

## **“Warning Signals!”**

### **1 Corinthians 10**

**Hymns: #343 What a Friend We Have in Jesus #527 Take My Life and Let It Be**

**Reading: 1 Corinthians 10**

In U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, the magazine of the Naval Institute, Frank Koch illustrates the importance of not letting one's privileges shipwreck you by pridefully ignoring warnings.

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on manoeuvres in heavy weather for several days. Frank was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow."

"Is it steady or moving astern?" the captain called out.

The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship, "We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees."

Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change your course twenty degrees."

The captain said, "Send: "I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees."

"I'm a seaman second-class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees."

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send: "I'm a battleship. Change course twenty degrees."

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course."<sup>1</sup>

“We changed course”. Have you ever had to change course? Have you ever received warning signals that you need to change your direction? As we come to this 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1 Corinthians, God...the Lighthouse, is signalling through Paul to the ship of the Corinthians, that they need to make a course adjustment. You see, there was more going on in Corinth with regard to meat sacrificed to idols we saw in Ch. 8 than simply the eating or abstaining of it. For some, it appears, were actually involving themselves in the ritual participation of the sacrifice of that meat to idols, and they felt they had the Christian liberty to do so. These Corinthian believers were in serious danger of shipwrecking themselves. In this chapter Paul is seeking to “correct their course” of this false thinking by signalling a warning to them from Israel’s past; he is signalling warning to them illustrated in the Lord’s Table; and finally he signals one additional warning to those of Ch. 8, regarding not stumbling another’s conscience.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado; *In the Eye of the Storm*; Word Publishing, 1991, p. 153

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#### 1. Warning from the Past V.1-13

**Current Privilege v. 1-5** *“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3They all ate the same spiritual food 4and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”*

We’ll recall that Ch. 9 concluded with Paul describing the race he was running, the prize he was after and the self-discipline he exercised along the way so as not to be “disqualified”. And we saw he was not talking about the possibility of him or a Christian losing their salvation, but rather the possibility of undergoing the sever discipline of being disapproved; being “disqualified” from the race by death. It is this thought that Paul continues with in Ch. 10. He doesn’t want the Corinthians to be ignorant of the past and God’s dealings with His own people. For those in Corinth who were no longer “competing according to the rules” (2 Tim 2:5), but were in error, relying on their privileges now as Christians to be involved in idolatry, Paul warns from their forefathers’ past that such privilege is no guarantee of immunity from God’s discipline.

When God delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage, they experienced five privileges which correspond to the Corinthian’s own experience. They were all under the cloud, meaning they had supernatural guidance and protection. They all passed through the sea, meaning they had experienced a miraculous deliverance- salvation. They were all baptised into Moses, meaning they were united with their spiritual head and object of their trust. They all ate the same spiritual food, meaning bread from heaven- the Bread of the Lord’s Table. And finally, they all drank the same spiritual drink, meaning Christ himself as the Water of Life.

In spite of all these privileges, God was not pleased with MOST of them and their bodies were scattered over the desert. Do you remember what the watershed event was that caused God to not be pleased with “most of them”? It was their failure at Kadesh Barnea when they accepted the bad report of 10 of the 12 spies who had gone into the “promised land”. They treated God with contempt and didn’t trust Him to give them what He had promised, and instead were fearful of the “giants” they saw. As a result, not one person of the some 1.5 million Israelites over twenty years of age would ever take possession of what God had promised to give them. The only exceptions were Caleb and Joshua, the two trusting spies. All the rest were consigned to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Heb. 3:19; 4:2 says “So we see they were not able to enter because of their unbelief”... and “the message they heard was of no value to them because those who heard did not combine it with faith”. Even Moses himself, privileged leader Moses, failed to enter because of his outburst of anger, striking the rock and so dishonouring God as holy in the sight of the Israelites. (Num. 20:12). These all died in the wilderness. God warns them and us that the privilege of salvation does make one immune to failure on route to heaven or God’s discipline along the way.

To further illustrate this, Paul gives four specific examples of past failures and warns that these have been written down for US to learn from and so avoid the same mistake.

**Past Examples v.6-11** *“Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.” 8We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did--and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9We should not test the Lord, as some of them did--and were killed by snakes. 10And do not grumble, as some of*

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*them did--and were killed by the destroying angel. 11These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.”*

- **“Do not be idolaters”**. This is referring to the incident that occurred while Moses was up on Mt Sinai. (Ex. 32: 1-6; 28-35) The people became impatient and said to Aaron, ““Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.” So Aaron “made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Then “the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” God was not pleased and as a result 3,000 people died by the sword of the Levites and the Lord struck an unknown number of them with a plague.
- **“Do not commit sexual Immorality”**: This example refers to Numbers 25 where Balaam had taught Balak, King of Moab, how he could defeat Israel by getting them to indulge in immorality with the Moabite women which would then lead them to sacrifice to their gods. As a result God’s anger burned against them and in one day 1,000 leaders who did this were put to death by Israel’s judges and another 23,000 people died by plague.
- **“Do not test the Lord”**: This example refers to Numbers 21:4-6 “But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.”
- **“Do not grumble against the Lord”**: This example refers to Numbers 16 when Korah, Dathan and Abiram along with 250 Israelite leaders became insolent and rose up against Moses’ leadership. In actuality, they rose up against God and His sovereign leading through the singularity of the man he chose. As a result, the ground opened up and swallowed Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their families alive and fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 leaders. When the rest of the people saw this they too turned on Moses and claimed he had killed the Lords people. As a result, God wrath came upon them in the form of a plague and 14,700 people died.

It is possible that each of these examples found expression in the Corinthian issue of eating food sacrificed to idols and therefore each of them was a particular warning to the Corinthians and Paul wanted to make sure they applied this to themselves...it wasn’t just OT history. God had disciplined in the past, He would discipline in the present. Death’s “disqualification from the race” was just as real to them, and us, as it was in the past examples. David Lowry comments here saying, “If the Corinthians believed their standing in Christ and corresponding freedom could be exercised in sin with impunity, they were wrong, possibly **dead** wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

**Warnings Applied v. 12-13** *“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”*

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<sup>2</sup> David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.527)*

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This passage reminds us of the proverb that “Pride goes before a fall” (16:18), and unfortunately it appears that pride was not in short supply among the boasting baby believers at Corinth. To become complacent or prideful is to risk falling into temptation; it is to expose ourselves to a fall.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Confessing Church pastor and theologian who was martyred by the Nazi’s in 1945 describes temptation like this:

“In our members there is a slumbering inclination towards desire which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power, desire seizes mastery over the flesh. All at once a secret smouldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames. It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire or ambition or vanity or desire for revenge or love or fame and power or greed for money or finally that strange desire for the beauty of the world, of nature. Joy in God is extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, He loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real; the only reality is the devil. Satan does not fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God...”<sup>3</sup>

It was this very forgetfulness of God that Paul was warning the Corinthians about. He knew they would be tempted to indulge in the social norms of their day and ritual idolatry, so he says to them “Don’t get complacent and don’t get proud. Remember God. Remember His past disciplines and don’t let your Christian liberty and privileges lull you into a false security. Stay in your lane, run your race, win the prize and don’t let yourself get “disqualified””.

God’s word here encourages us all in these two verses with several facts regarding temptation:

- Every temptation is a common one. In other words, don’t think you’re the only one who has ever had that thought, desire or inclination. If you are Christian, you are forgiven, reconciled, redeemed and justified. But you still have an “old man” that can rear its head and you have an enemy who tempts. It’s not “uncommon” to face temptation, and in itself temptation is not sin. Christ Himself was tempted by the Devil in the wilderness, and Jesus remained without sin. It only becomes sin when you cave into it. As Martin Luther put it, “You can’t keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can sure keep them from building a nest in your hair.”
- God is faithful. It is not God who is tempting you. God tempts no one (James 1:13). Rather it is God who is faithful to be with you in it.
- God is sovereign. He sovereignly limits what His permissive will allows from both the enemy and your old man. He knows how much you can bear, and He is not unaware of it.
- God provides a way out. God provides an escape in temptation; literally “with the temptation”, not necessarily from temptation. And that “way out” is the δύνασθαι- the power to literally stand up under it; to endure it.

The problem the Corinthians had, and the course correction that Paul was signalling warnings to them about, was that some of them, when faced with temptation to idolatry, were not relying on these facts. “They were not looking for a way out by endurance, rather they were looking for a way in by indulgence.”<sup>4</sup>

**2. Warning Illustrated in the Lord’s Table V. 14-22** *“Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. 15I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16Is not the cup of thanksgiving for*

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer; *Temptation*; in Chuck Swindoll’s *Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*; Thomas Nelson; 1998; p. 566

<sup>4</sup> David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians*; *The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*; 1983; SP Publications (p.527)

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*which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? 17Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. 18Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's Table and the table of demons. 22Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”*

Hear that last sentence again, “Are we stronger than He?” Paul is saying, “Folks, here is the Lighthouse. It’s not going anywhere. Your rank as captain means nothing and your little battleship is not stronger than the immovable land mass you are steaming straight towards. Change course...my dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

In this section it becomes clearer that some of the Corinthians were going way beyond simply eating idol meat previously sacrificed in the pagan temples; they were actually participating in their rituals and this was going too far. This was idolatry that would “arouse the Lord’s jealousy” and expose them to the same discipline their forefathers experienced, possibly even death.

Paul is trying to help them see that though an idol is nothing at all in the world and responsibly eating meat sacrificed to an idol was their Christian liberty, however to “participate” (Lit. *κοινωνία*—to have communion or fellowship) in the sacrifices of pagans is actually to have communion and fellowship with demons. To help them grasp this, he points them to the sacrament of the Lord’s Table. When we partake of the sacrament of Bread and Wine, it is way more than simply a remembrance, it is a “participation IN” Him. There is an actual spiritual communion and fellowship with Christ. In addition, we who are many, identify as one body; one with Him and one with each other. Similarly, there is a dark and dangerous oneness with demons when their ritual sacrifices are participated in. What a travesty it was for some of those Corinthians to think they could have it both ways. Paul warns them to flee from this idolatry and change course. For some, it was already too late. They had shamelessly participated in the Lord’s Table in this unworthy manner and as a result Paul tells them in Ch. 11:30: “That is why many of you are weak and sick, and a number fallen asleep”...meaning they died.

Here at TA&F we come to the Lord’s Table every Sunday. And each Sunday we read these words of exhortation in the Eucharistic Liturgy. We’ll examine this more detail in the next chapter, but for now let us recognize that we cannot have it both ways. We cannot live according to the world and participate in its ignorant and varied worship of demons and then approach the Lord’s Table to participate in His Body and Blood. This is a dangerous thing. Along with Paul, I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say....Flee idolatry in all its forms. Our God is jealous for the purity of His Bride and you are not stronger than He. Change course!

**3. Warning Regarding Stumbling another’s Conscience V. 23-33** *““Everything is permissible”—but not everything is beneficial.” Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive. 24Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. 25Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, 26for, “The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.”27If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. 28But if anyone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience’ sake-- 29the other man’s conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? 30If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?*

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*31So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 32Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God-- 33even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.”*

In this last section, we see Paul return to one of the Corinthian’s favourite slogans as he wraps up his reply to them regarding food sacrificed to idols. He says in effect “Yes, yes, I know...everything is permissible as you are so fond of saying, but let me reiterate as I’ve already said, not everything is beneficial or constructive. Yes, yes...you have freedom in Christ to any meat; in fact don’t ever even raise this issue of where it came from either when you buy it in the market or if an unbeliever invites you to dinner at his place. Your responsibility to build up the weak is actually far more important than your liberty surrounding meat.”

We’ve already looked at this principle in some depth back in chapter 8, so we won’t spend much time here. But there is one additional scenario that involves conscience; that is the conscience of the unbeliever. The scenario is if an unbeliever, who invited a believer to dinner, and then made a point of saying that what was being served was in fact meat that had been sacrificed to an idol, then the believer was to abstain...not because of his conscience, but because of the unbeliever’s conscience.

Eugene Peterson puts it like this in *The Message*: “Even though you may be indifferent as to where it came from, he isn’t and you don’t want to send mixed messages to him about who YOU are worshipping.” I think Peterson has captured the meaning quite succinctly here, “...you don’t want to send mixed messages to him about who YOU are worshipping.”

In our encounters with unbelievers the priority is not the exercise of our Christian liberties, but rather the sending of clear messages to them about Christ, the one we worship. Paul say in v. 31 “whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” “Whatever” is fairly encompassing wouldn’t you say? Our eating or drinking or dress or speech...these are all sending messages to an unbelieving world. If we heed the Lighthouse warnings for ourselves, we ourselves will become beacons of hope for a lost and dying world. Jesus called us specifically to this in His Sermon on The Mount when he said: ““You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:14-16)

V. 32 tells us that as believers we have a responsibility not to cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God. This too is fairly encompassing wouldn’t you say? Every person on the planet falls into one of these three categories, and there is not a fourth. You are either a Jew, a gentile or a member of the Body of Christ, the church of God. It’s worth noting here too that “this reference to the Jews separate from the church shows that the NT church did not replace the Jewish nation.”<sup>5</sup> This verse should forever dispel any notions of replacement theology, antisemitism, or “Kingdom now” teaching and it strongly argues for a premillennial view the end times. Earlier this week I heard a news report that gave some shocking statistics regarding this among evangelical in the US. 30% of those surveyed believe the Church has replaced Israel and is the recipient of all Israel’s biblical prophetic promises. Another 40% don’t know what they think about Israel and the Church’s relationship to her. A staggering 70% of evangelicals are in abject error or ignorance to this most important truth. What danger this is! The Abrahamic Covenant of Gen 12:3 is still in play today; “I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you.” Furthermore, what comfort is forfeited by such ignorance, for one cannot hold to “replacement theology” or be ignorant of its

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.528

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ramifications and still find comfort from the hope of the Rapture; that great pre-tribulational and pre-millennial promise of our God and Savior Jesus Christ to His pilgrim people.

The bottom line is we have a responsibility to everyone, as Paul himself did. This chapter concludes with Paul reminding the Corinthians again of what he'd said back in 9:22 about being “all things to all men” so that he might save some. He says here, “Even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.”

Is this your attitude? I'm not talking about being a “people pleaser” in the sense of mediocrity. Jesus said lukewarm mediocrity made Him sick; He wanted to vomit the Laodiceans out of His mouth for such “people pleasing mediocrity”. I am talking about people pleasing in the sense of always seeking to live and speak in such a way that they may be saved and /or built up.

In light of this teaching from the Word of God, and the Warning Signals from The Lighthouse, can I encourage us all to do four specific things?

1. If you have seen or sensed this morning any complacency in yourself regarding your Christian privilege, thinking perhaps you could never be disqualified; that you are beyond the reach of divine discipline, then go to God in prayer and acknowledge it. Ask His forgiveness and thank Him for His hand of mercy in your race thus far.
2. Review the four areas of warning regarding idolatry, sexual immorality, testing the Lord or grumbling and determine where your personality is most exposed. Go to God in prayer and acknowledge that too and ask Him for His grace to avoid it.
3. Let us soberly recommit ourselves to a deeper reverence in how we come to the Lord's Table. While none of us are “worthy” of His Body and Blood of Jesus, everyone of us is responsible to participate in a “worthy manner”. That means confessing our sins and examining our manner of approach conscious that we cannot come flippantly, carelessly or with an unrepentant worldly fellowship.
4. Finally, ask God to orchestrate an opportunity for you share the Gospel with an unbeliever this week. That may be as simple as giving them a tract or leaving a bible or sharing your testimony. I guarantee if you pray this, you will be alert and applying what Paul modelled in seeking the good of others so that they may be saved. Who knows...this may even become a weekly prayer request 😊