

*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.<sup>2</sup> They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.<sup>3</sup> They all ate the same spiritual food<sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. ...<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.<sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!<sup>13</sup> 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. (1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-13)*

### **Take this Warning Seriously**

Is a warning a sign of friendship or does it show something else? It depends on the situation, doesn't it? If you and your neighbor have had a long running dispute, "I'm warning you" might not be a friendly expression at all. But "Watch out! There's a car coming!" usually results in a thank you. Sometimes, friendly warnings are hard to hear. "You're ruining your marriage." "You're gonna get fired." Those kinds of warnings usually do come from someone who cares about you. Even if they say those words with anger and frustration in their voices, they issue those warnings in love. God's Word is full of warnings. Some of them sound very harsh. God threatens to punish people – even to send them to hell. And he's not kidding. But that's what makes the warnings acts of love. God issues them because he doesn't want anyone to go to hell. God speaks to us today in love in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. You all heard the double warning he issues there.

#### **I.**

**Take this warning seriously: be careful you don't fall!** To make us see the love in these words, Paul points to God's Old Testament people, Israel. He calls them "our forefathers" because they shared our faith before we were born. Now what Paul says about them is a little complicated. **"They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."** When Israel came up out of Egypt, God guided them with a pillar of cloud. That cloud passed over them and moved behind them to protect them from the army of Egypt. Then God opened the waters of the Red Sea and the nation of Israel passed through to safety on the other side.

Paul calls those physical actions a kind of baptism. To baptize means to apply water. The cloud and the sea were the water. In the New Testament, baptism is a sacrament. In it, God works. He claims us as his very own and he reaches into our hearts and gives us faith. Baptism now saves us, the Bible says. The baptism at the Red Sea saved the people, too. It saved them from their physical enemies. And that great act of salvation was supposed to point God's people forward to the greater acts which Jesus would do one day. In fact, what happened at the Red Sea is a kind of visible prophecy of how God would deliver his people from death and hell.

Likewise, Paul says, **"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."** The spiritual food was the manna that came from heaven and fed the people for forty years. The rock refers to an incident in the desert when they had no water and God made water flow from a rock. In a very harsh environment, God kept his people alive. Again, these physical events pointed to God as the great deliverer. God built on these events. In the Old Testament, water in the desert often serves as a prophecy of faith in Christ. Jesus himself pointed to the manna and called himself the bread from heaven. These events taught them that a Savior was coming who would deliver them.

Their spiritual rock was Christ. Jesus protected their physical lives in the desert and Jesus worked through the word and works of God to create faith in their hearts. He made them his people. That's what makes this warning so intense. Paul says, **"Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert."** What happened to this nation that passed through the Red Sea and sang and danced on the other side? What happened to the people who spent four decades eating miracle food? Almost none of them made it to the Promised Land. They rebelled against God because they did not trust his promise to give them that land. And God condemned them to wander until that entire generation died out. Their bodies were scattered in the desert.

Those people had the same faith we do. They trusted in the same Savior we do. But many of them allowed the temptations and frustrations of life to poison their faith. Some – perhaps many – lost their faith and died in the desert and went to hell. If it could happen to them, it can happen to us. We have the Christ God promised for 1500 years. But we live in the same sinful world they did. God loves us, so he issues a warning: **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”**

It’s so easy for us to think that we’re doing OK spiritually. I cringe every time I hear a Christian say, “I’d never do anything like that.” Most of us probably never will kill or rape anybody. That can lead us to think that God is pleased with us. We show up for church. We send our kids to Lutheran elementary school. We write a check every couple of weeks. We don’t do drugs or sleep around. Of course, God is pleased with us. Is he? Well, my friends, if you think that God is happy with you because of how often you show up here or how much money you give here, if you think that you get points with God every time you do what you’re supposed to and that’s the reason you’ll be in heaven, then you are in deep trouble, because God does not take people to heaven because they’re good followers. He takes them to heaven only because they trust in Jesus as their Savior.

Hopefully you know that already. But God’s warning still applies to us. “I’d never do that.” Can any sinner really say that? The truth is, any sinner could commit any sin at any moment. Praise God, most of us never will commit certain sins. But we are capable of them. It’s pride to think that we’re not. How many times have politicians who ran on upholding “family values” gotten caught cheating on their wives? I’m sure that when they started, most of them really were faithful spouses who wanted to uphold things they believe in. But they surrounded themselves with people who tell them how great they are and how much good they’re doing and they forget to be humble. Then they fall – they sin. Then they lie and try to hide it but it always comes out in a horrible, spectacular display.

If you think you’re standing firm, be careful you don’t fall. Every one of us has a weak and treacherous heart. I’ve known pastors who loved the Lord and who preached the truth but who forgot how dangerous sin is. And they fell. And the heartache that followed haunted them and their families for the rest of their lives. You are Christians. You do love the Lord. But don’t fall into thinking that you’re doing OK. Don’t whisper to yourself, “My faith is strong!” You’re still a sinner. The devil wants you to think that you’d never do those things because he knows that pride is the natural state of our hearts. Pride is the source of all sin. The sinful pride that still lives in us should condemn us to hell, even if we never have a spectacular public fall.

But God loves us. He sent Jesus into this world to save us from our own pride. Jesus died for the pride we were born with. He paid for it. He paid for every sin we’ve ever committed in our pride. He rose to forgive us. Are you guilty of sins that your pride caused? Do you live in fear you’ll be exposed? Jesus died for you. He rose for you. God has forgiven you. Come to me privately and confess those sins so that I can apply that gospel to you and then we can look for a God-pleasing way for you to go forward. We all belong to him – and the gospel came to most of us first in our baptism. There God washed all our sins away. He put faith in our infant hearts. No sin we can commit can change the promises God made to us on that day. We are forgiven. Let us walk humbly before our God and live for him and depend on him for strength to live that way.

## II.

Pride is poison to our souls. There’s another danger it poses: despair. Despair is giving up because we’ve sinned so much there can’t be any hope for us. It’s figuring, “I’m gonna sin anyway, so what’s the use? Nobody’s perfect.” God warns us against that sin, too. **Take this warning seriously: avoid despair when you face temptation.**

Every one of us has sins that are harder for us to resist. There are extreme situations: drug or alcohol or pornography addictions. People enslaved by those sins may feel like they’ll never be free. But we aren’t just talking about the extremes here. We are all addicted to sin. We all have sins that we commit over and over again and we have no idea what it would even feel like not to commit those sins. Every troubled marriage I’ve ever worked with shows a pattern of the husband and wife committing the same sins over and over again. And I bet that pattern shows itself in almost every marriage on earth to some extent. And after you’ve committed the same sin again and had another fight and you feel terrible, don’t you wonder why you keep doing the same things over and over again?

It’s because you were born a sinner. Even though God has given you new birth in Christ, the old sinner is still there fighting against you. Sometimes, we lose the battle. Despair is pride’s answer to that reality. I

know a lifelong Lutheran who regularly says to me, “If I get into heaven. I’m not sure I’ve been good enough.” Of course, that person hasn’t been good enough. But Jesus was. His life and death count for us. But pride can’t let go of guilt. When people say, “I have a special weakness in that area.” “That’s just the way I am – you should accept me for who I am,” that’s just pride making excuses for our sin.

God says, **“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.”** You’re not the only one with that weakness. There are no special temptations out there that only you have to go through. Every temptation we face, millions of other Christians face, too. They understand what it’s like. And God understands. Jesus who faced all temptation understands what we’re going through. Paul continues, **“And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”** God always keeps his promises. He promises you will not face a temptation that you cannot endure. God will not put you in a situation in which you have no choice but to sin. Now, that doesn’t mean it’s always going to be easy. But you have his promise. He knows exactly how much your heart can stand up to. He loves you. And he promises that you won’t face more than you can resist. He will always provide a way out.

Do you believe that? It’s not something I can prove and your personal experience may scream, “It’s not true! Look at all the difficult temptations I’ve had to face and how many of them I failed at!” But God is faithful. We can’t put our sin on him. Even when we have trouble resisting, trouble finding the way out, God promises that it is there. This is the God who sent his Son to die for us. He kept that promise. And he will keep this one. He will give us a way out.

And truthfully, most of the time, our difficulty is not that we can’t find the way out. We know exactly what it is. An alcoholic needs to get out of the bar or the friend’s barbecue or whatever situation is tempting him or her. All too often, the problem is we don’t want to take the way out. It’s means sacrificing friendships or opportunities or giving up sinful pleasures. We can’t blame God for that. That’s our own sin and weakness coming through.

But Jesus died even for that sin and weakness. He rose for us. He claimed us through the gospel and gave us faith. And he does provide us with a way out. He tells us to flee from temptation. He gives us the fellow believers to strengthen and encourage us. How often do we take advantage of that? How many of us seek out a fellow Christian to share our sin and weakness with so that we can hear the gospel and be encouraged to live for God? How many of us would ever dare to come to their pastor and tell him their sins? My friends, I am part of your way out. God put me here to help you in your struggle against sin. And God gave me the law and the gospel. God gave me communion and baptism. God gave me confession and absolution all to strengthen you to fight the good fight and resist temptation.

God is working in all those things. His promise to you when despair creeps up and seizes your heart is simple: he won’t let you be overwhelmed. He will always provide a way out. Trust that promise. There are dangers ahead. As long as we live here, we are in danger of pride and rebellion. We are in danger of pride and despair. But God loves us. He warns us so that we are prepared when those dangers come. Take his warnings seriously and trust in his promises to get you through the danger. Amen.