

The Cat's in the Cradle

1 Corinthians 10:1-6

November 21 & 22, 2009
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I want to thank everyone for participating in our church-wide week of prayer. Our hope is that this commitment to prayer will carry on throughout the year. May God help us to be a church that prays without ceasing.

I also want to wish you each a Happy Thanksgiving. Christians should be the happiest and most thankful people of all, don't you think?

I have entitled this weekend's message, *The Cat's in the Cradle* and I want to begin by telling you why. As you may know, this is the first line in the chorus of a song that was made famous by Harry Chapin. The chorus goes like this, *The cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon/little boy blue and the man in the moon/When you comin' home Dad? I don't know when/But we'll get together then son, you know we'll have a good time then.*

The song tells the story of a new dad who begins with great promise of being a dad, but there's always something else more important and he never quite has the time. The cat's in the cradle means the little boy is at home, but he's blue because his Dad's so far away like the man in the moon. The boy grows up and the dad grows old. Now it's the dad who wants the time but the son doesn't have time for him. The last line of the song says, *And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me/He'd grown up just like me/My boy was just like me*

The failures of the dad had become the failures of the son. The song was popular because it is so sadly common. One generation's failures are tragically repeated in the next and the next and the next. The sons become their fathers. This isn't a message on parenting; it is a message about spiritual failure – Israel's and Corinth's – and hopefully not ours.

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction. (1 Corinthians 10:11) The biblical stories of spiritual failure are recorded for us so that we don't repeat their disasters. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the utter disaster the Israelites were who left Egypt, saw incredible displays of God's power, but never entered the Promised Land.

For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. (1 Corinthians 10:1-6)

This is one of those passages that when you first read it, it is confusing. So if your eyes are rolling into the back of your head, wait. You'll get this. Always remember the context of a passage of Scripture. What have we seen? These Corinthian Christians had a really high view of themselves spiritually. They brag about their leaders (Paul, Peter, Apollos), their wisdom, their spiritual resume. And yet, they are the most messed up church in the New Testament. The most recent issue is the supposedly strong Christian's total disregard for the spiritual condition of the weak in the church.

The principle required diligence and drive, determination and discipline, but these words weren't even in the vocabulary of these strong Christians. Their favorite words were desire, privilege, gratification, and enjoyment. (Strengthening Christ's Church, Ellsworth, p. 157)

This is why Paul challenged them in 9:24ff. to run their spiritual race with all the grit and determination of an elite athlete. Run for the prize. The prize is not salvation; that comes by faith in Jesus' work on the cross dying for our sins. Salvation comes entirely apart from human effort. But once we are saved, we are running for eternal rewards that Christ will give us based upon the quality of our service to Him. Don't be disqualified for the prize!

You can almost hear the Corinthians saying, *Could you give us an example of what you're talking about?* Paul gives them the example of the Israelites who left Egypt. They exhibit starting well, but ending very badly. He calls Israel "our fathers" in verse 1. The Corinthians were Gentiles, like most of us, so Israel is not "our fathers" ethnically, but rather spiritually. Our New Testament faith is built on Old Testament promises that God made to Abraham and all his spiritual descendants. The children's song says it well, *Father Abraham had many sons/many sons had Father Abraham/I am one of them and so are you/so let's just praise the Lord.*

Israel's Impressive Spiritual Resume (Verses 1-4)

We see in verses 1-4 a list of spiritual experiences of the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt. In case you are not familiar with the story, God called Moses to lead the nation out. This required changing proud Pharaoh's heart to let them go. It took ten devastating plagues on Egypt but finally Pharaoh consented. That very night the nation walked toward the Promised Land to the edge of the Red Sea. Pharaoh's army chased them and God miraculously parted the Red Sea and Israel crossed on dry land. The waters closed again destroying Pharaoh's army.

How does a nation survive in a desert? God fed Israel each day with manna and He also provided water for them. He led them by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. He led them up to the Promised Land and promised to be with them in conquering it. But Israel refused to go in. They were afraid. They thought Egypt was sounding better all the time. And God punished them for it by decreeing that all adults in Israel would die and the next generation would go in.

Their spiritual privileges are what Paul lists in verses 1-4, each introduced with the word "all."

- ***All under the cloud – God's guidance of them***
- ***All under the sea – God's power for them***
- ***All followed a Deliverer – God's prophet Moses to lead them***
- ***All were sustained by spiritual food – God's provision for them***

Note a few things about this food. *All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.* (Verse 4) The rock referred to here was the rock that Moses spoke to and water flowed from. Paul says the Rock that followed them. What? Rocks don't move, do they? There was a rabbinic teaching that said the rock that provided the water followed Israel in their wanderings giving them a perpetual source of water. Paul seems to be drawing on the popular legend by saying there was a rock that followed them and that the Rock was Christ (verse 4). Even in the Old Testament, pre-Incarnation, Jesus was providing for His people.

Look again. Does this list of spiritual privileges sound familiar? It should. Who has received guidance from God? We have, through His Word and Spirit. Who has God's power delivered? Us! By the resurrection and regeneration. Who has identified with a divinely sent deliverer? We have. They had Moses, we have Christ. Who is sustained by spiritual provision from God? We are! There even seems to be a kind of analogy to baptism and the Lord's Supper here. The repetition of the word "same" builds the case.

We have the same spiritual DNA as Israel and our stories are very similar.

I'd like you to think about your story; your spiritual resume. If you were to summarize your spiritual biography, what would it say? *I came to faith when I was _____. I was baptized. So and so became a mentor to me. I was a part of such and such a church. God sustained me in this and that time of trial. My fondest spiritual memories are _____.* If you are a Christian, you have a spiritual bio, a resume. So did Israel. A very impressive one. Their happy days were very happy days with God. They wrote songs of deliverance (Exodus 15) and danced for joy in God's power to save. They had great days! It would be wonderful to read Israel's story as them happily riding off into the sunset. But sadly, that is not at all what happened.

Israel's Spiritual Collapse (Verse 5)

Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

With most of them God was not pleased? This is one of the great understatements in the Bible. How many of the Israelites that went through the Red Sea under the age of 18 were allowed into the Promised Land? Two – Joshua and Caleb. They were the only two who urged Israel to enter the Promised Land. Everyone else refused to go in. Or we could say, they refused to finish the race, and because they didn't, they were disqualified from the prize. That's the illustration here.

This is a vivid picture. The ESV translates the word "overthrown." It means to scatter about. In spite of how they started, the desert was littered with their dead carcasses. One calculation of the number of Israelites who died divided by 38 years in the wilderness comes out to an average of 90 deaths every day. 90 funerals every day for 38 years. Every funeral a reminder that walking by faith through the Red Sea and eating manna every day and drinking miracle water every day and personally experiencing God's desert provision is no guarantee of final approval.

What happened to Israel? How could people with spiritual experiences that 3,000 years later people are still making movies about end up Middle Eastern roadkill? Look at verse 6: *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.* Really? What evil? Paul lists what they did in verses we will get to. They worshipped non-gods, or idols, instead of the God who had done all this for them. They ignored His command about sexual purity and were immoral. They grumbled against God and complained about the manna and the water and just about everything else too.

Why are these recorded for us? So that we can see that starting well is no guarantee of finishing well, particularly when our faith isn't making an ethical difference in the way we live. This is the point for the Corinthians and for us. If you are so self-assured of your standing with God because of what has happened in your past, look at the Israelites and see that your pride in your past is placing you in a precarious spiritual position. *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.* (1 Corinthians 10:12)

Is the confusing passage becoming clear? It doesn't matter how well we start or even amazing works of God in our story; it's how we finish that matters. Too often we rest on something in the past and we get complacent spiritually, which makes us so susceptible to temptations and idols of the heart. Christians fall into this all the time. They have things they used to do or ministries they used to serve in but now there is next to nothing. They are resting. Coasting. Their past makes them think they stand, but will so easily fall. Like Israel.

We are such a special people to God! Did you know that I walked through the Red Sea on dry ground? Me. That's right. I am a Red Sea walker. Those were the days. Did you know that I personally witnessed the glory of God on the top of Mt. Sinai? Yep. Me. What God must think of me to give me that experience! I remember the first morning, waking up, going outside and there was this food on the ground; food from God laying everywhere, every day. I must be so special in His eyes. Abraham never ate manna. I have. Food in a desert. Water from rocks. Moses said "Hi" to me once. Did you know Moses talks to God face to face? I'm good with Moses, so I'm good with God.

Can you hear the Corinthian Christians? Did you know that the Apostle Paul started our church? We have his picture hanging in the church foyer so everyone can be impressed with the legacy of our church. We are famous the world over for our wisdom. We must be the smartest Christians on the planet. Do you realize how free we are? We are not stuffy like other churches. Most of us even eat idol meat! There are some that don't like that, but we don't care too much about them. Trust me friend, you won't regret joining First Corinthian Church. We have it all together.

The cat's in the cradle. The sons become their fathers and the fatal flaw repeats itself in Corinth and is ever present among Christians today.

The Extreme Danger of Spiritual Overconfidence

We may perceive that our resumes are impressive to God.

- *We are Americans! – God likes us*
- *We have the Bible - God speaks to us*
- *Our church is better – God favors us*
- *I grew up Christian – God knows me*
- *I was baptized and take communion – God is pleased with me*
- *I _____ – I am special to God*

*I went to Bible school. My daddy was a deacon. I've memorized x number of verses. I never miss church. On and on. It's like a team that stops playing to win and plays not to lose. Or how about the famous Titanic captain's statement, "Even God couldn't sink this ship." Now we would never admit these things, but subtly in our hearts, we take pride in our past and that pride undermines our determination to obey God in the future. *Why should I? Haven't I done enough?* Are we really that different from the Israelites who affirmed the covenant at Mt. Sinai and within 40 days were bowing to the golden calf? How many men here will praise God today and bow at the idol of pornography this week? Praise God today and give our souls for money this week? Praise God today and slander a brother or gossip about a sister tomorrow? Are we really that different? No. The warning applies.*

Our pride blinds us to our need to live by faith in God today. Or how about people who say, I can do this sin because after all, I am saved by grace and God will forgive me. I can

worship this idol because after all I walked through the Red Sea and God will forgive me. God is a God of forgiveness when we are truly contrite, but the attitude that presumes on God's grace like that has likely never tasted it in a saving way in the first place.

I meet people all the time whose spiritual resume is all in the past. They used to do this or they used to do that for God. *I used to serve God. I used to be involved in God's work. I used to.* But what are you doing now? The measure of spiritual success is not if you went through the Red Sea, but if you'll go into the Promised Land. *You can tell the vitality of your spiritual life by how old your illustrations are.* (David Jeremiah)

What about us. What about you? If I may speak directly, I see this mostly in people like me, who grew up in a Christian home or church. You get a group of 2nd and 3rd generation Christians together and there is a kind of "we're all okay" attitude. They talk about the old days and the Red Sea experiences of the past. Fine. But what about now? What's going on now in your walk with God? Are you spiritually complacent or spiritually dead?

What should it look like? *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.* (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Israel failed God morally. Their self-assurance made them soft morally and they disobeyed God. So the call of this passage is, Don't be smug. Don't be complacent. Flee from sin and live by faith. Don't pervert God's grace into a license to sin. I beg us to listen to this and to determine with all that is in us and with God's help that we are going to run this race of faith through to the end. To finish strong with faith and obedience intact. God's grace is there when we stumble. Still, we continue to *run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.* (Hebrews 12:1-3)

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