

I Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-13 *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors 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 in the wilderness... ¹¹These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹²So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³No 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.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Would you consider yourself a person of privilege? I think it's safe to say the vast majority of us wouldn't use that phrase to describe ourselves. When we think of a person of privilege, we think of someone who had every advantage possible given to them. We think of someone who didn't have to exert a lot of effort or energy to get where they are in life. We think of someone who doesn't understand the hard work those of lesser privilege had to exert to move up in life. People of privilege don't understand all the problems others have to overcome and obstacles they have to navigate through. A person of privilege is one who has had a pretty easy path to get to where they are. The label, "person of privilege," is usually one given to a person by someone else, not one people take for themselves.

When we look at the Israelites in the Old Testament, the label, "people of privilege," really fits. When we look back at their history, we can see what privileges they enjoyed as the chosen people of God. In our text, Paul helps us to recall some of those privileges. God had wonderfully provided for them during their 400 plus years in Egypt. When the Egyptians cruelly enslaved God's people, God acted in a miraculous way to provide deliverance for them. By God's grace, they saw and were a part of things that no people before or since have seen or been part of. It was truly a privileged group of people that marched out of Egypt in the middle of the night. God not only sent remarkable and powerful plagues on the Egyptians, he opened the Red Sea allowing the entire nation to march through it as they escaped Pharaoh's pursuing army and then brought the waters back together to destroy that army. He guided the nation personally by going in front of it in a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. What privilege Israel enjoyed as God personally led them to the land he had promised them. He didn't leave them alone as they journeyed through the desert, but accompanied them as a wonderful provider by not only providing manna and quail daily for them to eat but also miraculously providing water for them to drink. Not only this this group of people carry with them the covenant blessings promised back at the time of Abraham and reiterated at Mt. Sinai, they were miraculously delivered and sustained. They were people of privilege indeed!

But Paul shares with us a startling reality—these people of privilege never made it to the promised land. Though they were people of privilege, God was not pleased with them and most of them died in the desert and their bodies were scattered throughout the wilderness. We can't help but wonder what went wrong that these people who enjoyed more privilege with almighty God than anyone else has ever known ended up displeasing God and dying in the desert? I think we can answer this by saying that the people misunderstood the purpose behind the privileges God had given to them. With true human nature, the people of Israel assumed God had given them all these great privileges because of what great people they were. They assumed that they must have been pretty good people to have God treat them this way. How wrong they were! God's blessings did not come to them because they were great people. God's blessings came to them because of his grace. God's blessings served to show them God's faithfulness to his promises and give them confidence that he would remain faithful to the promises he had made to them, especially the promise of sending a Savior. All these physical blessings were intended to direct them toward the spiritual blessings they had in Christ their Savior. They were intended to strengthen the trust these people had in their God and spur them on toward living for him.

The wrong perception concerning the source of their blessings led Israel away from God rather than closer to him. They let all the privilege and blessings that God showered upon them go to their heads. They thought these blessings allowed them to live however they wanted. They thought they could flirt with sin and their old idolatrous ways and be just fine. Ironically, these blessings gave them such a sense of false security that when seemingly insurmountable obstacles confronted them, they failed to trust that God would take care of them. Rather than giving them confidence that God would be faithful to them and his promises no matter what came their way, they despaired of God's care and in unbelief rejected him. This happened on numerous occasions. When Moses was with God on Mt. Sinai for 40 days, they assumed he and God had abandoned them and turned their worship toward the golden calf they convinced Aaron to fashion for them. Their unbelief culminated when the 12 spies returned from scouting out the land of Canaan God had promised them. Ten of the spies came back full of terror and fright that the people of Canaan were too big and powerful for them to overcome. Only Caleb and Joshua came back full of confidence God was on their side and that the God who had opened the Red Sea and rescued them and destroyed Pharaoh's army could do the same to the people of Canaan. They were the only ones who trusted that the God who had provided physical blessings in the past would continue to be faithful to his word in the future.

All the blessings God had given them should have given each one of the Israelites the confidence that God would take care of them. God didn't just shower these blessings on a few of them, but on all of them. These blessings should have led each of them to respond with confidence in him in everything and with thanksgiving in the way that they lived their lives. Every normal consideration and every right reasoning demanded that under this shower of divine grace, deliverance and blessings that all of them should conduct themselves in a manner that God would be well pleased with them. But they didn't. Instead, they conducted themselves in a way where God was pleased with only a few of them and violently displeased with all the rest. In the end, it was only Joshua and Caleb from that entire generation who were allowed to enter into the land of Canaan. Being people of privilege did nothing for them when they didn't combine the advantages they received with full faith and confidence in God and his grace in all things.

Paul tells us that all these things were recorded as warnings for us. When you look closely at it, we have to say that like those Israelites of old, all of us Christians are privileged, people who have been touched by the grace of God, people who have received a baptism in which God brought forgiveness and adoption into our lives. Some of us have the privilege of being brought into God's family shortly after birth and never knowing anything different. What a blessing of God's grace! We didn't do anything to make that possible. God brought us into his family through the parents and/or grandparents he gave to us who saw to it that we knew of and believed in his grace from the very beginning of our lives! What a privilege! Other may have come to faith later in life, but no matter when you came to faith, God still sent someone into your life to share his word with you and bring you to faith. What a blessing! Has God given some privileges and advantages to us that he hasn't yet given to others? Perhaps he has. But all of this comes not because we are good or desirous people that God just had to have on his team. These advantages come as a gift of God's grace.

In addition to all these spiritual blessings, look at the way God has chosen to bless us physically. We've talked many times before about how richly God blesses us with physical and material blessings. While we may not have as much as others do, we certainly have all that we need and then some. God not only has graciously provided for all our needs but has opened the basket of his blessings and poured out on us more than we can imagine. Why does God do this? Martin Luther reminds us in his explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed: All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it. What a gracious God we have that he would give us such advantage in providing the physical and spiritual blessings that he has given us.

Looking to the past gives us confidence of God's blessings in the future. God will continue to watch over and provide for us physically and spiritually not because we are such good people but because he is faithful and will always be faithful to his promises. When we look at the past, this is what we see: God is faithful. He always provides what his people need—sometimes even in miraculous ways. He always has and he always will. Our privilege means nothing if we don't connect it to faith in God our Savior and provider.

All of this causes us to reflect on how we respond to the gifts that God gives to us. There are two ways that we can respond to the blessings and privilege God bestows on us: 1—take credit for these gifts and assume they must be a sign God is pleased with however you are living, even if you are flirting with sin or outright living in sin or 2—recognize that everything we have is a gift from God's grace and find your peace and confidence going forward that God who took care of you in the past will continue to provide for you in the present and into the future. When we are focused on what good people we are—how easy it is to worry and fret when danger and trouble come our way. It becomes too easy to show ingratitude for God's gifts by complaining and grumbling about our situation in life. Shame on us for all the times we have followed the Israelites and relied on ourselves as the cause for our privilege and lost sight of God and his grace. Truth is, for these times we deserve the same fate as these people and even worse. Not only do we deserve to die as they did, but we too don't deserve to see the promised land of heaven God has waiting for us.

When we recognize this, we see what an even greater blessing it is that God would send Jesus to be our Savior. Jesus never once grumbled or complained about the care of his Father nor the path he was asked to walk. He walked that path fully confident in his Father all times and gave his perfect life in payment for the sins that we commit. That sacrifice made by Jesus and given to us by faith is what gives us the certainty of sins forgiven and life in heaven. What a privilege that God would give us such a gift of his grace.

In this text, we find both a warning and an encouragement. The warning is obvious: don't ignore what past generations teach us about the serious nature of God and of taking for granted his blessings and the privilege he gives us. The encouragement is this: what you face is nothing new. God will always give you the strength to face whatever you face and he will always provide a way out. What you face is nothing uncommon that others also haven't faced. And how can we be so sure: God is faithful! That he would provide so much for us physically and spiritually in the past reminds us what he will do in the future. The same God who gives us food to eat and clothes to wear and shelter to live in and transportation to get around town in will also help us when temptation comes our way. This God who saw to it that he made our salvation possible by sending his own Son as our substitute will provide for us and sustain us spiritually as we face any temptation.

What great privilege God has given to us by his grace. Don't rest on your laurels when it comes to this privilege. Be reminded that it comes as a gift of God's grace to give you strength and confidence that God will always be with you as you move forward to serve him. Connect your privilege to faith and let God strengthen you through the advantage he gives to you in his word. You are privileged people. Rejoice in that fact and find your confidence in the God who so graciously gave you that privilege. Amen.