

First Corinthians

April 6, 2025
Chapter 10

The Matters of Jewish Idolatry

“Paul’s Jewish Ancestors”
Chapter 10:1 - 15

In Chapter 9, Paul begins to defend his Apostleship to the saints in the Corinth Church, stating their salvations are his seal of proof of his Apostleship. He continues to defend his Apostleship and speaks of his bond-ship as an Apostle. Under his bond-ship, Paul reveals his evangelistic Gospel plan tailored to three groups: the Jews, the Gentiles, and the weak. Under the weak plan, Paul says to minister to them for the sake of participating in the Gospel. Beginning here in Chapter 10, Paul will explain that he must minister for the sake of his Jewish Ancestors.

(2) For the Sake of the Jewish Ancestors (10:1-13)

Paul writes,

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

First, this is a perfect example that demonstrates how intentional Paul is with certain terms he uses in his writing. In verse 1, he chooses the word “brethren” instead of “brothers” for a reason. The entire passage discusses the Jewish ancestors who left Egypt with Moses. Clearly, Gentiles did not leave Egypt with Moses; only the Jewish descendants of Jacob departed from Egypt.

Second, Paul intentionally uses metaphors to illustrate the spiritual nature of the Exodus and the events at Mount Sinai. The cloud by day shielded them from Pharaoh's pursuit. The parted Red Sea offered a safe passage away from Pharaoh. Moses' baptism symbolically represented how the clouds enveloped and protected them. Likewise, the divided Red Sea encircled and safeguarded them. The path was deep across the dry sea floor. If the walls of water had collapsed, no one would have survived. Yet, the Jews did survive. When the Egyptian army attempted to pursue them, the walls fell, and the Egyptians perished. The LORD protected Israel.

At Mount Sinai, Paul mentions that his ancestors ate and drank from the same spiritual source: “Christ.” This is Paul’s testimony that the same Jesus Christ known to the Corinthian Church was the Protector and Provider of Israel at Mount Sinai. However, even with the knowledge that the LORD Jesus Christ was watching over them, many rejected Him, leading to His rejection of them. As a result, they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land and were buried in the sand at Mount Sinai.

With that background, Paul sets the stage with their example to Jewish idolaters in his day.

(a) Their Example to Jewish Idolaters (10:6-7)

Paul recaps,

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

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.”

We can accurately paraphrase Paul's words as, "Don't do today what our ancestors did before us." What is an "idolater"? Paul didn't explicitly define the term, but when he quoted the Old Testament passage, "*THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY,*" he indicated exactly where to find the definition, or at least the story that illustrates idolatry. That quote appears in Exodus 32:6. In that chapter, Moses is on Mount Sinai with the LORD. Because Moses took so long to return to the camp below, the people built a golden calf. Once it was finished, they sat down to eat and worship it. They drank, in its honor, and then stood up to engage in godless revelry. In just a few short days without Moses, the Israelites created their god in defiance. In this story, Paul warns the Jewish saints not to rebel against the LORD as they did when Moses was away.

Paul now turns to their example of Jewish immorality.

(b) Their Example of Jewish Immorality (10:8-11)

Paul continues,

⁸ Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. ⁹ Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. ¹⁰ Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 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.

Paul recalls three more immoral sins committed by the Jewish ancestors during the time of Moses.

"Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day." In Numbers 25, when Israel was only weeks away from entering the Promised Land, some of the Jewish men started to engage with Moabite prostitutes. This occurred through the worship of Baal, which angered the LORD. Here, we learn that 23,000 were destroyed because of this sin, while in Numbers, it states the number was 24,000. Clearly, a translation error has taken place, but one thing is certain: on that day, more people than the average population of a town in America died for engaging in the sin of idolatrous prostitution. None of them entered the Promised Land. The point is that as a saint of the Most High, you do not want to commit immoral acts.

"Nor let us test the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents." For this story, we return to Numbers, Chapter 21. As they traveled away from Mount Sinai, the people complained about God and Moses. The LORD sent serpents to bite those who had grumbled. Moses crafted a bronze serpent and lifted it high on a pole. To be saved from the snakebites, the people had to keep their eyes on the bronze serpent. If they looked away, they would be bitten. The lesson is that you should not complain about the Most High God and His chosen leader. *"Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer."* Here, we return to Numbers Chapter 16 with the rebellion of Korah. Korah, with 250 other leaders of the Jews, rebelled against Moses and Aaron. The earth opened and swallowed all 250 men. The point is, you do not rebel against the Most High's chosen leader and priest.

"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." Paul's point is significant. The LORD allowed all the tragedies in the wilderness during Moses' leadership to stand as a timeless example of what Jews should never do in sin against the LORD. What does Paul mean when he says, "upon whom the ends of the ages have come"? He refers to the time when this letter was written. In Romans 13:12, Paul tells the saints in Rome, "Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep, for now, salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. ... Therefore, let us lay aside the

deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” In the Old Testament, many Jews mistakenly believed that their salvation depended on their place in the sacrificial system and their obedience to the sacrificial laws. This thinking was flawed because, even in those days, they still needed to call upon the name of the LORD for salvation. The sacrificial system was an act of worship. However, in Paul’s time, it was clearly understood that salvation was attained by calling upon the name of the LORD, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit forever transformed lives. These warnings from Paul were meant to ensure that the Jewish saints would not be uninformed in any matter.

Now, Paul will give an example of not falling into temptation.

(c) The Example to Not Fall to Temptation (10:12-13)

Verses 12 – 13.

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

When Paul uses the word “*Therefore*,” what he is about to say is based on what he has just mentioned. He has just explained three sins that his Jewish ancestry committed with Moses: idolatry, immorality, and rebellion, all against the LORD. In light of those three sins, Paul warns everyone who believes they are strong enough not to be tempted by such sins to reconsider and “*take heed*” so as not to fall. “*Take heed*,” what does that mean? It means consistently making *careful observations and taking special precautions for protection*. Paul was well-versed in the dangers of sin and how they can catch even the careful saints off guard. He states, “*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to man.*” In other words, if you think you are something special, be cautious! There are temptations in this world that every human must confront.

But for the saints of the LORD, do not worry. Paul states, “*and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.*” In other words, as a saint, the LORD God is looking out for you. He understands your limits. He knows what you can handle. He knows what won’t drive you over the edge, make you want to jump, or cause you to sink. He recognizes the point where sin cannot cause you to do what is wrong and evil. He “*will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.*” He won’t let sin tempt you beyond your capacity to resist it. He is there for you, managing the temptation.

Temptations will come that are common to all humanity. “*...but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*” I see this verse as one of the most evident proofs of God’s plan for humanity to have free will, to choose their own path, to sin or not to sin. God will allow you to be tempted, yet not beyond your limit. He sets the road in front of you, yet allows you to decide how far down that road you will travel. The culmination of sin is at the dead end of the road. You can see it coming. But along the way, escape routes are available to help you avoid colliding with sin at the end of the road. Other paths will take you far away from sin. Will you be able to endure sin? That is not what Paul is saying. Will you be able to endure the temptation? That is precisely what Paul is conveying. The paths that lead away from temptation are your means of escape, allowing you to survive the temptation by steering you far from the act of sin.

To the beloved saints, Paul says to flee idolatry.

d) To the Beloved to Flee Idolatry (10:14-33)

Verse 14.

¹⁴ *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.* ¹⁵ *I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say.*

Paul again uses the word "Therefore." In light of his earlier comments about the path of temptation to sin, he advises to "*flee from idolatry.*"

When we think of the term "*idolatry*," we associate it with the worship of idols or false gods. However, the definition is much broader than that. The first of the Ten Commandments states, "*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol....*"

Now, let's broaden our discussion to the next commandment: "*You shall not take the LORD's name in vain.*" This does not refer to cursing, as many interpret it. It means claiming to belong to the LORD when you actually do not. If you assert that the LORD is your God while lacking in trust toward Him, it implies that you are placing your trust in something or someone else. Trusting something or someone else makes you an idolater because you have another god apart from God.

Now, the next commandment: "*Remember to keep the Sabbath, the LORD's Day.*" If the Sabbath isn't important to you, then something or someone else holds greater importance; therefore, that is another god besides God.

Next, "*Honor your father and mother.*" If you do not honor your father or mother, then you are not honoring God. Therefore, something or someone is more important to you than God, and that may be yourself.

We can go all the way through the Ten Commandments. If you break commandments two through ten, you have broken command one, "*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol....*" To make things worse, if you break any of the LORD's Laws in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, you have broken the first Commandment, "*You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol....*" *You are guilty of idolatry* if you break any of the LORD's Laws.

Paul says, "*I speak to wise men; you judge what I say.*" I say the same to you: judge what I just expressed. If you break any law of the LORD, you violate the first Commandment and are guilty of idolatry. You, who consider yourselves biblically wise, reflect on the clear proof I provided with the first of the Ten Commandments. Is that not true? And since it was the pre-incarnate LORD Jesus who delivered all the Commandments, are we not idolaters if we reject Him and place something or someone else in a more important position in our lives?

Using his statement, "*flee from idolatry,*" as a springboard, Paul urges those who consider themselves wise to reflect on a series of matters that will benefit many as the LORD's saints rather than focusing on themselves. First, Paul instructs them to consider the LORD's Supper.