went through the transition out of Egypt (sin) and they *all* began the journey, but only a *few* (two) of them ever completed it – Joshua son of Nun, and Caleb son of Jephthuna. What happened along the way? How could it be that whilst so many of them (around 800,000 ?) left Egypt, most of them fell along the way?

After crossing the sea, they were free from captivity, but soon were hungry and thirsty. The people rebelled, and wished they were back in Egypt. They said that at least there they had food and water. So, God gave them food and water. He gave them quails and manna to eat, and they had a rock that followed them around that continually brought forth water. Whenever they needed a drink, all they had to do was go back to the rock that never ran dry. Paul tells us that that rock was Christ (1:10:4).

The people rebelled against God 10 times, but He was still patient with them. After the 10th time, He threatens to kill them all and rise up a new nation after Moses their faithful leader. Moses pleads with God, saying that their enemies will hear about it and say that God was not able to bring the people out. They then come to the land and send in the spies to check it out. Ten of the spies said it can't be done, but two – Joshua and Caleb – said that with God we can overcome anything. The people listened to the 10 instead of listening to God. So, He rejects the people and says you will all die in the wilderness, except for Caleb and Joshua. The spies were in the land for 40 days, and so you will wander in the wilderness for 40 years – every year for a day that the spies were in the land – until every person over 20 years old when they left Egypt (except Caleb and Joshua) has died in the wilderness. (Num 14)

The people were sorry, but it was too late. “...with most of them God was not well pleased, and they fell in the wilderness...” (1:10:5)

What caused them to fall?

The short answer is their lack of faith and obedience to God, but then Paul expands on some of the things that they were doing, and lists five things. Importantly, the things that happened to them in the wilderness should serve as examples to us. Whilst their fate was set when they rejected God by not conquering the land, the people still continued to reject God by their actions.

1. Lust

The Israelites looked back at the things that they had left behind in Egypt, and lusted after them. In exactly the same way, the Corinthians were looking back at the former life and wishing for the things that they once possessed, but had left behind to make the journey into the promised land. And the story is not different for us. We don't properly kill off our old man – we want to take him along with us, and we look back at things that we ought to have left behind in our new lives as Christians.

2. Idolatry

Moses was 40 days on the mountain receiving the Law. The people said they didn't know what had happened to him, and ended up building a golden calf to worship. Moses was furious, and so was God. Later, the people left the worship of God and engaged in the worship of other idols – Moloch, Baal, and others. The Corinthians were right in the middle of pagan-worship-city. Some of them had engaged in such activities.

Paul discusses the action of the people in eating, drinking, and playing. This was very much what the people had undertaken – in eating and drinking the food offered to the idols, and dancing with licentious sportfulness as a part of the worship to the idol. The Corinthians were no doubt also engaged in similar activities, and eating the food offered to idols was the very thing that for which they were contending.

3. Immorality

The Israelites began to engage in sexual immorality with the Moabite women, and were worshipping the Baal idols that the women worshipped. God commanded that those who had engaged in activities with the Baal worship to be killed in broad daylight (Num 25:1-9). Paul says that 23,000 died in one day, whilst Numbers has 24,000 in total killed. (The other 1,000 must have died the next day).

The Corinthians had also engaged in idol worship, and probably with sexual engagement with the worship of Venus.

4. Tempting Christ

As the people wandered in the wilderness, the Canaanites attacked them and took some of them captive. They made a vow to God that if He would deliver them, then they would totally destroy their cities. God did deliver them. But soon the people grumbled about not enough food and water. God responded by sending a plague of snakes, and many of the people were bitten and died. A bronze snake was set up on a stake, and when any of the people were bitten, they only had to look up at the bronze snake and he would live (Num 21:1-9).

This is exactly analogous to our sin. We are bitten by the sting of sin, and we will die. But just as the snake was lifted up in the wilderness, so Christ was lifted up on the cross. When we look up to Christ, the consequences of sin is taken away (Jn 3:14-15).

The Corinthians were also liable to tempt Christ when they were severely persecuted by ungodly men. Paul warns them about tempting Christ by asking God for signs.¹

5. Murmuring

The people were no sooner across the Red Sea, than they were wishing they were back in Egypt. They complained to Moses 10 times, and wanted to go back. Eventually, the murmuring of the people got too much for Moses, and he lost his temper and struck the rock that brought water, when God had only said to wave his rod over it. It cost him his place in entering into the Promised Land. Despite his sorrow, God would not allow him to enter the land.

The Corinthians were in danger of such murmuring when faced with trials and persecutions.

¹ McGarvey, "Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans" Gospel Light Publishing Co, Delight Arkansas. P. 100

Why did these things happen?

These things reflect our humanity. We are all subject to the same human failings, and we all fall in sin in one way or another. The important point that Paul makes (1:10:14) is that the reason that they were written down was for our learning, so that we might see their examples and determine not to do the things that they did!

We might think that we are not like them and that we are stronger than they were. But Paul warns us “...let him who thinks he stands, watch out in case he falls...” (1:10:12). If we just left things there, we would conclude that we don’t have much hope. We are subject to the same human frailties as the Israelites, and although we have their examples, we think we can resist. But when the chips are down we often fail. “...for the things that I don’t want to do are the very things that I end up doing, and the things that I want to do I do not do...” (Rom 7:19)

This does not mean that sin is inevitable, and that we have no choice in the matter. We always have choice, for God always gives us the choice. The problem of sin is not a problem of the faithfulness of God – in that He gives up on us and forces us into sin – rather it is a problem of our faithfulness. God “...will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to withstand, but will with the temptation make a way of escape, that we might be able to bear it...” (1:10:13).

As we are confronted by sin, we always have a choice – a way to escape the sin is always there. When we resist sin, Satan will flee from us (Js 4:7), and by withstanding the temptations, we grow spiritually. But, the consequences are that we will be tempted by more difficult circumstances.

What do we need to do?

Paul wraps up his discussion “...therefore... flee from idolatry...” (1:10:14). The Corinthians were tempted by idolatry, just as the Israelites had been. The wise in the congregation would make judgement about what Paul had to say. They knew the consequences of where idolatry would take them, and Corinth was rife with idol temples and idol worship. Paul’s admonition is strong – flee from it!

McGarvey says: “Idolatry was so interwoven with lust, drunkenness, reveling, etc., that it practically included them, and it was not to be dallied with. If we go to the verge of what is allowable, we make it easy for Satan to draw us over the line into what is sinful.”²

The Communion

Paul (in his customary style of introducing a subject, then discussing something else, and then coming back to the subject again) introduces a discussion of the Lord’s supper. He will deal with it more fully in the next chapter. The point here is that the Lord’s supper – which Paul describes as *the cup which we bless* and *the bread which we break* – is a communion, sharing, fellowship, communication or participation. The word *koinonia* is translated as all five English words.

Just as being involved in idolatry means having fellowship, participation, sharing, communication, and communion with the idols (and those that worship them), so we are called into fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3). We cannot be in fellowship with both. Since we are Christians, we have chosen Jesus. That means that we must not engage with the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-25).

In exactly the same way “...physical Israel...ate the sacrifices...(and became)...partakers of the altar...” (1:10:18). In partaking of the sacrificial feast, we enter communion with God (the owner of the altar), and maintain a relationship between the worshipper and the object worshipped.

Whilst the idol doesn’t amount to anything, and neither is the food changed by being offered as a sacrifice, the point is that we ought not to engage in activities that engage with demons (which is

² McGarvey, Ibid, p.103

what the idols represent). Amongst the Gentiles, the idols represented demi-gods – gods with (supposedly) supernatural powers. Therefore at the core of idolatry was demon worship.

The clear implication that Paul is driving to is that participating in idolatry is to participate in demon worship – something that Christians should flee from.

Practical advice for food sacrificed to idols

Whilst all things are lawful – he has already acknowledged that there is nothing wrong with the food in and of itself, and the idol is not real, therefore it is not (technically) unreasonable to eat the meat. However whilst it is “lawful” to eat it, the question is does it *edify* (build up) those who eat it, or those who observe us doing it?

On the latter point, we must be careful, and watch out for the welfare of others, and not be concerned about just doing what we believe is right to the detriment of others.

On a practical level, when we (the Corinthians) went to the meat-market, much of the meat would have been offered in sacrifice to idols. Paul’s advice (instruction) is to not ask any questions, then they wouldn’t know (or need to be concerned) about the meat.

Likewise, when they went to dinner at the house of a non-believer, and they gave them meat to eat, they were to go ahead and eat it without asking questions or being concerned.

However, on the contrary, if the host at dinner (or the seller at the meat market) said that this meat had been offered to idols, then it should not be eaten. The issue of conscience here is not that of our own – for we know that there is nothing wrong with the meat, and that idols are nothing – but rather for the conscience of those who have told us. *They* might think that by our eating that we accept and participate in (or endorse) the worship of idols.

Conclusions on liberty

The Corinthians (apparently) posed the question of liberty in their letter, posing the question in such a way as to have Paul answer in the affirmative. It is true that there is nothing wrong with the meat, and it is true that idols are not real gods. However true liberty comes by not exercising our freedom when it causes someone else to sin or compromise his or her beliefs.

Paul showed the liberty that he had as an apostle, and how he controlled and tempered his freedom. We must be sure that the things that we do don’t compromise other people. McGarvey comments: “...the Christian must do nothing which gives countenance to those rites, and for the sake of others he must abstain from seeming to countenance them even when his own conscience acquits him of so doing.”³

Finally, Paul makes an appeal to those who are *offended* by our liberty. Paul has sided with the strong (who accept that there is nothing wrong with eating of meat), but he shows great sympathy to the weak (we must cause them to compromise the conscience). Equally, the weak must not criticise (“...*speak evil of...*”) the strong (who are doing what their conscience allows). Their conscience does not make it wrong to do what our conscience allows.

The important thing is that whatever we do, we need to do it to the glory of God, and do it with the full assurance that what we are doing is right.

In summing up, Paul adds that we must offend others by the things that we do – even though our conscience might allow it. He again reminds them of his example of not seeking gain for himself, and becoming all things to all men so that he would not cause any offence – to the Jews, to the Gentiles, and to the church of God.

³ McGarvey Ibid p.107