2-18-24

1 Corinthians 10:1-14 (3)

The Israelites were God’s chosen people. God spoke to Abraham and called him to be His own. God promised Abraham many descendants and land and that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. And Abraham responded in faith. Because Abraham believed God, it was counted to him as righteousness. That is important; it shows the we must have righteousness to be acceptable to God.

It is certainly the same now for Christians. When we believe in Jesus as Saviour, a transfer takes place. He took all our sins upon himself and paid the price for them; in turn, we are covered in His righteousness. It is because of Christ’s righteousness that we can come before God as we do in prayer; and can look forward to eternal life with Him. As with Abraham, it requires faith; believing God.

Paul begins this chapter making that point. It is faith, not following rules or participating in Christian activities that provides salvation. When the people of Israel left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness, they underwent a baptism, ate spiritual food in likeness of the Lord’s Supper, and received a spiritual gift of water from the rock, just as Christians receive spiritual gifts. But in spite of these things, a generation was laid low in the desert due to unbelief. If God’s chosen people can perish, so can some who claim the title of “Christian”, yet practice unbelief.

Remember the reason that the Israelites had to wander the desert for forty years: it was because of disobedience; which resulted from faithlessness. God told them to enter the Promised Land of Canaan and conquer it. They refused to enter because they feared the land and the people in it. They wanted to go back to their slavery in Egypt where they thought it was safe. Of the twelve spies who were sent into the land of Canaan ahead of time, the eleven who frightened the people into disobedience were the only ones to die that day. The rest of Israel had to face the consequence of their sin: they would remain in the wilderness forty years and that generation would not enter the Promised Land.

The Exodus from Egypt is a striking example of what to expect in the end times. In verse 11 Paul mentions that we are living in the time of the ends of the ages. In other words, the last days. The “last days” began when Jesus came to this earth as a babe in order to suffer for our sins. The Kingdom of God had come upon the earth. As Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery to Egypt, Jesus leads us out of slavery to sin and satan. As the Israelites wandered the desert in consequence of their sin, we live this life in the fallen world suffering consequences of our own sin and sin in general.

A generation of Israel died before reaching the Promised Land; but that doesn’t mean that all of them lost their eternal salvation. While Paul gives many examples of their rebellious nature, some would have remained or become faithful to God. In this life, those who turn to Jesus in faith will have eternal salvation even though we die on this earth. And just as the next generation of Israel was able to enter the Promised Land all of a sudden by a miraculous crossing of the Jordan River; so too will come a moment, a twinkling of an eye, in which Jesus will come back and take His people alive into the true eternal Promised Land.

During this life, there are many pitfalls we can encounter, there are many temptations that we will deal with. Paul points out several things the people of Israel did wrong and that these are recorded in God’s word so that we can avoid them. Some in the church at Corinth were turning the gift of Christian liberty into lawlessness; and that is something too many Christians fall into now. Our liberty in Christ does not free us from the moral restraints that demonstrate the character of God.

Last week we considered the example in verse 7 regarding idolatry with the golden calf. This actually took place before the Israelites refused to enter the Promised Land and were sentenced to wander for forty years. However, the LORD still held them accountable for their sin. Idolatry is a serious offence; God will not share His glory with anyone or anything else. Some of those in Corinth were knowingly consuming food sacrificed to idols and so, were in danger of turning to them. We must be careful that we do not allow anything to take the place of God in our lives; and satan is subtle, things can slip in on us without our being aware. Keep God in Christ first.

In verse 8 we are reminded of the account in Numbers 25. The forty years were almost over and the people were on the border of the Promised Land. They were in the territory of a people called the Moabites along with the Midianites. The Moabites were afraid of Israel so they devised a way to make the LORD God angry with them. They sent their women into the Israelite camp and they seduced a number of the men. Having done that, they invited the men to come with them to feasts honoring the Moabite gods. From there it was a short step for the men to bow down and worship these false gods.

In response, God sent a plague on them and 23,000 men of Israel fell. It was only the faithful action of Phinehas the priest that stopped the plague.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, we see that one of the problems in the church was sexual immorality. The Bible is very clear: sex is a gift from God that is only for a man and a woman who are married to each other. It is a fact that sin leads to more sin and that the sin grows as it progresses. The men of Israel allowed themselves to be led into sexual immorality. It was a craving they were unwilling to deny themselves. That led to them eating food that was sacrificed to a false god. Again, a craving for something different in the way of food. But this led to worshiping the false gods; so we have come again into idolatry.

In our day and age, sexual immorality doesn’t often lead us into bowing down to statues of idols; it becomes the idol. Living in the sin of sexual immorality will lead to greater cravings and greater perversion. It can lead to a life of living in defiance of God’s creation ordinance of marriage. Living in defiance of God is holding something in a higher place than Him: that’s having an idol.

To have 23,000 people die in one day shows just how serious God is about sexual immorality. Paul is letting the Corinthians know that Christan liberty does not set aside God’s feelings about this. And that’s because God’s feelings are completely in line with His holy character. Once more, God’s commands are not random but are based on His character; His perfect holy character.

The next example Paul brings up is when the people tried, or tempted, the LORD. This particular account is in Numbers 21. The Israelites had to take a long way around the land of Edom and they complained. Verse 5 says, ‘*The people spoke against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food*.”’ Here the people were speaking against the gifts God provided for them. He had freed them from slavery in Egypt, He miraculously provided them with food and water; it was their own fault they were still wandering the desert.

In response: *The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.* By “fiery serpents” it doesn’t mean that the snakes were flaming, it means that the bite caused a burning sensation; it was probably a painful death. People have no business testing the LORD. He is God and He is the Creator; we are His.

Now the people did cry out to God and confessed their sin, so our merciful God had Moses make a replica of the serpents and hang it from a pole. When someone was bitten they could look at the image of the snake and be healed of the bite.

Another picture of Christ, by the way. God didn’t take the snakes away; the people still got bit. But when they were bitten, they had a choice: They could have faith in what God told them, look at the replica of the snake and live; or they could choose to not look at the snake and die. God has not taken sin out of the world; we are still bitten by it. But we can choose to look upon the crucified Christ in faith and be healed from the effects of sin and live; or we can choose to ignore Him and suffer eternal death.

What verse 10 mentions is very close to tempting the LORD and that is grumbling. As we read through the first five books of the Bible, we see that grumbling was something the Israelites were very good at. They grumbled against God and they grumbled against Moses; which was the same as grumbling against God since Moses was God’s messenger.

Grumbling comes from an ungrateful heart. We’ve all met people like this: it doesn’t matter how many nice things you do for them, they aren’t happy; they will still complain and want you to do more for them. They won’t be happy with that either. Do we treat God the same way?

I fear that this is a very common sin among Christians; we grumble. Along with the grumbling we make demands of God and then are angry when He doesn’t fulfill them; this is testing the LORD. Think about it; how often do you find yourself complaining about something that doesn’t suit you? Maybe you don’t like the weather; remember who decreed the weather for any particular day. Maybe your car broke down and caused you to miss something you wanted to do. Have you forgotten all those times the LORD got you safely to your destination? Do you complain about your government officials? Do you remember that God appointed them?

To grumble is to show dissatisfaction with what God has ordained or allowed in your life. Although many things we deal with are very unpleasant, they are in our lives so that God may be glorified and so that we may grow in our likeness to Christ. In other words, God always cares for us in the best way possible and to grumble is to show we don’t appreciate Him.

When I say these things, I don’t mean that we always have a smile on our face and that we try to ignore difficult things. Life can be extremely difficult; all of us have suffered through some terrible things and it takes a long time, sometimes all our lives, to deal with them. These are things we take to the Lord in prayer. We can ask for the difficulties to be removed and we can ask repeatedly; but we must be submissive to His will. If we can, we are even to take actions to relieve ourselves of the difficulty; but our actions must be covered in prayer. Ultimately, we must pray as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane: *not as I will, but as You will*.

The antidote to grumbling is giving thanks. Dwell on all the blessings you have in this life. Think about the very gift of salvation. We don’t even deserve salvation yet God gives us so much more. I don’t say that you should give thanks for problems in your life; but give thanks that God is working through them to make you more like Christ; to sanctify you. Giving thanks is a hard thing to do; it is against our carnal nature. But the Holy Spirit will enable you to be thankful as long as you don’t resist Him.

Paul repeats in verse 11 what he said in verse 6, so it’s important: He tells us that these things happened to them as examples to us. We need to pay attention to what they did, and the consequences, so we don’t repeat the same mistakes.

In this Christian era, God doesn’t seem to immediately strike people down for sin; He doesn’t send fiery serpents among us when we grumble or test Him; He doesn’t rain down fire and brimstone for sexual immorality. But because of what we read in His word of the experiences of Israel, we know that He will deal severely with those who practice such things. Such is God’s great mercy that He does not immediately smite sinners, but gives them a chance to repent and turn to Christ.

Next week, Lord willing, we will conclude our study of these verses with a look at temptation and escape.

Prayer

Blessed Lord, thank You for Your blessed word, the Bible. Thank You for telling us of all the problems that took place in the past, both among Your people and those who were of the world. These examples let us know that You did not take these things lightly; that they were entirely unacceptable to You.

Your word lets us know that You are unchanging God; the things that were offensive to You then are still offensive to You now. In Your great mercy You do not send immediate retribution as we deserve, but give us time to turn from our sin; turn to Christ.

Help us to live a grateful life to You; help us to resist lawlessness and be obedient to Your good and freeing commands. Gently remind us when we grumble that You are all good God and that You have precious things waiting for us that we can’t even conceive of.

We praise You in Jesus’ name

Amen