

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Seventh Sunday after Epiphany - Sexagesima February 23, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 402, 524:4-5, 516, 421, 120:5.

Lessons: Psalm 1, Romans 4:1-13, Luke 13:1-9.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The Bible is not just a book of facts. Scripture has more than a mere archeological or historical interest for us. God himself tells us in Rom. 15:4: ***"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."***

This text contains a warning, for the Corinthians and for us. They thought that they could freely join in the wicked activities of the world around them. That temptation is also there for us, every day. Please listen carefully as God warns us

"SO, IF YOU THINK YOU ARE STANDING FIRM, BE CAREFUL THAT YOU DON'T FALL!"

1. Old Testament Israelites perished in the desert because they did not trust in God.
2. These examples were written for our leaning so that we may be warned.

"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." Paul speaking of Jewish believers as forefathers for the Christians is certainly appropriate, because ***"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*** (Gal.3:26-29) In this way Paul identifies the New Testament Church with the true Israel.

The Old Testament believers are your spiritual ancestors, too, for they too are part of the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints of which every believer in Jesus Christ as Savior is a member.

These examples are a warning for all who are in danger of yielding to fleshly lusts. Out of the entire number of adult Israelites that left the land of Egypt, only two, Joshua and Caleb, entered the Promised Land. ***"By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night."*** (Exodus 13:21)

Paul reminds us that they all passed through the sea, as we read in Exodus 14:22: ***"and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left."*** They were saved by the water, just as we are saved by the water with the Word of God in baptism. The gracious presence of God surrounded them every step of their journey. All the Israelites, without exception, escaped from bondage; they all were included in the miraculous deliverance in the Red Sea; yet most of them perished before receiving even their earthly reward!

"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." In addition to physical food, their spirits were refreshed through faith in Christ, present with them as the Rock of their salvation. Luther commented "they believed in that same Christ, although He had not yet appeared in the flesh, but was to come later."

How did the people repay God's kindness? Their unbelief lead to their death, and their bodies were scattered in the desert. We read in Hebrews 3:19: ***"So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their***

unbelief." God had patience, but they would not give him the whole-hearted obedience and trust which he demanded, and so his punishment came upon them. The entire older generation was destroyed, failing to reach the Promised Land, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb.

There were a number of incidents that happened in the wilderness, showing why the displeasure of God struck the children of Israel. ***"Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did."***

These incidents represent our punishment if we do not heed the voice of God. We should not be eager to do those things which displease the Lord; we should be careful that we don't set our hearts on evil things as they did. Hardly had the Israelites been saved from the hands of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, when they became dissatisfied with their journey in the desert and longed after the flesh-pots of Egypt. We read in Exodus 16:3: ***"The Israelites said to [Moses and Aaron], 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.'"***

Paul gives specific examples: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing the Lord, and grumbling. Repeatedly, as they continued their journey, they would raise their voices in rebellious murmurings and demand further gifts from the Lord. Repeatedly their revolt took the form of special sins of unfaithfulness, of sins especially hateful in the eyes of God.

Idolatry is the first sin he names. When Moses was up on the mountain receiving the stone tablets of the law from God is the most obvious example. The people persuaded Aaron to make a statue of a golden calf, one of the false gods of the Egyptians, out of their golden earrings, and they worshiped it. They deliberately prepared a sacrificial meal for the golden calf which Aaron had made at their demand, and they expressed their idolatrous feelings by their singing and dancing around the idol fashioned by a man's hands.

Think of all the temptations to all kinds of idolatry today. The devil and the world set all kinds of temptations before us to take the place of God and his Word. The world and Satan constantly offer alternatives to the worship of God. Remember, we are commanded by the true God to have no other gods, and to fear, to love, and to trust in the triune God above all things.

Paul also names sexual immorality. And isn't this ultimately idolatry, a kind of worship of the human body? The descendants of Abraham often welcomed and practiced the sins of the peoples around them. This kind of shameless immorality was often practiced in honor of pagan gods. One result was corruption which spread throughout the children of Israel and resulted in God's punishment upon them, with twenty-three thousand slain in one day for sexual immorality.

The warning against sexual immorality was especially appropriate in the case of the Corinthians, who were exposed to the shameless practices connected with the cult of Venus in their city. Let none of them think that he was immune against such immoral vices, if he deliberately joined the heathen. But we might also ask, aren't the temptations to abandon the sixth commandment especially strong in our day? One can barely watch an evening of television without seeing and hearing someone speaking of and showing sexual immorality as if it were as common as eating food. Let no Christian today think himself secure against the attacks and sins of the world, especially if one makes it a practice to open our lives to even just observing the sins of sexual immorality.

Paul goes on: ***"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."*** We read in Numbers 21:4-6: ***"They spoke against God and against Moses, and said, '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!'"*** Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died." Could there be a stronger warning against even grumbling against God? We might think of complaining about the earthly blessings that God so generously provides us. But how easy isn't it to simply complain and blame God for other things that happen to us, such as our aches and pains and poor financial choices and for things such as God not providing more possessions for us?

Their dissatisfaction even with the food furnished by God – manna, water, and quail – was due to their unbelief, and this unbelief was punished through the fiery serpents sent by God. The same sin of grumbling

about God and his ways of doing things is committed by Christians who are not satisfied with the solid and nourishing food given them in Gospel-preaching, but insist upon frequenting the places of the world's idolatry in the hope of obtaining food which suits their jaded appetites better. Such conduct is tempting Christ and will be punished accordingly.

The entire history of the journey in the wilderness is one of murmurings, but several occasions stand out, notably the revolt of Korah and his friends, and the subsequent uprising of the entire congregation. If it had not been for Moses standing between those to be immediately destroyed by God and the others at that time, the entire people might have been wiped out.

These lessons should be applied by us to ourselves. There is always the temptation to complain about the Word of God and those who bring it to us. Murmuring against God and his representatives is evidence of unbelief and rebellion, which God punishes severely. ***“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.”***

Jesus Christ has come. God's salvation has been fulfilled. The ***“the fulfillment of the ages”*** is really also a reference to the end of the world. All that Scripture prophecies has occurred and we recognize that the end of the world on judgment day could come at any moment.

God recorded such wickedness of Israel so that this would serve as warning examples for all people. We are to learn from the generations who have preceded us. To ignore what former ages have to teach us about the wages of sin and the consequences of guilt is folly.

Then we have Paul's final warning in this section: ***“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!”*** It is easy to think that “others may fall, but I won't”. But remember also Peter, who vowed that he would die with Jesus before he denied him. And he denied Jesus three times the night of Jesus' trial.

We also find comfort here. Regardless of whatever is tempting us, it is common to man. If anyone seeks to excuse a fall into sin, Paul takes away the excuses. ***“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.”*** Others have similar burdens and temptations. Those were ordinary human temptations that the Corinthians and Israelites faced. Many other Christians have encountered these temptations and have withstood them. Furthermore, God knows our strength and staying power and will not let temptation exceed it. He also supplies encouragement when temptations come, for ***“when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*** The ***“way out”*** of temptations includes the ability to bear it, and we can bear the temptations because God has promised “a way out.”

And here is the most important part: ***“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”*** There is always a way out. Sometimes this just means saying “no”, firmly, and following up with action. Sometimes this means being embarrassed in an earthly sense, when we have to say “no, I won't go along with you”. Sometimes this means losing earthly “friends”. But what kind of real friend would seek your eternal damnation?

Though we must take heed lest we fall, yet should we not be terrified; for either our trials will be in proportion to our strength, or strength will be supplied in proportion to our temptations. We live in a tempting world, where we are surrounded with snares. Every place, every activity, every enjoyment abounds with them, yet we can find comfort from such a passage!

God knows what we can bear, and what we can bear up against; and he, in his wise providence, will take care that we be not overcome, if we rely upon him, and earnestly strive to remain faithful to him. ***“He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it,”*** either the trial itself, or at least the evil that may come of it. There is no valley so dark but he can find a way through it, no affliction so grievous but he can prevent, or remove it, or support us, and in the end overcome it to our advantage.

So today we have seen warnings, but also encouragement from the Word of God. May we always turn to God in every temptation! Amen.