

Know God's Escape Route

It is lined with deadly temptation -- It is marked by Word and Sacrament.

1 Corinthians 10:6-13

TEXT: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 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 things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 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 Jesus' name, fellow redeemed:

I'll never forget the time when I first hunted my uncle's property up in the East Jordan area. His farm was located high on a hill overlooking a valley that contained a large cedar swamp. The day before we gathered together and walked down the steep hills to the swamp to see where each of us were to be located. My uncle led me through the thickness of the cedar swamp along a narrow trail already made by the deer we were hunting. After this we climbed the steep hills leading back to his home. I looked back to the valley below to assure myself of the location of the trail that led to the spot I was assigned.

Long before sunup on opening day, we again gathered at the top of the hill. In the dark were a dozen hunters who began the descent and then one by one separated as we each went to the location of our assigned hunting spots. My flashlight served me well until I reached the valley. But then, as I crossed the valley floor toward the edge of the cedar swamp, I began to wander in the dark. My flashlight did not have the power to locate the deer trail that would lead me to my hunting location. After wandering and searching among the small rocks and cedars of the valley floor that seemed insignificant to me high up on the hill, and being upset with myself for not being in my spot at that holy time when darkness would slide into enough morning light that might reveal a deer on opening day, I realized that I would have to wait until the sun came up to find my spot. I kept searching, even as the sound of the gunshots from lucky hunters began to pierce the dawn.

As they say, this was a "teachable moment." Today, when anticipating a new hunting trail, I mark it with these little thumb-tacks that have a shiny surface and will reflect the light of the smallest flashlight. I don't want to miss the thrill of being where I want to be on opening day ever again.

But that's just hunting. Stupid old deer-hunting. On an infinitely higher and more important level is what is before us in Paul's warning to us in regard to our way to eternal life in heaven. He warns: **KNOW GOD'S ESCAPE ROUTE.** It is lined with deadly temptations. It is marked by Word and Sacrament.

The entire 40 years that Israel wandered in the wilderness was used by God to be symbolic of the Church and its way to eternal life in heaven. What He did to lead, teach and chastise the people whom He had created for the purpose of bringing the Lord's Savior into the world would also be useful for us who are the Church of the New Testament period. That's what Paul clearly says: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 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 things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!* Just as the way to the Promised Land of Canaan was lined with deadly temptations for Israel, so the way to eternal life for us today is lined with things that can destroy our faith.

Paul enumerates several situations when individual Israelites lost their faith, fell under the Lord's judgment, were killed and went to hell. Twenty-Three thousand once were lured by Moabite women to have sexual relations outside of marriage, where killed and went to hell: *We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did-and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.* Many were led to grumble against

having to camp for 40 years, were killed by snakes and went to hell: ***We should not test the Lord, as some of them did-and were killed by snakes.*** Is Paul trying to “scare the hell” out of us? Yes! For the way to heaven is lined with deadly, spiritually-deadly temptations!

Within this historical context, Paul warns: ***So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*** Are you standing firm? Are you sure? Is this something you think? Or is it something that is assured outside of your own subjective opinions and feelings? Are our children standing firm in the faith? You think? In his letter to the Colossians (chp 3), Paul writes: ***Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*** Notice that he calls greed, “idolatry.” Now who of us would deny that the way through this world is full of things that stimulate all kinds of impure behaviors, lust and evil desires? But the First Commandment is broken by greed! Our culture is now dominated by generations of people who feel “entitled.” From Social Security to food stamps; from politicians trying to win young votes with promises of “free tuition” to those who believe everyone should have a free cell phone or TV. It’s all greed, and we are a people who have fallen to it.

What shall we do? Know God’s escape route! It is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

So much of what is taught as Christian is based upon the subjective feelings of the individual. But if our feelings are being pulled back and forth between love and hate, lust and purity, greed and God, what is there that can be that certain direction to eternal life? It cannot come from within us for as Paul also writes: ***I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.*** Ro 7 No matter how badly I desire to do what is good, I cannot! This one passage alone separates all other ways and hopes of salvation from the ONLY WAY that is through Christ alone.

And this is important for the Protestant churches who withhold baptism from infants do so because they believe that children are not accountable until they reach an age where they can feel the Spirit and accept Jesus. So that way of salvation is denied their children.

The Catholic churches have been plagued with the belief that all humans have a free will which is able to choose God’s grace and to grow in that grace. So the Gospel is replaced by human works of penance.

But Paul clearly declares that he cannot do it! If there is salvation, it must be done by God Himself, and by God’s grace it has been done by Him through Jesus Christ. As Paul declares: ***All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*** 2 Co 5 Do you hear that? Do you believe that? The way to God through this world of sin and temptation is that we are reconciled to God and sin is not counted against us! That’s why when you gather together here to worship Jesus, you also give generously of your health and wealth for the Ministry of Reconciliation, to preaching the Gospel, baptizing, and the Lord’s Supper.

Will this free us from the temptations that line the way of salvation, the reach out and grab us and our loved ones as we go? No. But the Lord will always be there for us until our lives of service here are fulfilled. Paul reminds us of this truth: ***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.*** Whether the temptation is a temptation to sin or a temptation to test and strengthen, here is the promise: God will ALWAYS provide a way to escape or if it is a cross, the strength to stand.

All this is from God who provided escape routes for His people Israel, from the strengthening of the heart of a young Joseph who resisted the seductions of an Egyptian queen, to the crossing of the Red Sea, to the command to make a snake of bronze and place it on a pole so that those who sinned and were bitten by snakes could simply stare at it and live.

Now since Paul points to these things as examples for us, let us know God’s escape route as we walk toward heaven. We have the forgiveness of sins through Jesus and the power of His Holy Spirit through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Amen