

Danger: Falling Christians

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: I began my message last Sunday by stating what a privilege it is for me to proclaim to you week after week the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – how in love God sent his Son into this world to assume human flesh and to suffer, die, and rise again for our salvation. I do this because I want you to be supremely confident that in Christ you have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in glory. And when I say you have them, I mean even now. It's not something out there in the future, or that become yours when you pass a certain finish line; no, through faith in Christ Jesus forgiveness and salvation are your possessions right now. You can be confident of it. At the same time, however, I need to warn you about becoming recklessly overconfident. For that we turn our attention to today's Epistle lesson.

St. Paul had done a great job of preaching and teaching the Gospel during his eighteen month stay in the Greek city of Corinth. The church there grew substantially under his direction, and the members of the church were known for their thorough knowledge of the Holy Scripture and their exercise of spiritual gifts. Unfortunately, after Paul's departure, it became a deeply divided congregation plagued with false doctrines, factional infighting, and struggles for superiority and control. But hanging around like a cloud above these troubles there was among the members a general sense of moral indifference. For many, the Gospel meant that sin was simply no longer a problem. You could go along and sin as much as you please: join pagan friends and relatives in feasting at the temples of idol gods, hire prostitutes, act hatefully toward others, neglect the poor and needy, whatever, it didn't matter because for Christ's sake God forgives you. It seems the prevailing attitude was "I've been baptized, I believe the Gospel, I study God's word, I come to the Lord's Table, I have the Holy Spirit – so my place in the eternal Promised Land is ready and waiting. I've been saved. Now all I have to do is make myself as comfortable as possible until I inherit what's already mine". This was definitely not good; but before we start casting stones at the Corinthians, we should ask ourselves if don't sometimes also fall into the same attitude of moral indifference. It's safe to say that we all suffer from a certain amount of spiritual and moral laxity. By nature, we seek the easy path to glory.

So to the church at Corinth – and to us – Paul gives a little history lesson. He says, "You remember our forefathers, don't you, those that the Lord led out of slavery in Egypt and promised to take to the Holy Land? They had their "baptism" in the Red Sea when the Spirit of God delivered them through the water from the forces of their enslavers. If you had asked any one of them as they stood on the edge of the sea that just swallowed up the Pharaoh's pursuing army, 'Are you saved?' they would have answered, "Sure I am! Didn't you see what the Lord just did for me?" And they had God's Word hand delivered to them from Mount Sinai and taught to them by Moses, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. They even had their own kind of sacramental meal: spiritual food, bread which came down from heaven and water flowing from a Rock which was Christ himself. And God lived with them in the Tabernacle and led them on their journey in the cloud and pillar of fire. If you had stopped any one of them and said, 'Where are you going?' they would have answered, 'I'm going to the land the Lord has promised to give me'. 'Are you sure you're going to get there?' 'Well, of course I'm sure, I'm one of God's chosen people – I've been saved'.

"But how many of them actually made it to the Promised Land? Very few of them. Most perished in the desert – the place was littered with their bodies. Why? Largely because of

moral indifference. They set their hearts on evil desires. They fell into sexual immorality. They grumbled with discontent. They figured that as long as they were marching along with God everything was okay. If they sinned, they could sacrifice a goat or something and everything would be all right again. ‘After all, isn’t that why God directed us to offer sacrifices, to cover up sin?’”

Well, yes, that’s exactly why God gave the people the Old Testament sacrificial system: to atone for sin. But the problem was the way they thought about the sacrifices. They figured as long as they had goats, they could go on sinning, because in the end God would get what he wanted: dead goats. Unfortunately, it wasn’t dead goats that God was after. What he wanted was people with repentant hearts, people who were sorry for their sins. The Lord was looking for the fruit of repentance. He wanted people who brought goats for sacrifice to represent the death *that they knew they deserved* – but when the people lost sight of that, and didn’t feel any kind of sorrow for their sin, it became necessary for God to apply death and trouble directly to the people. And so Paul runs down a list of disasters that the Lord sent to the Israelites to get them to turn back to him with repentant hearts.

And then he says, “These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for *our* instruction”. Those stories are not just historical curiosities about how God used to deal with people in ancient times: the stories are about us. Their casual attitude toward sin and sacrifice are illustrations of our attitude about sin and the sacrifice Jesus made for us. In fact, we may be at higher risk than they were. At least they had to handle the goats, see the blood, and smell the smoke: they were confronted by death. We figure “Hey, the sacrifice for my sin was paid two thousand years ago. I’m saved, and I can’t contribute anything, so I’ll just keep doing what I’m doing and collect the reward at the end. And when we hear about the judgments God sent to the Israelites we think, “How could people be so faithless and so easily captured by temptation? They deserved what they got.” In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus asks, “Do you think those people upon whom disaster fell were worse sinners than you? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will perish.”

That’s the key: repentance. It’s the fruit of the tree that Jesus is looking for. It consists of the recognition of our sin, the genuine desire to change, and the realization that we cannot change on our own, nor can we atone for the sins of the past. It is repentance that drives us to the cross of Christ where sin is atoned for, and where we receive the power to change. And herein lies the problem: we tend to see repentance as a past event in our lives. It happened when we became Christians, when we left the sinful world and started walking with God in faith. Now we are walking with God, so we are his chosen people, his elect. And then we make the subtle shift from relying on the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for us to relying on our election. “I’m saved because God chose me, and if I’m chosen then I’m standing and I cannot fall”. And when we get to that point, Paul tells us we are teetering on the edge of disaster: “Let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall.”

To be sure, when we rely on our election for salvation we have already fallen, because we have shifted our trust from the atonement Jesus made for us to a hidden decree of God. That sort of thinking actually makes the atonement unnecessary. God could have chosen anything for you to believe in, made faith in *that* the criterion for salvation, and then elected you to believe it. But the problem we humans have is sin, not election or the lack of it. And the solution to our sin problem is on the cross where our Savior died. It is repentance that drives us to the cross. So the Christian life is one of continuous repentance because that keeps us going to the cross. Every day, every hour, we think on the repulsiveness of our sin in the eyes of God, and his righteous anger against us because of it. We feel the desire to leave sin behind and the

need to change our behavior; and we hold before us the image of the death of God's Son to save us from it. So, if I ask, "When were you saved?" the best answer is not "when I became a Christian" or "when I was baptized", and especially not, "When I was elected", but "When Jesus died for my sin and rose for me". Our faith and our salvation rests in what happened to him, not what happens to us.

At this point you may be wondering where election fits into this. Perhaps I can best answer it this way. Every day the Christian repents. I ask him, "Are you saved?" He thinks, "Yes, I am relying on Jesus for salvation from my sin", and he answers "Yes, I am saved". But, knowing his internal tendency to sin and fall, to neglect repentance, to downplay his need for it, to become morally indifferent, he wonders, "Will I be saved tomorrow? Tomorrow will I be repentant?" It is exactly that question, that anxiety, that brings us back to the cross tomorrow. It is that question that prevents us from standing on our own and keeps us relying on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's how our election works itself out on a day to day basis. And lest we fall into a panic of uncertainty, Paul assures us, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

The way out God has provided for us is repentance, because that keeps our focus on Jesus and what he did for us. It is in him that we stand up under all temptation. It is by continuously looking at Jesus that we make our calling and election sure. So, come, let us with repentant hearts fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith; who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. In him we stand. In him we cannot fall. Thanks be to God. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!