

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. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! ¹³ 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 10:1-13)

Temptation Seizes Us

“It’s a different world.” I can’t count the times I’ve said that. When I was a child, most kids I knew had stay home moms. I only knew a handful of kids whose parents were divorced or who lived with only one parent. The world has changed. This week, there was a controversy in South Dakota over a law that would require children to use the bathroom in public schools that corresponds to the actual, biological sex. The world has changed. We could list many, many more examples. Does it seem to you like the changes make it easier or harder to practice your Christian faith? I think most Christians would say it’s harder. Certainly, it was a lot easier when most people in our society believed that divorce was bad and organized religion was a good thing and that parents should discipline their children when they sinned. But at the same time, if you take a wider view of history, you’ll see that the devil’s weapons really haven’t changed all that much. He uses them in different ways at different times, but in a broad sense, he appeals to the same sinful desires that live in all of our hearts. This morning, St. Paul makes that point to us. For as long as we live in this world **temptation seizes us.**

I.

That’s going to be true no matter where or when we live. God recorded a great deal of Old Testament history so that we can see ourselves in the triumphs and the defeats of those believers who went before us. This morning, St. Paul really focuses on the failures of God’s Old Testament believers. Twice he tells that those Old Testament failures were examples for us so that we don’t make the same mistakes. A common theme runs through the examples he gives us: **the temptations that come from sinful pride seize us.**

Paul says, **“Our forefathers were all under the cloud and ... they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”** He’s talking about the generation that marched out of Egypt under Moses. A pillar of cloud went ahead of them and they went wherever the cloud went. Of course, they all passed through the sea when Moses divided the Red Sea and they marched through on dry land. He calls that being baptized into Moses because they were sprayed by the water just as we are sprinkled by the water in our baptism. It was not a sacramental baptism, but it did join them to the leader God gave them.

Paul then 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 food was the manna that God gave them for forty years in the desert. The drink was when Moses struck a rock and water poured forth. These were spiritual because they were miracles. But the spiritual rock that accompanied them was different from the rock that Moses walked up to and struck. That rock was a boulder standing in the desert. The rock that went with them, the true source of their strength and their life, was Christ. Old Testament believers trusted in the same Savior we do.

So Paul is not talking about unbelievers. He’s talking about people like us, people who knew their Savior and experienced God’s great acts of salvation. Then Paul says, **“Nevertheless, God was not pleased**

with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.” That entire generation died in the desert, except for two men, Joshua and Caleb. Over the course of forty years in the desert, temptation took its toll over and over again. Paul lists some specific temptations: first idolatry. At the very foot of Mt. Sinai where they could look up and see the glory of God, they made a golden calf and worshipped it. He adds adultery. When the people came to Moab, many of them slept with shrine prostitutes. The third sin he lists is grumbling. They whined and complained about that manna. They were sick of it and wanted to go back to Egypt where they had been slaves but at least you could get a decent meal. After each of these sins, thousands died.

Could we fall into those sins? How often don't we whine and complain? We enjoy a standard of living that would've been impossible to imagine when Paul wrote these words. We enjoy a level of personal freedom many people envy. Yet the election is showing just how angry Americans are. We whine and complain – and believe me, I am the first offender. We're not happy with how God is taking care of us because we don't have what someone else has. It's just sin. Do I even need to bring up all the sexual temptations in our society? It's everywhere and alongside it goes the breakdown of marriage: one man and one woman joined together for life. I continually encounter people who think they're good church members but don't agree with God's model. But at least we can say we're not guilty of idolatry, right? Every sin puts what I want ahead of what God says. What is idolatry but putting something in God's place? How many of us can honestly say that God is as important to us as our job or our comfort or our personal happiness?

The world may have changed, but the devil still uses the same bag of tricks. He doesn't need to invent any new sins because the old ones work just fine. God shows us these Old Testament examples because sin never changes. Why did these believers fall into these clear sins? They cared more about what they wanted than what God said. That's sinful pride. It's pride that makes us whine because God gives other people things he doesn't give us. It's pride that puts my desires ahead of what God says. I can't you tell how many times people have sat in my office and made excuses for sin – “God wants me to be happy.” “Who's being hurt?” “It's my life and that's just how I feel.” For us, that pride can take a particularly dangerous form. We start to think our sins aren't big deals because we would never do those terrible things we see other people doing. You know what God says to us when we think like that? **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!”** Pride is the first sin. We need to see it for the soul destroying unbelief that it is.

But that's why Jesus came. The Son of God humbled himself to live in our place. He had no sinful pride in his heart. So he never sinned. Never once do we hear Jesus whine or complain. If anyone ever had a reason to, it was him. But he never did. Of course, Jesus was absolutely pure sexually, in his heart and his mind, as well as in his words and actions. Jesus never put anything ahead of his devotion to God. His perfect life now counts for us so God sees us as perfect. Then Jesus died and paid for all our whining, for all our lust and all our failures at living with our spouses in joy, for everything we ever put in God's place – for all our sinful pride. Jesus' blood washes all that sin away. Then Jesus rose to say that we are forgiven, now and forever.

But forgiveness is not a license to go on sinning. We died to all that sin when Jesus died. We were nailed to the cross of Christ in our baptisms and we rose with him to a new and holy life. So now God calls us to live that life. Follow Jesus, who made himself nothing, and stand humbly before your God and lean on him for strength in temptation. That is the key to a life of faith.

II.

But there is a flip side to this whole discussion. After being hammered by the law, it's easy to feel crushed. God doesn't want us to feel crushed. He wants us to feel loved and lifted up. He focuses on our sin only so that we can focus on his grace. He did send Jesus to die for us. Jesus did love us so much that he was perfect in our place. Jesus refused to come down off that cross because dying there was our road to life. Jesus rose to give us hope and strength and courage. God wants us to focus on the solution at least as much as we focus on the problem. Rather than being so sure of ourselves that we fall into the sin of pride, sometimes we despair that we will ever really be able to defeat temptation. That leads to a whole host of temptations that the devil has been using for thousands of years. **The temptations that come from despair seize us.**

What do we mean by despair? It's thinking there is no hope. There's no point in trying to live a Christian life because I'm just going to fail. Of course, we can't be perfect here. But we can still live Christian lives. We can bring forth fruits of faith. But sometimes, we're so obsessed with our failures, that we act and think like no one else could ever understand how hard this is for me. St. Paul says, **“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.”

No temptation is unique. Everything that makes my life hard, other people suffer with, too. Every weakness in my faith is common to other Christians. Millions of other Christians face every temptation that I face. It's sheer egotism that thinks that my life is so bad that no one else can understand it.

That kind of pride leads to despair, to giving up hope of living for Christ, even to giving hope of being forgiven. Despair means your faith is dead. Without faith, the devil wins and we go to hell. So how does God overcome our pride and despair? First of all by reminding us that we're not as special as we think we are. All our temptations are common to man. Then he repeats his promise: when you are tempted, God will provide a way out. There is always a way out. Sometimes, the way out is just not doing the sin. Sometimes the way out is having a Christian that we can talk to when we struggle with temptation. Sometimes the way out is to break the cycle we're in – the monologue that we repeat to ourselves about how unfair it is or the pattern of repeated fighting that we get into with our spouse over the same issues and the same problems. Sometimes the way out is to flee temptation. Get out of the bar. Get off the computer. Get out of the house. But God always provides a way out. He loves you and he does not want you to fall into sin.

Now, that's hard to see when it comes to those sins that are particularly difficult for us. Sin is an addiction. Some people can't help but drink too much or do drugs, and once they start they can't stop. All sin is like that. Lying is addictive. Gossip is addictive. Of course pornography and whining and complaining and messaging our own egos are all addictive. The more you do them, the more you want to do them. You can be trapped by any sin. What is your sinful addiction? Part of God's way out is recognizing that it is a sin that you have a problem with it. Maybe you need to confess that sin to your pastor. How will that help? It will give me the chance to apply God's love and forgiveness with the sin that torments you most. That gospel is his power to conquer. Maybe you need to find a Christian you can trust who will help you to flee temptation. Maybe you need to be more faithful in coming and hearing his word.

But God makes a promise to you. He will not let you fall away. He will not let sin conquer your soul. When you're afraid that you can't beat this, when you're afraid of what your sin is going to do to your life, when you are sinking into despair, that's when God points you back to Jesus. He died for you. He rose for you. He stands in heaven and guides all things for you. He sends the word and pastors and teachers and confession and the sacraments and the congregation you're a part of and he works in your heart. And he promises that he will be with you to the very end of the age. He will not let you slip away from him. Trust that promise.

Today, we have before us one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith. When we think we're standing firm, God warns us that we are in danger of falling and even destroying our faith. That's what sinful pride finally does. And when we're in terror that our sins will destroy our faith and cheat us out of eternal life, God promises that he will never leave us or forsake us and he won't let sin win. And both things are true. Both lead us back to Jesus. In that sense, the world has not changed. Jesus is still our Savior. Amen.