

"The Way Out"

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

March 3, 2013

3rd Sunday in Lent

My grandfather was the son of a Lutheran school teacher. That meant that he, like my sons, would often help his father with things in their one room school house. My grandfather would like to tell the story that went something like this, "I had to get up early every morning and go start the fire in the wood burning stove at school. Then I would have to walk home for breakfast. I would have to walk back to school for classes and then walk back home for lunch. I would have to walk back from lunch early to tend to the fire. After school, I would have to put out the fire and walk all the way home again. Sometimes I'd have to do this after we had a big snowstorm." It was at this point when someone (usually my father) would say, "But, Dad, you lived next door to the school." And my grandfather would just grin.

As we get older, we often look to the past and think how much harder things were in the past. We regale our children and grandchildren with stories about how hard it was "back then." Every year that we tell the stories, the summers get hotter, the winters get colder; the snow gets higher; and the distances we have to walk get longer.

But there's one area in which we reverse that trend. When we talk about spiritual matters, it seems that the "here and now" is much more difficult than it was "back then". Temptations are harder. Evil is greater. Having faith and practicing it is much more difficult. We either use that as an excuse for our own behavior or as an explanation for why many have fallen away from God or do not attend church. It was the line of thinking which the members of the church in Corinth had and which Paul addresses in our text.

Paul addresses the issue by reviewing God's dealing with the people of Israel after the Exodus. God had shown them great grace. Over 600,000 men 20 years and older had left Egypt. It

was God and God alone who had freed all of them from slavery and delivered them from the tyranny of Pharaoh.

As they traveled in the desert on the way to the Promised Land, they were all under the cloud – that is, in the presence of God for their worship. They enjoyed a preview of baptism as they passed through the sea and were baptized into (joined with) their leader, Moses. They enjoyed a preview of the Lord’s Supper as they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the spiritual drink – that is, the manna and the water provided by God in a miraculous way to sustain them in their journey. They enjoyed a preview of Christ. The Jews had a legend that a rock accompanied the people through the desert. This was the Divine Wisdom in the form of a rock. Paul labels this rock as Christ, the Son of God before He assumed human form.

In other words, the people of Israel had everything. Yet Paul says, “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased.” That is the understatement of all time. Of the 600,000+ men who left Egypt, only two – Joshua and Caleb – entered the Promised Land. The text says, “for they were overthrown in the wilderness” or, as one translation puts it, “their corpses littered the desert.”

What went wrong? Israel took God’s grace lightly. They started to value themselves, their wants, and their needs more than they valued God. And “with that kind of sinful self-reliance and self-confidence, Israel developed an unfaithfulness toward God.”

What did they do? They had evil desires, wanting to go back to Egypt. They become idolaters, beginning with the worshiping of the golden calf at Mt. Sinai. They engaged in sexual immorality and 23,000 died on the same day as a result of it. They put God to the test with their complaining over the way in which God was caring for them. They grumbled against God and His chosen leaders. All of this resulted in death.

All of these narratives were recorded in the Holy Scriptures as warnings and examples for the Corinthians, Paul says. The Corinthians had been freed from their bondage to sin and were delivered from the tyranny of Satan through the perfect life and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

They enjoyed the presence of God in worship. They were brought into the faith by Holy Baptism and sustained in that faith through the Lord's Supper. Jesus was truly present among them in His Word and Sacraments.

Yet they had evil desires. They wanted to go back to the old days when they enjoyed the conviviality and the meat and other delicacies offered in the idol temples. They were being invited by their neighbors to worship their false gods with them in the temples of Corinth. They were involved in sexual immorality. There was a word in the ancient world for engaging in the worst of sexual depravities: it was "to corinthianize". They were impatient over the way the Lord was caring for them. They grumbled against the Lord and His chosen leaders. Some liked Paul. Some liked Apollos. Some liked Peter. Others ignored human leaders completely and claimed only to like Christ. It was truly a mess in that church.

The situation in Corinth was not different than the situation with the people of Israel in the desert. It was the same. Things were not harder for the Corinthians now. They were the same. Temptations were not more difficult in Corinth. They were the same. And the warning from God through St. Paul was: if God destroyed His people in the wilderness for their sin and their refusal to repent and turn to Him in faith, He will do the same to the Corinthians.

That warning is for us as well. We are the same as the people of Israel in the desert. We are the same as the Christians in Corinth. We have been freed from our bondage to sin and have been delivered from the tyranny of Satan purely by God's grace through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Our sins have been forgiven. Death and the devil no longer control us. We enjoy God's presence in worship, not through a cloud, but through His Word. We have been brought into the faith by Holy Baptism and sustained in that faith through the Lord's Supper. Jesus is truly present with us in His Word read and preached by His called servant and in His body and blood on our altar in the Lord's Supper.

Yet we can be in great danger if we begin to take the grace of God lightly. When we value ourselves, our wants, and our needs more than we value the will of God, we are in grave danger. We, too, can become unfaithful to God.

We'd like to think that temptations today are much harder now than they were at the time of Israel's travel through the desert because of technology such as the internet. We look around us and think sin is greater in volume and that depravity is worse now than it ever was in Corinth. We think that trusting in Jesus Christ and following Him is much more difficult than it ever was.

The truth of the matter is that it is all the same. We are tempted with evil desires that seek to convince us to join in with the sinful practices of this world, rather than staying apart from them. Idolatry surrounds us and we are invited to join in or, at least, accept it under the guise of tolerance. The temptation to sexual immorality is strong these days. We get impatient over the Lord's way of caring for us individually and as a congregation. We reject His gifts and think we know better how to do it. And there is still grumbling against God and His chosen leaders.

Do not be deceived. Do not think that God's wrath and His destruction could never happen to us because we are His people. If God did that to Israel for their sin and lack of repentance, He will do it to us if we blithely continue in sin while claiming to be His people and refuse to repent and turn from our evil ways. Paul's warning to the Corinthians is for us, as well: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

But there is hope – the same hope Paul offered to the Corinthians. First of all, if you feel burdened by temptations and think they must be harder in our modern age than the Israelites or Corinthians ever experienced, take heart. The Scripture says, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man." While we may not have it better than the Israelites or Corinthians, we certainly don't have it any worse.

Secondly, in spite of our frequent and often gross unfaithfulness, the Scripture says, "God is faithful!" He will forgive any sin of anyone who truly repents and turns to Him, trusting in Jesus Christ.

That is any sin – no matter how terrible it seems to us and no matter how often we have done that. That is for anyone – life long Lutherans (who we might think deserve a break), new converts to Christianity (much less Lutheranism), or dying scoundrels on their death bed. It is by God's grace, not by how good we live or how much we clean up our act, that we are forgiven. And that grace is available to all.

God's faithfulness also means that there is a limit to the temptations you will experience. "He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability" to resist. The fact that we give in to temptation is not because the temptation was too strong but because we were too weak. You will never have temptations stronger than your ability to resist them.

Thirdly, God promises, "with temptation he will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it." At first glance, this seems to say that Christians are endowed with some super power that allows them to escape from temptation. It IS true that we ALWAYS have a way to escape from temptation without sinning and there is some comfort there. However, too often we don't take that way and we give in to sin. But God provides an even stronger Way of escape: His Son, Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Jesus has already overcome all of Satan's temptations and He did it for us. His resistance and His obedience are credited to our account. And the sins we accrue through giving in to temptation are all forgiven through Jesus' sacrifice of Himself on the cross. He is the Way and the Strength to resisting temptation. He is the Way and the Source of forgiveness.

So, learn from the examples and the warnings God has given us in His Word. Do not be like the Israelites. Do not be like the Corinthians. Do not take the grace of God for granted or use it as an excuse for giving in to temptation. At the same time, don't depend on yourself either or you will fall. Hang on to Christ. Return to your baptism daily. Drown the old Adam there through contrition and repentance for your frequent surrender to temptation and sin and have a new person come forth daily. Read, mark, and inwardly digest the Word of Christ so that you are taught to recognize temptation.

Feed on Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion to be nourished and strengthened to resist temptation.

We might get tired when our parents or grandparents tell us stories about how bad things were in the past and we might start to ignore them. However, when the Word of God starts telling us stories about how God's people behaved in the past, let's listen carefully. God is warning us to avoid their mistakes and the punishment these mistakes brought upon them. Rather, heed the warning of Scriptures. Avoid the quagmire of sin and rebellion. When temptations come, look for the way out – the only way out – Jesus Christ who has overcome all temptations and paid the price for all sins for you. He will get you through. Amen.