

Lessons from Israel in the Wilderness

Part 1

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[00:00:00] Would you open God's Word and read with me, in the first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 10. Tenth chapter, first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. We'll read from verses 1, we'll read from verse 1 to verse 13.

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and did all eat the same spiritual meat, and did all drink the same spiritual drink, [00:01:04] for they drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be idolaters, as were some of them, as it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. [00:02:03] Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for examples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore, let him that thinketh his standards take heed, lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man.

But God is faithful, for will not suffer you to be tempted, above that ye are able. But will, with the temptation, also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

[00:03:06] I must be very brief this afternoon, if T is at half past four, Mr. Goodwin. I think he's at half past five, probably. Yeah, I know what you meant. But even so, we're a little bit late. Now, the passage that we had read to us this afternoon gave us, I believe, a comprehensive picture of the history of the professing church. And I use that term advisedly, the professing church. We must distinguish between what is mere profession and what is real and vital. Now, if we look at the church from the divine side, and think what it is and the sight of our Lord and Savior, here it is that it's building the church. He is adding those living stones. It's being formed as an habitation of God through the Spirit. And he loved the church. He gave himself for it. He lives for the church. [00:04:06] He is serving it now by sanctifying and washing it with the washing of water by the Word. And soon he's coming to receive it to himself and to present it, a church in glory, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Now, that is the church in its perfection and its beauty and its completeness. But what the Lord has laid upon my heart this afternoon is the church as committed into the hands of men. And

what do we find? Failure and declension all the way through. Now, I don't wish to occupy you too much with the failure, but we are told that these things happened unto the children of Israel for our admonition. We have something to learn, because in Israel's failure we can see our own, or we should do. But I know some may feel that to be occupied with failure is not altogether profitable. I agree.

[00:05:20] I rather like the philosophy of an old servant of the Lord, I think it was C. H. Macintosh, who was accosted by a dear brother who was very concerned about the state of the church. And he said, don't you think, Mr. Macintosh, that we should be concerned? Don't you think we should look at the ruin of things and the failure that's come in? And the dear man of God said, yes, my brother, by all means, take your fill, if you wish, look at the ruin of things and feel your part and mine in it. But he said, when you've done that, look upwards, look heavenwards, see the glory of God and see the one who is in that glory. [00:06:02] Think of the Lord Jesus Christ there in all the glory of God, the one who has all resources in himself and who has promised and undertaken to bring that church for whom he laid down his blood safely into those many mansions prepared for them. Well, that is it. But I do feel that there is much to learn from this portion of scripture. It gives us an outline of the history of Israel, yes, but of the church of God in its decline and its failure. And it's a very solemn opening, isn't it? And we find there that, shall we say, participation in sacred privileges did not exempt the children of Israel from God's displeasure and judgment.

[00:07:01] No, we must not rest solely upon the fact that we've been brought up in the meetings, and I can testify to the blessedness of that, the great joy and privilege of being brought up in a Christian family, father, grandfather on both sides, and it's a great asset. But it doesn't vouchsafe to me eternal life. That is a personal matter between my soul and the living God and the Saviour who died for me. So, that is what we find in the beginning of this portion, but coming to verse 6, you will see there are five outstanding incidents in the history of the children of Israel that the apostle selects. And he doesn't just throw them together in a haphazard way, we might think so at first glance, but he's tracing, I believe, the history of Israel in its gradual decline and the history of the church in its declension too. [00:08:10] Now, the first thing in verse 6, it speaks about lusting after evil things, and it carries us back to Numbers 11, and this is a portion that our dear brother reminded us of at the conference.

Where they went back to the things of Egypt which they'd left behind. They harked back and they said, we remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic. There are six things there, low-down things, things that would attach us to the earth. And it's a marked contrast, surely, with the description that we have in Deuteronomy of the land that God had provided for his people where he says, [00:09:02] The Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks, of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey. Seven things there that speak of the glorious inheritance that is ours, that God has provided for us as his children. But here they say, there is nothing at all beside this manor before our eyes. What a sad, solemn thing to say. You see, they despised God's food for them. This manor was the provision that God had made for them. And day by day, not one day forgotten, throughout those forty years, the hand of God provided a food that was suitable to them, to sustain them in their wilderness journey. [00:10:01] And that food speaks to us of the Lord Jesus Christ, the bread of God come down from heaven, the lowly man of God here below. Yes, it speaks to us of the Christ of God incarnation and in humiliation. But here we find, they said, our soul is dried away. There is nothing at all beside this manor. Wasn't that sufficient for them? Isn't Christ sufficient for us? Now, this is a

challenging word to us all, to me, as well as to you, because as we journey on through the wilderness, God has made provision for us. And his provision is a heavenly Christ, is the Lord Jesus Christ. And we need to feed upon him that we might be sustained for all the trials of the wilderness. But are we saying, perhaps not saying it aloud, but thinking in our hearts, well that's all that we have, there's nothing at all. Are we despising this heavenly food that God has provided? [00:11:12] How it must have grieved the heart of God. And you see, it says, the manor was as coriander seed and the color thereof was the color of delium. Remember, in the 16th of Exodus, it's described as a small ram's thing, speaking of his eternal character, speaking of his lowliness, the meek and lowly one. And we read the color of it was white. We know that that speaks of his spotless purity, the perfect, holy, spotless Son of God here in meekness and lowliness on earth. But it says that the taste here, I think, it's fresh oil, yes, verse 8. It had become insipid, it had lost its sweetness. It's easy to sing, as we often do, we love to sit as learners at thy feet, thy words than honey, far more sweet.

[00:12:20] Yes, we can sing that, I trust we can sing it truthfully, zealously. But, you know, we have to ask ourselves if we are losing the sweetness of this heavenly provision that God had made.

And not content with the manor as it came, they gathered it and ground it and beat it into a mortar and baked it in pans and made cakes of it. I suppose that was to save the bother of going out regularly, daily, getting up early before the sun was up and gathering it. They could bake it. Yes, you know, manor cakes sometimes are more easy on the palate. Ready-made sermons, addresses about the word, even devotional books and commentaries, those answer to the manor cakes perhaps, the manor bacon prepared of man.

[00:13:23] But, let us get it from the word of God and gather up this heavenly food that God has provided, fresh from the courts of heaven. This sets before us the departure from first love as we have in the epistle to Ephesus, Revelation 2 and 3. They found the manor unpalatable to them.

And so, you see, the danger is that other things come in to fill the void, to fill the heart. A sad thing if we find an unseen Christ insufficient for us and we turn to other things, the paltry things of this world to satisfy our hearts. [00:14:20] And that carries us to the next incident that we have in Exodus 32, the warning against idolatry, Exodus 32, where Moses went up the mountain and he was out of sight.

They'd lost sight of him and they come to Aaron and they say, up, make us gods which go before us, for as for this Moses, the man that brought us out of the land of Egypt, we want not what has become of him. They'd lost sight of Moses. He'd gone from their view. They wanted something that their eye could rest upon. And so, this God was passioned by Aaron and the golden calf was made and the people fell down before it and worshipped it and they said, these be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. [00:15:20] And even Aaron made a proclamation, tomorrow is a feast of the Lord. He dared to associate the name of the Lord with this idol that had been set up. That's what we have in apostate Christendom today. They have their idols and they dignify their idolatry with the name of Christ and with Christianity. They make it respectable for people to use.

And so, it is a warning to us. You may say, well, there's no fear that we're going to fall down and worship a golden calf or any idol that men have set up. Well, perhaps not. [00:16:07] But, you know, it's often been pointed out that an idol is anything that comes between our souls and Christ. And if we're not satisfied with him, other things will crowd in. We should be occupied with the things of this world. The apostle John, as you know, closes his epistle, the first epistle, with a declaration of the person of Christ, of the deity of Christ, and of our association with him. And he says, we know that the Son of

God has come and has given us an understanding that we may know him that is true and we are in him that is true, even in his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. And immediately he adds, little children, keep yourselves from idols. Why does he do that? [00:17:07] Is it not to remind us that anything that would rob us of our appreciation of the wondrous person of our Lord Jesus Christ is no better, nothing better than idolatry. Keep yourselves from idols.

An idol is anything that would come in between and take up our gaze, occupy our hearts. I don't know whether you remember, some of the older ones might, those well-known lines, I'm rather fond of them myself, the peerless worth of Christ. I don't know whether I can remember the last clause, I might be able to, the last stanza. It is that look that melted Peter, it is that face that Stephen saw, it is that heart that wept with Mary, can alone from idols draw, draw and win and fill completely till the cup or flow the brim. What have we to do with idols who have accompanied with him?

[00:18:18] Lines worth remembering, I think. But we pass on and we come to the third warning and it carries us to the 25th of Numbers, a warning against, not idolatry this time, but fornication.

And I believe it is a warning against spiritual fornication. You may say, well you're going to, you're stressed that you're going to, you're misapplying it there dear brother, you're, you're, I think it's just a warning against uncleanness. [00:19:01] Well, take it that way. By all means, there never was a day in which we need to be reminded that we keep ourselves spotless, free from the evil practices around us. In this permissive age, how we need to be reminded that as children of God, we must walk a clean path and we must be motivated by principles that are founded on the word of God and that are suited to our heavenly calling. Well, flee from fornication, says the apostle. But in the, taking this passage as I'm doing this afternoon, as an outline prophetically of the history of the declension of the church, the moral declension, I feel we're entitled to look upon this as spiritual fornication. Particularly as we have it in Revelation, Revelation 2, the Lord's address to Pergamos, and we read there that, we read about the doctrine of Balaam who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel to eat things sacrificed unto idols and to commit fornication.

[00:20:28] And the account given to us in Numbers is very solemn. It says, Israel abode in Shittim and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods and the people did eat and bow down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baal Peor. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. You know, Balaam was hired, Balak, to curse the children of Israel and to hinder or to prevent their entrance into the land that God had chosen for them. He failed in that, but he changed his tactics and he overcame them by his wiles, by his treachery.

[00:21:19] And so he sought to seduce them to commit these evil alliances with the children of God. Balaam had been obliged to bear witness to the separate character of the children of Israel.

His first prophecy, you remember, the first of the four, said this, Israel, or thy people, shall dwell alone. They shall not be reckoned among the nations. That is, they must be a separate people, separate to the Lord. And they shall not mix with the nations around. They must be a witness to the one true God. [00:22:03] But here they indulge in these evil things, allying themselves with the women of Moab. And so that wall of partition was broken down. And God's purpose for the children of Israel was undermined.

And that's what we have to be on our guard against. And dear friends, I speak about spiritual

fornication, but we might say it's illicit intercourse with the world, going hand in hand with this world. That's the very thing that followed, wasn't it, the persecution. We have it in Smyrna, and then in Pergamos, we have the alliance with the world under Constantine, when Christianity was forced upon the people. And we find the Church of God outwardly under the patronage of the world at that time. Well, we have to be on our guard against these things. And we have been warned by several speakers at the conference of the great need to be kept from the spirit of worldliness. [00:23:24] It's creeping in into our lives, into our families, into our homes, into our meeting rooms. We have to be on our guard, beloved brethren, because the Lord is worthy of all our energy and of all our thoughts and all that we can devote to him. He's worthy of it all. And let us not see that our testimony is marred by the growing, overspreading influence of this world.

And the fourth one of these incidents carries us again into Numbers, the 21st chapter of Numbers this time, isn't it? 21st chapter, and it's a sad history, a sad picture we have here again.

[00:24:18] We find that they were discouraged, the children of Israel. It says that the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way, and the people spake against God and against Moses, wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, neither is there any water, and our soul loatheth this light bread. Yes, a sad part of their history. In the 11th of Numbers, they despised the manna. Here, they go as far as to say, our soul loatheth this light bread.

[00:25:11] Maybe you wouldn't go as far as that. Of course you wouldn't. But, you know, scripture says, Jeremiah says, I think, who hath despised the day of small things? Do you despise the small things of the day? You get discouraged and discontented with the small meetings. Do you look upon the two or three that are gathered together and despise them in your heart? Remember that even though but two or three gather together, they are gathered as an assembly of the Lord. The Lord is in the midst. You despise the little company. You despise the Lord. And these children of Israel, they said, our soul loatheth this light bread. It was God's provision for them. They despised the God that had provided so lavishly for them. Not once did he forget them. He provided it. All they had to do was to go out and gather it. [00:26:16] It was provided for them fresh from the courts of heaven, uncontaminated by the sand of the desert even, because it lay upon the dewdrop, we read. The Spirit of God would remind us of the spotless purity of that one who deigns to be our food. The bread of God come down from heaven. Yes, but there is that tendency among us, within us, each one of us, to find an unseen Christ, I repeat it, an unseen Christ, insufficient. Now, we want to ask ourselves, isn't he sufficient for the heart of God? He's the bread of God, God's food, and he fills all heaven with his glory, this wondrous person of the Lord Jesus. Isn't he enough to fill your puny hearts to overflowing? [00:27:14] But, you know, you have to know the joy of communion with him. You have to set apart times when you can be alone with him, and he alone with you, and to know the joy of fellowship with him.

Now, just going back very briefly to Revelation, where the Lord gives a warning to them, he says, I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is. Yes, they were settling down in the world that was governed by the authority of the evil one. [00:28:01] The Lord knew it, he took notice of it. But I like this little bit, now I must just hurry on here. He says, I know there are overcomers, I know that you are in an evil world, but there are those that are seeking to overcome the spirit of it, some that are seeking to walk in communion with me day by day. Well, he says, to him that overcometh, I've got a reward. And what is that? To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna. Now, that's very precious, you know, that refers to the manna that was laid up in the golden pot. It was Israel's provision for the wilderness, yes, but it was in the golden pot, and it was

hidden from their gaze throughout all their wanderings. God's eye rested upon that. And, you know, if you're among the overcomers, the end of the journey, you have a wonderful reward, a wonderful prospect to look onto. [00:29:02] God is going to share his delight in his beloved Son, his appreciation of the beauty and worth and perfection of his Son as he walked here, man amongst men, he's going to share his thoughts with you and with me. We are going to eat, I say we, I say if we are overcomers, that is, of course. If we have our hearts saturated with the things of the world, we shall lose all desire for anything more. But if we are satisfied, yea, if our hearts are filled with Christ here, then the end of the journey will be this reward, to eat of the hidden manna and to have the white stone of approval and approbation with a new name. That little secret between the overcomer and the one who overcame on our behalf, that risen glorified one. But the last of these five incidents carries us to Numbers 14, and it's a very solemn portion that we have in Numbers 14.

[00:30:15] This is what we read here. It says, This was nothing but rank, rebellion, and apostasy.

[00:31:10] Here they consider, well, making a fresh captain, having a fresh leader, giving up Moses and Aaron, setting them aside, God's representatives, setting all God's representatives aside, and setting up a captain of their own, going back into Egypt. Ah, we can think of that one who deigns to be the great captain of our salvation, the one who has pledged to bring each child of his safely across the wilderness and to bring them safely to himself, the great captain of salvation. What's he doing? He's bringing many sons unto glory, and not one will he leave behind. But here you see, this typifies where the declension has risen to its peak, all authority shaken off, and man's choice instead of God's, man taking the supremacy in the things of God.

[00:32:16] It's a sad picture, but it's what's coming. And in these incidents, dear friend, it's a very solemn picture, but we should be thankful that God has seen fit to give us such a clear indication of what things are heading up to here. From the time, the turning away from first love in Ephesus, to the time when the whole professing church is rejected by the Lord in Laodicea, that time is coming. But the Lord would call us to himself, he would bring his word to challenge our hearts as to how far we have wandered, [00:33:03] and he would have us here occupied with the task that he has given us to do. And this solemn portion closes with two principles, really. First is our responsibility.

Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed, lest he fall. You may say, I don't feel I'm in any danger of this, you know. Children of Israel, yes, I can understand how they got discouraged and dissatisfied and wanted something more, and looked back to the things of Egypt, and wanted to get back there. But we have to be on the guard against complacency and self-sufficiency. Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed, lest he fall. It's only the grace of God that can keep us true and faithful to himself. [00:34:03] And secondly, there's God's sovereign character brought out in verse 13. God is faithful. Yes, God is faithful. We can fall back upon the faithfulness of God. Our responsibility, yes, we've got to take heed to ourselves, but God is faithful. Faithful to his Son, and faithful to everyone who belongs to his Son. He will not suffer us to be tempted above what we are able. He'll make a way of escape, but he desires to draw us to himself. And, dear friend, may this be the result of our afternoon's meeting, that we are called to a closer, more intimate walk with our blessed Lord, that we may be encouraged. He remains faithful. Yes, in spite of all our weakness and failure, he is the same. [00:35:02] And if we say at this late stage of the Church's history that it's too late to expect blessing from on high, that is a language of unbelief. He is faithful, and his resources are unchanged. God is the same. The failure is with ourselves. Let us judge ourselves so that we may know more of his wondrous grace and his faithfulness. Amen.