

Do not flirt with sin

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For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.(1 Corinthians 10:1-14)

Introduction

This passage warns those of us who are Christians not to think that just because we have been greatly blessed by God, he will not discipline us if we rebel against him. It tells us that even if we are Christians, even if we have been saved from going to Hell, and even though we enjoy many great privileges, if we indulge in sin, God may deal with us very strongly. The apostle Paul draws lessons from

the history of God's people in Old Testament times. They enjoyed similar blessings to the ones we enjoy as Christians, but most of them were severely punished by God for their disobedience. Therefore we who are Christians should not consider ourselves immune from God's discipline if we entertain sin in our lives.

The passage can be divided into three sections:

Spiritual privileges do not exempt you from being disciplined by God, verses 1 - 4.

Sins which bring forth God's discipline, vv. 5 - 10

Lessons we should draw from these things, verses 11 to 13

1. Spiritual privileges do not exempt you from being disciplined by God

Paul takes his readers back to the time when God called the Israelites out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. He shows that the people of Israel experienced blessings which are equivalent to those we enjoy as Christians. Yet the enjoyment of these privileges did not exempt them from being severely disciplined by God when they engaged in sinful practices.

He mentions five privileges that they enjoyed:

1) They were led by God

Paul says that the Israelites were all "under the cloud". When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt he provided a pillar of cloud to guide them. At night this cloud became a pillar of fire, so the Israelites knew where to go by day and by night. And when the Israelites were threatened by the Egyptians who were chasing them, the cloud moved between the Egyptians and Israelites, and gave light to the Israelites and brought darkness to the Egyptians. In other words it protected the Israelites.

Jesus does this for us who are his people under the New Covenant. He describes himself in John 10 as the Good Shepherd, who guides his sheep, and provides for them and protects them.

2) They were delivered from an evil regime

Secondly, Paul says that Israelites all passed "through the sea". When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt they were hemmed in, with the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian army pursuing them from behind. God told Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, and as he did so the waters were divided and the Israelites went through on dry ground. Then, after the last man had crossed over, Moses stretched out his hand again and the waters closed over the Egyptian army who were chasing the Israelites. God decisively and once and for all delivered the Israelites from the evil regime in Egypt, and brought them out into the desert, where they were free to know and serve God. There was now no going back. They could only go forward from here.

This is what God has done for us who are Christians. He has delivered us from the Kingdom of Satan, and brought us into the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says in Colossians 1.13 - 14, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." And, having been saved, those of us who have been baptised have also gone through water, the water of baptism, to show what God has done.

3) They were united with their leader

Thirdly Paul says that they were all "baptised into Moses". In other words, they were united with him. Their fate was inextricably bound up with his. What happened to Moses happened to them. His future was their future. Why? Because they went through the sea with him, and they were led by the cloud with him.

So for us, we have been "baptised" into Christ Jesus. Paul says in Romans 6.3 - 4, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." We are united with Christ, just as the people were united with Moses. The people were united with Moses by going through the sea. We are united with Christ by having been baptised in the Holy Spirit. What happened to Christ has happened to us. Just as he died, so our old life has died. Just as he was raised, so we have been given new life in him. Just as he was given a new resurrection body, so we shall have a new resurrection body.

4) They were fed by God

Fourthly, Paul says that they all ate the same spiritual food. By this he is referring to the manna, the bread which God gave the Israelites to eat. Each night, except the night before the Sabbath, the bread would come down like the dew, and would settle on the ground for the Israelites to go and pick up and eat. By using the word "spiritual" Paul means that it was bread which was miraculously provided by means of the Holy Spirit. He does not mean that the bread was anything other than material bread which satisfied their physical needs.

This was the equivalent of Jesus, who is the spiritual bread that we "eat" as Christians. Contrasting himself with the manna that the Israelites ate, Jesus said, as recorded in John 6.48 – 51

I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

5) They drank water provided by God

Paul says in verse 3 that "they drank the same spiritual drink". The Greek repeats the word "all" which is left out by the NIV here. On at least two occasions God provided water for the Israelites to drink, out of the rock. Paul says that the rock was Christ. It is not that Christ became a physical rock moved about, but rather that Christ went with them, and caused the water to come out of the rock at different places.

So Christ provides living water for us to drink. It is recorded in John 7 verse 37 that Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

So the Israelites enjoyed similar privileges to the ones we enjoy as Christians. At each point where we are privileged, you can find an equivalent for the Israelites. This makes verse 5 all the more striking: "nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them: their bodies were scattered over the desert." Most of them did not make it into the promised land. In fact, of all the hundreds of

thousands of adults who came out of Egypt, only two, Caleb and Joshua, entered the promised land. The rest were "strewn in the desert." Even Moses himself was excluded, because of an incident where he sinned. The warning is clear: if we indulge sin as believers, God will discipline us. We may still be saved, but God will deal with us strongly.

Is there a conflict here with the promise of forgiveness, for example Jeremiah 31.34, where God promises "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."? No. As regards our eternal salvation, God does not remember our sins against us. We are for ever justified if we truly look to Christ as our Saviour. But precisely because God is for us, because he is committed to making us holy like Christ, he deals with us when we sin, and does not allow us to continue unchecked in it. We see an example of this sort of discipline by God in 1 Corinthians 11.29 – 32, where Paul describes how God has disciplined some who have sinned in the way they participated in the Lord's Supper:

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

Some believers have got ill, and some have died prematurely, because God has "judged" them, or disciplined them, not because they are going to Hell, but so that they will not go to Hell. So God disciplines his people because he loves them, and is determined that they should become like him.

2. Examples of sins which bring forth God's discipline

Paul says in verse 6, "these things happened as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did." The Old Testament narratives are there for us to learn from, and particularly to learn about sins to avoid. Paul here mentions four sins which the Israelites committed in the desert, for which they were chastised by God, and which we must avoid in our lives:

1) Idolatry

Paul says in verse 7, "Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to indulge in pagan

revelry". This is a clear reference to the account in Exodus 32 of when the Israelites made a golden calf. Moses had been a long time up the mountain, receiving the law of God. The Israelites got Aaron to make a golden calf. They were worshipping this idol as Moses came back down the mountain with the tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments with his finger. In his anger Moses threw the tablets down, and they broke. He called out "who is on the Lord's side?" and the Levites rallied to his side and killed many who had been involved in idolatry. God also sent a plague among the people.

We need to guard ourselves from idolatry. In the Western world we might not have actual statues to which we offer sacrifices, but there are many other idols to which our hearts may be drawn. According to Romans 1.25 idolatry is worshipping and serving created things. Some of the things which are present day idols are: desire for status, desire for money, pleasure and comfort, homes, holidays, children, clothes, mobile phones, sports personalities and rock singers.

God is our husband. He is rightly jealous for our love. He will deal with us if we feed idolatry. We must cut it out. Instead we should find our satisfaction and delight in God.

2) Sexual immorality

Paul says in verse 8, "We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died." This is a reference to Numbers 25. The King of Moab had tried, unsuccessfully, get Balaam to curse the Israelites. Then he tried a different tactic. He got the Moabite women to seduce the Israelites and get them involved in sexual immorality. The result was that God severely disciplined the Israelites and a plague broke out, with over 23,000 being killed.

The warning for us as Christians is clear. We must not commit sexual immorality. Sexual immorality takes various forms: sex before marriage, which is fornication, sex with someone who is already married (apart from your own husband or wife), which is adultery, sex with a member of one's own family, which is incest, sex with a member of the same sex, which is homosexuality, or sex with an animal, which is bestiality. All of them are wrong, because all of them break God's plan for sex which is to join together a man and his wife. And Jesus warned us that fantasising about committing such sins is equivalent to doing

them in the heart.

If we indulge this sin as believers, God may well deal with us very strongly. We must cut this sin out of our lives. If you are married, focus desire onto your spouse. If you are single then keep these desires under control until such time as you are able to marry.

3) Testing the Lord

Paul says in verse 9, "We should not test the Lord, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes." This is a reference to Numbers 21.4 – 9. The people complained against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert. There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" As a result of their sin, God sent a plague of poisonous snakes among them, and many were killed.

They were testing God because they were inciting God to judge them. They were saying effectively that they wished they were back in Egypt. They were despising the salvation which God had provided for them.

We do the same thing when we complain about our position as believers. We make comparisons with unbelievers, and feel sorry for ourselves, and say "Why did I have to become a Christian? What good has it done me? Look at those unbelievers, and how happy and carefree their lives are, and here am I slogging my guts out for God, and what is he doing for me?"

Watch out. Self-pity is a serious sin. It is really testing God, and is likely to provoke his discipline. What is the answer? Remember the blessings of God, past, present and future. This is where the Israelites went wrong. They forgot what God had done for them, and what he was leading them to. We need to be careful not to do the same thing.

4) Grumbling

Paul says in verse 10, "And do not grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroying angel." This is probably a reference to the rebellion incited by Korah, Dathan and Abiram, recorded in Numbers 16. These men were envious of Moses' authority, and accused him of putting himself above the people. They were joined by 250 Levites. Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their families were

swallowed up by the earth, and the 250 men were burned by the fire of God. But it did not end there. The whole community then rebelled against Moses. This led to a plague, resulting in 14,700 dying.

There is a clear warning for us here. We should not grumble against those whom God has called to be his servants. If we grumble against those whom God has called, we are grumbling against God himself. What often happens in church life is this: people do not like what they hear. But since they are professing believers, they cannot say they do not like the Word of God. So they look for some way of attacking the one who has declared the Word.

Be careful not to grumble against those whom God has placed over you. You may find yourself fighting against God himself, and he may be roused to vindicate his servant. Of course, God's servants are not exempt from sin any more than anyone else, and if you observe a leader sinning you need to challenge him about this, according to Matthew 18.15 - 18. But be careful that it really is his sin you are challenging, and that you are not grumbling because your own sin has been challenged by that leader. If you attack or undermine a leader because your own sin has been exposed, you are risking God's severe chastisement coming upon you.

Lessons we should draw from these things

Paul concludes by saying, in verse 11, "These things happened to them as examples, and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come." We are living in a very privileged time. We are living in the period to which the whole of the Old Testament was looking forward. All that happened in the Old Testament time was for our benefit, that we might learn from it. But we must learn the lessons, otherwise we shall land up repeating the mistakes of our spiritual ancestors.

So, says the apostle, "if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" We need to realise what a powerful force sin is, and how weak we are naturally speaking. We might feel all secure and strong in our Christian lives, and then suddenly be overtaken by sin, with disastrous consequences, if we are not careful.

The following verse, verse 13, is one which, rightly, has given comfort to Christians through the ages. "No temptation has seized you except what is

common to man. And God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." In the context, however, it is not just a wonderful promise. It is also a challenge to us, because if the temptations we experience are common to all men, and if God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, then if we fall into temptation it is our fault. And if it is our fault, then we shall be held responsible if we do so, and we are liable to be dealt with very severely by God, because we have no excuse for our sin. So, all the more, we need to resolutely fight sin in our lives.

Finally, I must say a word to any who read this who are not as yet Christians. What is the message to you? The message is that it is vital that you get saved through Christ. Peter writes in one of his letters "It is time for judgement to begin with the family of God; and if it is hard for us to be saved, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the Gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4.18). This passage has been telling us about how God will severely discipline believers who continue in sin. If God is so severe with his own children, what hope is there for those who are outside of his love? If you are not yet saved, come to Christ quickly before it is too late, that you may be saved from the wrath that is to come.

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