

If You Think You're Standing Firm

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[0:00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of October 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled If You Think You're Standing Firm and is from 1 Corinthians 10.1-11.

A family picnic turns to tragedy when lightning strikes. A night in a Taiwan hotel becomes terrifying when an earthquake occurs.

A fisherman standing firm on a rock by quiet water suddenly is washed away by a freak wave. The slogan of that old film Jaws sums it up.

Just when you thought it was safe. And then the danger comes. That's the sort of slogan that applies to 1 Corinthians 10.

The chapter that we're looking at today. You may like to have it open on page 931. Because Christians also suffer from the same illusions of safety as to people with natural things in this world.

[1:27] Are you a Christian standing firm in your faith? Are you a Christian standing safely in your faith?

That is, do one of the following apply to you? Are you somebody who never asks anybody to pray for you?

Are you somebody who doesn't read the Bible very often or seriously? Or somebody who sits loosely with church membership or going to a Bible study group?

Or are you somebody who knows that God is endlessly forgiving? Are you somebody who is theologically knowledgeable? Are you somebody who has recent experiences of God's grace and power in your life?

Are you somebody who knows that God is a Christian? Perhaps you are somebody who finds it hard to identify your own personal sin? Maybe you are somebody who thinks you are safe to read whatever you like?

[2:34] To look at whatever you like? Or go wherever you like? If any of those descriptions applies to you, this chapter applies to you.

The Corinthians of St. Paul's Day thought that they were standing firm. They thought that they were safe in their relationship with God.

We saw two weeks ago that they were boasting in their knowledge, the beginning of chapter 8, one of many references to such things in this letter. They considered that they were strong Christians, mature and wise Christians.

Where they saw green lights, St. Paul saw flashing red danger signals. In this chapter he likens them to ancient Israel.

When ancient Israel left Egypt in about 1450 BC under the leadership of Moses, there were significant events accompanying their exodus from Egypt.

[3:40] There were various miracles that were performed, plagues that were brought by God against the Egyptian king, the Pharaoh, in order to allow him to, or make him release the Israelites to leave the land.

When they left, there was a pillar of cloud by day to guide them. By night a pillar of fire. When they came to the Red Sea, it miraculously parted so they could cross through it.

And then the waters closed over and engulfed the pursuing army of Pharaoh. But it didn't stop there, for in the desert itself, that portion of desert between Egypt and the Promised Land, God miraculously provided for them.

Water from a rock, where there was no other water to be found. A strange substance called manna. A food that God gave them six days a week, and on the sixth day enough for two days.

Not only that, he provided at different times meat, and other miracles for their sustenance and life. You can read about all of that in the book of Exodus, and the book of Numbers in the Old Testament.

[4 : 54] And if you were an ancient Israelite, surely you too would feel safe with God. The God who's done such extraordinary things for them, and provided so miraculously for them.

Surely you were standing firm, or on firm ground with such a God. Paul's description of ancient Israel, in the first four verses of this chapter though, is unusual.

He doesn't just talk about the things that happened for ancient Israel. Firstly, he calls the ancient Israelites, our ancestors in verse 1. Remember, he's writing to Corinthians, who are not only Jews, but also non-Jews, or what are called Gentiles.

To say that ancient Israelites were their ancestors is unusual. But what he's doing is saying, they're our spiritual forefathers. They were the people of God just as we are. And what St. Paul is doing in these verses, is to draw the links tightly between ancient Israel, and the Corinth of his day.

He's trying to make them realize, that they stand in the same position, that ancient Israel stood. That's why he uses such strange language, in verses 2 and 3 and 4.

[6 : 11] Ancient Israel, he says, was baptized into Moses, in the cloud and in the sea. There's nothing about baptism in the Old Testament. But what he's saying is that their experience of being saved and rescued from Egypt, and passing through the Red Sea, corresponds to what Christian baptism is, as the beginning of life with God.

But not only baptism, he goes on to say, they all ate the same spiritual food, and drank the same spiritual drink. Referring to the manna from heaven, and the water from the rock probably. But then he says, most extraordinarily, for they drank from the spiritual rock, that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

Well, there's nothing in the Old Testament, to suggest that, that food was somehow Jesus Christ. Although, at the end of Moses life, he wrote a song in the end of Deuteronomy, that talks about God the rock.

Which is probably the basis, for Paul's comment here. But why St. Paul is making, such a strange statement, about the rock being Jesus, is because he's saying, where they ate and drank, miraculous spiritual food, it's exactly the same in a sense, as you partaking of the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine, feeding on the body and blood, of Jesus Christ.

He's saying that the ancient Israelites, stand in the same position, to the Corinth of his day. He's showing the similarities between them. He's not wanting the Corinthians, to dismiss the ancient Israelites, and saying, well, they stood in an inferior position to us.

[7 : 41] St. Paul is using very strong language, to say how closely, the ancient Israelites stood with God, and had experienced his grace, and provision. Like the ancient Israelites, the Corinthians had every reason, to think they were standing firm with God.

The sting of the tail, comes in verse 5 onwards. Nevertheless, he says, a very strong but, Israel fell.

God was not pleased, with most of them, and they were struck down, in the wilderness. It's a masterly understatement, because God wasn't pleased, with any of them, except two. Only two adults, survived the wilderness, 40 years.

All the others perished. The people who entered, the promised land, included Joshua, and Caleb, and those who were children, when they left Egypt, and those who were born, in the wilderness.

What's Paul's point here? Just as ancient Israel, was like Corinth, in having lots of reasons, to stand firm with God, and boasting about, and being proud about, their privileged position with God, so too Corinth, is making the same mistakes, that ancient Israel made.

[9 : 03] And ancient Israel fell. Corinth, was in danger, of falling the same. The mistakes of Israel, which are mentioned, in the following verses, are those, that the Corinthians, are making, or are in danger, of making.

Four times, in verses 7, 8, 9, and 10, St. Paul says, do not do this, just as they did. Do not do, what the Israelites did. Don't make the same mistakes, that they made.

What are their mistakes? In verse 7, the first one, do not become idolaters, as some of them did. That is, do not be people, who worship idols, like they did.

And then, Paul quotes, from the book of Exodus, 32, the people sat down, to eat and drink, and they rose up, to play. Well that doesn't, in itself seem, all that bad.

But it comes, from the context, where ancient Israel, made a golden calf, an idol, that they bowed down, and worshipped. At the very place, that God had spoken to them, on Mount Sinai.

[10 : 12] There they committed, gross idolatry. And it's an idolatry, that was associated, somehow with meals, and rising up to play, carries a sexual connotation, about it.

You see, the Corinthians, were indulging, in eating meat, at idol feasts, in the temple. There wasn't explicit, bowing down, idolatry. So Paul doesn't, Paul picks, a particular verse, that relates, to the Corinthians problems.

They're eating meat, in idol temples, as part of the idolatrous feasts. And maybe even engaging, in some sort of, sexual promiscuity, in the same time. The problem of the Israelites, was they got bored, with God, very quickly.

And so they turned, to other things. The second mistake, of the Israelites, in verse 8. We must not indulge, in sexual immorality, as some of them did.

And 23,000, fell in a single day. The reference here, is to the book of Numbers 25, right near the end, of the 40 years, in the wilderness. You'd think they'd learn, after the beginning mistakes, but no.

[11 : 21] Not ancient Israel. Right near the end, in the last, little bit of their time, in the wilderness. They came through, the place of Moab. And there, many Israelites, engaged in sexual activity, with Moabite women.

As well as, idolatrous worship, of the Moabite gods. You can read about that, in Numbers 25. 5. Clearly, the Israelites, had got bored, with God again.

Clearly, they were looking, for excitement, or satisfaction, elsewhere. Clearly, they were ungrateful, to God, for all the things, that he had done, for them. And the Corinthian Christians, are in the danger, of the same mistakes.

Their third mistake, is in verse 9. We must not put, Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed, by serpents. Again, referring to an incident, in the book of Numbers, chapter 21, this time.

That's where Israel, grumbled, wanting better food. They were thankless, and ungrateful to God, for his provisions. They were wanting more. And so, God sent them, fiery serpents, as a way of punishing, and warning them.

[12:30] When this, when Paul mentions here, that they, are putting God, to the test, what it means, to put God, to the test, is to see, how far you can go, with God.

To push the boundaries, with God. You remember, when you were a little child, and you knew that, there were certain things, you could and couldn't do. You must be in bed, at 8.30, or something like that.

And you'd push the boundaries. You'd make up, make up excuses, to see, how far you could push, your mother and father, how late you could stay up. Or, how many excuses, you could keep pushing, the boundaries, so that you didn't have to, make your bed, or do the dishes, or whatever it is.

Maybe some of you, still do that, I don't know. That's what it means, to put God to the test. To, to dabble a toe, over the boundary line, that God said.

And you look around, and you think, God's not done anything here, I'll put my foot down. God's not done anything here, I'll push the boundary, a bit further. I'll keep pushing, I'll keep walking.

[13:36] God's obviously not going to condemn me, for doing this, otherwise he would have said something. I'm putting him to the test. I'm seeing how far I can go. I think I can sin with impunity.

It didn't work for ancient Israel. But Corinth was making the same mistake. The fourth failure of the Corinthians, or the Israelites, and therefore by implication the Corinthians, is in verse 10.

And do not complain, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. There were numerous examples of this, in Exodus and Numbers, where the Israelites complained, they complained, they complained about everything there was to complain.

Theirs was a life of ingratitude to God, always looking for something better, something more, than what God had given them. In Numbers 14, at one instance where they complained, that's where God decreed, that only two, Joshua and Caleb, would enter the land.

And all the others would perish, which is why they ended up being 40 years, in the wilderness, while that generation died out. As you hear these illustrations, do you think, here am I?

[14:56] Or do you think, oh well that's ancient history, that's other people we're talking about here, it's nothing to do with me. If you think you're safe, if you think this is not about you, if you think that you're immune, from the same vulnerabilities, as ancient Israel and ancient Corinth, then you're kidding yourself.

Not that I'm saying, that you're necessarily sexually immoral, or an idolater, but all of us stand vulnerable, to the same mistakes, as ancient Israel, and ancient Corinth. If you think you're standing firm, be careful lest you fall.

Verse 12 is the key. Verse that we should already know off by heart. Although this translation is a bit different, from the song that we sang. So if you think you are standing, with a sense of standing firm, watch out, that you do not fall.

Just like ancient Israel, the Corinthians of Paul's day, were cocksure, arrogant, boastful about their spiritual maturity, and power, and knowledge.

They were complacent. They were self-confident. They thought themselves above danger. In effect, Paul is saying here, pride comes before a fall.

[16:08] If the Bishop of Canberra can slip, so can all of us. The Vicar of Forest Hill can fall, so can all of us. And yes, it's true, you might retaliate, and say, and agree with verse 13, that no testing is too great for us.

And yes, it's true, as verse 13 says, that God is faithful, and He's able to keep you from falling, as we shall sing at the end of the service. And yes, it's true, as verse 13 says, that God provides a way out for you.

But read on to verse 14, to see what the way out is. Flee idolatry. Flee from the worship of idols. The promise of God's faithfulness, and protection, and help, does not apply to those who are rushing headlong, into idolatrous feasts.

The way out, the way God protects, is by saying, flee. On my holidays, a couple of months ago, I drove across the Nullarbor, and at different spots, got out at the lookouts, to see if we could see any whales, and to see the cliffs.

And invariably, there were signs, if not fences, saying, beyond this point, it's dangerous, the cliffs crumble. They look safe to me.

[17:28] They look firm to me. You get a better view, just a bit further on. You can look further down the cliff, maybe see more whales, and some other things of excitement.

The sign is the warning. Danger beyond this point. Do not go to the cliff edge. It may look firm, but it can crumble and fall.

You see, the way God protects us, is by giving us clear warnings. Don't go beyond this mark. It may look safe, it may look enticing, it may look exciting, but it's dangerous.

And God's promise of faithful protection, is for those who heed the warnings. Stop. Flee. The dangers of idolatry.

And so on. If you fail to heed the warning, don't expect God to help you. He doesn't promise help to those who rush into idolatry, headlong, but to those who flee.

[18:41] During the week, I read an article by an American minister, about the moral fences that he has set up for himself in his ministry, so that he can protect himself from the enticements of sexual immorality, and so on.

Moral fences are good things. God makes many very clear for us. And for all of us, there should be practices that we do not do, because we realize that in such things we may be vulnerable.

But the trouble with too many Christians, is that they sit on the fence, or they live their lives peering over the fence.

Here's the fence that God's set up. It says, flee idolatry. It may say, flee sexual immorality. But what Christians often do is, walk along the fence.

Look over the other side. Lean over the other side. Lift a leg so you can lean over enough. Then are you not in danger of falling? Don't live your Christian life like that.

[19:46] It's not about how close to the fence we can get, but how far we can flee from the dangers, that the fence warns us about. God says, flee idolatry.

Don't lean over. Flee sexual immorality. Don't lean over. Flee complaints and grumbling. Don't lean over the edge.

Flee putting God to the test. Don't lean over the edge. The early warning signs for Israel are worth remembering for ourselves.

They got bored with God. Their spiritual excitement with God seemed to wane. They presumed upon his kindness. They thought that he was endlessly forgiving, so it doesn't matter what we do.

Their hearts became ungrateful. For all the extraordinary things God had done for them, they began to just want more, and grumble and murmur and complain about their life and their lot.

[20 : 50] They failed to see the danger. They pushed the limits of how far they could go with God. They're the things that are the first steps of the rocky and slippery path to idolatry.

It looks to be firm ground, but it's not. It's dangerous. They're beyond the fence. To flee is to eliminate those early warning signs.

If your heart with God has begun to go cold, then take steps to rectify that. Read the Bible again. Take God seriously again.

Pray. Pray with somebody else. Pray earnestly and consistently with somebody else for your own spiritual lives. If you think you're standing firm, be careful you don't fall.

Take measures now before it's too late. For those who invariably fall and sin, begin by taking small steps.

[21 : 55] Check it early. Why is Paul so concerned with idolatry in Corinth? Because the Corinthians thought that they could go and eat in the idolatrous feasts in the temple safely. They thought that idols were nothing. Therefore, eating in the idolatrous temples is not an issue. We may as well go and be part of the local community. And Paul agrees that idols are nothing.

He said that in what we've seen in the last two weeks. He repeats that in verse 19 as well. What do I imply then? That food offered, sacrifice to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything?

No, they're nothing. Is the way those questions are phrased. But the problem is, he says in verse 20, is just because idols are nothing doesn't mean there's no danger there. For if you go up to the temple and engage in the feast of meat offered to idols, you are in fellowship with demons and demonic forces, is what he says in verse 20.

Now the problem for that is that it's totally incompatible for a Christian. For Christians partake of the Lord's Supper. It's not a sacrifice, but it recalls Jesus' sacrifice.

[23 : 05] And when we eat of the bread and wine at Holy Communion, we are in fellowship with each other and with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an exclusive relationship. That's what he's saying in verses 16 and 17.

So if then you go up to the temple and eat the meat that's offered to idols, you are now entering into fellowship with demons. You cannot have both. You cannot have an exclusive relationship with Jesus and have fellowship with idolatrous demons as well.

That's the point of verses 21 and 22. God will be jealous if you go and enter into fellowship with other demons. Just like any wife would be jealous if their husband went to have relations with another woman.

It's her right to be jealous for an exclusive relationship with her husband and vice versa. So too God with us. If we entertain other idols and gods and enter into fellowship with demons and so on, God will be provoked to jealousy, Paul says in verse 22.

Because we've broken down the exclusivity of relationship with God. The Corinthians have written to St. Paul asking for his ruling on this.

[24 : 17] It seems that those who'd written had wanted to be part of the temple feast thinking they were nothing and safe. And also that they wanted to take all the other Christians along. The ones who perhaps were reluctant to go.

And over the last three weeks or last two weeks and today, we've seen Paul's answer. Firstly, he said in chapter 8, love other Christians, even weaker Christians.

That's the first principle. Last week we saw the principle that you should give up your own rights for the sake of the gospel. Today we've seen that he forbids going up to the temple to worship or to be part of an idolatrous feast.

But he now adds a rider to that in verses 25 to 30. Because all the meat that you could buy in the marketplace, or some of it I should say, may well have been offered to idols.

You don't necessarily know when you go to ancient Corinth's marketplace. What then? Paul says it doesn't matter. Don't ask. Buy and eat.

[25 : 25] What about if you're invited to somebody's house? Eat what they put in front of you, but don't ask questions. But if you get told, he says in verse 28 to 30, that meat has been offered to idols, then don't eat.

The context has changed. So there's no problem with meat being offered to idols in itself. It's still meat, and it's God's meat, and eat it and give glory to God. But if the context of eating it has got idolatrous connotations about it, don't.

Not because it may be dangerous for you if you're having a private meal with someone, but for the sake of the consciences of those who've told you and those who are with you. That's his argument in verses 25 through to verse 30.

Then in the last few verses, he sums up all of these three chapters with a couple of principles about how Christians ought to behave generally. Firstly, he says, that Christian behavior should be subordinated to giving God glory.

Whether you eat or drink, he says, whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Verse 31. So yes, there are lots of things that Christians can do. Make sure giving glory to God is behind everything that you do.

[26 : 47] Then he adds a second principle, another restraint on Christian freedom. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God. That is, don't give offense to anyone.

That doesn't mean don't hurt their feelings. What he means by that is don't put up a stumbling block of offense that will somehow harm somebody's relationship with God.

That's what he means by that. The next verse is the same when he says, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do. That is, he's not just trying to keep everybody happy, he's trying not to put a barrier to people growing in their relationship with God or becoming Christians and responding to the gospel.

It's so easy, isn't it, to be proud and unloving Christians. It's so easy to be like the Corinthians were, to think that we are safe and that we are secure and that somehow other people need to get like us.

If we adopt the practices that Paul has given us in these three chapters, our lives will surely change in significant ways.

[27 : 54] It's hard to do what he tells us to do. It is hard to restrain our freedom and our rights for the sake of the gospel, out of love for other people, whether Christian or not.

But Paul gives us no way out here. He says, imitate me, the beginning of chapter 11. And just in case you think that he himself is here boasting of his own practice, he qualifies that by saying, just as I imitate Christ, be imitators of me as I am of Christ.

For of course, Jesus is the best example here, isn't he? The one who gave up all his rights, all his freedom to exercise or to be part of the glory of heaven, giving it all up for our sakes and for the sake of the gospel.

So then this chapter ought to be a warning to all of us. If you think you're standing firm, be careful, lest you fall.

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