

1 Corinthians 10:1-17

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. 7 Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play."

8 We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. 9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. 10 And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

11 These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

12 So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. 13 No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. 15 I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

A SIGN

We say that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace. What does this mean? The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way,

"First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves and taste with my mouth the bread and the cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood."

In other words, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a concrete *sign* of God's grace. A sign points us to a far greater reality.

For example, driving down the road we may see a sign that says, "Orlando 50 miles." The sign tells us that we are going in the right direction (if we're going to Orlando), and it points to something greater, the city of Orlando.

When we've been far from home it's exciting to see signs that tell us our home is close.

In the same way when we take the Lord's Supper, it's a sign that the Lord is close. We remember that his blood was shed for us and his body was broken for us. In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven and we are adopted into God's family.

In our lesson for today Paul refers to the "cup of blessing" that is a "sharing in the blood of Christ," and the bread that is a "sharing in the body of Christ".

We need food and drink to live; so also we need spiritual food and drink. We need these concrete signs of God's grace and forgiveness.

Like those road signs that point us to Orlando so the elements of the Lord's Supper point the way to the Kingdom of God.

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

I think it's also important to note that this meal speaks of blessing, but it also speaks of sacrifice. The meal reminds us of the cross, of body broken and blood shed.

When we take the cup and the bread we remember the benefits of God's salvation and forgiveness, but we also remember the challenge to live in a new way. Jesus took up the cross for the world, and we are called to take up the cross of self-denial and follow Jesus.

We are blessed to be a blessing. We are saved in order to serve others.

The Lord's Supper is designed to draw us together. That's why we also call it Communion. We not only have communion with our Lord; we also have communion with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Verse 17 of our lesson puts it this way, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

Ironically, the one thing that is supposed to unite us has in many cases torn us apart. Debates about the Lord's Supper have been very divisive. We have engaged in esoteric, theoretical arguments about where the presence of Christ is located.

At the risk of being excommunicated by those theologians who like to ask how many angels can dance on the head of a pin I ask, "Who cares? What difference does it make?"

Christ is present. Isn't that enough? In the sacraments we see signs of God's grace. We hear him say, "This is my body that is broken *for you*. This is my blood that is shed *for you*."

And the crucial phrase is that last one. This is "for you."

This is a personal promise that you can trust in faith. And this feast of grace and forgiveness should make us more gracious and forgiving toward others.

How dare we exclude sinners from this meal of grace?

Don't we remember that we are sinners saved by grace and not by works?

Have we forgotten that this is the Lord's Table, and our Lord invites all those who trust in Him to share the feast that he has prepared?

We want the table of grace to be as large as possible. When we take the Lord's Supper we anticipate that Grand Day when the New Jerusalem comes to earth.

We look forward to that day when people will come from all over, from the North, South, East and West to eat at God's table.

GRACE AND GRATITUDE

On the other hand it is possible to eat the Lord's Supper in an unworthy fashion. It is possible to reject the gifts of grace and substitute a meal that leads to destruction and God's judgment.

This was the problem in the Corinthian Church. They created a "faith" to suit their own desires instead of trusting in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. How did this happen?

Many of the Christians at Corinth did not really understand the concept of salvation by grace through faith. And I'm afraid that many Christians today also do not understand this basic article of faith.

I've been studying the Heidelberg Catechism lately and I really like the way that Catechism explains the faith. It talks about our guilt in just a few short questions and answers. Then in what comprises about half of the Catechism we learn about God's grace. And finally the Catechism is completed with a section on gratitude.

The order is vitally important. God's grace is the answer to our sinfulness. And gratitude is our Spirit inspired response to God's grace.

But, what if we don't feel grateful? Then, we have not understood the depth of our sin or the depth of God's grace.

Do you remember Jesus' parable about the king's servant who squandered a lot of the king's money? It was a huge amount, but the king in an extraordinary display of grace forgave this debt.

What did the servant do? Was he grateful for the mercy that the king had shown him?

No. He found one of his own servants who owed him a small amount of money and showed him no mercy. He threw him into debtors' prison.

Now some other folks told the king what this ungrateful servant had done. How do you think the king reacted to his servant's lack of mercy?

That's right. He judged him harshly.

And Jesus said the same thing would happen to us if we do not respond to the grace of God by being gracious toward others.

God will judge us. (Matthew 18:23-35)

PROBLEMS IN CORINTH

Some of the Corinthians were in danger of God's judgment. They were acting in a very proud and ungracious way toward their fellow Christians.

They thought that they were the most intelligent and had the greatest spiritual gifts. They even made fun of those Christians who struggled to leave the old pagan lifestyle behind.

In fact some of the Corinthians seemed to think that it didn't matter how much they sinned. They believed something like,

"God will forgive me. He's in the forgiving business."

Instead of struggling to leave the old life behind these "advanced" Christians sought to blend the Christian faith with the pagan society in which they lived.

They embraced the immoral practices that were a part of pagan temple worship. They ate meat that had been offered to idols.

When they ate the Lord's Supper (which in those days was a real meal that helped feed the poor among them) they greedily took the lion's share of the food and drink and turned the whole thing into a drunken orgy.

Paul said,

"You are in grave danger. God will judge your ungracious actions. You need to repent. You need to go in a different direction."

A HISTORICAL EXAMPLE

And then the Apostle used an example from Israel's history to drive home the point.

When Moses led God's people out of Egypt they experienced God's salvation in a very direct way. God parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape the wrath of the Egyptian army.

When they were in the wilderness the cloud of God's presence led them. God fed them manna from heaven and gave them water from the rock.

But, despite receiving God's gracious provision on a daily basis, many did not trust God.

Instead, they craved what was evil. Their life was marked not by faithfulness but by idolatry and immorality.

And God judged them on numerous occasions. Most of them did not make it to the Promised Land.

Paul said that God's gracious provision in the wilderness was a kind of foreshadowing of the Lord's Supper and the ministry of Jesus.

And this story of unfaithfulness is also a warning, an example of what can happen if we reject God's gracious provision and instead put our trust in false gods.

Paul tells the Corinthians,

"So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall."

The key word is watch.

Christians are called to live with a sense of personal awareness. We should live with a sense of humility.

We should recognize the fact that we don't necessarily know the way that we should go because we are blinded by our own pride and sinfulness.

THE MOUNTAIN OF MISERY

Several months ago I took a cruise to the island of St. Kitts. Our excursion on that island was a hike up a dormant volcano that was now a very steep and slippery rain forest.

The brochure said that this excursion required a high degree of fitness, but I work out every day. I grew up climbing mountains.

How hard could it be?

The climb was so steep and slippery that half the group turned back before reaching the summit.

But, I was determined to reach the top. I paid my money to peer down into the cauldron of this ancient volcano.

Unfortunately the view was not that great.

I did, however, get a whiff of sulfur wafting up from the lake below.

It was harbinger of things to come.

On the way down I became frustrated with the lack of climbing skills of two youngsters from Miami. The rest of the group was pushing far ahead. So I left the two stragglers (and the last guide) in an attempt to catch the group that had gone on ahead.

Soon I found myself all alone. The rainforest shut out the light, and the rocks and roots were very slippery.

But, still I was confident. I was determined to catch the group ahead. I pushed to go even faster.

And then I came to a fork in the trail. Which way should I go?

Instead of waiting on the guide I choose ... unwisely.

The ground underneath my feet gave way. I twisted both ankles as I fell and found myself at the bottom of a very steep and muddy hill.

I eventually made it up the hill and down the mountain, but I paid for my hubris for days to come with sore muscles and quite a few nightmares.

Take that as a parable of how we often live.

We overestimate our own ability. Instead of trusting in our gracious Guide we go it alone.

And that is when we fall.

Because of my misadventure on the mountain the kids from Miami eventually passed me, and I was the one lagging behind.

In fact I just about fainted. The guide patiently waited for me, gave me water to drink and stayed with me as I gratefully finished my trek down the mountain of misery.

A WAY OUT

That patient guide is my example of how God stays with us when we fall.

God is with us in the wilderness. He gives us water to drink. He gives us bread to eat. God comes alongside us and helps us find a way out.

Now my mountain misadventure could have had a worse, even a tragic ending. When I fell down the wrong path I thought about just forging on ahead. I thought, "Maybe this is the right way."

If I had done that, the guide told me that the path actually led in the opposite direction!

That was the part that gave me nightmares. I could have spent a very long night with the monkeys who have overrun that part of the jungle.

Fortunately I swallowed my pride and waited on the guide. I went in a different direction.

When we are tempted and fall, the way out is the way of confession and repentance. The Greek word translated “a way out” or “a way of escape” was a word used to describe a mountain pass. The imagery was often used to describe an army trapped in the mountains and then escaping destruction by finding an escape route.

That, according to Paul, described the situation of the Corinthians. They were trapped. They, like those who had gone before them, did not realize their own sinfulness. Their pride has blinded them.

But, they do not have to succumb to temptation. A gracious God has provided a way out. It was possible for them to change. It was possible for them to go in a different direction.

The same is true for us.
All of us are tested and all of us fail.
But, God provides a way out.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness God brings us manna and water to drink.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness Jesus comes to us with the bread of heaven and the cup of blessing.

When we are broken by our sinful ways, God in Christ provides a banquet of hope and forgiveness.

Once again I invite you to drink the cup of blessing and eat the bread of forgiveness.

This is Christ's blood, shed *for you*. This is Christ's body, broken *for you*.

He will help us find our way back home.

Amen.