

1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-13 *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors 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 in the wilderness. 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 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 Christ, 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 culmination 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 overtaken 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 endure it.*

A warning label on faith

1. The advantages which we have been given
2. The danger of taking it for granted

Warning labels seem to be everywhere. We find them on products that can harm us if we misuse them. We find them on things that don’t seem to have any danger at all. We find warning labels on fast food drinks and frozen dinners. We find warning labels on clothes and shoes. We even find warning labels on toys. Today, the Apostle Paul gives us a warning label on faith.

You may think that we shouldn’t need a warning label on faith. When I taught catechism class, one of the questions I would put on the test was this: Are you certain of eternal life in heaven? Why are you certain? What answer did I want? A firm and solid “yes.” Why? Because Jesus lived a perfect life and died on the cross in my place. Through faith in him I can be certain of eternal life in heaven. So, should a Christian ever be afraid of going to hell? Again, the answer is “yes.” It may seem contradictory, but that is what God’s Word tells us. That’s why we have the warning of our text today. He gives us a warning label on faith.

Paul wrote, *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors 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.* Imagine what the people of that generation saw. They witnessed the

ten plagues on Egypt. They saw the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They saw the Red Sea open up before them and then come crashing down on Pharaoh's army. They woke up to manna every morning. They received thousands of quail for meat. They drank water from a rock.

All of this emphasized to them what God told them at Mt. Sinai: "Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:6) Of all the nations on the earth, they were God's chosen people, God's treasured possession. They had every advantage that a people could want. *Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.*

The Israelites' 40 year wandering in the wilderness is a picture of our life. As they passed through the waters of the Red Sea, we have passed through the waters of baptism and begun our journey to the promised land of heaven. They were blessed with heavenly food and water from a rock. So, we have been blessed with the spiritual food and drink of the Lord's Supper. They had the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. We have Jesus' promise, "Surely, I am with you always to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) They had God's Word proclaimed to them by Moses and Aaron. We have God's Word written and preached to us on a regular basis. And we have more. We have the full message of the gospel, the proclamation of full and free forgiveness in the shed blood of Jesus. We also have Jesus' promise: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:28) We have been called, "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession." (1 Peter 2:9)

Do you remember the movie, "Pretty Woman"? In the movie a wealthy businessman takes a woman off the streets, cleans her up, gives her a makeover and dresses her in the best clothes. Because of his generosity, she became a pretty woman. That is a great picture of Christ and the Church. He took us filthy people living in sin, cleansed us in the water of baptism and made us his beautiful bride. What more could God do for us? What more could God give to us? We have been given every advantage for our salvation and we should be confident of our eternal life.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Most of the Israelites of that generation did not enter the promised land. Over 600,000 fighting men left Egypt. 23,000 died in Korah's rebellion. Snakes bit the Israelites when they complained and thousands more died. One by one those over 20 years old died in the wilderness. Only two, Joshua and Caleb, entered the promised land. *Their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.* What an ominous reminder that God punishes sin.

Why did they sin? With all the spiritual advantages they had and all that they had seen God do, why did they sin? Because they were sinners. Sounds simplistic, but it's true. We don't have to teach our children to sin. They know how to quite well by nature. We don't have to show our children how to throw a temper tantrum or be selfish or demand their way. They are born knowing how to do all those things. It's easy for them.

It's easy for us. *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.* There is a false security in which people can live. It's the security in which people don't see the sinfulness of their own lives and don't understand the meaning of the holiness and righteousness of God. Most of us have heard someone say, "I'm not afraid to die because I have always tried to live a good life." They think they are standing firm on their own goodness.

There is a danger in not knowing that something is dangerous. We hear of a child who picked up a rattlesnake to play with it, because he didn't know it was dangerous. So, Christians play with sin because they forget how dangerous it is. They become careless and indifferent about their soul's salvation, reckless and overconfident in their own strength. When they are warned against what they are doing, they either become angry or defiant. "Don't worry about me," they say, "I am fine."

You may think that you could never fall from faith, as did many of the stubborn Israelites. But if you think it's no big deal to check out that X-rated site or you complain about the food God has given you without any tinge of guilt, you may be closer to losing your faith than you think. You may say that you have been baptized, but do you continually feed your baptismal faith with God's Word and sacrament? Do you think you can pick and choose when to hear God's Word as long as you get around to it someday?

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! It is just this knowledge of the dangers to faith that should make us realize how much we need the strength of the Lord. It is the power of our own sinful nature that ought to drive us into the arms of Jesus. For even though we are weak, he is strong. Although our enemies are powerful, he is almighty. Although the hold we have on him is often feeble, the hold he has on us shall never be broken: "no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:28)

It's not a matter of you being strong enough. It's not a matter of you praying more or putting on a happy face and getting through it. It's a matter of you being put to death. God has to kill your sense of self-reliance and pride. You need life outside of yourself, in the mercy and forgiveness of Christ.

In baptism God has marked you as his people. He has lavished his great blessings on you. He has freed you from the power and guilt of sin. In baptism, self with its sinful pride is drowned and you live and stand on the promises of God.

Hundreds of feet in the air, walking on a four-inch steel beam. Those are the steel workers who build our buildings. One summer in my college days, I worked high on the steel, building an oil shale processing plant in western Colorado. A friend told me that the higher you are, the easier it is to walk the steel beams. When you are closer to the ground, it's easier to be distracted by what you see on the ground and you are more likely to lose your balance and fall.

It's easy for us to be distracted by this sinful world and lose our balance. We can fall into sin on one side or despair on the other side. We need to keep our balance on faith in Jesus. We keep our balance by realizing how weak and helpless we are in ourselves but also by realizing

that we have a loving God who sent his Son to die for us, a God who holds us firmly in his hands.

We can be certain of our salvation because our spiritual rock is Christ. Jesus and his forgiveness can make us sure of our eternal life. Our salvation is certain because it all happened before we ever came into the world. It all happened in the doing and dying of the Son of God. This is the good news of the gospel. This is certain. This is our answer to our sinful nature that tries to knock us off the beam of faith. Standing here, we are firm and we won't fall. See, it's not about me; it's about Jesus.

So, let us say with the Apostle Jude: "To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— ²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." (Jude 24-25)