

Freedom and temptation

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Date: 24 April 2016

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from 1 Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 24 to chapter 10, verse 14, which you'll find on page 1152. Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?

So, run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we are imperishable.

So I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them, God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

[1 : 10] Now, these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, that people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

We must not indulge in sexual immorality, as some of them did and 23,000 fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Now, these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. But with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. Well, do please sit down and take up a Bible and turn to that reading, if you will. 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and 10, page 1152 in the Church Bibles.

[2 : 39] Why don't I pray before we look at it? The Apostle James writes, But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he was like.

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed, that your word, your law, is indeed a word of liberty. And we pray, therefore, this morning, as we hear your voice together, please would you guard us from that temptation of being hearers, but not doers.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now, I wonder if you've ever had the experience of being absolutely convinced something was going to happen, and then, to your great surprise, it didn't.

[3 : 51] It happened to us several years ago. We'd booked a holiday. We'd been looking forward to it for weeks. We packed the day before, the night before. We are all ready, ready to go to the airport. The next morning, you know how you can almost smell the sea air, can't you, in that situation?

Absolutely wonderful. But then that night, illness struck, and we were unable to go. It was a great lesson to us in the danger of presumption. Perhaps you've had a similar thing, perhaps a job interview, or an exam, or a sports match, or something like that, that you thought was in the bag.

Perhaps a crystal pen. No, we won't go there this afternoon. But anyway, the surprise, I think, of this next section in 1 Corinthians is that the Apostle Paul says that precisely that could happen with heaven.

Because I wonder if you noticed, as the passage was read for us, how the language of warning, warning against complacency, warning against presumption, is everywhere in this passage in 1 Corinthians 9 and 10.

Just have a look with me. In 9:27, lest I myself should be disqualified. 10:5, they were overthrown. 10:8, fell.

[5:02] Verse 9, destroyed. Verse 10, destroyed. And the key application for us today comes in chapter 10, verse 12. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall.

Now, before we look at the detail, I just want us to take a step back for a moment and see how this passage we're looking at this morning fits into all of chapters 8 to 10, which, as you'll know by now, is one section as a whole.

The summary of the section comes at the end of chapter 10, chapter 10, verses 31 to 33. Just have a look at them. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.

Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God. Just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

1 Corinthians 8 to 10, as we've said, shows us how to bring glory to God in our everyday lives. But that, I guess, could be a very slippery phrase, couldn't it?

[6:09] Speaking for myself, I reckon I could justify plenty of things in terms of giving glory to God. Which is why verses 32 to 33 are so important. Because they show, as you see, in very concrete terms, in very specific terms, what giving glory to God looks like.

So, it is verse 32, have a look at it. It is working for the salvation, sorry, end of verse 33. It is working for the salvation of others, that they may be saved.

That is what it means to live, to bring glory to God. Those who are unbelievers, those in verse 32, who Paul calls the Jews or the Greeks, just as we saw last week in chapter 9, as well as those who are already believers, those, verse 32, Paul calls the church of God, as we saw in chapter 8.

In summary, verse 33, living a life that brings glory to God is not about living a life for myself, seeking my own advantage, but instead, seeking to please others, that they might be saved, living for their salvation.

And that is why, in chapter 9, verse 24, the spotlight shifts, if you like, very firmly onto our own hearts. So chapter 8, live for the sake of other believers, for their salvation.

[7:35] Chapter 9, live for the sake of unbelievers, for their salvation. Chapter 9, verse 24, the spotlight suddenly shifts onto our own hearts. And the reason is, because actually, whether or not we are living like this, says a great deal about our own spiritual health.

So then, how do we heed the warning? Well, first of all, we are to run the race. Chapter 9, verse 24 to 27.

It's a gift of a passage, isn't it, for the day of the London Marathon? It was not planned, certainly not by me, to be like this, but it is a gift of a passage for the day of the London Marathon.

You and I are to run the Christian life as if our, the race rather, that is the Christian life, as if our life depends on it. Why? Well, for the very simple reason that it does.

Have a look at verse 24. Do you not know that in a race, all the runners run, but only one receives the prize. So run that you may obtain it.

[8:39] Which, of course, is not saying that only one person gets to heaven. That would be completely ridiculous. But it is saying, God is saying, that that is the mindset we need in the Christian life.

Like the runner who is determined to win the race and get the prize. Something, perhaps the Corinthians knew, verse 24, do you not know?

It sounds as if they did know, doesn't it? But something they had conveniently forgotten. Hence, verse 25, every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable.

First century Corinth was just nine miles from the site where the Ispian Games, second only to the Olympic Games, were held every two years. The Games were fiercely competitive, of course.

Just imagine asking an Olympic athlete preparing for the Olympic Games this summer for Team GB. Just imagine asking them, what are you hoping to achieve in your particular competition?

[9 : 46] Well, they're not going to say, are they? Well, I just want to get to the finishing line. They're going to say, I want to win. I'm in it for the gold. Well, the prize in these first century games, we are told, was a wreath.

Apparently, it was a wreath made of wilted celery. I don't know if you've ever thought that was something worth running for, but it was made of wilted celery. Whereas, of course, what Paul is encouraging us to do is to look beyond time, beyond death, beyond this life, into eternity, and to see the far greater eternal prize.

We are to run the Christian life with that clear, eternal perspective. To do so requires self-discipline and self-control.

Just as verse 26, the runner doesn't run aimlessly. The boxer makes sure every punch counts.

Because the great danger in all of this, you see, is that you and I will take our eyes off that future eternal prize.

Well, you say, what does it look like in practice to run like this, to run the race that is the Christian life like this? Well, of course, it looks like 1 Corinthians 8 and 9. Giving up our freedoms, giving up our rights, all for the salvation of others.

[11 : 08] To build up other Christians, to win unbelievers. Of course, it looks like that. Because in eternity, that is what will matter. It is costly of time, costly of energy.

But can we see whether or not we are living like that is an indicator of our own spiritual health. Just as you might go to your GP for a cholesterol test or a blood test, which is an indicator of our physical health.

So this is an indicator of our spiritual health. Because remember, a Christian, someone who's put their trust in the Lord Jesus, is someone who is saved and set apart, not then just to serve themselves and to get on and live the kind of life they would have lived anyway, but set apart to serve the Lord Jesus.

That's how 1 Corinthians began. Just turn back to the second verse of the letter, 1 Corinthians chapter 1. 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 2.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.

Sanctified, saints, very similar related words, set apart to serve.

[12 : 28] Set apart to serve the Lord Jesus. And that is why back in chapter 9, verse 27, Paul recognizes that actually there is no other way to live for Jesus than to die to our self-interest, to live in a disciplined and costly way, all for the salvation and the benefits of others.

I wonder if you've noticed, but it seems to me that one of the great sadnesses in any church is to see people who are highly motivated and focused in some areas of their lives, but completely fail to live with that same motivation and focus when it comes to their Christian life.

focused and driven, perhaps, with regard to their career or bringing up children or passing exams or perhaps a particular sport, I don't know, perhaps even training for marathons or something like that. Focused and driven in those kinds of areas, you just think of the time and effort and determination that we pour into things like that as their bodies scream to them, no, please don't put me through that again.

And yet, at the same time, they seem to regard the Christian life like a sort of Sunday afternoon stroll in the park. And that is a great sadness.

[13 : 52] But perhaps it describes some of us this morning. If it does, look again at verse 27. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.

If the apostle Paul takes this seriously, then should we not take it seriously? We are to run the race that is the Christian life with our sights very firmly fixed on the eternal prize.

Secondly, we're to learn from the past, chapter 10, verses 1 to 10, because here Paul takes us right back to the Old Testament, to Old Testament Israel, who we are told in verse 6 and verse 11 are an example for us.

They're an example of people who had enormous privileges, yet actually they were destroyed. They faced the judgment of God.

Let's look at each in turn. First of all, the privileges, verses 1 to 5. Paul looks back to the Exodus when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. Many of us will remember when we looked at Exodus last year, we saw, didn't we, how the events of the Exodus foreshadow the gospel.

[15:08] So you'll remember with the Exodus, there was a rescue from slavery in Egypt. It was in the journey through the wilderness to their destination, the promised land. Just as for the Christian, there is the rescue from slavery to sin, there is the journey that is the Christian life, and then there is the destination, the new creation, heaven.

And as so often in the Bible, it's the repeated words and phrases that unlock the meaning of the passage. So as I read verses 1 to 4, just see if you can spot the repeated words and phrases. For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the clouds and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the clouds and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. What was the repeated word? All. All, all, all.

They had great spiritual privileges, but, verse 5, nevertheless, with most of them, God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

In fact, we're told that of all the adults who left Egypt over the age of 20, only two reached the promised land, Joshua and Caleb. Notice, too, when you hear how three times Paul uses the word spiritual.

[16:37] It is just what these puffed up Corinthian Christians thought about themselves. We're spiritual. We're in tip-top spiritual health, they thought. Perhaps some were saying, well, look, we've had the most amazing conversion experience.

But, verse 1, so did the Israelites. They experienced God's leading by way of the cloud. They passed through the Red Sea as it was divided, experiencing God's salvation.

Perhaps someone else says, but I've been baptized. But so, too, verse 2, in a sense, were the Israelites baptized into Moses, the great deliverer.

I take the Lord's Supper. I take Holy Communion, says someone else. I'm all right. Just as, in a sense, these Israelites did, verses 3 and 4. They all had the same spiritual food to drink, the manna and the quail, which the Lord sent, the same spiritual drink, the water that came from the rock.

I know Jesus, someone else says. I'm a follower of Jesus, someone else says. But so, in a sense, were they, verse 4. They drank from the same spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ.

[17:51] Nevertheless, verse 5. With most of them, God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

They were very privileged, but they were destroyed. Verse 6. Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

They are examples, you see, of the very real possibility of being indifferent to sin and setting our hearts on evil as if those things don't matter.

And so, in verses 7 to 11, we have four areas in which that indifference to sin showed itself. They're the temptations we'll see that the Christians in Corinth faced, and I imagine they're the very temptations some of us will face as well.

First of all, idolatry. Verse 7 is a reference to the building of the golden calf in Exodus. Do not be idolatrous as some of them were, as it is written, that people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

[18:56] Now with each of these, what I've done, I've put on the outline the Old Testament references as well. So if you want, don't look them up now, but if you want to chase them, then do look them up this afternoon. So here we are, verse 7, at which point, please don't think of kind of nursery school, you know, sitting around in a circle, having your mid-morning drink, and then going off to play on the climbing frame.

No, it is not that. This is, think out of control student party instead. This is the feasting and sexual indulgence associated with pagan worship.

We're told God was angry, 3,000 were killed in one day. And of course, the issue of idols is exactly the issue, isn't it, in this section of 1 Corinthians.

Just look down at verse 14, the last verse we had read, therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. It's not a word, is it, that we use, the word idolatry?

It's not part of our vocabulary. But it doesn't mean we don't do idolatry, it just means we are blind to idolatry. Anything or anyone that we put in the place of God in our hearts is an idol.

[20 : 10] It's what we love, it's what we trust, it's what we serve above anything else. Second, sexual immorality.

Verse 8, we must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did. And 23,000 fell in a single day. In Numbers chapter 25, the Israelites, men, had sexual relations with Moabite women who invited them to make sacrifices to their gods, which they did.

We're told God's anger burned against them and 23,000 died. And again, sexual immorality is exactly the issue, isn't it? In Corinth, just turn back to chapter 5, verse 1.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, as it will be an issue for some of us, the issue of sexual immorality.

And Paul's point is, just don't kid yourself that you're standing firm as a Christian if that is you. Third, testing, verse 9, we must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents.

[21 : 24] In Numbers 21, God's people spoke out against God, but they also spoke out against God's appointed leader of them, Moses. And we've seen exactly the same issue in Corinth, haven't we?

Some were testing God by questioning the authority of Paul. Chapter 9, verse 2, if to others are not an apostle, at least I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Just as sadly, there are those today who they want to claim to be Christian, but actually they reject the authority of the apostle Paul. Fourth, grumbling, verse 10, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

In Numbers 14 and 16, God's people have grumbled again against God and against Moses and were destroyed. just as the Corinthians are grumbling against Paul and against his gospel.

A friend tells how she and another girl both in their 20s went to Israel for a holiday several years ago. One had lived in Israel during her gap year, so she was confident that she knew her way around.

[22 : 34] On the first day of the holiday, they got the bus going out of Jerusalem. It happened to be the wrong bus. It was going in the wrong direction. By the time they realized, they were completely in the middle of nowhere, so they got off the bus at the next bus stop.

As the bus drove away, it was pitch black. There was hardly any traffic around. There were no pedestrians. They were six miles from the border with Syria, not far from the border with Lebanon. They could hear rockets going off in the distance. Eventually, they hitched a lift. The driver who picked them up told them they were completely mad. a number of people had been hijacked on that road.

Both girls vowed never to tell their fathers. They thought they were okay, but actually nothing could have been further from the truth.

Just like the church in Corinth, just, I imagine, like some of us this morning. Run the race, learn from the past, thirdly, heed the warning, verse 12.

[23 : 40] Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. After all, these warnings, verse 11, they are for us.

Isn't verse 11 an extraordinary verse? You see, God had us in mind, those who would say we are Christians, when Moses wrote the book of Exodus and Numbers.

It's why Paul has written verses 1 to 11 in such a way, you see, it makes it very hard for us, doesn't it, just to kind of dismiss it all and say, well, that was just them. It all happened a very long time ago. You see, I think our danger, and certainly my danger, is that I read these warnings, but actually, don't we read them without teeth? Isn't that our danger? You know, we think, well, God surely wouldn't do that today, or well, I'm not quite in their situation, or surely now that Jesus has come, things are different.

Can you hear the excuses? Or perhaps, well, doesn't Jesus say that Christians don't fall away and things like that? Well, Jesus does say that.

[24 : 52] John chapter 6, verse 37, on the outline, all that the Father gives me will come to me. Whoever comes to me, I'll never cast out. But he also says that the mark of being a genuine disciple is that we actually hold on to his teaching.

John 8, verse 31, if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. Just as in the parable of the sower, he tells us there will be those who seem to begin well in the Christian life, but actually the cares of this world or opposition or whatever it is mean they fall away.

Yes, Jesus does keep those who belong to him, but those who do belong to him take these warnings seriously, as real warnings, not as warnings without teeth. Ignore the warnings, travel into the waters of sin, and spiritual shipwreck awaits you. Paul is saying, if like the Corinthians, you look like Old Testament Israel at the moment, then make sure that you don't end up like Old Testament Israel in terms of their destiny as well.

The Bible, you see, has different promises for people in different spiritual states. It brings great comfort for those who are battling to live for Christ.

[26 : 26] but a very different message for those who, on the one hand, claim to be Christian, but are making no effort to fight sin and who are presuming upon God's promises.

It's not enough, you see, to simply to say, I'm a Christian, I've prayed a prayer of commitment, and Jesus will never let me go. So, you see, my temptation is to think, well, I'm in full-time Christian ministry.

I must be standing firm. And so, I don't take the warning seriously. There'll be others who will say, well, I was brought up in a Christian family.

I must be standing firm. I've always been to good churches. I must be standing firm. I lead a small group Bible study. I go on Christian camps. I give money to Christian things.

I must be standing firm. I'm regarded as the pillar of the church, whatever it is. I must be standing firm. But, verse 12, therefore, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

[27 : 33] What do you say? How do I stand? Or, verse 13, by resisting temptation. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.

God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. but with a temptation he will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it.

Notice, there's a promise. God won't let us be tempted beyond our ability to say no to it. Now, there will be some here this morning and we frankly despair in the face of temptation.

Well, here is a great promise to hold on to. But, surely, verse 13 is primarily a warning, isn't it? Perhaps, some in Corinth were saying something on this.

Paul, you just don't know what it's like to live as a Christian in Corinth. Here we are. We're surrounded by temptation. It is everywhere. You know, idols everywhere. Temples everywhere.

[28 : 34] All the temptations of a big city. Paul, we live in the real world in Corinth. No, verse 13. Don't believe the lie that the particular temptation that you face is unique to you and has not been faced by others.

And don't believe the lie that you cannot say no to it. It is, you see, a serious warning to those who are not resisting temptation or have given up resisting it.

Can't you say, what is this way of escape Paul speaks about? Well, notice, it's not a promise that the temptation will suddenly just kind of vanish into thin air. It is a promise, verse 12, to be able to stand firm in the face of it, and verse 13, to endure as Christians in the face of it.

Well, how do we do that? Well, verse 14, therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. We'll think much more about that next week. But for this week, it is chapter 9, verse 24 to 27, where we start it.

It is by running the race with our eyes clearly fixed on the finishing line, with our eyes clearly focused on eternity. In other words, it is living a life which is consistent with the gospel.

[29 : 55] The problem with the Corinthians is they don't want to live like that. What about you? I guess the danger is that we won't heed the warnings, so let's make sure we heed and learn from the past.

Finally, a word for those who are genuinely battling to live the Christian life, for those who are genuinely trying to run the race that is the Christian life with our focus fixed on eternity, yet who are only too aware of our guilt and our fragility.

Well, distrust of ourselves is a spiritually healthy thing. Knowing our failings and throwing ourselves on the mercy of God, running the race as forgiven sinners.

As our final song will remind us, the cross of Jesus holds me as heavenwards I look. And as for those who are looking on the Christian life this morning, with light you are here, this of course is the starting point of being a Christian.

Recognizing that we have nothing to offer God at all. Recognizing that we cannot earn our salvation. And calling out to God and turning to him, the God who longs to forgive those who trust him, the God whose son has died for our sin, that we might be forgiven.

[31 : 33] Why don't we spend a few moments in quiet and reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize.

So run that you may obtain it. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for the eternal prize that awaits those who have truly put their trust in the Lord Jesus and turned to him in repentance and faith.

And thank you, Father, for this warning of 1 Corinthians. We pray you'd help us to heed it and take it to heart and to be those both individually and corporately who live for your glory and for the salvation of others.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.