

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-10

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 8 Paul has set forth an important principle on Christian freedom. Freedom must not be exercised if the use of Christian freedom causes others to stumble. In the last chapter Paul shows how he placed limitations to his own Christian freedom for the benefit of others and now in this section Paul illustrates from the Old Testament how exercising Christian freedom can adversely affect our own lives.

Misuse of Christian freedom can disqualify us from effective Christian service. Now one of the surest ways to fall into sin is to become overconfident and it seems that this was a problem at Corinth at least among some of the members of the church (4:8-14).

They probably thought that they were strong enough as Christians to freely associate with their pagan neighbours in the ceremonies and social activities of Corinth without being morally or spiritually affected. Paul tells them that they are deceiving themselves, for abusing Christian freedom not only harms others but harms the individual who wants to live on the edge of Christian freedom and wants to get as close to sin as possible without actually sinning. Such thinking is foolish and shows a self-confidence that will eventually lead the believer to fall into temptation and sin. The mature Christian does not try to stretch Christian freedom to its limits for he knows the dangers of such thinking and actions. So Paul turns to his Old Testament to illustrate the pitfalls of overconfident living.

Paul uses a number of incidents from the 40 years when Israel wandered in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan.

1. THE PRIVILEGES OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vs. 1-4)

The word “for” (v 1) refers back to the disqualification for service in (9:27). The word also introduces the examples that are to follow therefore it is a link word between the two sections. Paul does not want the Corinthians to be ignorant of the Old Testament illustrations that he is about to use. He is preparing them for new insights into familiar stories.

Paul wants them to remember what happened to Israel in the wilderness. Paul speaks of our forefathers meaning here forefathers in the faith those in Israel who truly believed. Now Paul emphasises the oneness of Israel and the commonness of their experiences under Moses leadership for the word “all” is used four times (five in Greek) to indicate this. Now Paul covers three basic areas where Israel as a whole were blessed

a) Liberation from Egypt (v 1) – Israel spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt they were under total subjection to a foreign power who severely mistreated them. But God miraculously delivered Israel and he opened the red sea for them to pass through the sea on dry land. He guided them by a pillar of cloud by day, which became a pillar of fire at night.

Now the saving of the people of Israel from their enemies is a symbol of the saving of sinners in the New Testament. Saved not from some physical enemy but saved from our spiritual enemies of sin, death and Satan. Israel was called out of Egypt into the Promised Land. They were set free from their bondage and as a result they were to be a witnessing community to the pagan world.

Now as Christians we have been set free by Christ, sin no longer dominates our lives, death holds no fears and Satan no longer controls us. We are truly free to be a witnessing community and that is a wonderful privilege. But we must remember that Israel misused her newfound freedom and fell into the sin of idolatry, immorality and rebelliousness. Paul is saying to these self-confident

Corinthians and to us not to let the same thing happen to us. We are saved from sin we are truly free, set free by God through Christ but be careful that we do not use our Christian freedom as an opportunity to sin.

We are saved to serve not saved to live for self. That is what Israel was doing therefore learn the lesson from the Israelites.

b) Baptism into Moses (v 2) – Now the basic Christian significance of baptism is identification with Christ. Water baptism is an outward sign of spiritual union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Baptism symbolises the baptism that all believers experience when they repent and trust in Jesus Christ. We are then baptised into Christ, identified with him we are one with Him (Galatians 3:27).

It is that idea that spiritual identification rather than some physical ceremony that Paul has in mind here. The Israelites were baptised into Moses in the sense that they identified with him as the Lord's appointed leader over them. They were one with him in going through the Red sea they were fully trusting him as their leader. Now Paul's point is that if Israel who were united with Moses in going through the Red sea fell into sin then how much more careful should we be who are united to Christ and have been delivered from our enemies.

Being united to Christ is a wonderful privilege that sets us free but we must remember that we belong to Christ therefore how we exercise our Christian freedom reflects upon Christ our Saviour.

c) Spiritual Sustenance (vs. 3-4) –The Lord provided for the Israelites and fed them physically. He provided them with manna and with water to drink and that food came from God and this is what Paul means when talking about spiritual food. It was physical food provided by Spiritual means i.e. God directly provided the Israelites with food.

Now the source of this food came from a spiritual rock, which we are told was Christ. So even there in the Old Testament God in Christ is with his people and providing for them. The same is true today God provides all that we need physically and spiritually through Christ. He has saved us and set us free and is with us today. We are a privileged people but are we going to use our Christian freedom to bring disgrace upon the Lord's name and in doing so show contempt for the Lord's goodness to us? That is what Israel did as we will see now as we consider

2. THE ABUSES OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM (vs. 5-10)

Israel as a nation shared in these wonderful privileges yet God was not pleased with most of them. As a result God refused to allow them to enter the Promise Land except Joshua and Caleb, and the people died in the wilderness. Israel had been blessed and privileged by God. They had experienced freedom as a result of the Exodus but they misused their freedom and fell into temptation and then into sin.

They became overconfident in their own ability and pushed their freedom beyond its limits.

Now the judgements experienced by the Israelites in the wilderness are examples to us so that we do not set our hearts on evil things like they did (v 5). They were free from their enemy and instead of living controlled and dedicated lives to the Lord they lived for themselves and ultimately for sin. Christian, God has rescued you and saved you for a purpose. You are free from the power of sin but learn the lesson from the Israelites do not use your freedom in Christ to live for yourself. Instead live controlled and committed and dedicated lives for the Lord. Give yourself totally to him and not to your own sinful desires. Israel was guilty of four main sins.

a) Idolatry (v 7) - Idols were more familiar to the Corinthians than to us because their whole society was built around them. No religious, social, political or business function was conducted without some involvement with idol worship. Many of the Christians at Corinth were overconfident in their own moral and spiritual strength and they had become careless as a result.

They believed they could attend and associate with pagan activities without being spiritually harmed. The result was that some had slipped back into idolatry and others were in danger of doing so. Paul is using Israel as an example. They were hardly out of Egypt before they fell into idolatry. Exodus 32 records their sordid story.

While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the 10 commandments the people became impatient and persuaded Aaron to make a golden calf. Although the calf was a representation of a popular Egyptian god, the Israelites planned to use it to worship the one true God. They somehow thought that they could use a pagan idol to worship the one true God. They had for so long been around the pagan ceremonies of Egypt that it seemed natural for them to adopt that pagan worship to their God. Paul quotes Exodus 32:6 (v 7) to show the extent of their idolatry.

The eating and drinking refers to excessive feasting that followed sacrifices to the pagan gods and the words “pagan revelry” refers to sexual relations related to the worship of a pagan god.

God judged Israel and 3,000 died (Exodus 32:28 cf. v 8) to highlight the seriousness of disobeying God. Now some of the Corinthians had also reverted to their old ways of idol worship probably thinking they could worship God using old ways and methods. But God can only be worshipped in the right way. Those who try to honour God with immoral and pagan practises bring dishonour on God and judgement upon themselves.

Now if we worship anyone or anything other than the living God then that is idolatry. People sincerely worship Mary or the saints or statues believing that it helps them to worship God and gain access with him. But such worship is idolatry. Now we would never do that I'm sure but are there people in our lives that are more important to us than God. Then that is idolatry. Are their things that have become more important to us than God? Then that is idolatry.

Just think of our lives. Does the way we live our lives tell us anything about whom we really worship. Is there a commitment to God alone? Is He first in every aspect of our lives? Is pleasing him put before everything else? If not then we are idol worshippers. Paul warns us here that idol worshippers are dealt with by God (v 8).

Is it possible that some of the things that happen to us are a result of our idol worship? Does God not act to remind us of Him and of our need to worship him alone?

b) Sexual immorality (v 8) – Although Paul has already alluded to this sin in verse 7 here he deals specifically with the sin of immorality. The incident, which Paul refers to here, is recorded in the book of Numbers (Numbers 25). The people of God joined in the worship of Moab and 24,000 people died as a result. The difference in numbers here is that probably 23,000 died that day and the rest died later as a result of the plague. Now sexual immorality was closely associated with pagan worship in Corinth and the pagan temple in Corinth had 1000 ritual prostitutes. It seemed that most social occasions at the temple involved sexual immorality and so Paul warns these self-confident Corinthians about the danger of thinking they can attend pagan activities and yet remain pure.

The temptation to sin sexually was great. Now many Christians fall into sexual sin because they are over confident in their own strength. We often think that we can resist such temptations and perhaps we put ourselves into situations where sexual temptation is hard to resist. Christian young

people can think going to a nightclub is fine for they are free in Christ. Yet while there they will find the temptation to sin immense.

People might feel they are strong Christians and can cope with the office flirt but beware the people of Israel fell into sexual sin and that is possible for all of us. Do not allow our Christian freedom to place us into situations where we can be tempted in this area of sex. God takes action to deal with people who sin sexually so beware and learn the lessons from the Israelites.

c) Testing God (v. 9) – Now once again Paul is thinking about an Old Testament event and this time he is turning our attention to Numbers 21:5. God had provided manna to eat and water to drink but the people were not satisfied. They wanted more variety so they complained and questioned God's goodness testing his patience. They had no concern for pleasing God they were only concerned about pleasing themselves.

They did not use their freedom to serve their Lord better but instead they expected God to serve them better.

Sadly there are Christians who test God like this today. They live as close to this world as they can they want to see how much of this world with its ungodliness they can partake in before God acts. They test God by seeing how much of this world with all its sin they can enjoy before God's patience runs out. In doing so such people are risking God's discipline for God's patience will eventually run out.

Such Christians think that because they are saved by grace and are set free by God through Christ then surely they can live close to the world because even if they do fall into sin God is a forgiving God. Well God acted in Numbers 21:6 and many people died. God is extremely gracious and extremely patient with us, He puts up with far more than any of us expect. But we must understand that by denying his word and living for ourselves we are testing God's patience. Living as we like without obeying his word is dangerous for his patience is not unlimited and there comes a day when God acts in discipline in order to teach us not to put the Lord to the test.

He acts in order to help us realise that the Christian life is about serving God and not about doing, as we like. He teaches us that forgiveness depends upon true repentance and not just saying some form of words. So if any of us are not living in a pleasing manner then learn the lesson from the Israelites and be careful in case we test God for his patience is not unlimited and he will act to teach us not to test him.

d) Grumbling against God (v 10) – The last major sin that Paul mentions is the one of grumbling or complaining against God. The Old Testament incident is found in Numbers 16:32-48. After Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their fellow rebels were destroyed by the Lord all the people grumbled against Moses and Aaron blaming them for the death of God's people (v 41).

However God was so incensed at their complaints, which ultimately were against the Lord and his justice that he immediately sent a plague that killed 14,700 people (v 48). The lesson is clear grumbling against others or against the church is ultimately a complaint against God. It's so easy to complain about the Lord's purposes in our lives.

Why has God made me so ill? Why do I suffer so much? Why am I unemployed? Why does nothing work out right for me? Why am I so lonely? We can often complain about God's will in our lives or the life of others that we begin to complain in our hearts if not with words about God's slowness to act to improve the situation or the situation of others.

But we must understand God does not take our grumbling and complaining lightly. When we complain or even question God's ways we are challenging his wisdom, His goodness and His

grace. Contentment to accept God's purposes and will is an amazing gift of God. Paul learnt to be content but we too need to learn to be content and accept all that God brings into our life good and bad as gracious gifts from an all knowing and wise God.

He knows what is good for us he knows what he is doing in our lives so accept his will and do not complain or grumble for in doing so we are challenging God. God responded to the complaining of his people in the Old Testament in judgement. Complaining is a serious sin and he does not allow us to grumble forever. He will act and he does so in love in order to teach and discipline us so that we learn not to complain.

So as I conclude, learn the lessons from these Old Testament stories. Christ has set us free through his death but Christian freedom does not give us a license to sin either by committing idolatry or immorality or testing God or by complaining to Him.

Learn to use your Christian freedom in service to Him, which means a fleeing from all sin and committing ourselves wholeheartedly to Him by trusting him and accepting his will and purpose for our lives.

May God teach us to learn the lessons from the mistakes made by the Old Testament people of God so that we will not sin as they did?

Amen