

Prayers

To God

Pray to the Lord Your God; give Him praise in whatever tongue or language you feel appropriate; wait on Him to hear His Word for your soul; be ready to live according to the instructions He will give.

For myself

Theme - 'standing tall'

Pray for the church of God and your place within it. Pray that you will play your part in what the church of God is doing in your part of the world, and that you will do your best to contribute to this vision.

For others

Lord God, many of the things You do within this world remain for us an entrancing mystery. But let us not stand back to merely watch Your plans unfold within this world. Give us the courage to take up our calling, be used by You, and become a part of Your mystery, Your plans and purpose for the future of Creation. May we be satisfied with nothing less. AMEN

Meditation

Are we available when the Lord requires us?
Or, being otherwise occupied with life,
Do we think the needs of the Kingdom of God
Do not fit the calendar of our commitments?

Are we available when the Lord calls us?
Or, being far too tired or sometimes lazy,
Do we stall, and put off His work 'till tomorrow
Because we don't want to do it today?

Are we available when the Lord needs us?
Or, being otherwise minded, distracted,
Do we imagine that the things we normally do
Are more important than the call to holy living?

Are we available when the Lord comes knocking?
Or, being blind to the things of His Kingdom
Do we prefer the greater temptations of the world
Because we've long since sold our souls?

But the Lord still calls and awaits our response,
Still longs to love us, bruised and hassled as we are,
And we can always turn again to receive His love;
That is, if by some miraculous prompting, we will ...

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

¹ I do not want you to fail to understand, fellow believers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud; all passed through the sea, ² all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that came after them, and the rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down and died in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they desired it. ⁷ Do not become idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they got up to dance!' ⁸ We must not commit sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were killed by serpents. ¹⁰ And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the angel of death.

¹¹ These things happened to them as an example, and they were written down as warnings for us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹² So if you think you are standing, be very careful that you do not fall. ¹³ No testing has taken hold of you that is not a common human experience. God is faithful, and he will not allow you be tested beyond what you are able to bear; with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to bear it.

Review

In everything Paul has written so far, he has responded to issues of concern brought to him by messengers, and has sought to correct what was happening in the life of the church. He feels obliged to confront these problems head on because he was the founder of the church and believes this gives him authority to speak to all, whatever faction they have subsequently attached themselves to. In doing this Paul sometimes calls on the basic Christian teaching of the Gospel, and sometimes he skates to the very edges of Christian theology. For example, in the opening of his letter he drills home the core Gospel teaching of the effective sacrificial death of 'Christ crucified' (e.g. 2:2); and in the last two chapters he calls on mature Christians to put aside some of their principles in order not to offend those of 'weaker' faith (e.g. 8:10-13), but only for the greater cause of the Gospel itself.

Paul now begins to speak to the Corinthians in a different way. He begins to warn them against the sin of rebellion which bedevilled the people of Israel in the Old Testament; he does not want the dire religious problems of the Old Covenant to affect the new people of God, and uses Old Testament scriptural examples to make his appeal. In this way, he makes the case that the Scriptures of the Old Testament exist as a warning for God's people today; '*now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they desired it ...*' (10:6); '*they were written down as warnings to us ...*' (10:11). At the very least we must ask ourselves whether this way of using the Old Testament has something to teach us.

The cloud, Moses, and the spiritual rock which is Christ ... (10:1-5)

The first five verses are fascinating, because they reveal the way Paul used the Old Testament to make a point about the new people of God. He links Old and New Testaments by speaking of Israel's forefathers as '*our ancestors*' (10:1), meaning that Old Testament Judaism and New Testament Christianity are irrevocably linked in a historic and unbroken spiritual inheritance. We may take this for granted today, but it is important that all God's people recognise their spiritual inheritance, and ensure it is not forgotten.

The connection between Israel and the Church is driven home by references to some of Israel's most powerful salvation experiences. Paul says, '*our ancestors were all under the cloud*' (10:1), which is an enigmatic way of saying that both ancient Israel and the Church come under the authority of the one God. The 'cloud' is a classic symbol of God's guiding presence leading Israel through the desert (Ex 13:21, 40:34f.), and Paul emphasises the connection, '*all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea ... ate the same food ... drank from the same spiritual drink*' (10:2,3).

If God's people Old and New Testament are connected, then what does this mean? Certainly, all Jews knew that after God liberated them from Egypt and brought them through the 'baptismal' experience of deliverance through the Red Sea (10:2), their spiritual strength failed. Israel's disobedience meant they incurred God's wrath, and all those who left Egypt died in the wilderness (except Joshua) before reaching the Promised Land. So by reminding the Corinthians of this, Paul warns them of the consequences of their disobedience, for despite the amazing work of salvation they had found in Christ, they could still go their own way and be thoroughly disobedient, just like Israel. To emphasise the connection, Paul places Christ within his illustration, saying famously, *'they drank from the spiritual rock that came after them, and the rock was Christ'* (10:4). What a startling claim! People receive from Christ, but still incur God's displeasure! No one can say, *'I am a Christian'* and expect everyone to believe they are perfect!

Further warnings about the people of Israel and the Corinthian church (10:6-10)

Paul's point is very well made; the Old Testament is full of warning signs, which can teach God's people about all sorts of human frailties (10:6). He highlights several things to illustrate his concerns about the Corinthian church. First of these is the sin of idolatry, *'do not become idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "the people sat down to eat and drink, and they then got up to dance!"'* (10:7). This phrase is mysterious to us, for we do not understand why dancing after eating could result in idolatry! It is likely however, that what Paul was referring to here was a form of 'after meal' cultic dance which was dedicated to Roman gods. Jews had their own traditions of festive dancing, but the strong sexual and cultic overtones of dance in the first century meant that Paul was concerned at its practice in amongst God's people.

Dance often has sexual overtones, and note how quickly Paul slips between talking about dance and sexual immorality (10:7,8), and we should remember that one of the first major issues in this letter is sexual immorality (chapter 5:1f. 5:15f.). The issues at Corinth difficult; *'a man has (sleeps with) his father's wife'* (5:1f.). Now in the Old Testament, there is a story told in which a plague erupts on Israel, and is only averted when an Israelite man is found having sex with a Midianite woman who was a worshipper of *'Baal of Peor'* (Numbers 25:1-9). The plague stopped when the two were killed by way of punishment, and it was found that 24,000 people died while the plague persisted. Paul is challenging his readers; are such a large number to be slaughtered in the church because of the immorality of two people in the Corinthian church?

Then, in the same vein, Paul calls to mind Israel's famous rebellion in the wilderness, when the people put God to the test by complaining about guidance; on that occasion, a plague of serpents beset the people which was only dealt with when Moses *'placed a bronze serpent on a pole'* (Numbers 21:9). Paul says simply, *'we must not put Christ to the test ... or complain ... and (be) destroyed by an angel of death'* (10:9). The Old Testament punishments of God's people were severe; are they to be the same now?

The message; stand and be faithful ... (10:11-13)

Paul now makes his point. All this are examples from which God's people must learn, and this is the point of the Old Testament. How casually we treat the Old Testament today, when we pick and choose plum texts we think convey New Testament sentiments, when we need to get to grips with the truth of this great and godly record, and see the difficult things as well as the wonderful! He says, *'they were written down as a warning for us on whom the ends of the ages have come.'* (10:11). Time is short, so why waste it on what is known through Scripture to be fruitless?

The next phrase in this last paragraph is a wonderful text and well known to many; *'if you think you are standing, do not fall, for no testing has taken hold of you that is not common human experience. God is faithful and He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able to bear.'* (10:12,13). These sentences have been a great source of comfort to many, but let us look at what they mean, but they summarise what Paul is saying here. First, Christians should not presume they cannot fall and should take care not to fall foul of the God who has saved them. Second, there is no excuse for failure, because no testing is beyond general human experience of the Lord's provision to endure, and without believing this the Christian is truly lost.

So when Paul adds, *'with the testing He will also provide the way out so that you may be able to bear it'* (10:13), he is not merely giving us reassurance, he is confirming a fact of life for those who trust in God completely. This is not a text for the faint hearted, to help the weak find a way out of difficulties; it is a promise of God the the active faithful who are involved in His work, are conscious of the enemy's attacks, and who trust their Lord and God that in the midst of life He will not fails them. This is the strength and maturity of faith Paul is urging on the Corinthians.

Discipleship

Application

Old and New Testaments

In this passage there is a good and classic description of how the Old Testament can work to help us understand the New. Paul says that the stories of Israel in the Old Testament teach us about the frailties of God's people so that we may be warned of the problems we face even today. So if we read the Old Testament and watch out for Israel's failures, we will be well warned about what happens when God's people go their own way, and can learn lessons for today. People do not always appreciate this, but Scripture has much to teach us about church life today in the Old Testament stories of God's people.

Dancing?

Paul's example in verse 7 implies that there is something ungodly, if not devilish, about dance. Should the Christian then avoid dance at all costs? Certainly, most dance is an elaborate relationship ritual with sexual overtones, and its exaggerated free flowing, disciplined or freestyle movements and touching can sometimes be highly sexual, even in routines regarded as far removed from sordid implications. I prefer to believe that Paul's gripe was not with dance itself, but the particular 'after meal' dance with its sexual overtones he regarded as contrary to acceptable Christian discipline. If God's people like to dance today that is no bad thing, as long as they understand that as in all walks of life, what is done can become an idol, especially when it is valued more highly than the Gospel, than even God Himself. When this happens with whatever activity or hobby, we make idols that come between us and the God we claim to worship on Sundays.

The message of hope

The only way we can use the message of the last paragraph today is to accept it as God's promise for the faithful. It is certainly a passage worth remembering, and it begins with a warning to Christians that we cannot presume we are able to stand tall in every situation, that we are impregnable by the devil and His temptations. Every man or woman is subject to earth's trials and can succumb to the devils' temptations and testing, and if we think we above this we are wandering astray from the truth. However, for those who know their frailty and who understand their dependence upon the Lord God, verse 13 is a treasure to return to time and time again. It offers us a lively hope that our God will never let us down and will stand with us in all circumstances. Nothing is beyond his power to uphold His own.

Ideas for what to do

- *Think for a moment about your knowledge of the Old Testament. What famous passages stick out and inspire you, and what do they teach the Christian church today? Write down a list of Old Testament teaching that has been significant to you in your life; consider for example the Sabbath, tithing or moral teaching (the Ten Commandments).*
- *What major tests do you face, physically, spiritually, mentally? Are they all about you, or are they problems or sins held in common by others? Pray about how to handle these tests, and pray about whether you need to talk to others about them. Speak to a pastor if necessary.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about what the Christian church can learn from the Old Testament?*
2. *To what extent is idolatry a problem today, and how may it be overcome?*
3. *Is it really true that we experience nothing that is so unique to ourselves that no one has ever experienced it before?*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, bless us as we do our best to live the lives You would want of us. Help us to live according to the Gospel in both difficult and in easy times. Bless us with the power of Your Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, we pray. **AMEN**