

**Third Sunday of Lent**  
**March 11, 2007**  
**1 Corinthians 10:1-13**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**Be Careful that You Don't Fall**

1. Complacency is the enemy
2. History provides warnings
3. God is faithful when we are tempted

***NIV 1 Corinthians 10:1 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 over the desert.***

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

***<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment 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 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.***

In October of 1999, a 58-year-old Santa Barbara woman named Jan Davis went to Yosemite National Park with the intention of doing something illegal. She and her companions hiked to the top of the granite face called El Capitan with the intention of jumping from El Capitan and parachuting safely to the valley floor 3,500 feet below.

The woman and her companions were BASE jumpers. (BASE is an acronym that stands for Buildings, Antennae, Spans, Earth.) BASE jumpers hurl themselves off buildings and other structures for the thrill of it. In fact, Jan and her companions intended to protest a park ban on BASE jumping from El Capitan by demonstrating that it could be done safely. Down below in the valley floor, Jan's husband had set up a video camera to record the jump. When they reached the top of El Capitan, the first three jumpers flung themselves from the cliff and parachuted to safe landings. Then it was Jan's turn. She jumped, but when after a few moments of freefall she attempted to open her chute, nothing happened. Her body fell unimpeded to the rocks below. The story of this tragedy is still told on the Yosemite Park Web site to warn people of the danger of BASE jumping.

It's not just the park police at Yosemite, however, who say, "Be careful that you don't fall." The apostle Paul was saying something very similar to that in 1 Corinthians 10. He said it because he detected that the Corinthians were complacent about their spiritual welfare and nearly oblivious to the spiritual danger they faced. So this morning let's examine a bit more closely the apostle's warning to see what the danger is and to see how we can remain safe.

### **1. Complacency is the enemy**

In the investigation that followed the 1999 BASE jump at Yosemite, it was determined that Jan Davis had anticipated that her parachute would be confiscated by park police after she'd made her jump, so she borrowed some older equipment and apparently did not personally oversee the packing of her parachute. The result was tragic, a kind of complacency that people who risk their lives in BASE jumping simply cannot afford.

There seemed to be a similar sort of complacency about spiritual things in Corinth. People were apparently telling themselves that if they'd been baptized, if they participated in the Lord's Supper, then they'd be fine spiritually. But as you read 1 Corinthians you find that the congregation was suffering from all kinds of problems: quarreling, lovelessness, sexual immorality, and a lack of reverence for holy things like the Lord's Supper. Yet, rather than repenting of these sins, they took refuge in their baptism and their attendance at Communion. Now it's true that baptism and the Lord's Supper are designed to reassure us of God's love for us, but to find comfort in the sacraments while continuing to live unrepentantly is a serious mistake.

This elicits a warning from Paul: *“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. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”* You could say that the Israelites had “sacraments,” too, as they traveled through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Paul says they were baptized into Moses when they crossed the Red Sea. And they ate the spiritual food and drank the spiritual drink that God miraculously provided for them. But look what happened! *“Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.”* Their complacency was spiritually deadly.

During this season of Lent we frequently hear Jesus warn his disciples about spiritual danger. In Gethsemane he said to Peter, James, and John: **“Watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the (flesh) is weak.”** While he was still with his disciples in the upper room, Jesus advised Peter: **“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.”** And while they were still eating the Passover meal, Jesus warned Judas, **“Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not been born.”** And yet the complacency continued. Peter, James and John slept instead of watching and praying. Peter continued to think he had the resources to remain loyal to Jesus. And Judas continued right down the path to perdition.

We do risky things, too, sometimes don't we? Some of us might use yard and garden tools without the proper eye protection. Some try dialing cell phones while hurtling down the highway at 65 miles per hour. And then there's the issue of men and their ladders. But the riskiest thing we can do from the standpoint of eternity is to grow complacent about our faith. When we remove ourselves from hearing God's Word, when our attendance at the Lord's Supper is rare, or when we unrepentantly harbor our sins rather than confessing and renouncing them we are risking the loss of our faith. That's why the apostle continues with a series of warnings from history.

## **2. History provides the warnings**

The philosopher George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” St. Paul wrote much the same thing here in 1 Corinthians 10: *“Now these occurred as*

*examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did."* He proceeds to review as many as four different incidents in which Israelites died because they continued complacently in their sins. *"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.' We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel."* These were just some of the incidents in which the bodies of Israelites were "scattered over the desert" because they failed to heed God's warnings.

Not that people are much better today at heeding God's warnings. Idolatry in all its forms—subtle and gross—is rampant, as people love and trust and fear other gods than the one true God. Immorality is out in the open. People continue to test God with outrageous speech and behavior. And the tendency to grumble about the way God provides for us hasn't evaporated either. These are sins of which we, too, must be constantly wary.

There's a school of thought that says there is no such thing as falling from Christian faith. But it's hard to defend such a belief in light of passages like one that occurs in the explanation of the parable of the sower in Luke 8. There Jesus tells us that the seed that fell on the thin layer of soil over a rock and sprouted quickly, but then withered under the heat of the sun, stands for those who **"believe for a while but in the time of testing they fall away."** In 1 Timothy 1 Paul writes about his former coworkers, Hymenaeus and Alexander, who **"shipwrecked their faith."** And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that those who are trying to be justified by the law **"have fallen from grace."** (5:4) These passages demonstrated that it is possible to fall from faith. Thus the warning: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

So what hope is there for us? The enemy is strong and persistent and clear and we are weak. But the Holy Spirit didn't lead Paul to write this so that we would be led to give up in our battle against temptation. As Paul continues, he identifies our hope.

### **3. God is faithful when we are tempted**

What Paul writes here is not intended for the spiritual version of BASE jumpers, for spiritual daredevils who unrepentantly take risks with

their faith. Rather this is for repentant believers who are being assaulted by the devil and his temptations. Paul says, "*God is faithful.*" The record is clear. God was faithful to Peter, who found forgiveness in Christ despite his ardent denials. God was faithful to the disciples who ran and hid rather than standing with their Savior as they had promised. God forgave them and restored them. God has been faithful to every promise he's ever made. He faithfully sent the Savior he promised. He faithfully raised Jesus from the dead. Our God is a faithful God.

Paul writes about one particular manifestation of God's faithfulness here: "*He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.*" The paper sacks in which the bagger at the supermarket places our groceries are all rated for the amount of weight they can carry. Have you ever exceeded the rating? What happened? The handles came off, maybe. Or the bag tore and its contents spilled out. Is that what God does with us? Does he permit us to be weighed down with so many temptations that finally we break in despair? Never! In his faithfulness God simply will not let us be tempted beyond what he knows we can bear.

Paul goes on to explain, "*But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*" The "way out" may be that God strengthens us through the gospel in Word and sacrament to do what we thought was impossible. Or it may be that God answers our prayers by bringing the temptation to an end. But under God's loving providence there is always some way out so that we can stand up under the temptation.

The little letter of Jude was written to people who were facing the assaults of false teachers who were attempting to rob them of their faith in Jesus. While the possibility of falling victim to these false teachers was very real, Jude invites his readers to live in hope because of God's faithfulness. He writes toward the end of his letter, "**But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.**" And a few verses later he closes the letter with this doxology: "**To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!**" So, while the caution "Be careful that you don't fall!" is always in place, falling from faith is not inevitable.

Rather, as we live in repentance and faith in Jesus, we can be confident that our faithful God will deliver us from every temptation and bring us safely to our home in heaven. Amen.