

God Will Provide A Way!

1 Corinthians 10:12-13 [read]

This passage from Paul's *Letter to the Corinthians* provides comfort but it also raises some fears.

Apparently it is possible for a Christian to fall away from a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

But what would cause a Christian to do so?

Is it a matter of succumbing to too much temptation?

If so what constitutes "too much?"

And what is "the way out" that God has promised to provide to those who are being tempted?

These are important questions because they have to do with our salvation.

But one thing you can be sure of is that when the Bible raises a question it always answers it.

God never leaves us in the dark about anything that is important to our faith.

God is in the light business, not the darkness business!

Paul issues this warning in our Epistle lesson for today when he says, "*If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.*"

Then he illustrates the possibility of falling away by citing the example of the Israelites during the Exodus.

During all the time they were in the wilderness the Israelites constantly grumbled about how God was taking care of them.

First He didn't get them water as soon as they needed it, then he didn't get them food soon enough, then they didn't like the food he did provide.

On two occasions they even rebelled against Moses who had delivered them out of slavery and was leading them to Canaan, the land of milk and honey God had promised to their forefathers.

God was so displeased with them that He only allowed two of those who had originally set out from Egypt to enter the promised land.

The rest died in the wilderness.

These should be sobering words for us to hear.

Some Christian denominations have chosen to ignore them and take the position that it is impossible to fall away from a saving faith.

Once saved always saved, they say; a believer has eternal security in his salvation, no matter what.

Would that it was true but the Scriptures simply won't support it.

In *Hebrews 6:4-6* the author writes: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance..."

Or *2nd Peter 20-21*: "If [people] have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them."

Or *Hebrews 10:26-27*: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

If those words don't describe falling away from a saving faith, I don't know what would.

So we have no choice but to deal with them, because God has given them to us for a purpose.

How does one fall away from a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ?

Paul's answer is: "*By setting your heart on evil things.*"

What evil things does Paul have in mind?

And what does he mean by "setting your heart" on them?

Well, he lists four evil things: idolatry, sexual immorality, testing God and grumbling.

So what exactly are these sins and how do they lead us to abandon our faith?

We'll take idolatry first.

Luther said that whatever you trust the most to keep you safe and make you happy is your god—and that will either be God Himself, or it will be an idol.

For a Christian, such idolatry usually takes the form of coming to trust other things *along with* God—or in addition to God—to keep you safe and happy.

Which do you trust the most: God or the Cleveland Clinic to keep you alive and healthy?

Do you trust God or your pension and your IRA to take care of you when you get old?

Do you trust God's blessings during Divine Service on Sunday or the golf course to make you happy?

For most of us the answer to all three questions would be: God—and that other thing as well.

If that's the case then you're putting your trust in idols as well as Jesus Christ.

The second evil is sexual immorality.

Now, given the increasing decadence of American society in our day and age, not much needs to be said on this point.

Suffice it to say that we are bombarded with temptations to sin sexually every day of our lives.

To the extent that they have succeeded in inflaming our imaginations and capturing our attention, they have become idols.

And if we've convinced ourselves that sexual temptations are just too powerful to resist comfort ourselves with the thought that "everybody does it anyway"—we have set our hearts on an idol.

The third evil thing Paul mentions is testing God by demanding that He prove Himself to us by performing on command: doing what we think He should do when we think He should do it.

It's the state of mind that says: "*God, as long as you keep doing what I think you should be doing—and do it when I think you should—I'll continue to trust you.*"

If you don't, well, we'll just have to see."

It's demanding that God conform His ways to our expectations rather than conforming our expectations to God's way of doing things.

Rather than believing that God "*...causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose,*" we appoint ourselves judges of what's good for us and what's not and then judge God on how well he lives up to our expectations.

John Milton wrote his epic poem *Paradise Lost* to "...justify the ways of God to man."

But with all due respect to Milton, God does not need to be justified to us; it is we who need to be justified before God.

Finally, there's grumbling against God.

This is perhaps the most common sin we are tempted to commit—and the most insidious.

Grumbling issues forth from a cynical, pessimistic attitude we allow ourselves to adopt in order to deal with life in a fallen world.

It can easily lead us to abandon faith in a loving God.

When something terrible happens, we say, "Where was God?"

Armed with this attitude, we give up hope in God and just drop out, knowing that if we are hopeless, at least we won't be disappointed.

The grumbler equates cynicism with wisdom, and hope with naiveté.

Grumbling is the wellspring of several unpleasant behaviors: sarcasm, condescension and contempt, to name a few.

Grumbling is also a self-fulfilling prophecy: it produces the results it expects,

Nobody likes to be around a grumbler and so he ends up isolating himself and becoming bitter, just as he figured he would.

It is one of the saddest things in the world to see someone sink into cynicism.

Think of how we hate seeing it begin to appear in our children when their natural enthusiasm begins to be replaced by a “been there, done that” attitude.

When their eagerness to learn is replaced by the desire to be “cool” and start rolling their eyes.

We grieve when we see it because we know that it’s through childlike qualities of faith and love that God comes to us and enables us to make God known to others.

Cynicism and pessimism and bitterness never drew anyone to Christ.

So these are evils that men can set their hearts on and there is probably not one among us who has not been tempted at one time or another to do so.

How do we withstand such powerful temptation?

Paul says, *“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.”*

Well, what *is* the way out?

The answer is supplied by Jesus in our Gospel lesson.

He says, “Repent or perish.”

And there you have it: repentance is the way out that God has provided.

And what is repentance?

It’s more than feeling guilty.

It’s more than suffering the pain of a stricken conscience.

It’s more than remorse, the regret we feel over having committed some particular sin.

Repentance is the Godly sorrow we feel over our sins and a Godly desire to turn away from them.

Repentance is the realization that we would be happier without our sins which engenders and a heartfelt desire to turn away from them.

But repentance, like all Godly things, is a gift from God which we can accept or reject.

It's tempting to refuse the gift of repentance because superficially we feel better when we don't repent.

It's not pleasurable to consider our sins.

And, of course, in our sin nature we don't want to get rid of them anyway because as a colleague of mine once said, we like our sins and enjoy them.

Like the junkie with his needle, we know they give us instant gratification.

So when the Holy Spirit tries to give us repentant hearts, we are tempted to say no, and when we say no to the gift of repentance, *we set our hearts on evil things.*

Every time we refuse to repent, we harden our hearts a little toward God, and feel a little more freed up to set our hearts on the evils we deplore.

In the words of the Proverb, it is a way which seems right to a man, but which leads to death.

How long does it take a heart to harden?

To become fossilized and impervious to repentance?

In Biblical language, "for the conscience to seared as with a hot iron?"

Jesus' parable of the fig tree suggests about four years.

Not to be taken literally, I suppose, but it does suggest that there is a certain season for repentance, a time during which the gift is offered and after which it is withdrawn.

That there finally comes a time when God reluctantly says to the one who has refused to repent and has set his heart on evil things: "*Thy will be done.*"

We have just entered the season of Lent, the time in the church year when we dedicate ourselves to sharpening our "repentance skills" by examining our sins and praying to God that he will impart to us a Godly sorrow over them and a Godly desire to turn away from them.

I urge you to spend some time praying for repentance during this Lenten season.

I think you will find that God is responsive to that kind of prayer.
Through the prophet Ezekiel he said: *“As surely as I live I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.”*

And Jesus said, *“There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than for ninety-nine righteous men who do not need to repent.”*

Jesus has opened the door to heaven, faith opens the door to Jesus, and repentance opens the door to faith.

Amen.