

Our Examples

In 1 Corinthians chapter 10 (the New Testament Portion of our Daily Readings), the inspired Apostle describes particular events from the history of Israel thus: “these things were *our examples*”. In our considerations today, we shall examine those “examples” to understand the principles and lessons applicable for ourselves. The first point is expressed thus:

“...these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, *as they also lusted*” (1 Cor. 10:6)

Israel then, provides us with an example of the satisfying of lust: “all that is in the world, *the lust* of the flesh, *the lust* of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1Jno. 2:16) is not of Yahweh, and is to pass away by the expansion of the rulership of Christ. “Lust” is a word that defines the world in which we live. It is part of the Human constitution to want, and to have, and if there was ever an age that promoted lust as a natural, normal, and desirable thing, it is that in which we live. Bombarded from all sides with media advertising, it is difficult to escape from its insidious influence, and maintain a sense of objectivity. But very often, those things we are induced to want seem to be innocuous in themselves. “as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark”, even so were the days of the Son of Man. There is nothing wrong with eating and drinking, or being given in marriage, either then, or in our day. But it is the desire and pursuit of these things that is wrong. To be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:4) is a spirit that characterizes the age in which we live: a desire to Have, in opposition to the spirit of Christ which is a desire to Give.

EVIL THINGS

This was the case of the “evil things” that Israel lusted after. The allusion is to Numbers chapter 11, where we read that:

“the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us to eat? We remember *the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick*” (Num. 11:4-5)

Notice, that there is nothing intrinsically “evil” about the things they desired. Fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic – all normal foods in today’s world. But what was wrong, and what made them “evil” was a lusting after them instead of being satisfied with what Yahweh had provided. So they continued to complain: “but now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes” (Num. 11:5-6). Their desire to have was greater than their appreciation of what they already had. They regarded the Manna as “nothing at all” by comparison of what they enjoyed in Egypt – and this same spirit is part of the natural human constitution of all men. From Eden onwards, men have been dissatisfied with what their Maker has provided for them, and sought after the fulfillment of his own lusts. Eve saw that the forbidden tree was pleasant to the sight, and good for food, and partook of it in rebellion to her Maker. Israel lusted after the tasty foods of Egypt – yet interestingly, the things they desired were insubstantial in themselves. A hungry soul cannot be satisfied with munching on an onion, or eating some garlic. All of these things are light, insubstantial things that are pleasurable on the palate, but are useless in their ability to nourish. So it is that men

naturally delight in “trifles light as air,” which, when compared with the bread of life, cannot spiritually nourish or strengthen. The man of God however, sees that which pertains to eternity: the bread of life, and the water of life. So far as the pursuit of natural things to, having food and raiment he is content (1 Tim. 6:8), receiving those things with thanksgiving before God who giveth all.

IDOLATRY

The next “example” is that of idolatry:

“neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat, and rose up to play” (1 Cor. 10:7)

This aspect of eating and drinking in revelry, and rising up to play reinforces the principles we have just considered: lovers of pleasures rather than loves of God. The people bowed down before gold (i.e. a golden calf), which they thought had saved them. Even so today, men bow before the gold of money, offered up upon the altar of mammon. Being so preoccupied in seeking pleasures, men are naturally blinded to the things that pertain to the Eternal Spirit.

These circumstances are most instructive for our day. Moses had ascended into the presence of God upon the mount to receive the Law that was to form the constitution of the nation, and the people were to patiently wait for his return. Yet they turned aside from the way of righteousness in his absence, to the extent of even doubting whether or not he would come. The example to us is quite plain: we are waiting for the prophet “like unto” Moses, and just as the people were to patiently await their Law-giver to come back to them, even so we look for our Lord Jesus Christ. “Occupy till I come” is the divine maxim. We must conduct our affairs with wisdom and discretion, so that the coming of Christ will be of no surprise to us, but will fulfill all our lifelong yearnings and desires. It is a characteristic of an “evil servant” to “say in his heart, ***My lord delayeth his coming:***” (Mat. 24:48), and it is the characteristic of the faithful to be ready for that day. Seeking to crucify the flesh, we seek only those things that are above, where Christ sits at the Right Hand of God, and yearn for the time of his coming, when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of Yahweh, and His Beloved Son.

We therefore, do not engage in the senseless partying of those who have no hope, being “alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart” (Col. 1:21). We are called to be a holy people, separate from the idolatrous ways of the heathen. Though it may be that we were once like them, we are called to better things, which secure an eternal future for us. So it is written of the man of God that:

“he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: ***wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot***, speaking evil of you; who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead” (1 Pet. 4:2-5).

Esteeming reproach for Christ’s sake greater riches than the treasures of the World, we look away from carnal things to the great recompense of reward (Heb. 11:26).

FORNICATION

The Apostle continues:

“Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand”

The allusion here, is to Numbers 22-25, and the attempt of Balaam to curse God’s people, out of a love of riches and honour. We recall that Balack, the king of the Moabites sought to persuade this renegade prophet to speak a curse against Yahweh’s people. It was a fruitless enterprise to begin with: why should the Almighty listen to the voice of a mortal man to curse His people? But as events turned out, Balaam was not permitted to speak a curse, and could only speak those things that Yahweh had commanded him ... which were words of blessing instead. However, being greedy of gain, Balaam sought a different way to curse the people – by getting them to bring a curse upon themselves. Numbers 25 begins thus:

“And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab” (Num. 25:1).

The Book of Revelation fills in some of the details here:

“But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication” (Rev. 2:14)

Though he failed to pronounce a curse upon Israel, Balaam found another way to bring about their fall – to place them in a circumstance where they would bring condemnation upon themselves. He taught Balak how he could curse Israel, by both eating meat offered to Idols, and to commit fornication. It is this aspect of Fornication which is emphasized in the historic record of Numbers 25; what Balak had to do was to send in the Moabitish girls, to tempt Israel in such away that through their own actions, they would induce their God to condemn them.

Again, there are many significant lessons to be gleaned from this account. Balaam was a man driven by covetousness, and greed. So Jude warns of false brethren:

“woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and *ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward*, and perished in the gainsaying of Core” (Jude 11).

We must rather be motivated by a love of the brethren to build up and edify, not the love of the reward of iniquity that may make them fall. But there is another point here: Romans chapter 8 describes the position of the believer in Christ:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... for I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35-39).

So it is that all these external circumstances cannot bring a curse upon us, any more than Balaam could bring a curse upon the people of Israel. But there is one thing missing from that list. Israel could only be cursed by bringing a curse upon themselves in their disobedience to their God. What the Apostle does not mention as a separating influence is *our own selves*. We can bring the curse of God upon us, by rebellion and disobedience to his ways. Nothing else, and nobody else can separate us from the love of God and his Christ: let us take heed therefore, and not be tempted in carnal things that can cause us to fall from our elevated position of Grace.

TEMPTATION

The Apostle continues:

“Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of Serpents”

The allusion here is to Numbers chapter 21, where we read of how the people chided with Moses:

“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 water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And Yahweh sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and much people of Israel died” (Num. 21:5-6).

Notice the common theme: the people were dissatisfied with what their God had provided. They regarded the divinely provided food as inadequate: “no bread” and “light bread”. The lesson here is not to treat our Father’s care of us lightly. We must not want and desire more than what God provides, for such is covetousness which is idolatry. As a consequence, the fiery serpents were brought into the camp, and much people died. So it is that the ways of covetousness can only bring forth death.

But there was a way of salvation provided to save those who were bitten by the serpents from death. After he had prayed to Yahweh on the people’s behalf, “Yahweh said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole, and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten, *when he looketh upon it, shall live*. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it on a pole, and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, *when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived*” (Num. 21:8-9). Salvation was provided to Israel by the lifting up of the image of the serpents that had bitten them. That image displayed the serpent rendered powerless – the image could save, and not condemn those who looked upon it in faith. So it is, that we have a foreshadowing of the love of God extended to those who look upon the Son of Man in faith:

“as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jno. 3:14-16).

Just as God’s love was seen in the lifting up of the brazen serpent, even so God likewise loved the world, that in the lifting up of His Son, salvation might be obtained. In our Lord Jesus

Christ we see a likeness of that which brings death to us all: the likeness of sinful flesh. So it is written that:

“what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

Again,

“he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

When we look towards the Lord Jesus Christ, we see the serpent-image lifted up, having its power nullified. Being “made sin” in the sense of having a nature of sin, or the “likeness of sinful flesh”, in his lifting up upon the cross, we see sin lifted up. Like the Brasen serpent, Messiah was lifted up for the salvation of those who would seek salvation through him. But in him, sin was condemned, and the *diabolos* destroyed. The lifting up of Messiah was a lifting up in victory over the greatest enemy of mankind, as one who bore our nature, yet overcame it, and abrogated the law of sin and death which condemns all men to the grave. Let us therefore lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily beset us, “*looking unto Jesus* that author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2).

As Israel looked to the Brasen Serpent, we must therefore look unto Jesus as one who overcame, and rendered the serpent powerless over those who have faith in his ability to save. Rather than to tempt God in despising the things he has provided, we must appreciate the greatest provision He has made for us, in the putting away of our sins through faith in His Son.

MURMURING

The final “example” for us to consider is that of murmuring:

“Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer” (1 Cor. 10:10).

Murmuring, grumbling and complaining is a common feature of men and women in the world – but it is something that should not feature in the minds of those who love God, and commit all their ways to Him. The allusion is to the murmuring of disbelief expressed by the people when they lost the faith that Yahweh was able to save them, and bring them into their promised inheritance.

“all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would God we had died in this wilderness!” (Num. 14:2).

It was against the murmurers that the judgment of God came:

“the men, which Moses sent to search the land, who returned, and made all the congregation to murmur against him, by bringing up a slander upon the land, even

those men that did bring up the evil report, died by the plague before Yahweh” (Num. 14:36-37).

Murmurers can cause much damage in ecclesial life. We know that it is through much tribulation that we shall enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22), and it is necessary therefore that we share the same spirit of endurance as Messiah himself. Complainers who grumble about the difficulties of life help no-one, and can undermine the confidence of many.

In the case of Israel, the murmuring was because the adversary seemed to be greater than originally thought. The murmuring was because of the “children of Anak”. So they complained:

“... all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight” (Num. 13:32-33).

Notice the fatal mistake that the people were making: they were comparing themselves and their own abilities with the perceived greatness of the adversary. However, they should have been comparing the enemy with the real greatness of their God. And in this, we have a powerful exhortation for ourselves – we can either grow faint at the difficulties in The Way, or we can trust in the Power of God to save. There may be times when we feel spiritually weak and unable to contend against the wiles of the flesh, which seem strong and overpowering. Sometimes we might find ourselves beset with problems and difficulties, and wonder how we can cope. But it is at such times that we really do need to consider the greatness of our God, and how much more powerful He is than the negative influences that pull us down. Instead of grumbling and murmuring before fellow man, we should take our case to our Father in prayer, and trust in Him to ensure that all things will work out for our ultimate good.

“MANY”

There is another feature that we ought to consider. Notice that in the passages under consideration, it was not *all* in Israel who were numbered with the faithless:

“neither be ye idolaters as were *some of them* ... neither let us commit fornication as *some of them* committed ... neither let us tempt Christ, as *some of them* also tempted ...neither murmur ye, as *some of them* murmured ...”

We have considered the failings of Israel, who were called to be the people of God. But we do so not so that we can boast against the branches which were cut off, but rather that we might humbly consider their example, and resolve to be different. In the midst of the congregation, there was a small minority who held fast to their hope in the promises made to Abraham, whilst all around men and women were bowing before the altar of mammon. Even so it is today. Rather than follow the multitude that wander down the broad way that leads only to death and destruction, we need to stand apart, and maintain the faith which was once for all given unto the saints.

Concerning the Gospel, it is written:

“some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses” (Heb. 3:16).

Again:

“unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being joined by faith to them that heard it” (AV Marg, Heb. 4:20)

In every age, there have always been a minority who hold the Truth as it is in Christ Jesus. We need to be joined by faith to those who hear and obey the Gospel message, even that great cloud of witnesses made up by men and women throughout the generations that have passed since the fall of Adam. Men and women all around us might seek to discourage us by their lack of faith and foresight concerning the days to come. Complaining and murmuring at the difficulties of life, they can only be a negative influence in ecclesial life. We, however, do not have to be like them. We can be different. We can have the joyous vision of the kingdom ever before our minds, strengthening and encouraging us to hold fast. We can be an example of patient continuance in well doing in the face of adversity, and so encourage others to do likewise. Israel fell, and we were grafted into the tree in their place. We therefore, must heed their example, that we might grow and prosper, rather than to be like them and be cut off as they were.

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