

1 Corinthians 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 10 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we may not desire evil 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 rose up to play. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.

We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.

[1 : 18] But with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people.

Judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?

What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord, and the table of demons.

[2 : 17] Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up.

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.

If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner, and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, This has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience.

I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the Church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

[3 : 28] Although it is easy to miss when we read the chapters as detached units, 1 Corinthians chapter 10 continues the argument that has been going on since chapter 8 of Corinthians.

This is all Paul's discussion of eating food sacrificed to idols. And that might surprise us when we read these verses ahead, but yet, as we look back, it should make more sense.

It is in the background of the beginning of the chapter, and we'll come back to the foreground by the end. Paul has just been talking about his own example, his example in earning his own keep, rather than placing a burden upon the Corinthians, as he was entitled to do.

Now it seems Paul's argument takes a sharp turn, and goes into seemingly unrelated territory. He talks about the experience of Israel in the wilderness. He begins by talking about all our fathers. The story of Israel is the story of the Church. He's writing this to Gentiles in Corinth, not just to Jews. As the people of Christ, we are the children of Abraham. We're also, perhaps more surprisingly, people who stand in the same line of history as those who failed in the wilderness, as the unfaithful ones who perished and were judged.

[4 : 36] All of our fathers were under the cloud. All of them passed through the sea. The cloud was God's visible presence with them, the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night.

The sea was the Red Sea through which they passed, and were delivered from the Egyptians. They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Baptism into Moses is a strange way of talking about the Red Sea.

Yet Paul seems to be using this in a rather strong sense. What could he mean by baptism into Moses? If we look at the beginning of the story of Exodus, Moses himself is drawn out of the water. He's named for being drawn out of the water. He's drawn out from among the reeds, and Israel is later drawn out from the reed sea. His deliverance is connected with his birth narrative, and Israel is brought out of the sea as part of its event of birth, as the firstborn of the Lord.

What happens first to Moses happens to his people. In the crossing of the Red Sea, the people are brought into Moses' experience, the experience that Moses had before them.

[5 : 40] Moses had previously gone to Mount Sinai, experienced and met with the Lord there, and then he's going to lead the flock of the people to the mountain, and then he's going to meet with the Lord there again.

They're going to enter into his experience. In the same way, when we are baptised, we are baptised into Christ. His story becomes our story. We are baptised into his baptism in the Jordan, declared to be God's beloved sons and daughters, set apart for mission.

We are baptised into the baptism of his death. We are buried with him, in order that we might be raised with him in the future. His spirit baptises the church at Pentecost, so that as we are baptised with his spirit, we can share in the blessings of his ascension.

In the crossing of the Red Sea, Israel also came under the leadership of Moses in a new way. At the end of chapter 14 of Exodus, we're told that they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. That was the consequence of the experience of the Red Sea. And Moses here is implicitly functioning as a Christ figure, as a type of Christ to come. They were baptised into Moses.

[6 : 46] They also ate the same spiritual food, referring to the manna. In speaking of spiritual food, Paul might have in mind things such as Psalm 78, verses 23 to 25.

Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on the manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels. He sent them food in abundance.

They also drank the same spiritual drink. Here he's referring to the water from the rock, mentioned in Exodus chapter 17 and Numbers chapter 20. And the rock that followed them, he says, was Christ.

Now this is a very strange claim to make. In this passage, Paul might be alluding to intertestamental traditions of reading the story of the Exodus, and joining some of the dots, and filling in some of the gaps.

Yet when we look at the original text, there are legitimate connections to make. The Lord is described as the rock. In the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 24, this language occurs on several occasions.

[7 : 46] The rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. Verse 4. But Jashurim grew fat and kicked.

You grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then he forgot God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. Verse 15. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

Verse 18. How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? For their rock is not as our rock.

Our enemies are by themselves. Verses 30 to 31. In the original account of striking the rock, the Lord is associated with the rock in a very powerful way. In Exodus chapter 17, verses 5 to 7. And the Lord said to Moses, Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and taking your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.

[8 : 52] And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, Is the Lord among us or not?

Putting these things together, it is not inappropriate to speak of the rock that followed them. In Numbers chapter 20, there is again the rock that is struck, albeit now in a different location. Rather than thinking of a literal rock that's moving around, we should think about the Lord as symbolically associated with the rock, communicating himself to his people at various specific rocks that all represent him as the one rock.

What is the point of all of this section? Paul is telling the story of Israel in a way that shows clear connections between their story and the story of the church at Corinth. The children of Israel had a baptism, the baptism of the crossing of the Red Sea.

They had the presence of the Spirit in the cloud that accompanied and led them, and they had the supper in the spiritual food that they ate of the manna, and the spiritual drink of the rock.

[9 : 54] Paul is showing deep correspondences between events across history here, and he's making a strong claim. He's not merely drawing parallels in form between an Old Testament fleshly deliverance and a New Testament spiritual deliverance.

He's making a far stronger claim than that. He's arguing that the Old Testament deliverance was a spiritual deliverance. The problem, however, was that the people were fleshly.

If the Corinthians think of themselves as spiritual people, they should learn a lesson or two from the Israelites, who had all these spiritual blessings and yet made nothing of them. Now, from enumerating the spiritual blessings received by the Israelites, Paul turns to speak of the ways in which they failed.

They sinned with the golden calf. The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play in Exodus chapter 32. They sinned with Baal of Peor in Numbers chapter 25, and a very great number of them died.

There were fiery serpents in Numbers chapter 21, and they put Christ to the test. This is perhaps one of the more arresting claims made here. They weren't just testing the Lord, they were testing Christ himself.

[11 : 03] The Corinthians might think themselves spiritually above the Israelites, but yet the Old Testament Israelites had Christ in their midst too. Christ was the angel that led them on the way. Paul also refers to the grumbling of the people.

This could refer to a number of different events, such as the terrible litany of events of grumbling that we have in Numbers chapter 11 and following. Many of those who grumbled were destroyed by the destroyer.

The destroyer is referred to in Exodus chapter 12 verse 23 as the one who slew the firstborn of Israel in the Passover. And all of this is an example for us.

The connections between the two stories, the fact that Christ was with them, the Spirit was with them, they had all these spiritual blessings, sets them up as examples that we can learn from. In this case, as cautionary examples.

There is a similarity between the Corinthians situation and that of the wilderness generation. They are both awaiting salvation. In the new covenant, Christ has brought his people out, but he has not yet brought them in.

[12 : 03] Christ has inaugurated the last days, but the Corinthians must faithfully follow him into the promised land of the age to come. And they must beware of being presumptuous or overconfident. Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

The Corinthians are acting as if they reign like kings already, as if they had already attained all these blessings, as if they had already arrived at their destination. But they are compromising in exactly the same areas as the Israelites in the wilderness.

They're compromising with sexual immorality, they're desiring evil, they're testing Christ by their disobedience, they're grumbling and engaging in dissension, and they're compromising with idolatry.

God can test his people, but when he does, he provides ways of escape and doesn't overwhelm them. Being tested by God does not pose the same sorts of dangers as testing God does.

When God tests us, he does not test us to destroy us, but to prove us, to bring us into a greater maturity and into a fuller possession of his good gifts. Having retold the story of Israel and the wilderness in this way, Paul brings his argument back to its primary point in verses 14 to 22.

[13:14] He presents three different types of meal in parallel. The Lord's Supper, Jewish sacrificial meals, and pagan sacrificial meals. And all of these meals are about forging bonds of participation.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Christ. It's a means by which we are made one with him and with each other in his body. The celebration of the sacrificial meals of Israel was a way of participating in the sacrifice of the altar and enjoying fellowship with God.

Paul, while he does not believe that the idols are anything, the idols aren't real gods. There is only one true God and all other so-called gods are either imaginary or created beings.

However, even though the idols aren't real gods, this doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all. Rather, the pagans are sacrificing to demons. They are participating in the table of the devil himself. Here Paul is alluding once again to the song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32. Here to verses 16 and 17. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods.

[14:22] With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.

This clinches Paul's point. In referring to this, the story of Israel that he has just retold makes a lot more sense. Israel had all these spiritual blessings, but they entered into participation with false gods and suffered as a result.

And the proud Corinthians, who despite all their boasts have a lot more in common with the children of Israel than they might suppose, are in very great danger of doing the same thing. He concludes this section by asking, Are we stronger than he?

You Corinthians, you think that you are strong. You think that you can eat of the food of idol feasts with impunity. But yet, are you stronger than God? The God who judged Israel for the very same thing?

Seen in this light, the supposed strength of the Corinthians is ridiculous. Why does Paul argue as he does? Why does he present this argument, which seems to be the clincher at this point, rather than leading with it in chapter 8?

[15:28] Partly because idol food could be encountered in a number of different contexts. Idol food could be encountered in the meat market, where you might eat food that had previously been part of a pagan ritual.

Idol food could also be encountered in an actual pagan celebration, or in a meal dedicated to some idol. It seems as though the so-called strong Corinthians were involved in both practices, and Paul speaks in different ways to these different situations.

In verses 23 until the first verse of chapter 11, Paul brings his argument into land. He returns to the Corinthian statement, all things are lawful, that slogan which we previously saw in the second half of chapter 6.

And he moves now from an emphasis upon our own rights to one of helping and building up our neighbour. All things may be lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things may be lawful, but not all things build up.

And he presents a principle by which we can enjoy freedom. Eat anything in the meat market without asking questions. As the psalm declares, the earth and everything in it belong to the Lord.

[16:34] While purposefully participating in pagan meals is wrong, the idol is nothing. The food offered to the idol is still a blessing from the Lord's hand. As Paul argues elsewhere, nothing is unclean in itself.

Abstracted from the end of idol worship, the food of the marketplace is good. And there's a break with kosher laws here as well. Eating marketplace food and eating with Gentiles, these were not things that the Jews would have done.

