

THE CHURCH AND HER PAST

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written to and for Christians who had recently been saved out of the current paganism of that day. It did not deal with mythical problems but with very real ones.

In the ninth chapter Paul had shown the overwhelming importance of self-discipline. He himself practiced it, not only for the sake of the gospel and of others, but for the sake of his own soul. It is not enough to enter upon the Christian race, but we must run like the man who wins the prize. The Christian conflict is no sparring contest, so we must exert every effort and all energy until the enemy is prostrate. There is always the grim possibility that one who has begun well may end badly.

This principle is strikingly illustrated, Paul went on to say, in the history of ancient Israel. The Israelites began well and enjoyed signal privileges, but in the end their bones bleached the desert.

In our modern sophistication we usually discount and depreciate the past. Many think that all that matters is what we have discovered. If we were to take out of our world all that we depend on which came out of the past, it would be an empty and vacant place. The Bible is a Book filled with the wisdom of yesterday. It is divinely selected facts and truths which have been written for our benefit. Revelation saves us the expense of experience. The Bible offers us a wisdom that will save us the heartaches that come by learning through experience.

I. The Illustration. I Corinthians 10:1-5.

Paul appealed to the experience of the Israelites, whose history was recorded in the Old Testament.

1. A picture of privilege.

Like our own privileges, those of the Israelites were multifarious.

(1) All of them were under the cloud.

This remarkable body, which was opaque by day, to screen them from the sun, and luminous by night, was at once their guide, glory and defense. They were thus signally protected by God. They were all divinely protected, led and guided. It is a glorious privilege to have divine guidance and protection. How safe we are when God guides and protects us!

(2) All of them passed through the sea.

The cloud and the sea were the means of exit and entrance. By the cloud they left an old life associated with Egypt. By the sea they entered a new life associated with Canaan. Menaced by fearful danger, they were commanded to walk on, and by doing so they passed out of peril. They were hedged in, but God made for them a path through the waters. God always has a safe way for those whom He favors. God helps us when we are at our wits' end. Everything may fail, but God will not fail. One would think that any people who were favored in such a remarkable fashion would never be forgetful of their Deliverer, but they were.

- (3) All of them were baptized unto Moses.
They became the disciples of Moses. They were under his leadership. Under God, Moses was their ruler and head. That was a great privilege, for Moses was a prince among men.
- (4) All of them were fed miraculously.
They were no longer sustained by such food as came from Egypt. They were sustained by the manna of the wilderness. Theirs was no ordinary fare. A good table was spread for them. God does not half starve His children. The manna was given to them. They could not provide it. They knew nothing about its source except that it came from God. They were fed with the supply that God gave them. "He sent them bread from heaven."
- (5) All of them were supplied with drink.
"They drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ."

In spite of these new experiences and abundant provisions, many of the Israelites proved unfaithful. Their failure was not due to the fact that provisions were inadequate. They had an ample and adequate life, but they looked after the world about them and lusted for what they did not need.

Paul thus reminded the Corinthians how the Israelites had passed out of bondage into liberty and freedom. He also reminded them how it all happened. Nothing was the result of their own effort. Everything depended upon the doings of God. He provided the cloud, the deliverance, the freedom, the meat, the drink and the privileges that were theirs. All of it was of God, and none of it was of themselves. Everything was supernatural, or due to God's doings.

Paul urged the Corinthians to take that as an illustration of a great principle. The tendency for them was to conclude that a people so privileged cannot fail.

2. A picture of transgression.

- (1) They lusted after evil things.
They were not content with the good things which God had provided for them. They complained about the manna and longed for the flesh-pots of Egypt.
- (2) They became idolatrous.
They did not become idolatrous instantly, but they did so gradually. Paul realized that the danger of the Corinthians was very similar. They did not intend to worship idols when they inclined toward the sacrificial feasts of the heathen, but this peril was quite real.
- (3) They fell into immorality.
False worship naturally leads to sinful living. To the Israelites idolatry was the door to sensuality.
- (4) They tempted God.
By their sinfulness they provoked God. Their unbelief and disobedience strained His long-suffering to the utmost. They were guilty of a great sin.

(5) They murmured against God.

Their murmuring against God was not an insignificant matter.
It was impugning the divine character.

3. A picture of punishment.

God will by no means spare the guilty. Privilege cannot save us from sin. Neither can it save us from punishment. God's justice was impugned, but it certainly was not impaired. Those who murmured against it felt its stroke. God is gracious to those who yield themselves to Him in joyful obedience, but His attitude is quite different toward those who defy and dare Him.