

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 food⁴ 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. ... 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 10:1-5, 11-13)

How Much Church do We Need?

How much church do you really need? When we have a holiday service during the week – like at Thanksgiving, do you need to come the Sunday before and after, too? Christmas this year is on a Tuesday. So you'll be able to come to church the Wednesday evening before for an Advent service, the Sunday, Monday night for Christmas Eve and Tuesday morning for Christmas Day. That's four different church services with four different sermons in less than a week. Do you need that much church? How about Bible study? If you go to Peace or to HVL, you study God's Word every day. Do you need to come to Sunday school or to Adult Bible Class?

It might seem like I'm trying to make some people feel guilty, but I'm really not. Rather, I'm thinking about all the adults and all the young people that I've confirmed over the last 25 years. Every single one of them promised to come to church and hear God's Word and take communion faithfully. I remember one young lady who was so excited to come to class and be confirmed. But a year or two later, she stopped coming. When I asked what was going on, she told me she had a new job and new friends and a really active social life, especially on Saturday nights. She just couldn't drag herself to church on Sunday morning. Then she said, "But I know what I believe and that's never going to change." I hope that remained true. But she never did return to faithful church attendance. I could tell lots of stories like that, and stories about teenagers complaining that the Bible has been shoved down their throats. Lots of people make coming to church a much lower priority than I wish they would. So the question remains: **how much church do we need?**

I.

How much to keep from falling away? That's really the key question, isn't it? The children of Israel might have asked the same question. Their worship services looked very different from ours, but God gave them a life of faith that touched almost everything they did. In our epistle lesson for today, St. Paul zeroes in on the generation that marched up out of Egypt. They were the generation that God gave the Mt. Sinai covenant and all those worship practices. They were ministered to by Moses, who got to talk directly to God. Of course, they had experienced all those miracles that went with coming out of Egypt.

Paul says, **"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."** He's talking about those miracles they witnessed. God sent a pillar of cloud ahead of his people on the march. It towered over them. When Pharaoh trapped them by the Red Sea, that cloud stood between Israel and the Egyptian army. In that sense they were "under the cloud." And of course, they went "through the sea." God divided the Red Sea and they escaped through it. Then Paul says, **"They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."** The point is that God saved his people through water, just like he saves us through the water of holy baptism. Now, that baptism in the cloud and the sea wasn't a sacrament like ours is. But God did use it to bring his people to Mt. Sinai where he made a covenant with them.

Then Paul said, **"They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink."** Again, he's talking about the miracles God did. He gave them bread from heaven – the manna – six days a week for forty years. Later, God also gave them water from a rock. Paul calls these things "spiritual." They were real, but they were more than just an opportunity to eat and drink. God was building the faith of his people through these acts of power and love.

But then Paul says, **“For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”** The real source of their faith was Jesus who was with them there in the desert. Why does Paul say it this way? There’s an ancient Jewish legend that says that after Moses struck the rock and water came forth, the children of Israel took a piece of the rock with them and it continued to provide water until they reached the Promised Land. Now, the Bible says nothing about that and I’m not certain that’s what Paul had in mind. But if he did, he was pointing out to them that the legend really wasn’t true. And even if it was, Jesus is the source of life and strength for his people.

Now what does all this Old Testament history have to with us? God spent an enormous amount of time and energy and love on his people. This generation had seen it all! They had seen the Ten Plagues and God coming down on Mt. Sinai and they had followed the pillar of cloud he sent them. They had Moses himself teaching them and writing the first books of the Bible. They had Jesus accompanying them and protecting them and working through his gospel promises to build their faith. They had every reason to remain faithful to God all their lives.

But what does Paul say? **“Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”** Only two of the people who marched out of Egypt actually made it to the Promised Land! Our text for this morning skips a few verses, but those verses list of some of the sins and rebellion that God’s people were guilty of as they marched along. God would not let them enter the Promised Land until that entire generation died off.

What was the problem? Paul says, **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”** Israel was guilty of sinful pride. They thought they had all the religion they needed. All those sacrifices and rituals, all the preaching and teaching made them think that they knew what they needed to know. But when push came to shove, again and again, they made the wrong and sinful choice.

God recorded all this history so that we can learn from Israel’s mistakes. One of the greatest threats to our faith is pride and complacency. We know what we believe. We’re never going to forget it. We’re good people and we know how we’re supposed to behave. If you think you’re standing firm, be careful you don’t fall! God was not pleased with the faith of most of the children of Israel, even though he had given it and nurtured it. God was not pleased when they fell into sin and rebelled against him. God punished them. He can and will do the same with us if he isn’t pleased with our faith. Now, no one is going die in the desert if they stop coming to church. God is not going make the earth swallow teenagers who think they’ve had the Bible shoved down their throats. God is not going hit us with lightning bolts from heaven if we don’t come to adult Bible class or if we skip holiday services. There may be nothing in our lives to show that God is not pleased with our rebellion and sin. But if we fall away because we think we would never let that happen, we will wind up in hell.

But that is not where God wants to send us. He sent Jesus to keep us out of hell. Jesus is with us every day just like he was with the children of Israel and he provides spiritual food and drink for us. He feeds our faith with the gospel in word and sacrament. The heart of that spiritual food is forgiveness. Jesus died because we sinners think we can do good enough on our own. Jesus suffered hell itself and then gave up his spirit because we drift away from him and somehow imagine that we’re doing OK. Jesus paid for all that pride and sin. He rose to tell us that. He rose to promise us life.

That’s what church is really all about. I know you’ve all heard me say all that before. But one of the most evil things about our life in this world is that we’re born sinners, so our natural inclination is to think that we deserve to go to heaven. We just have to jump through the right hoops. God has to convince us of something that we could never figure out on our own: we’re saved by Jesus. The sinner inside us is so powerful that if we stop hearing that good news, we will begin to confuse that message. We’ll turn Jesus into a good example and the gospel into rules for good citizenship. We’ll think we’re going to heaven because we’re good people. That pride will destroy us. But hearing about God’s love in Christ, recognizing our sin and Jesus’ solution, that is the key to staying faithful until death. We can never get enough of that message.

II.

But sinful pride shows itself in more than one way. We can think we’re too strong to ever fall away. To which St. Paul says, “If you think you’re standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.” But our pride can hit us another way, too. It can lead us to despair over our sin and failure. How is that pride? Well, we think, “I should know better. I shouldn’t commit this sin. I should have this problem under control.” But I don’t. So I beat myself up about how weak and worthless I am. That causes me to question whether my faith is real or

whether it is enough to get me to heaven. But God ministers to us in that situation, too, through the church. **So how much church do I need to keep from despairing?**

Despair means more than being really sad. It means believing we're too sinful to be forgiven. That might be an even greater sin of pride than complacency because it says that Jesus' death wasn't enough to cover me. The Son of God lived and died and rose again. He suffered hell itself. But that's not enough to pay for my sins. When you put it that way, you see how untrue that is. And there may even be a time when people need to hear that. But St. Paul goes in another direction this morning. He 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."**

He makes three points that I wish I could stencil on the door to your house or tape onto your refrigerator or hang from the mirror in your car so that you would read them over and over again. Point number one: no temptation has seized you except what is common to man. Sinful pride says no one understands what I'm going through. It's worse than anyone else has to deal with. The devil has devised a special temptation just for me. But the truth is, the devil uses the same tools over and over again because they work. He dresses them up a little differently today. He couldn't use the internet to sell sex outside of marriage during Paul's day. But sexual sins were every bit as common then as they are today. He uses different technologies and activities to indulge people's desires until 3 am on Sunday morning, but St. Paul points out that people who sin, sin at night. So we really are facing the same kinds of temptations, just dressed up in different garb.

Point number two: God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. Now, that doesn't mean we won't ever face a temptation that beats us. We sin every single day, so we obviously do face temptations that beat us. But he says that he won't let a temptation come that has the power to destroy our faith. Now, we can choose to turn away. But God will never make us face a temptation that is too strong for us. He knows how strong we are. He knows what's hard for us and what we can take in stride. He works to build our faith every day.

Point number three: God will provide a way out so that we can stand. Again, he doesn't say that we won't sin. He says that we will stand. We will continue in our faith because we have the way out of temptation. We have Jesus. He works through the gospel and he tells us we are loved and forgiven. He works through our pastors and teachers and through our fellow members and he encourages us to make good choices. And he picks us up when we fall. Every sin is paid for and we are forgiven. Trust in your Savior and strive to live for him in the midst of all the confusing and painful temptations we face.

It's interesting. If we are guilty of pride and complacency, God warns us not to fall. If we are afraid and weak, God promises to help us. Where do we hear those warnings and those promises? In church. In our private devotions. In our time spent with other believers. How much church do we need? Enough to get us to heaven. God has given that much church to us. Amen.