

*A Perspective on Our Strengths*  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I'll begin this morning with a couple of questions. These questions will help you listen to the message I'll be bringing from 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. The first question is, "In what areas of your life do you feel weak and vulnerable and most likely to sin?" Does anything come to mind? Most of us are painfully aware of these areas of our lives. "As long as I can remember I've been consumed with jealousy. I just can't enter into other people's good fortune; I take no joy in their well-being. All I can think about is how I wish I had their intelligence, their money, their children, their good looks, their walk with God." For you it may not be jealousy but one of the other "big seven": jealousy, pride, lust, anger, greed, sloth, or gluttony. Unless you have totally checked out, you can identify areas of your life in which you feel weak and vulnerable and likely to sin.

Let me say that *this* sermon is not about *those* things. Other sermons may be about those things, but not this one. So put those things out of your mind. This sermon will address your answer to the question, "In what areas of your life do you feel confident and strong? What are your spiritual gifts and strengths? Where do you feel like God has done a good work in your life?" This is not a trick question. There is nothing wrong with identifying your strengths or acknowledging where God has been at work in your life.

My answer to this second question involves the Scriptures. When I came to Christ as a sophomore in college, God gave me a love for the Scriptures. Since the early days I have loved to read and study the Scriptures. God has given me a sound mind to understand the contents of the Bible and theology. Eventually God gave me the desire and ability to teach the Scriptures. God has done a good work in my life in relation to the Scriptures.

For you, it may be something else. You may be good in relationships. Or you may excel in serving; you may be one of those people who gladly invests time and energy in serving others. You may have a heart for those who are hurting; your mercy and compassion motivate you to meet needs around you. Perhaps your family life is a strength; God has given you a strong marriage or a heart for raising your children to love God.

In light of your strengths and the areas in which God has worked, here is the challenge from our passage today. 1 Corinthians 10:12 reads,

12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

Paul doesn't say, "Let him who feels weak and vulnerable be careful not to fall. . ." That's certainly an appropriate challenge. But the challenge *here* is to be careful in the areas in which we think we're strong – in which we "think we stand." I am not assuming that you are prideful or careless in your strengths and in the areas in which God has worked. But there are some unique temptations associated with our strengths and gifts. Join me today in considering 1 Corinthians 10:1-13. In the middle of Paul's discussion about freedom, he addresses this issue of being mindful of the spiritual dangers associated with our strengths.

*A Lesson from Israel's Past: God's blessing and provision do not guarantee that our lives*

***please Him. (10:1-5)*** In verses 1 through 4 Paul details the spiritual advantages of the children of Israel. Paul uses the word “all” five times to emphasize how universally the children of Israel experienced God’s deliverance and provision.

10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.

Exodus records how God rescued the children of Israel – every one of them – from slavery in Egypt. God led them all through the wilderness by a cloud. When they were trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, God parted the water and they all walked through on dry land. Paul writes that “all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea.” Perhaps the fact that both the cloud and the Sea were full of water suggested the imagery of baptism to Paul. The point is that the children of Israel were all fully identified with Moses and his unique role in the salvation of the people.

Verse 3 mentions that all of them ate the same spiritual food. They all ate the manna that God provided each day. Paul calls it spiritual food because its origin was spiritual (i.e., it was from God), not physical.

Verse 4 says that “all drank the same spiritual drink.” Twice during their wilderness experience (once at the beginning of their journey [Ex. 17] and once toward the end [Num. 20]) God provided water through a rock. All of them drank this spiritual, supernaturally-provided water.

Interestingly Paul says that they were drinking from a “spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.” Paul’s conviction was that the triune God sustained and protected the people in the wilderness. Therefore, if God provided spiritual drink, it’s also appropriate to say that Christ provided spiritual drink. The children of Israel even had the blessing of Jesus Christ, the Rock, following them in the wilderness. Again, they had every spiritual advantage.

But in verse 5 Paul points out that even though ***all*** of them enjoy amazing spiritual benefits, ***most*** of them were displeasing to God.

5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

This is the same term (well-pleased) we find in the gospels; at the baptism of Jesus the voice from heaven announces, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.” God took great delight in Jesus His Son. God enjoyed Him and was satisfied with what Jesus thought and said and did. By contrast God was ***not well-pleased*** with most of the children of Israel. God didn’t have the satisfaction of enjoying them and delighting in what they thought and said and did. They robbed God of the pleasure He wanted in them. Consequently, they were “laid low in the wilderness”: they died without ever having reached the Promised Land.

Paul is making a very simple, yet profound observation: *God’s blessing and provision do not guarantee that our lives please Him.* Past spiritual experiences do not validate your present walk

with God. Who could boast any greater spiritual experiences than the children of Israel!?!? And yet such experiences didn't translate into walking with and pleasing God.

In a similar way, we need to avoid looking at all the things God has done in our lives and automatically thinking, "God must not have any problems with the way I'm living my life . . . look at all the ways He has blessed me . . . look at all the ways He is using me in the lives of others . . . look at the spiritual gifts He has given me. . ." The example of Israel in the wilderness should make us pause and realize that God's blessing and provision do not guarantee that our lives are pleasing to Him.

A word of qualification: There is an absolute sense in which every new covenant believer is pleasing to God in Christ. We are fully accepted and beloved in Him. In an absolute sense we are pleasing to God. But in another sense, we can either please or displease God through the way we live our lives. I'm making a rather obvious point here: our behavior can either please or displease God. He isn't a permissive Father who thinks that we can do no wrong. He notices and cares how we live. And so we need to learn this lesson from Israel's past.

***An implication for how we read the Scriptures: Examples in Scripture instruct us to avoid common sins. (10:6-12)***

6 Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.

In other words, don't just read about the children of Israel's experiences as interesting historical events. Read them as a warning. The things that happened to them are an example "for us." It's possible for us to have every spiritual advantage (as they did) and still displease God. Paul is warning us so that "we would not crave [lit. lust after] evil things as they also craved." Paul gives four specific examples of sins that are common to them and us. The first is ***idolatry***.

7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY."

Paul makes reference here to Exodus 32:6 and the people worshipping at the golden calf. When Moses delayed in coming down from Mount Sinai, the people demanded that Aaron "make us a god who will go before us." These were the same people who had seen God's power through the 10 plagues and through the parting of the Red Sea. They had experienced God's provision through the manna and through the water gushing from the rock. They had every spiritual advantage, yet they became idolaters. Paul warns against following their negative example.

Of course this example had special relevance in Corinth. In verse 14 Paul will write, "Flee from idolatry." Those who felt the freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols needed to make sure that they didn't willingly or unwillingly participate in idolatry. Of course we need to make sure that we are not idolaters, substituting things/people for God

The second example is ***immorality***.

8 Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.

This is a reference to the incident recorded in Numbers 25:1-9. The men of Israel “played the harlot” with the daughters of Moab. God’s judgment upon them involved a plague in which 23,000 lost their lives. Their experiences with God in the wilderness didn’t make them immune from immorality.

The third example is “*trying/testing the Lord.*”

9 Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.

Numbers 21 records how the people “tried” or “tested” the Lord by complaining about their conditions. They became “impatient” because the journey in the wilderness was so long and so hard. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, but they accused Him of not knowing what He was doing: He brought them out into the wilderness to die (there was no food or water). Never mind that God fed them spiritual food and drink! Basically they despised their deliverance. Such an attitude was a slap in the face to a compassionate, powerful God. In this way they tried/tested God and the consequence was judgment. God sent serpents who bit and killed many.

The fourth example is *grumbling*.

10 Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

You can read about their grumbling sometime in Numbers 16:41-50. Our first thought is that grumbling doesn’t belong in a list with idolatry, and immorality. Grumbling seems rather benign, rather harmless. Everybody has their pet peeves and things that get under their skin. What’s so offensive to God about grumbling?

In Numbers 16 the people should have admitted that they were experiencing God’s judgment because of their own sin. But instead of examining their own hearts and being humbled and broken, they blamed Moses and Aaron! They said, “You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord’s people.” That was not, in fact, the case. They were the ones who brought God’s judgment upon themselves. But it’s always easier to blame our difficult circumstances on others (i.e., to grumble) instead of examining our own hearts to see if we’ve brought our trouble upon ourselves.

In verse 11 Paul reiterates that we should learn from the experience of the children of Israel.

11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

This means that when we read the Scriptures, we need to be eager and teachable. God wants us to instruct us through the Scriptures. This is all the more urgent because “the end of the ages have come” upon us. We are living in the last chapter of history. This is no time for being complacent and spiritually lazy. Therefore, we need to learn from the examples we find in Scripture.

If you ever find yourself bored with your Christian life, read the Scriptures asking questions like,

“How am I just like the people I’m reading about? How does this example instruct me to walk with God?” Those questions open up a whole world of relevance for our lives. For example, Paul mentioned “grumbling” in verse 10. Life is often stressful and difficult – in the home, in the workplace, and in the church. When the pressure is on, it’s always easier to blame our problems on others (i.e., to “grumble”) than to humble ourselves before God. Let’s face it: we live around flawed, imperfect, sinful people. If you want to, you can always find someone and something to grumble about. The example of the children of Israel should instruct us that instead of grumbling, we should humble ourselves before God.

I can think of times when I’ve been running late for a meeting (typically a meeting that’s very important to God and vital to the future of Christianity) and I’m scurrying around the house trying to find the right shirt, grabbing something to eat, looking for my car keys, etc. In that mindset, small inconveniences become a big deal and it’s very easy to grumble and blame others for my being late. I get in the car and drive like a maniac so I can be on time. . . . only to realize that my car is on empty . . . and I hit every red light . . . and I grumble . . . Does that mindset remind you of anyone (besides your 2-year-old)? The children of Israel. Like them, I have every spiritual advantage in Christ Jesus. Really. God has delivered me from sin and death through His Son Jesus. And God has filled my life with good things. And so when I’m stressed because I’m running late, instead of blaming others, I need to examine my own heart. I need to find a time to quiet myself before God and listen.

Here’s the warning:

12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

Even if God has blessed you and gifted you in amazing ways, don’t forget your potential to sin. At the end of chapter 9 Paul expressed a healthy fear of his own potential to sin. He wrote that “I beat my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” Paul trained himself so that he might not “fall.” He practiced what he preached.

Gordon MacDonald wrote *Rebuilding Your Broken World* in 1988. In that book he recounts that he once told somebody that the one area he was sure he would never “fall” was the area of personal relationships. He had strong convictions and a strong marriage; having an affair just wasn’t a real threat. In retrospect, he now realizes the foolishness of that mindset because he had an affair. He has fully repented and his marriage has been fully restored, but he “fell” in the area in which he thought he was the strongest.

My encouragement to you is to discern the particular temptations in your life associated with your areas of strength. We all know the temptations associated with our weakness, but do we understand the temptations associated with our strengths – the areas in which we “think we stand”? Maybe you’re a very discerning person: you see things that others don’t see. Perhaps discernment is a strength, but instead of being helpful, you end up grumbling. In Paul’s categories, if you grumble, you fall.

***A word of encouragement/hope: God is faithful to lead us through our particular temptations. (10:13)*** After the warning of verses 1 through 12, we have a powerful word of encouragement in verse 13.

13 No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

We need to resist the tendency to think, “My temptations are unique. They are stronger and more alluring than other people’s temptations. My temptations seem to be custom-made to appeal to my greatest weaknesses. They are in a category all their own.” In reality, that’s not true. They may be custom-made for you, but they are not unique. They are common to all people. This doesn’t make your temptations easier to resist. But it does mean that you have the same opportunity for obedience that everybody else has . . .

“ . . . and God is faithful . . .” God is faithful 1) to limit my temptations to what I am able to handle, and 2) to provide a “way of escape” – a way “out” of that temptation without sinning. When you and I are facing temptation, the most relevant question is not, “Am I strong enough to resist this temptation?” but “God, how have You been faithful to provide me with a way of escape?” Many times God provides the way of escape well ahead of the temptation. Many times we can anticipate when we’re in tempting situations; we can talk with others and ask for counsel and prayer.

“ . . . so that you will be able to endure it.” When we “endure” temptation, we pass through it without sinning. One way to get rid of temptation is to give in to it (i.e., go ahead and sin). But giving in to temptation keeps us spiritually immature in that area of our lives. The other way to get rid of temptation is to endure it, to pass through it without sinning. Over time, enduring temptation leads to spiritual maturity. Our minds and bodies are trained in the ways of God.

God is faithful to provide a way of escape in the areas in which we know we’re weak and in the areas in which we think we stand. But think especially about the temptations associated with your strengths and the areas of your life in which God has worked. Paul is saying that it is not inevitable that you fall to those temptations. To the contrary, if you allow Him to, God will help you endure such temptations and will magnify your strengths.

- If you are gifted in discernment, you don’t have to grumble when you see problems and things that need to be addressed; by the grace of God, you can be kind and gentle in how you share and an instrument of God for change.
- If you are gifted in speaking, you don’t have to be prideful toward those who aren’t; by the grace of God, you can be helpful in communicating truth.
- If you are gifted in relationships, you don’t have to be frustrated and judgmental toward those who aren’t; by the grace of God, you can reach out and show them a better way.

This passage makes clear that God is “for” us. The strengths and gifts He gives us don’t have to be our downfall. Quite the opposite: the strengths and gifts God gives us can and should be a source of joy and blessing to others.