

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.

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. (1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-13 NIV2011)

Walk the Line

When we look at these words from Paul, it seems like we have a contradiction. In verse 12 Paul warns: **“If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.”** In other words, there's no such things as “once saved, always saved” here. It's a real possibility to fall from faith! Then in the very next verse Paul encourages: **“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”** In other words, God will keep you from falling. So which is it?

I do not wish you to be ignorant dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul says. We must learn our history lest we fall into the same mistakes. So Paul reminds us of our ancestors in the faith, the Old Testament Israelites. All of them were under the cloud that led them out of the land of slavery in Egypt to freedom. Not one of them was lost as the Red Sea split and they safely walk through on dry ground while Pharaoh's army drowns in the waters. Paul describes it as a type of baptism: the old life of slavery is killed in those waters and they rise as a new creation, people of God. When they run out of food in the wilderness, the Lord is faithful and provides them with bread from heaven—manna. When they were thirsty, he gives them water to drink from a rock. Time and again the Lord protects and provides for his people. Why? It wasn't just so they would survive in the wilderness but: **“So they will know that I am the Lord your God.”** All of those physical blessings were given so they might remember the one who gave them. The Lord is the one who set them free. The Lord provides. Fear, love, and trust the Lord above all things.

Nevertheless, what happened? **“God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.”** Read Exodus through Deuteronomy and you see a repeated theme. The Israelites grumble. They complain. They despair when things get difficult and are not ideal. They do not trust God. Eventually they suffer the consequences of their sins: over 1 million dead bodies are scattered in graves across the wilderness.

How could they do something like that? All of them received the same blessings. How could they be so blind? How could they be so oblivious, grumbling, complaining, not trusting? How can someone fall like that after seeing all that God had done? We wouldn't do something like that! That's what Paul wants to make abundantly clear: Yes, yes you can.

Take away the years that separate us and there we are. Like the Old Testament Israelites, through Jesus, God has set us free from slavery to sin and the burden of the Law. In the waters of baptism he has snatched your soul from the grips of Satan, put to death that old way of life, and made you his child. He provides air to breathe, clothes to wear, food to eat and water to drink. He guards you as you sleep at night. He protects you as you wake up. He's with you as you head to work. You have no idea what types of dangers God protects you from day after day. God gives us all these blessings to remind us of him, our constant need for him, how we are completely reliant on him. He doesn't just give us these to fill our bellies and give us comfort in life. He uses all these blessings so that we know that he is the Lord who we are to listen and obey, to trust and love with our whole heart. Then on top of it all he feeds us with Word and Sacrament to bring us through this life to life everlasting with him.

But there's a problem for us. It's hard to see the spiritual. Life after this world is always later. It's hard to keep the spiritual side of things on our mind when the physical is in your face and grabs our attention. You need clothes to wear. You need food to eat. You need money to pay the bills. You want to enjoy the time you have right now. You want to be able to provide a better life for your kids. You want to make the most of it. This is good.

It's scary, though, how quickly and easily the physical can overshadow the spiritual so that your faith life suffers. Time with Jesus, being fed with his Word, receiving the Lord's Supper, is left to whenever you have the time and nothing else is planned. Have you convinced yourself you already know enough? What's more learning, Bible studying going to do? Didn't I already get my church degree when I was confirmed?

But at least you are in church, right? As long as you are physically present often enough that seems important. Never mind that your thoughts are on the ranch, your plans this afternoon, the conversations you need to have, the people who aren't here.

You know you should do better. You want to. There's this sin in your life that you know is wrong and shouldn't do it. But we assure ourselves and others: "Don't worry. I know where I stand. I know what I believe."

So off we go chasing after all of these physical things because that's what seems to be what needs our attention most right now! But whilst we are chasing after them, how far are you running away from the one who provides all of them? Instead of serving the one who gives all those physical blessings, we love the blessings too much. We fear, worry, grumble, and complain wondering what if it's not enough. We place our trust in needing to have certain things and certain amounts instead of placing our trust in him who

generously provides everything. Instead of worshipping the one true God, we look for answers and place our hope in physical stuff. Life here on earth is the end all and be all. Being in God's Word remains the thing you can do later.

If you are thinking to yourself, "I really know someone who should hear this!" I hope by "someone" you are including yourself. Paul is writing to baptized Christians who join in the Lord's Supper and hear God's Word—people like you. Are you paying attention? God doesn't record these events so we have some interesting stories to learn. It's a warning. We sadly know too many who have slipped away. We've asked how, why, speculated possibilities, and struggle to understand. But Paul isn't writing this for us to think about them. He's warning you. Any single one of us can fall away. Don't say, "That's not possible! I would never." Remember Peter said the same thing before he went and denied Jesus three times. If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.

At the same time, God does not wish us to despair or to doubt. Faith is being sure and certain. Paul continues in v.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."**

Yes, situations are different. Yes, the specific experience may be unique to you. But once you remove the extenuating circumstances and details, every temptation you feel and face is common to mankind. "But this is different and that's why I should be able to do it," is just false. The details, situations, circumstances do not change the truth that either you will serve God or you will serve yourself.

"I had no choice; there's nothing else I can do." Wrong again. God is faithful. He does not lead us into temptation but delivers us from evil. There's a way out. It may not be what you want to hear. It's a real possibility it will mean missing out on some experiences and you will have some real struggles including financially, personally, with family and friends. But what does it matter if we gain the whole world or even just a little extra comfort if it means forfeiting your soul?

God is faithful. He is. Even when those struggles feel too heavy to carry...when that temptation clouds your mind so it's hard to think of anything else....when you are at your wits end and you don't know what to do, God is faithful. He who provides for your daily bread provides the sustenance you need to do what he calls you to do. Jesus declares, **"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and who ever believes in me will never be thirsty"** (John 6:35). Food spoils. Bodies fade. Experiences come and go. Your time on this earth ends. We want to live! And Jesus is the bread that gives us life. He knows the temptations that you struggle against; he was tempted just like you are. He knows what it feels like being backed into corner with no other choices; being true man the temptations were common to him too. Yet, he was without sin. He never fell. That's why he came into this world: to defeat sin, temptation, the tempter himself—to give us a way out. With his sinless life he took our place. With

the shedding of his blood he pays for all the times when we have and will fall. With his dying on the cross he crushes the tempting devil's head and destroys his work. With his rising from the grave the bread of life gives you life with him. Life here in this world is not the end all and be all. It's in Christ who reassures you, "You are not on your own. With my Word I lead you down paths of righteousness for my name's sake. No valleys are too deep, no paths too crooked, no futures too dark that I cannot give you a way out. I have delivered you from evil and the evil one. When you have fallen, confess your sin, I forgive you. God is faithful. He cannot punish you for your sins, he's already punished me. He will not leave you alone against that temptation, you are his baptized child. He doesn't leave you to starve, he feeds you with a Holy Supper. This is my body and blood poured out for you for the strengthening of your faith and forgiveness of sins. It's not about your trying harder and finding strength within you. I am your refuge and strength. Rest on me."

Yes, the physical seems more relevant and in our faces. But with eyes that have been washed out with the blood of the Lamb Jesus, we see the spiritual blessings He gives as well. When you see your family around you remember the family of believers that stretches over time and space and cultures including all the saints in heaven who fought the fight of temptation and now have the crown of life. When you think of the comforts of your home think about the peace that God gives as his face shines on you. With the acts of service we do consider how Christ serves you through the love of family and friends, the helpful hand, the encouraging word, the truck driver, the construction worker, the farmer, the rancher. The love we receive is always greater than what we give. When you sit down at the table to eat look forward to the heavenly banquet that awaits you in heaven and the bread of life we have in Jesus. Make a thoughtful effort to think about these things. No need to be weird about it. But take some time, stop and think, and see how God has blessed you in your life.

So which is it? As God's people, we walk the line of apparent contradiction. On the one side: yes, we could fall. Therefore, we need to be careful. You need to be in the Word and Sacraments. You aren't ever going to be prepared enough for all the temptations that will come your way. At the same time, do not despair. When we have been unfaithful, God is ever faithful. We have one who has defeated every temptation and sin for us. He's right there ready to forgive and pick us up again when we have fallen. Rest in God's promises as we walk the line. Amen.