

An Eye on the Road

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(OWBTG #34,35,36 from hymnal; #31,32,33 from website, newer version)

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Rev. Richard J. deLange

Dear Friends of our Lord Jesus,

I'm sure you've noticed little memorials when you drive along the highways and even the backroads. When someone has been killed in a car accident, family or friends put up a little cross or something else that marks the spot where they lost their loved one. These markers remind us to be careful on these roads where others have perished.

One author tells about similar signs. "As you drive on the main road through central Northumberland, between Newcastle upon Tyne and the Scottish border, you see frequent signs saying things like '150 Accidents Last Year On This Road,' and 'Number of Speeding Fines Last Month: 37'. The message is clear: think about what happened last time—last year, last month, whenever—and make sure you don't become part of the next lot of statistics yourself."

Reading 1 Corinthians 10 is like one of these reminders that point us away from danger and remind us to keep an eye on the road and the signs along it that God provides. The road is laid out for us in the Bible. The Bible is the primary means of revelation God has given us about himself. In it, he gives us direction to keep us safe.

So, when we talk about keeping an eye on the road, the first thing the Apostle Paul draws our attention to is driving blind, if you will, or what he calls avoiding ignorance.

Do Not Be Ignorant

Right at the beginning of chapter 10 we read, "for I do not want you to be ignorant..." Then Paul proceeds to give lessons from Israel's history. And he does this so that the Corinthian Church—along with Trinity Church in 2017—learns from the lessons of the past. If we see what happened on the road in the past, we will gain new insight and then we'll hopefully steer clear of those danger zones.

To help us see where Israel went wrong, Paul tells the Corinthians about the time of the Exodus when Israel came out of Egypt. That grand moment in Jewish history set the stage for God's work among his people in bringing about the Messiah. It was a time when God was clearly leading his people to a new life. They had a pillar of cloud to follow by day and a pillar of fire at night. Whenever that pillar moved, the people got up and followed. It was so obvious where God was. After all, more than just a cloud or fire, that pillar symbolized the presence of God among his people. Israel's redeeming God was with them, leading, guiding and protecting them—even miraculously bringing them across the Red Sea on dry ground. He led them in order to ensure that they got to their inheritance—the Promised Land of Canaan. As long as Israel stayed on the road God was leading them down, everything went well for them.

But, clearly, they didn't do that. Hence v.5:

1 Cor 10:5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

And v.6 continues,

1 Cor 10:6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

Paul elaborates on how some of those people whose bodies were scattered on the side of the road were idolaters, engaging in pagan revelry, they were sexually immoral and they were constantly dissatisfied and grumbling against Moses and indirectly against God. In short, they had forgotten where they came from and what life they were called to live. Delivered from slavery and brought into a life of freedom by God's grace.

Reminders of Israel's past illustrate God leading his people from slavery to freedom. Then for the NT people of God like the Corinthians and us, Paul links that story to Jesus. Just as Israel has a story that moves from physical slavery to freedom by their leader Moses, so we have been freed from spiritual bondage and brought into freedom through Jesus Christ our leader. Paul uses words like baptism and speaks of the spiritual rock who was the Messiah, thereby tying Israel's physical exodus to our spiritual delivery and freedom.

Congregation, do you understand that we are now on the road of freedom in Christ? We are no longer enslaved to sin. We're no longer in bondage to our flesh. The blindfolds are ripped off of our eyes so we can see the road God is calling us to travel. We have the Bible to guide our steps. In 1 Corinthians 10, the cloud and the sea for the children of Israel are like the Spirit and the baptism-water for us as Christians. We have reminders like baptism that say to us over and over again, "You belong to God! You were rescued from sin. Washed and filled with the Holy Spirit." You are destined for freedom as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, Paul hints at God's nourishment and grace to us in the Lord's Supper when he refers to Israel's spiritual food and drink in v.3. All of these things remind us of our victory over sin and our freedom in Christ.

But more than just reminders, those references to sacraments are intended to remind the Christians in Corinth—and you and me—of God's presence and power with us now. So these gifts represent God's means of grace for us in the temptations we face in this world. God is with us on the road of our life just as he was with Israel coming out Egypt, and all throughout their history. In Christ, he comes still closer to us and promises us grace to help us in our time of need. We must not forget that. We must see all these gifts and signs and receive them with gratitude and faith and joy from God. He reminds us in these things that he is with us. Don't be ignorant, thinking you are on this journey all by yourself.

Paul purposely highlights the gifts God has given us to grow stronger and to withstand temptation in God's strength, rather than our own.

Making faithful use of the sacraments helps us because they are means of grace. In and through them, God mysteriously but genuinely works to strengthen our faith. We need this spiritual nourishment as much as Israel needed God to supply them with nourishment while making their way to the Promised Land. And after arriving there too. Another means of grace we speak of in our reformed theology is the preaching of God's Word. We must also make use of the Word of God as another way in which God reminds us of our freedom in Christ and his presence among us. Remember what our confessional reading from *Our World Belongs to God* tells us:

32. The Bible is the Word of God,
the record and tool of his redeeming work.
It is the Word of truth,
breath of God,
fully reliable in leading us
to know God
and to walk with Jesus Christ
in new life.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes through the Word and sacraments so that we know that our Lord Jesus is with us and will help us. Yes, he helps us travel forward in the new life he has called us into. Where we were once ignorant and blind, now we have light and can travel in the freedom and strength we've received through Christ. That's the first thing we pick up from Paul here in 1 Corinthians 10.

Do Not Be Cocky

Secondly—and I only have two points tonight—when we talk about keeping an eye on the road, the Apostle Paul also reminds us not to be cocky. He says in v.12,
1 Cor 10:12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

One of the dangers of driving is not knowing how to do it and then getting behind the wheel. That's what we mean about ignorance. But a second problem is thinking you're so good at driving that you can practically do it blindfolded. People do that every day in our society. Drivers write and send text messages while moving down the road in a ton of steel. And we hear all too often of the tragic results of that. Well, when it comes to living the Christian life, Paul says,

1 Cor 10:12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

We could say that the first group of people who fall into sin do so because of ignorance—not knowing who we are in Christ and not knowing his Word and seeking God's grace to live in Christ's freedom. The second group falls due to over-confidence. But it's not over-confidence in the Lord and his grace. No, it over-confidence in themselves. The definition of cocky is being overly self-confident. Someone who is very arrogant and assumes they know all the answers. It involves pride and it usually includes a bit of rudeness. You have an exaggerated opinion of your own importance or strength. Cocky people—if we could measure them like height—are people who might have strength or importance that is, say, 4 foot high. It might reach the top of the pulpit here. But they think they are 6 or even 8 feet high. A cocky person might say, "I'd never do what so and so did. I'm way better than that."

So the Lord is saying to us, "*if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*" Don't be confident in your own ability to stand strong in the face of temptations to sin as you travel through life.

You see, congregation, when we start thinking that we can handle things on our own, we will get into trouble before too long. You know why? Because when we are over-confident or arrogant or proud, we do not recognize our need for grace. And Paul is warning the church in Corinth that that can happen even to the Christian. We might say

that we need grace to be saved. Of course we do! Every Christian knows that. But we also need the grace of our Lord Jesus to withstand temptation. Not just to forgive our sins but also to help us to keep from sinning. The arrogant or proud Christian might think we can make progress in our walk with Christ without looking to him for help! In theological terms, we need grace for justification but we can handle sanctification on our own.

Friends, we need grace from our Lord to live the Christian life. And that grace comes through direct help from Jesus or through the Holy Spirit. It comes through our searching and meditating on God's Word. It comes through the sacraments as we heard a few moments ago. It also comes at times in the form of a guardian angel or some other special intervention sent by God. More often, though, God's grace and help for us comes in the form of our church family, individual members or friends or others from within our own family. The people of God are formed and strengthened in communion—communion with God and with others.

I've seen too many sisters and brothers in Christ fall flat on their face, tripped up by sin, because they thought they could stand firm all alone. It's true whether we struggle with pornography, alcohol, drugs, overeating, smoking, or even with gossiping, lying or bad thought about others. One is not worse or greater than another. And this is only a small list of all the sorts of things we find ourselves tempted by. But recognize that it's pride that keeps us from accepting grace from God.

We all struggle with sin and temptation, but maybe we are too proud—or maybe just too afraid—to ask someone to help us. We might pray about it every day. We go to church regularly, read and hear the Word of God. We receive the sacraments. But we still struggle. Meanwhile, God is offering us help through our sisters and brothers in the church. But we don't want that kind of help. We don't want anyone to know that we struggle with something. In that way, we want to do it on our own. We fail to make progress in our walk with Christ and even fall back into the trap of our temptation because we won't take the help God is giving through other people.

Yes, that is grace from God coming in the form of a fellow believer who can help us and support us as we strive together to follow Jesus. At the end of the book of James, for example, he talks about confessing our sins to one another so that we can be healed. Obviously, salvation and healing come through Christ, but sometimes we simply need affirmation and support in the form of another believer. We need to hear the words, "You are forgiven and God loves you!" from another Christian to whom we confess our sin and seek support and accountability.

You see, it isn't easy in any time or place to withstand the temptations that come our way. The Corinthian Church was surrounded by all kinds of sin and temptation. In a quick scan through just the first 5 chapters, I find Paul highlighting quarrelsomeness, foolishness, jealousy, desecrating the body as God's temple, arrogance, incest and many other forms of sexual immorality, greed, drunkenness, idolatry, slander and crookedness. Temptation is all around us today just like it was for the Corinthian Church.

Corinth was a seaport city which normally heightened the level of immorality and temptations. Sailors looking for a good night on land was as common then as it has

been throughout history. That brought with it all kinds of immorality, which led Paul a few chapters earlier in 7:2 to write,

1 Cor 7:2 But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

There too—in a monogamous marriage—is a God-given form of accountability and support in the face of sexual temptation.

And God is offering that to us in various ways in our day as well. We live in a very permissive society where no one really wants to call anything sin anymore. It has been refreshing in recent months to hear the outrage in Hollywood about sexual assault. But sometimes that sounds rather prideful. There's not much humility in many of those condemnations. It's easy to call others on their sin but sin lives in each of us and we all succumb to temptation at times. As Christians we shouldn't act like we're better than anyone else. Any victory we have over sin is by the grace of God. And we must remember and acknowledge that.

Nonetheless, we must see that God is serious about helping us battle sin and temptation. Listen again to the last verse of our Bible reading. It's a verse we often quote as a means of saying God is with us in the face of temptation. And that's certainly true, encouraging and comforting. Listen:

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to mankind. 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"

or "endure it." We are blessed with the comfort of having our faithful God on our side since Jesus came to make us right with God. God is for us!! Always!

But this verse also reminds us that God takes sin seriously. And because he's on our side, Paul is saying we can withstand temptation. Sin shall not be your master. Our gracious Lord tells us through the Apostle Paul that he knows our struggles with temptation. Jesus did not sin, but he certainly was tempted. So, our first place to turn in temptation is Jesus, of course. Pray and seek his help. Even remind yourself that he is with you, just as certainly as God was with Israel in that pillar of fire and cloud. Our Lord Jesus is with us. All the resources of heaven are at his disposal to help us in the face of temptation. He is committed to getting us to our eternal inheritance, just as God was committed to getting Israel to the Promised Land. So we need to turn to Jesus every day and give up on ourselves. Don't think you can withstand temptation all by yourself.

To that end, let us take hold of all the gifts our Lord gives us in our daily struggles with sin and temptation. We don't just want to see the signs on the side of the road that warn of danger and then ignore them while we go on our crazy way. No, God gives us grace to help us in every and all situations. But let us embrace all the ways that he embraces us. We hear from his infallible Word how to live. We receive his formal means of grace in the form of preaching and sacraments. But, in addition, as we deal with things that we can't seem to get victory over, let us humble ourselves—drop our over self-confidence—and take the help our loving Lord Jesus gives us. Receive the grace that comes through our spouse, family, friends and other sisters and brothers in Christ in the church.

Indeed, our Lord Jesus is faithful. His grace provides for all our needs.