

## **HOW TO AVOID SPIRITUAL RUIN**

### **1 Corinthians 10:1–13**

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1 Corinthians 10:1–13 (NIV)

“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. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 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. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things, 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 got up to indulge in pagan revelry.’ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 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. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And 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.”

I speak today on the theme, “How to Avoid Spiritual Ruin.” Chapters 8 through 10 of 1 Corinthians are actually dealing with a question the Corinthian church asked Paul. The question was this, “Is it all right to eat meat that has been offered to idols?” Paul’s answer is yes, it’s all right. But there are two limitations on that answer. It is not alright if eating that meat will trouble

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your conscience. You cannot violate your conscience. And it is not alright to eat meat offered to idols if you cause another person's spiritual destruction.

In chapter 9, Paul goes on to give a personal example, which reinforces his counsel, and says that we all have an obligation to our brothers and our sisters in the Lord to avoid any conduct which would lead to another person's destruction. He uses his example of refusing to be paid when he was at Corinth. The model of behavior which says, "I have a right to give up my rights." And there are occasions as Christians when we must exercise our right to give up our right, lest someone be destroyed through our example.

The second illustration though which he reinforces this counsel is the example of Israel. He illustrates, from Israel's history, that newfound liberty can quickly lead to license. The children of Israel were fresh out of Egypt. They were enjoying the liberty, which had occurred to them because of the Exodus. But that liberty soon degenerated into license. Paul had warned, in 1 Corinthians 8, about causing another person's destruction. Now in 1 Corinthians 10, in this illustration which we read today, he warns about causing our own destruction through participating, which may, on its surface, be harmless, but actually wind up being very harmful for us. He is talking about spiritual ruin. There are three things that he says about spiritual ruin, using Israel as an example.

**I. The first thing that he says is that past spiritual deliverances and blessings are no guarantee at all that we will have future spiritual successes (verses 1–5).**

Five times he uses the word "all," it's a big word for Paul here, to indicate that the entire group of Israel was included in the experience of spiritual blessings, just as we as believers have all been included in the spiritual blessings that Christ has gained for us. We're not in doubt as a Christian whether we've experienced the atonement of Christ and forgiveness of sins, if we've

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come to Him. We're not half-in and half-out. We are all included in Him. Paul says of past deliverances, "for all were under the cloud," a reference, of course, to the pillar of cloud, which led them by day and became, by night, the pillar of fire which led them as well. The cloud for Israel was the embodiment of God's glory. It in the Old Testament, it had two functions for Israel. It marked the guidance of the Lord upon their corporate life. And it also marked protection for them. Because when the Israelites came out of the land of Goshen and were at the verge of the Red Sea, and Pharaoh and his army were chasing them, the cloud moved over and stood at night between the Egyptians and them, and the cloud came to be for them, not only guidance, but protection. All who are in Christ or all in the Old Testament age who were in Moses are guided by the Lord, and as well, protected by the Lord. All were under the cloud. He says, also, that all pass through the sea. Not a one of God's people were left in the sea to be drowned in the sea. All enjoyed the blessing of deliverance. Indeed, all who have been born again in Christ have enjoyed the deliverance which Christ has given us.

He says that all were baptized into Moses. It's a strange phrase. That's the only time in Scripture where we have the phrase "baptized" in reference to Moses. All were baptized into Moses. It's a phrase, which simply means that the people, in passing through the Red Sea, are immersed into Moses' leadership. They have, before, been a rag-tag band of individuals. But because God has brought them out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they are now under his administration. Exodus 14:31 says, "When the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in Him and in Moses, his servant." So the people that came out through the Red Sea trusted in Moses.

He said that all were made to eat the same spiritual food. That, of course, is manna. The word, of course, actually means, "What is it?" That's what "manna" means. Because when the children of

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Israel were first given the flaky substance lying on the ground, they said, “What is it?” And that became the name that coined the food. The “What Is It?” food—manna. They all ate the same spiritual food.

Psalm 78:25 later, looking back upon this event, says, “Men ate the bread of angels. He sent them all the food they could eat.”

Paul also says they all drank the same spiritual drink. This, of course, is reference to the fact that, on several occasions in Israel’s wandering, Moses struck a rock and water gushed forth.

Wherever they went, God provide water in the desert. Some rabbis before Paul’s time had a tradition that a tumbling boulder or a tumbling rock rolled along after Israel, wherever it went, so that it always had water on tap. Paul may have been referring to this Jewish tradition when he said, “the rock that followed them was Christ.” That is to say, throughout their journey, it was Christ who supplied them water in unexpected places and unexpected ways.

But for Paul, it is not just for food and drink. It is spiritual food and drink. All were made to eat the same spiritual food and all made to drink the same spiritual drink. Why is the food and water called “spiritual”? Paul’s point is that the water and the food were supplied so miraculously that it should have been a sign to Israel of the fact that God was really caring for them. It’s like when we sit down to a meal and say grace. We are, in that moment of saying grace, hopefully, making a sacramental act of taking food. We’re not, hopefully, just passing through it as a form or ritual without meaning. But we are recognizing, when we take that bread and food and drink, that the ultimate source of that is God himself. So Paul is saying to the Corinthian believers, “Remember, Israel had its baptism through the Sea and it had its communion. You have your baptism, something you pride yourself in. You have your communion, something you have divisions over.

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Do you not recognize baptism and communion as the presence of God giving you deliverance from the past and giving you present spiritual blessing?”

But in spite of all of these advantages, and this is where Paul begins to make his point—in spite of all of these advantages Israel had in the wilderness, nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. That verse is the most classically understated verse in the Bible. It makes it sound like God was displeased with 51 percent of them. He was displeased with most of them. In actual fact, the only two He wasn't displeased were Joshua and Caleb, out of over two million people—that is, 1,999,998 against two. He was displeased with most of them. I like Paul's way of tactfully putting something that's very painful to remember.

With most of them, God was not pleased. But they were (and the word literally is) “catastrophied” in the desert. That word means to spread out. And Paul pictures the wilderness as being strewn with corpses. All the spiritual blessings, and yet, they were catastrophied in the desert.

What is Paul trying to say and apply to the Corinthians and to us? In 1 Corinthians 9:27, the end of the last segment in Corinthians that we shared together, Paul talked about keeping his body in shape, lest having preached to others he himself should become disqualified or become a castaway. Paul, as a Christian apostle, has learned not to rely on past successes to guarantee future successes. His great concern, at this moment in his life, is not simply to coast on some past spiritual experience. He is concerned about being a castaway. Now he applies this to Israel's experience. Here they were, having all the blessings, yet they became “catastrophied” in the desert.

In my fifteen years in the ministry, I can show you corpses of what used to be effective Christians. Having started out with great blessings from God, for some reason or the other, they

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became catastrophied in their experience and now walk either as enemies of the gospel of Christ or as persons who really have no direct relationship of service to Christ at all. It's a very real danger.

### **II. Paul goes on to indicate another step to spiritual ruin. That past spiritual deliverances and blessings do not bring immunity from present spiritual dangers.**

He says these things occurred as examples. Or the word is “types.” You're familiar with branding irons. An iron with a logo on it, and you burn it into the flesh of an animal. The branding iron makes an impression. Using this framework of reference, a “type” is something that makes an impression. A typewriter is this way. It leaves an impression.

Paul is saying that the Old Testament ought to be a branding iron in the hand of God, which becomes the type, which burns into us a consciousness of how God works. It becomes for us an example, a type. This example of Israel is meant to impress our own spiritual experience, lest we, in facing present spiritual opportunities and dangers, also repeat the same mistake. We must be branded by that experience, because we must know who we are. We are God's people.

I picked up our little dog the other day. I noticed that Jewel had put a collar on him and a name tag. He's now about seven or eight months old. Sunshine is his name, a little red-headed poodle. I didn't realize she had done that. I picked him up and got closer to him and the nametag said, “My name is Boomer.” Boomer is our dead dog. That was his name. I marveled at that for a moment. Sunshine had no idea that he was wearing Boomer's name tag. He had no concept of his own identity. You could put any name on him and it wouldn't matter. He would not protest. He would still be happy, wag his tail, come and get his food.

But not so though with God's people, who should know their identity. This is the point that Paul is making here. The people in the wilderness forgot who they were, forgot the nametag that they

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were wearing: “This is holy, this belongs to the Lord.” Paul articulates for us some kinds of present dangers which they faced, which the Corinthians were facing and which we, in our own life, face.

**A.** There’s the danger of desire for evil things (verse 6). Actually, as you go back to the Old Testament, you find that the way the desire for evil things began to take place in Israel was very harmless. At one point, after being out in the desert a few days and eating manna a few weeks—this flaky substance that Exodus says tasted like something that had been cooked with olive oil—they began to long for cucumbers, leeks, onions, garlic, and meat—the food of Egypt. No wonder they did this. If you had to eat flaky stuff that tasted like it had been cooked with olive oil everyday, I hate dry cereal myself and manna must have been something like that, you would long for leeks, onions, garlic and meat, as well. That’s what they began to desire.

The problem, through, with the desire is that the only way they could fulfill the desire is to go back to the place from which they came—to Egypt. Therefore, it was a wrong desire, because at that particular moment, they could not go back. Paul perhaps is subtly making that point here with his listeners in Corinth. That there were some things of the old life that, in and of themselves, were not wrong (such as eating meat offered to idols and maybe even setting down to a pagan dinner in an idol compound), but it might very well lead to spiritual ruin in bringing one back to a place where it would be spiritually harmful to participate in that experience. Legitimate things sometimes are in the wrong places.

**B.** There’s also the danger of idolatry, which is longing to be back where you were before you became a Christian, returning to the old things. Paul is warning the Corinthian Christians that dinners in the heathen temples could bring them into the same error that idolatry brought the people of Israel into, who set out to make the golden calf and then began to engage in immoral

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behavior. He said, “If you go back in the pagan setting where prostitution and immorality is regularly a part of the worship procedures, you yourself can be pulled back, sucked back into that kind of lifestyle.” He notes the danger of immorality and the danger of dumping blame on God. Verse 9 says, “We should not test the Lord.” That’s the idea here of dumping blame on God, because in the wilderness, in Numbers 21:5, “They spoke against God and against Moses and said, ‘Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the desert. There’s no bread and no water and we detest this miserable food!’” They’re saying to God, “God, You’re going too slowly and we’re impatient. Why did You do this to us?” All along, God is bringing them out to bring them into a better land.

Have you ever gotten impatient with the Lord and been upset with Him, that He’s not moving at a fast enough speed in your life? This is the kind of danger, toward spiritual ruin, that Paul’s warning the Corinthians and us of.

### **III. Finally, Paul tells them that past spiritual successes don’t guarantee us immunity from the danger of grumbling.**

In the wilderness, they complained. They began to murmur (in verse 10). Each of us, when we look at our trials, can either thank God for what He is doing in us, in the midst of those trials, or curse God for the trials. Spiritual ruin begins to occur when thanksgiving is gone, and we begin to curse and complain against Him.

Paul is also saying in this passage that present helps are available for success over temptation. There are two words in the Greek which may be used for “temptation” or “testing”. One, wherever it is used, means “to test.” Usually with a view of a person failing the test. The other means, “to test with the idea of passing the test.” A test given with the idea of being approved. Every test that we are tested with by Satan is one given to make us fall. God himself will not test

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anyone in that way. But God will allow us to be tested, from the viewpoint of being approved.

How can you ever tell the worth of something unless it has been tested? We're going to be tested.

When we are tested or tempted, what resources do we have? Verse 11 says that we have the resource of Scripture, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings to us on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." What is our characteristic response to be when we get into a real tough time of testing? To come to the Word of God and draw strength and energy and resource in the midst of that testing. We simply cannot successfully go through temptation or testing without God's Word.

Jesus practiced this when He was tempted by Satan. Where did He get His resource? Out of the wilderness experience of Israel. The Scriptures which He quotes back to Satan are Scriptures from Deuteronomy which speak of God's care for His people then. Jesus uses Israel as an example for His own life. He said, "God cared for them then and was true and provided for them and gave them bread, He will provide for Me as well." I don't think we can ever successfully fight temptation unless we look to the Word of God as our resource.

Also, of temptation, Paul is saying to us that we've got to recognize that we're vulnerable. "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). This keeps us away from an idea that we have now reached a period in our spiritual experience where we are immune from temptation. As a young person, I thought that I could actually get to a place in God where I would not be tempted anymore. I usually associated that place as belonging to a youth camp or a retreat high in the mountains. There's something about being high up in the mountains, where you can have an experience with God. I would say to myself when I had a new experience with God up on the mountaintop, "Now I am immune from temptation," only to

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discover that, upon returning to the valley, that temptation had become worse than it ever had been before. Not realizing that it's a spiritual principle that the stronger you get spiritually, the stronger the temptation comes. It's like diving down in the ocean. The lower you go on the ocean floor, the more the water level is impacting you. "He that stands take heed lest the fall."

The sinking of the Titanic, on April 14th, 1912, was a disaster that's become a symbol of false confidence of the Christian who says "I've got it made." Blind confidence is seen in the attitude of the Titanic's radio operator on the evening of the disaster. A radio operator from a nearby vessel, "The Californian," tried to warn the Titanic that there were icebergs in the area. The Titanic operator responded with these impatient words "Shut up! Shut up! I am busy." His unconcern was no doubt based on the assumption that the Titanic was unsinkable. Besides, the operator was preoccupied with sending and receiving messages about the progress of ships in the cape sailing regatta. Shortly after this of course, the Titanic struck an iceberg. The whole loss of fifteen hundred lives came because of a disobedience to this principle that Paul gives in verse 12, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."

There are illustrations of this in the great Christian history. There are illustrations of this in our own life. John Calvin, with his great theological mind, could at times be austere, cold, cruel, legalistic, and even order the execution of his enemies.

Luther, with his great robust faith and courage which enabled him to stand before emperors and kings, could, at the same time, be a very weak and sinful person in his vulgarity, anger, and carnal rage against his enemies and even fellow believers in the Lord.

I have found that I am most vulnerable to temptation, especially to discouragement, after great spiritual highs and successes, where I feel like I have really broken through to a new level. I am wiped out the worst after feeling the most anointed in preaching. "Take heed, lest in thinking you

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stand, you fall.” There’s a recognition that none of us have reached the point where we are immune to temptation. Individuals new in Christ sometimes feel that perhaps being a pastor, a minister of the Word of God, exempts you from trial. Therefore, “You can’t possibly know what ordinary people go through.” We’re all vulnerable to temptation and we recognize that and don’t try to put on some brave air.

With that recognition of vulnerability, the Scriptures also provide us the realization of deliverance from temptation (verse 13). The first thing we see in verse 13 about temptation is that we all have common trials. “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13). To be tempted is part of being human. You’re not alone when you are tempted. The devil likes to make you feel you are alone, that you are the worst, sickest, most sinful person who ever lived, and no one else has ever had those thoughts or ever been pulled to go in that direction. You, therefore, belong to the lowest part of hell, with Satan himself, because you are so bad that no one has ever had your terrible, sinful disposition or attitude or action. Millions have been tempted to steal. Millions have been tempted to lust. Millions have been tempted to lie. Millions have been tempted to commit adultery. Millions have been tempted to pass blame on God. Millions have been tempted to be bitter toward God for an experience which we don’t have a handle on. It’s a temptation that’s common to man, so there’s nothing particularly unique about your temptation or mine. It’s shared with the whole human race. You could line up everybody and they would all have that temptation. There’s comfort in that, at least, to know we’re not alone.

That doesn’t, on the other hand, give us license to say, “If millions have been tempted, then millions have fallen, and I’ll be one of the millions that fall.” Paul’s point is that there’s nothing unique about being tempted. It’s human. There’s no sin in the temptation itself. I used to think

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there was something sinful about being tempted, but there is no sin in being tempted. Jesus was tempted, yet He didn't sin. So there are common trials, common temptations.

We are assured, also by the Scripture, that we have controlled pressures. "God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond that which you can bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13). You are able to face a temptation you are facing in your life or God would not have let it come to you. That's a very clear word from the Scripture. You say, "It's rough to believe that. If you knew what I was facing—it feels so much beyond my strength."

Those who work in the area of bodybuilding or any other discipline of sports bring to us the recognition that, if you're going to develop athletically, you're always going to have to push yourself further. You're going to have to pick up ten more pounds of weights. You're going to have to run the extra quarter of a mile. You're going to have to push yourself to a point that further develops your capacity to develop physically.

The same is true on the spiritual level with spiritual development and temptation. The Lord will not allow us to be tempted beyond that which we are able. And sometimes we think He's pushing us a little bit further than we are able. But we are guaranteed by the Scripture that He isn't. So any temptation that we face, we can have the confident assurance, "God, You know that I have the stamina in You to make it through this temptation. So I'm going to accept this struggle from You and I'm going to win, because it's not beyond my ability. I'm not going to use the cop-out that You put something on me that I couldn't bear."

By the way, there's great comfort in this, too. That the Lord keeps us from many temptations that we are not strong enough to carry. I only have to make a mental check of my own life of things that I have not been tempted with that, if I were tempted with, I perhaps would not have the strength to face them. As I inventory my life, I discover that in those areas I have not been

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tempted at all. God has kept that temptation away from me. But the temptations which I face are within my resource and within my power. I'm able to bear this or God would not let it come.

With common trials and controlled pressures, we are also told that we have certain escapes.

“When you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). The word that's used for “way out” is a word which, in the Greek language, was used to describe a mountain pass. The imagery is of an army trapped in the mountains, surrounded by an enemy, but which escapes an impossible situation by finding a hidden mountain pass and gets out. Paul says, “This is the way with trials.” When it seems like it is stronger than you can bear, God will, with the test, provide an escape, a way out so that you can be able to endure it.”

The way of escape is always there. It may be simply a mental way of escape. For Jesus, the way of escape in the wilderness was not to have some trap door open under Him so He could get away from Satan for a while. But the way of escape for Him was mental, and the way of escape was retreating to the Scripture and quoting it to Satan. His way of escape was the Scripture. Then the devil left Him for a period of time. Sometimes, God will provide a physical way of escape. Sometimes, for persons like Corrie Ten Boom in the concentration camp, it may not be a supernatural release, but it may be a way of escape in terms of providing a hiding place in the Spirit, a place with God which keeps us with stamina to go through that. He provides a way of escape in order that we can stand up under it.

So the Lord calls us to successfully develop the habit of responding to temptation. When we fall, like riding a bicycle, we get back up and keep trying again, until we've mastered that particular area of testing in our life. If you're anything like me, you'll find that Satan will keep testing you in an area and will continue to test you in that area until you develop strength in it to resist.

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When you've developed strength to resist, he'll move on. He'll hit you in some other area, maybe more subtly, more refined. But he'll keep at it.

“The way to spiritual ruin,” Paul is saying in the Corinthian letter through the experience of Israel, “is to simply think that we can coast on past experiences. And become nonchalant about present dangers. But living the Christian life is a walk and involves being alert to what's before us in the present moment.”

### **Closing Prayer**

Thank You, Lord, for the resource of Your Word today, which gives us such great hope. The testing that we're experiencing now as people, as intense as it may be in our life, is not something that others haven't gone through. Others have been in the same place that we're in today. And through Your grace and help, they have found a way of escape and they have succeeded. We thank You, Lord, for the controlled pressures, the fact that things are not so heavy and so pressurized that we don't have the ability to stand up. We thank You, Lord, for the certain escapes that You provide. We thank You, Lord, for the reminder of Your Word, which gives to us, in every moment of our experience, counsel to be ready to face that experience, to not simply go into an experience with a fleshly kind of confidence. But only with a confidence of humility and dependence upon You. The pain that some in this body are experiencing is beyond our level to drink in, to understand, but somehow, Lord, the pain of temptation and testing which they are facing is a pressure which, in their on life, is going to make them exceedingly strong. You've promised that the pressure wouldn't be greater than what they could bear. And You'd provide a way of escape. So, Lord, we take our stand, not on our experience, but upon Your Word. We believe this to be true. We pray that there would be grace and strength and health to persons this

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very week who will walk through great pressure and temptation. For You are with them and You will not leave us nor forsake us. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.