

1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-13

True or False: “There are many paths to the same God.” Based on what God tells us, we would say “false”. Jesus is the only Way, Truth and Life. He is the Bread from heaven who gives life to the world. Yet there are many in our society and our city who would say “true, there are many different paths to the same God.” There are some people, even Christians, who have a hard time saying that God will send people to hell. It’s not a happy announcement for anyone to make and most people call that thinking intolerant. The reality is that we live in a pluralistic society with many opinions and spiritual paths. In our lesson for today, Paul addresses how to be a Christian in a pluralistic society. He does it by looking at the people of Israel, who were surrounded with blessings and temptations. There are dangers to confront when we are surrounded by people with completely different beliefs. How will you and I live when we meet people who wrongly believe there are many paths to God? What will we do when we face challenges to our faith and temptations to sin? Paul leads us to ask: **What can the past teach us?**

Part 1.

God’s people saw some amazing wonders and signs with Moses as their leader. For over four hundred years, the people of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt. The pharaohs had regarded the Israelites as a threat to national security, so they made them slaves. The people built pyramids and cities and finally cried out to the LORD for deliverance. “Save us from this miserable slavery, O God!” – that was their prayer. God heard them and sent his servant Moses to the rescue. Whether we remember the Exodus from Egypt from our Bible History days or from Charlton Heston’s depiction of Moses in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, we know that the people of Israel all had the same experiences. That’s what Paul is reminding us of in today’s lesson: “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.” Our spiritual forefathers underwent the same deliverance when Moses lead them out of Egypt. All of them went through this.

Paul points out two special events which have something to teach you and me. **What can the past teach us?** The Israelites “were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Baptized into Moses – what does that mean? Think about the parting of the Red Sea. Moses took his staff and at God’s direction spread it out over the water. God sent a strong wind to divide the water into two giant walls. Then the Israelites literally walked through the Red Sea on dry ground with a wall of water on their left and on their right. This was their water experience with Moses—their baptism into Moses. That event was something everyone experienced. But what does this teach us? You and I have had a water experience. No, I’m not talking about a trip to Wisconsin Dells. All Christians have experienced the baptism into Christ. With the Word of God and water, you and I have been connected to Jesus’ death and resurrection. We have a baptism, just like our Old Testament forefathers.

There is a second lesson Paul wants us to learn from the Israelites. Not only did they have a baptism of sorts, but they also had another blessing from God. You can probably guess what I’m talking about. Let me read what Paul wrote and then you can think of this second blessing: “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink.” What miraculous blessing did the Israelites enjoy in the wilderness? It was a blessing we heard about in our first lesson. It was the blessing of manna from heaven. God sustained them with miraculous spiritual food and drink in the desert. All the people had the same food and drink. No Israelite survived by any other means. Can you guess what our meal is as God’s New Testament people? It’s a meal we celebrate on the second and last Sundays of the month. It’s the meal we call the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.

Someone might think: Okay, pastor, I understand that the Israelites had a baptism and meal, just as we have Baptism and Holy Communion, **but what does the past teach us about life today?** “Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.” Over 600,000 men plus women and children went with Moses up out of Egypt. They all, every last one of them, experienced the same blessings. Yet how many of those 600,000 men entered the Promised Land? Two. Two men, Joshua and Caleb, out of 600,000 people. That’s equivalent to the city of Milwaukee (600,000 people) and only two pleased God.

What’s your earliest memory within this church? Maybe it was fifty years ago or maybe it was five, but do you remember sitting in this church? Take a second and think about that time, think about the people who were there with you. Here you are again, sitting in God’s house. Look around you. How many of those people do you see today? Certainly, there are those who took jobs in other places and joined other churches, but what about those people who have fallen away from faith in Jesus? Were they bad apples all along? Did God exclude them from his blessings when he passed out forgiveness? NO! We all have received the same forgiveness and the same Baptism and the same meal of Holy Communion in this church. Yet, that does make it easy to live in a godless society. There are still challenges to our faith in Christ. The battle for our souls still rages. Because we have these blessings from God, we are tempted to treat them like Israel did. We think we can sit back and relax in a society which does not care about Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life.

Maybe you've heard someone complacently say, "Well, you don't have to go to church to believe in Jesus" or "I can keep on committing this sin, because Jesus will forgive me". Faith alone saves—that is true. That is what we base our rescue on and that alone. Jesus died and rose to save us from the eternal fires of hell. He did it because he loved us. He did it because he wanted to. Faith alone saves, brothers and sisters, but faith is never alone. The Israelites took God's grace lightly and they paid dearly for it. If you think you are standing firm, **Be careful you don't fall.** That's what the past teaches us. It teaches us that pride goes before the fall. The individual who thinks there's no spiritual danger out there, he or she is the one who needs to be on guard and watch out. You and I need sleep, but Satan never takes a break. He and his evil angels are always lurking, looking for someone to devour. And there is no meat juicier than the flesh of a man or woman who thinks that spiritual danger is not a reality. When we stop being humble and repentant, we stop being children of God. "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." **What can the past teach us? Be careful you don't fall!**

Part 2.

The temptation to despise God's gifts and to focus on material things is a temptation which is common to human beings. How can we conquer this temptation? What will we do when God sends difficulty into our lives? Where will we find strength when Satan is on the prowl? Paul has the powerful message of comfort: **God upholds us through all!**

Paul wrote: "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." Temptations and trials will come into our lives. But God has promises for us his people. He has promised faithfulness. That means that God is never going to leave us or forsake us. It means that Jesus' forgiveness and strength will always be with us. He forgives our sins and gives us the joy of heaven. We all can shout for joy because we will be in heaven with the LORD Jesus. There is no doubt where you are spending eternity. You and I will be in heaven.

God's faithfulness also means that when we are tempted on earth, he won't let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. He is in control of the temptation. He limits it and uses it for his purpose. But when the temptation does come, he promises two things. First he provides a way out or an end to that temptation. Second he provides the ability to stand up under it and endure. That may sound like a contradiction. How can he provided a way out and a way to endure? Isn't it either one or the other? Sometimes God provides an end. But more often he wants us to endure until the end. Paul told his friends, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Yet **God upholds us through all!**

An alcoholic kneels before the Lord to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He comes to church battling the urge to have another drink, he comes with the weight of 25 years of broken relationships, he comes 4 years sober. What does our God promise him? He will not give you more than you can handle. He promises an end and the ability to endure until the end comes. God loves you. He's faithful to his promises.

A teenage girl named Grace sits in class and watches as other students pass drugs when the teacher's back is turned. She knows that after school they're going to corner her again and ask her to smoke with them. She did it with them last year, but now Grace has put that sin behind her. What does our God promise her? He will not give you more than you can handle. He promises an end and the ability to endure until the end comes. God loves you. He's faithful to his promises. "He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear."

A woman casts a handful of dirt on the coffin of her husband. 57 years together and now he is gone. These will be her first days alone since she was a young woman. Cooking for one? Cleaning an entire house for one? Driving to church alone? Temptations to loneliness and despair are found in his empty recliner and a cold bed. What does our God promise her? He will not give you more than you can handle. He promises an end and the ability to endure until the end comes. God loves you. He's faithful to his promises. Maybe the end won't come until we see heaven, but he promises the strength in Jesus to endure. He loves you that much.

Today we've been talking about a paradox (something which sounds false but is absolutely true). It's the paradox which the past teaches us. **Be careful you don't fall, but God upholds us through all.** Jesus tells us, "No one can snatch you out of my hand." God is upholding us and yet there is the danger of falling from faith in Jesus. How can this be? Jesus has us in his hand, but that doesn't mean that we can't jump out. God's promises will never fail us, brothers and sisters. But let us never fail to stand firm in Christ. Ponder the past and **be careful you don't fall.** Find your strength to stand firm in God who upholds us through all. AMEN.