

**VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023**  
**The Book of I Corinthians**  
**Lesson #7**  
**Answers to Their Letter (III)**  
**Chs. 10**

**I. Introduction:**

As Paul answers the Corinthians' 2<sup>nd</sup> question on "to eat or not to eat food sacrificed to idols (ch.8), giving him a platform to address both their opposition against his apostleship and authority and mistreatment of him financially (9: 1-14), he launches into a passionate plea for them to emulate him in giving up all rights for the sake of the gospel (9: 15-27).

Now, he also uses a negative example, that of the people of Israel in the wilderness, to warn them against unbridled abuse of freedom before he wraps his exhortation about the proper use of freedom in Christ,

**Chapter 10**

**10: 1 -13 The negative example of the people of Israel**

***10: 1-5 –They were a highly favored people***

**"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. <sup>2</sup> They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. <sup>3</sup> They all ate the same spiritual food <sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness."**

In calling the generation that came out Egypt "our forefathers", Paul is probably referring to them as the forefathers of Sosthenes (the former synagogue leader) and himself, both Jews, while the majority of the Corinthian believers are Gentiles, hence the latter reference to the same group as "the people of Israel". (10: 19)

Using the generation that has come out of slavery in Egypt as their example, Paul describes basically using NT's term:

- They have been baptised (into Moses);
- They have eaten and drunk at Christ's table:
- "Nevertheless", they have displeased God and received horrible judgment

(1) Baptised into Moses

- While NT believers went through the water, they were under the cloud and passing through the sea: Paul is referring to their experience in Ex. 14: 19-22 as they were pursued by the armies of Pharaoh:

“Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, <sup>20</sup> coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long. <sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, <sup>22</sup> and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left”

- God used the pillar of cloud to shield them from the Egyptian armies, and the light on one side and the darkness on the other side clearly was evidence of a miracle; and
- With the Red Sea parted to the point the people of Israel could cross on dry ground further demonstrated God’s mighty power in saving them from the pursuing armies of Pharaoh.
- However, you might recall that right before these miracles, in Ex. 14: 10-12:
 

“As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup> Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’”
- Paul likens their experience as having been baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea—the coming out of the darkness of slavery into the freedom of light:
  - Paul is obviously borrowing the image and meaning of our baptism into Christ, one of identification with Christ (Rom. 6:3)
  - In this sense, Moses was a type of Christ in that as the people of Israel obeyed his word to proceed forward (instead of retreating backward), they had identified with Moses who was used by God to effect their deliverance.
  - Their subsequent adherence to the Law of Moses (which in truth is the Law of God) reinforced their identification with Moses as their deliverer.
- However, one wonders how meaningful such a baptism was and firm was their identification to Moses and the God that Moses pointed them to. Paul emphasizes that “all” witnessed and experienced these miracles, and “all” were baptized into Moses—not a single one of them did not experience and taste of this deliverance.

## (2) Ate and Drank at the Table of Christ

- Then, Paul also points out that after their “baptism”, they continued to witness and experience the miraculous nurture by God as “**they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink**”.
- Paul obviously refers to the eating of Manna from heaven (EX. 16:14ff) and the drinking of water from a rock both at the beginning and end of their wilderness wanderings (Ex. 17: 1-7; Nu. 20: 2-13). It is note-worthy that both times water would come out of the rock upon being struck by the staff of Moses (just as Jesus, the shepherd was stuck, Mat. 26:31)—no wonder when he struck twice instead of once the second time, he drew the rebuke of the Lord. Both times though was preceded by the grumbling of the people:

**“If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! <sup>4</sup> Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? <sup>5</sup> Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink” (Nu. 20: 3-5)**

- However, Paul points out that what they ate and drank are far more than physical food and drink. All these miraculous provisions were meant to help them know their God, draw close to Him, and love Him as their deliverer, their Savior, and using the “rock” from which water came, Paul points out that Christ was already there with them throughout their journey!
- It is said that Paul is making use of a Jewish legend that says the rock accompanied the Israelites throughout their wilderness journey (Morris, 139), but I think Calvin is right that by alluding to Christ being the one that provides the manna and the drink (especially through the rock being struck), Paul is equating their experience with our Lord’s Supper which he soon addresses in chapter 11.

(3) Nevertheless—They displeased the Lord

- In spite of being “baptised” and eating and drinking at the Table of Christ, their continued rebellion and grumbling against Moses led to God’s punishment: all of those who came out of Egypt (except Joshua and Caleb) didn’t just die in the desert, but **“their bodies...scattered (littered, JB) in the wilderness”**—an emphasis of God’s judgment!

Notes

1. Paul in essence is paving the ground of comparing the Corinthian Christians with their forefathers in that as much as the forefathers were baptised into Moses (and the Corinthians are baptised into Christ) and partook in the spiritual food and drink (while the Corinthians partake in the Lord’s Supper), their rebellion met with the punishment of God.
2. It is theologically important that Paul uses “was” to denote Christ as the rock “likely...to indicate the reality of Christ’s presence in the OT events” and not “simply in a figuratively way.” (Fee, 449)
3. In any case, the motif of using baptism and the Lord’s Supper to compare the forefathers and the Corinthian believers is quite unmistakable:

Motif	Forefathers	Corinthian Christians
Baptism	Into Moses (type of Christ)	Into Christ
Lord’s Supper	Manna and water from the Rock (which was Christ)	The bread and the cup
Response	Displeased the Lord	What if they follow their example?
Result: severe discipline	Bodies littered in desert	What would they face?

### **10: 6-10 –The sins of forefather elaborated**

**“6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7 Do 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.” 8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9 We should not test the Lord (or Christ), as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.”**

Paul points out the core of the sins of the forefathers as “setting hearts on evil things” which manifested itself in the following four areas, in particular:

- Idolaters
- Sexual immorality
- Testing the Lord, and
- Grumbling

In each case, Paul quotes specific historical instances to illustrate his point and urges the Corinthians not to follow their examples:

#### **(1) Idolaters**

Paul is citing the incident in Ex. 32 as an example and quotes exactly v.6b from the LXX. It is helpful to read here v.6 in its entirety which the Corinthian Christians with their excellent biblical knowledge would know:

**“So the next day 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 pagan revelry.”**

- This happened at the sacred moment when Moses went up to receive the Ten Commandments of the Lord, and Aaron, while waiting for Moses’ return, yielded to the pressure of the people and built a golden calf for them to worship, after pagan’s custom.
- This resulted in the punishment by God of the killing of 3,000 of them and the striking of the people with a plague (Ex. 32: 28, 35).

This particular example of idolatry would be used by Paul later in this chapter to warn the church against the eating of food sacrificed to idols (10: 14-22)

#### **(2) Sexual immorality**

Paul then cites from Israel’s example in Numbers 25. Allow me to quote vv. 1-3:

**“While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, <sup>2</sup>who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. <sup>3</sup>So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord’s anger burned against them.”**

Paul’s citing of this incident is not accidental obviously because sexual immorality is a serious problem in the church of Corinth (5: 1-5, 10-11; 6:9-10, 12-20). More than that, it shows that temple sacrifices and the eating thereof go hand in hand; and so do sexual immorality and the attendance at temple sacrifice. Therefore the worshipping of idol in the temple (in this case, that Baal of Peor), the eating of the sacrificed food and the engaging in sexual immorality are all inseparable.

#### Note

Here is the controversy concerning the “missing thousand” as Nu. 25:9 indicates that God killed some 24,000 by a plague (Nu. 25:9) while Paul says 23,000 instead. I am sure either number is a rounded number. I believe Paul who is such a learned OT scholar would have no doubt access to some document that we have no access to today which likely rounds the number (downward) to 23,000.

#### (3) Testing the Lord

Then, Paul cites the incident in Numbers 21 which was really one of the many examples that the Israelites “tested” the Lord.

**“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’ <sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.”** (Nu. 21: 4-9)

- Psalm 78: 18 speaks to this incident and charges the Israelites with “testing” God:

**“They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved.”**

- Why would the Psalmist charge them with testing the Lord?
- Based on the context of the incident
  - The people did not like Moses taking a much longer route for their journey, going around Edom, and “they grew impatient on the way”—likely they thought they should go through Edom, if the Edomites would not let them through, they could easily attack and defeat them just as they just did to the king of Arad (Nu. 21: 1-3), and
  - They expressed their dislike through complaining about “this miserable food”, referring to manna.
  - The last time they complained about food (in Numbers 11), God inflicted them “with a severe plague” (Nu. 11:33).
  - Therefore with this same complaint, they were really testing God’s patience; in fact they were daring God to punish them again and God it!

I was quoting the entire story of the incident which ended with the healing by a bronze snake that Moses put up (if they believed the words of Moses and looked up at the bronze snake), because 10:9 in some MSS (text) read, “We should not test Christ”, instead of “the Lord” and the word, “Christ...used in the original text is almost certain.” (Fee, 457)

- Paul likely refers to John 3: 14-15, in which Christ uses this bronze snake to prefigures His own death, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”**

- So Paul again points to the fact that the forefathers in the desert were testing Christ who was present with them.
- With this example, Paul is warning the Corinthian Christians not to take what he has been warning against them lightly, and continue to sin, whether by prideful divisions, sexual immorality and its toleration, and association with idol-worship. The theme of not testing Christ will be taken up again as he talks about their disrespect toward Christ's body and blood at the Lord's Supper in the next chapter.

#### (4) Grumbling

Finally, he points out the repeated sin of grumbling by their forefathers in the wilderness, citing, among many incidents, the one that on the face of it was not directed at God, but only at the leadership, namely Moses and Aaron in Numbers 16. Allow to quote:

**“Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—became insolent <sup>2</sup> and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. <sup>3</sup> They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?’”**

The result of their complaint against Moses and Aaron resulted in: **“the ground under them split apart <sup>32</sup> and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions... And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense”** (Nu. 16: 31-32, 35).

Even with such an unmistakably divine punishment, **“the whole Israelite community”** dared to blame Moses and Aaron for the demise of the offenders and grumbled, **“You have killed the Lord’s people”**. (Nu. 16:41). Their stubborn rebellion resulted in the further killing of 14,700 more by a plague which Paul attributes as the deed of the “destroying angel”.

Yes, they thought they were not opposing God but Moses and Aaron, but those were God-chosen leaders, therefore their grumbling against them was actually against God. So, by extension, Paul is warning the Corinthian Christians against their criticism about him and his apostolic authority as grumbling against the Lord, since it is Christ who has appointed him as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8)

#### **10: 11-13 –These examples are meant for us**

**“<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! <sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. 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 endure it.”**

Paul makes it clear all these (in fact, the entire history of Israel) were recorded down as warning for us—*“to whom the ends of the ages have arrived.”* (literal translation) This obviously echoes what Paul has said earlier that “the time is short” (7:29), except that the early exhortation was

about the need to devote ourselves to the Lord without distractions (7:35), but here is a warning against the need to be held accountable, hence the emphases on the horrible punishment by death in all cases.

- Paul knows the Corinthian Christians quite well, and he expects that there are some would dismiss his warnings, thinking that they'd never commit the same sins as their forefathers
- We, too, may fall into the same trap, but Paul urges us to think twice—idolatry in many forms, sexual immorality, testing God as we are impatient and grumbling against leaders based on jealousy—these are temptations that are “**common to us all**”.
- If we are over-confident or care less about these temptations and open ourselves to them, chances are we will fall, just like the Israelites!
- And if we are tempted, there are good news and bad news
  - The good news is, “**God is faithful and would not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear**”—i.e. He would intervene and will provide “**a way out**” for us.
  - The bad news is if we fall, we really have no excuse then!

### 10: 14 -33 Learning from the examples

With the word, “Therefore”, Paul goes into the application of the lessons learned both from the example of the people of Israel and his own example.

#### **10: 14-22 Learning from the example of the people of Israel**

**“14 Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for 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? 17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.**

**18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You 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. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”**

While Paul previously talked about idols being nothing and thus the eating of food sacrificed to idols should also be nothing (8: 1-6), after citing of the two examples of the people of Israel concerning idolatry and sexual immorality (10: 7-8), he seems to change his tone in that now he says:

- Those eating the food sacrificed to idols (Baal of Peor) and those participating in the altar are one the same people—“**The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods.**” (10:2), and
- The sacrifices were made in fact to demons—recognizing the demonic dimension of the worship of the Moabites.



The conclusion is: idol worship is not harmless and that the offering of food sacrifice and the eating thereof are one the same act of worship—eating at the table of demons (v.21) is the same as participation at the altar itself (v. 18)

To reinforce this point, Paul uses the participation at the Lord’s Supper as a comparison. But to understand Paul’s argument, we need to draw in what he explains in greater details about the Lord’s Supper in the next chapter in which he says,

**“The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>25</sup> In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”** (I Cor. 11: 23-26)

### **What the Lord’s Supper is and is not:**

The words emphasised by the Lord concerning this ordinance which He Himself has instituted shortly before His crucifixion are: **“do this in remembrance of me”** which He said twice, once concerning the eating of the bread and once about the drinking of the cup.

- Therefore the Lord’s Table is a “remembrance”
- The “remembrance” is not just about the completed work of His redemption, but a “remembrance of me”—the person who gave us His body and His blood.
- Hence, Paul says such a “remembrance” is a participation (the Greek word is *koinonia*), which means a fellowship or a communion.
- In other words, the eating of the bread and the drinking of the cup is an act of remembering Christ, the person, and with such a remembrance, we are having a time of communion with Him through such a remembrance by means of the bread which reminds us of His body broken for us, and by means of the cup which reminds us of His blood shed to seal the New Covenant (or New Testament).
- Such a remembrance or communion is sacred, not to be taken lightly, or some would say, we enter into a sacred space through his remembrance or communion—although the bread would not turn into His sacred body, and the wine would not turn into His sacred blood which would be a repeat of His sacrifice, not a remembrance.

Thus, Paul says we cannot have communion with demons and have communion with Christ at the same time

- Equating the eating at the Lord’s table with the eating at the table of demons
- Which was exactly the sin committed by the people of Israel
  - As they been drinking the spiritual drink, eating the spiritual bread in the wilderness and yet
  - The also drank and ate at the table of Baal of Peor.
- Like the people of Israel, we cannot afford to arouse the jealousy of the Lord (Ps.78:58ff)
  - Or we shall face His punishment, just the same—we are not stronger than He!

### **10: 23-33 Learning from Paul’s Example**



**“<sup>23</sup> Everything is permissible (lawful)—but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible (lawful)—but not everything is constructive (edifying). <sup>24</sup> No one should seek their own (good), but the others (good).**

**<sup>25</sup> Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, <sup>26</sup> for, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.”**

**<sup>27</sup> If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. <sup>28</sup> But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. <sup>29</sup> I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours.**

**For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience? <sup>30</sup> If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?**

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

- The overriding principle that Paul has practiced:
  - No one should seek his own good (i.e. self-seeking), but
  - The good of the other.
- Under this principle
  - Within those actions permitted by the law (i.e. the Law of Moses)
  - The guiding principle is:
    - Is it beneficial to others, and
    - Will it edify other people!
- Hence the application when it comes to eating meat in the marketplace (not within the temple of idols which is strictly forbidden by Paul in vv. 14-22 above) is:
  - Raise no question about it, since you are not eating in the temple, you have no part in the participation of the worship;
  - But if someone, somehow, knows and points out that the meat has in fact been offered in sacrifice—do not eat it
    - a) For the sake of the one who told you, and
    - b) For the sake of his conscience (not ours).

Question is who is the “someone” and why would he raise such a question?

- It is likely that this someone at the meal is a non-believer as the meat is hosted by a non-believer (v.27).
- Thus, when he sees a Christian is about to eat food already sacrificed to idols, based on his knowledge of Christianity and likely also because the witness of this believer, he knows that Christ and demons cannot co-exist—meaning if the believers knows that the food has been sacrificed to idols, he probably would not touch it. Non-believers have a deeper understand of the demonic component in their worship.
- Therefore
  - If the believer upon being told, stops eating the food—this would bear witness to that person (who told him) that Christ will not co-exist with

demons, and if one day he should turn to Christ, he has to abandon his idols—so this is “for the sake of the man”.

- However, if the believer still goes ahead and eats it, this non-believer who understands the demonic dimension of the act of sacrifice which is tied to the eating thereof, his conscience will be conflicted asking: “Have I led him to sin against his God, or is it really okay to continue eating at both tables—that of the demons and that of his Christ?”

In either case, it is plain that under that situation, no believers should continue to eat such food.

Immediately, Paul again senses opposition to this teaching:

- **For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience?**
- **<sup>30</sup> If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?”**

Drawing from what he has been saying all along, he sums up his own mottos as follows:

- **For God’s glory:**
  - **<sup>31</sup> So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.**
- **For the good of others:**
  - **<sup>32</sup> Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—<sup>33</sup> even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many,**
- **By all possible means, save some (9:22)**
  - **so that they may be saved!**

With these principles in mind, it is really not that hard to decide whether to eat or not to eat, or for that matter, how to exercise our freedom in Christ!

With that he ends his teaching concerning freedom in Christ by saying, “**Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.**” (11:1, which should belong to chapter 10).

- As much as he admonishes them to follow his example
  - It is really Christ’s example, not his, or
  - Put it a slightly different way, he might be saying, “Follow my example to the extent that I follow Christ’s.”