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Blessings and Abuses of Freedom in Messiah

10: 1-13

The benefits and abuses of freedom in Messiah DIG: After reminding them of the discipline needed to “run the race” (9:24-27), Paul cites this example of Isra’el’s past. Why were these reminders necessary? How do they relate to the Corinthian situation? What is the “moral” of Paul’s teaching? Was Paul in error when he said 23,000 people died? Why or why not?

REFLECT: What temptations do you most consistently have to face? Hence, does verse 13 encourage or frustrate you? How so? How are you a witness to the people in your family, at school, in your neighborhood, or at work? Could any of your actions or attitudes be a stumbling block and disqualify you as a representative of our Lord, stumbling them?

Our freedom in Messiah is not meant to lead us to self-indulgence, but to selfless service.

The ancient **Israelites** were to be a channel through which **all the families of the earth** were to **be blessed (Genesis 12:3b)**. It was in that **race (9:24-27)** that **the nation** had misused **her freedom** and became **disqualified** as a witness to **the world** by falling into **idolatry**, immorality, and rebelliousness. Likewise, the believers in **Corinth** were supposed to be a channel of **blessing** to that wicked **city**. **For brothers, I don’t want you to miss the significance of what happened to our fathers** as **they** left **Egypt** on **their** way to the Land of Promise **(10:1a)**. This introduces an illustration showing that the reality of being **disqualified** by **God** is real (compare **Psalms 78** and **106**). Even though **all the Israelites**, believers and unbelievers, had extraordinary advantages, with **the majority of them God was not pleased, so their bodies were strewn across the desert (10:5)**. Therefore, **Paul** was saying to the self-confident **Corinthians**, “Don’t let what happened to the nation of **Isra’el** happen to **you!**”

Isra’el enjoyed five blessings:

1. Paul begins by reminding **the Corinthians** about **the blessings the Israelites**

experienced - **blessings** that **he** could relate to specific experiences of **the Corinthian** believers. **All of them**, both believers and unbelievers, **were guided by the pillar of cloud** (Exodus 13:21-22). **The Israelites** enjoyed the presence of **God in the pillar of cloud** that led **them** in **their exodus** from **Egypt** and **their journey through the desert** (10:1b). **The Corinthians** had also experienced **God's guidance** (Luke 1:79) and **protection** (First Peter 1:5).

2. In 10:1c Paul says: **And they all passed through the Sea of Reeds** (Exodus 14:19-31; Psalms 105:39 and 136:13-15). The point being that just as **the Corinthians'** life in **Messiah** began by faith and then **baptism**, so **"our fathers"** deliverance from **Egypt** began with a kind of **"baptism"** - **passing through the Sea of Reeds**. But even that, **Paul** will go on to say, did not keep **them** from being seduced by **idolatry** and thus falling short of the prize (9:24-27).²⁴⁹

3. And in connection with the cloud and with the sea they all immersed themselves into **Moshe** (10:2). Therefore, the **immersion into Moshe** means being united with **him**, accepting **his** vision, goals and leadership. **The Israelites** did this by trusting **him** in connection with the cloud and in connection with the Sea of Reeds. Translations which have **the Israelites** being **immersed in the cloud** and **in the Sea of Reeds** are misleading - according to the TaNaKh **they** were next to or under **the cloud**, and **they** passed on **dry ground** between walls of **sea** water on either side of **them**. Rather, as an anonymous critic has pointed out, it was **the Egyptians who were** "baptized in the sea, well and truly!" Nevertheless, there is an analogy here between **the immersion into Moshe** and **immersion into Messiah** (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; First Corinthians 1:13-15 and 12:13), just as in the following verses **the food** and **drink** are in some measure analogous with **the bread** and **wine** of **the Lord's Supper**.²⁵⁰ **The Corinthians** had been immersed into **the Body of Messiah** (12:13), of which **He is the Head** (Ephesians 1:22), and in whom **they trusted** (Matthew 12:21; Ephesians 1:12).

4. Also, they all ate the same food (**manna**) pertaining to **the Spirit** (10:3). **The manna they ate** uniquely points to the Lord's Supper. **The manna** given in **the desert** is called **"spiritual food"** because it was in no way a product of nature but **grain from heaven** and **the bread of angels** (Psalm 78:24-25), a gift from **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh**. It's origin was **spiritual**, and thus, although it nourished the body, which **Yeshua** points out so forcibly in **John 6** on **His** teaching on **the Bread of Life**, this **manna** should also have had an effect upon the soul.²⁵¹ **The Corinthians** too had eaten **bread from heaven** (John 6:31-34).

5. And they all drank the same drink from the Spirit - for they drank from a Spirit-sent Rock which accompanied them, and that Rock was the Messiah (10:4), he was quoting from a story later written in **the Talmud** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law**), **that from the time that Moshe struck the rock at Horeb and brought forth water until the death of Miriam (Numbers 20:1), this water-giving rock “accompanied the children of Isra’el through the desert and provided water for them each day” (Ta’anit, 9a Bava Metzia, 86b).** Throughout the TaNaKh, there are several instances where the title **Rock** (Hebrew: *tzur*) is directly associated with **YHVH** (Deuteronomy 32:4, 15 and 32:30-31; Isaiah 26:4 and 44:8). Yes, **Paul** says, a little of **the story from the Talmud** is true: **a rock** did accompany **Isra’el** throughout **the desert** wandering, **a rock** out of which **they** kept **drinking** all the time. But this was not **the rolling boulder** of the legend. This was **a mass of rock** that was far greater and far higher and entirely **spiritual** in **its** nature: **That rock** was **Yeshua Messiah**. The word **Paul** uses here for **Rock** is not *petros*, meaning *a small stone or pebble*, but *petra*, meaning *a massive immovable cliff, rock or ledge*, just like the one at **Caesarea Philippi** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ex - On This Rock I Will Build My Church**). **Messiah** was also **the source** of supernatural **water** for **the Corinthians**. **Yeshua** had said: **Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them (John 7:37b-38).**

Nevertheless, despite all **the blessings** above, **Paul** told **the Corinthians**, **the Israelites** failed to obtain the prize: With **the majority of them** **God was not pleased, so their bodies were strewn across the desert (10:5).** All **Isra’el**, both believers and unbelievers, had been graciously **blessed** (see the commentary on **Romans Cp - The Grief of Isra’el’s Past Paradox**), liberated and sustained by **the LORD in the wilderness**, but in **the “race,”** that test of obedience and service, of being a witness to **the world**, most of **them** were **disqualified (9:24-27).** **They** misused and abused **their freedom** and **their blessings.** In self-centeredness and self-will they fell into **temptation**, and then into **sin**, as the book of **Numbers** can attest. Overconfidence was **their** undoing.

Many of **the disqualified Israelites** were believers who became unfit for **God’s** service. **They** became what **Paul** refers to as **vessels of dishonor.** **They** had not **cleansed themselves** from youthful lusts and had not **pursued righteousness, faith, love and peace.** **They** had not **called upon the Lord out of a pure heart (Second Timothy 2:21-22 Berean Study Bible).** As a result, **they** were scattered around **the desert** like pieces of broken **vessels** that were no longer useful. Since this was so, **the Corinthians’** complacency in matters of self-discipline and **their** corresponding fondness for self-

indulgence required immediate attention.²⁵²

Our **freedom in Messiah** is not meant to lead us to self-indulgence, but to selfless service (see the commentary on **Galatians Bu - Brothers and Sisters, You were Called to Freedom**). **Now these things took place as prefigurative historical events, warning us not to set our hearts on evil things as they did (10:6)**. While a variety of sinful behaviors can be considered here, although the connection remains only implicit in the argument, the echo of **Numbers 11:1-3** sounds ominous for those **Corinthians** who desire to **eat meat** sacrificed to **idols**.²⁵³

Paralleling the five blessings enjoyed by Isra'el in the new found freedom from Egypt, Paul proceeded to recount five failures experienced by Isra'el during that time.

1. Paul began by summarizing the sad cry: Give us meat to eat (see the commentary on **Numbers Bs - The Complaining at the Kivrot Ha'Ta'avah**)! **The Israelites** named the cemetery for those who were killed **Kivrot Ha'Ta'avah**, meaning *graves of the craving*. **ADONAI** gave **them** what **they** wanted, but while the **meat** was still between **their** teeth, **He** struck **them** with a plague. The application to **the Corinthian** situation was obvious: **To sum up, if food will be a snare for my brother, I will never eat meat again, lest I cause my brother to sin (8:13).**

2. Don't be idolaters, as some of them were - as the TaNaKh puts it, "The people sat down to eat and drink, then got up to indulge in revelry" (10:7). The warning against **idolatry** was very relevant to the conditions in **Corinth**. Paul quotes **Exodus 32:6**, where **eating, drinking** and dancing point to a typical **idol** festival. Often such a festival degenerated into debauchery. For **those** believers who thought **they** could freely take part in **idolatry**, Paul intended, with illustrations like this, to knock out the false props which supported **their** behavior before **God** intervened and took **their** lives like **the immoral brother** (see **Ba - Failure to Discipline an Immoral Brother**).²⁵⁴ **He** would not have **His** name dragged through the mud of **their** spiritual adultery.

3. And let us not engage in sexual immorality, as some of them did, with the consequence that 23,000 died in a single day (10:8). In the **Israelites** case, **the immorality** associated with **idolatry (Numbers 25:1-2)**, which also characterized much pagan worship in the first century. But **the Corinthians** indulged in **immorality** in contexts other than **idolatry**, as instances of rebuke in **5:1** and **6:18** illustrate. As **God** had brought **death** to **the immoral** among **the Israelites (Numbers 25:4-9)**, **He** could also do in **Corinth** as with the case of **the immoral brother** above. This was a sobering thought for

those who could flaunt **their freedom in Messiah** because **everything** seemed **permissible to them (6:12 and 10:23)**.²⁵⁵

Was **Paul** in error when **he** said that **23,000 died in a single day**? Some have linked **Paul's 23,000** with the **3,000** who died in **Exodus 32:28**. But it is clear that here in **10:5-10**, **Paul** drew all **his** illustrations from the book of **Numbers**. And in **Numbers 25:9** it records how **24,000 people died** as a result of **God's** judgment. It seems that the **Numbers** account records the total of those who died, including the leaders, who apparently numbered one thousand (see the commentary on **Numbers Ae - The Issue of Rounded Numbers**). **Paul's** figure of 23,000 refers only to those who perished in the plague.²⁵⁶

4. And let us not put the Messiah to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by snakes (10:9). Because **God** took the **Israelites** on a longer route to the Promised Land, **their tempers grew short because of the detour and they spoke against God and against Moshe** saying: **Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To die in the desert? Ha'Shem sent poisonous snakes and many of Isra'el's people died (Numbers 21:4-6).** **Paul's** point is that the **Corinthians'** challenge of **his** former prohibition against **their** attending pagan meals was actually **putting Messiah to the test** like the ancient **Israelites** had put **ADONAI to the test in the desert**. They wanted to eat at the **Lord's** Table and the table of demons.²⁵⁷

5. And don't grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the Destroying Angel (10:10). The verb **grumble** is used a number of times of the **Israelites** complaining against **ADONAI**, a complaint followed in each case by suitable punishment. **The people** also spoke rebelliously against **God's** appointed leaders **Moses** and **Aaron** (see the commentary on **Numbers Cw - The Rebellion of Dathan and Abiram**). **Grumbling** against **God** calls down divine punishment.²⁵⁸ **Paul** was facing a similar situation (see **Ai - Divisions in the Church at Corinth**).

These things happened to them (the Exodus generation) as prefigurative historical events, and they were written down as a warning to us who are living in the acharit-hayamim, or the end times (10:11). These were examples and warnings to the **Corinthians** that the **God** with whom **they** were accountable, who was bringing **His people** to a close at the **end of days**, was the same **God** who disciplined the **Israelites** with **death**, and could do so again (**11:30**). If the **Exodus generation** met such a horrifying end by rejecting the **spiritual Messiah** who nurtured **them** throughout **their** journey, how much more the **Corinthians** would be condemned by rejecting the risen

Messiah.²⁵⁹

Paul now brings this review of **Isra'el's** history to its conclusion by directly applying these **warnings** to the believers in **Corinth**. **Therefore, let anyone who thinks he is standing up be careful not to fall (10:12)!** The Bible is full of examples of the dangers of overconfidence. The book of **Esther**, for example, centers around the plan of a proud and overconfident man who saw **his** plan backfire. King Ahasuerus of Persia promoted **Haman** to be **his** second in command, with the instructions for the people to bow before **Haman** as they would the king. **Mordecai**, however, would not bow down to **him**, and when the proud and arrogant **Haman** was told that Mordecai was **a Jew**, he persuaded Ahasuerus to declare an edict that would give **him** revenge on all **the Jews** in the land by having **them** destroyed. Through the intercession of Queen **Esther**, **Haman's** evil plan was exposed, and in the process **Haman was impaled on the pole he had set up for Mordecai (Esther 7:1-10)**, who was given all of **Haman's** possessions and the royal honor **Haman** had expected for **himself** (see the commentary on [Esther Cf - The Greatness of Mordecai](#)).

Just as **the Israelites** kept falling into **temptation** and **sin** in spite of **their** redemption from **Egypt**, the same thing can happen to us. Thus, those who feel confident that they could be disciplined by falling under **the Lord's** judgment should watch out, lest they do so. This warning will soon lead **Paul** back to the specific issue of participating in banquets at idol temples.²⁶⁰ If **the Corinthians** thought that **their** standing in **Messiah** and corresponding **freedom** could be exercised in **sin** with impunity, **they** were wrong . . . possibly **dead** wrong.

None of us are immune to **temptation**. Given the right situation, you and I are capable of any **sin**. **God** knows this, so **He** has assigned us as individual believers the responsibility of keeping each other on track. The Bible says: **Encourage one another daily . . . so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness (Hebrews 3:13 NIV)**. "Mind your own business" is not a phrase that we should be using. We are called and commanded to be involved in each other's lives. If you know someone who is wavering spiritually right now it is your responsibility to **go after them** and **bring them back** into the fellowship. **James** tells us: **If you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back (James 5:19 The Message).**²⁶¹



After a strong warning about self-confidence and pride, **Paul** gives a strong word of encouragement about **God's** help when **tempted**. **No temptation has seized you beyond what people normally experience, and God can be trusted not to allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear.** After kicking out the props of **their** false security, **Paul** pointed to **the One** on whom **the Corinthians** could rely. **The temptations** that **seized the Corinthians** were like those people had always faced. **They** could be met and endured by depending on **God**, who is **faithful**. **On the contrary, along with the temptation he will also provide the way out, so that you will be able to endure (10:13).** Part of the problem, of course, was that some, in the face of **temptation**, were not looking for **a way out** by endurance, but **a way** in for indulgence.²⁶²

Reading between the lines, it was as if **Paul** were saying, "There is no risk of failing as long as **the Corinthians** were dealing with ordinary **temptations**. **God** would help **them** through such temptations. But that would not be the case with **idolatry**. **The way out** in that case is simply put: **run from idolatry**, which is the concern of what **Paul** says next (see [Bs - The Truth About Idolatry](#)).²⁶³