

Idol Meet and Idol Meat

1 Corinthians 10:1-11:1

How far can you take our assurance of salvation?

- Because I'm assured of salvation, can I confidently commit adultery, knowing God's forgiven me?
- Because I'm assured of salvation, can I confidently indulge my materialistic passions, knowing God's forgiven all my self-centredness?
- Because I'm assured of salvation, can I confidently involve myself in all sorts of pagan rituals, knowing my true allegiance is to God alone?

Back in 2002, the then Archbishop of Canterbury elect was inducted as a druid in a Celtic ceremony. That even raised the eyebrows of the journalists who reported it. Is that the sort of thing our Christian freedom allows?

Some in Corinth apparently felt they were free to attend pagan temples and be involved in sacrifices to idols. We don't know their complete reasoning. We can only pick up bits and pieces from Paul's answer in these three chapters of 1 Corinthians. From chapter 8, we know:

- They believed idols have no real existence.
- They believed there's only one true God.

From the three chapters as a whole, we know they were strong on insisting on their Christian freedom. From the beginning of chapter 10, there are hints they believed they were protected by their involvement in baptism and the Lord's table. They had a strong assurance of their own salvation based on their Christian experience.

At several points Paul agrees with them.

- Paul also believes that idols have no real existence.
- Paul also believes that there's only one true God.

- Paul believes food offered to idols remains food and isn't somehow contaminated.

Yet, Paul disagrees with their current use of their Christian freedom.

- For them, it's a question of their knowledge and their rights. To Paul, that focus leads to pride. That focus is ultimately non-Christian because its bottom line is selfishness – the freedom to do as I please when I please.
- For Paul, it's a question of love and freedom. That focus leads to encouraging and building up others. The bottom line isn't me, but someone else.

We saw that contrast in chapter 9 – and Paul returns to it at the end of this chapter.

However, in this chapter, Paul also introduces a new element. There's another reason why some aspects of their behaviour are wrong. Paul argues strongly against their behaviour of attending pagan sacrifices.

The Significance of Idol Worship

At first, it looks like Paul changes subjects. All of a sudden he starts talking about Israel and the exodus. You wonder what this has to do with Christian freedom and sacrifices to idols. The connection's twofold:

- First, Paul just spoke of the need for athletes to exercise discipline and self-control to win the prize. He spoke of his own personal discipline – lest he find himself disqualified. Israel's exodus generation provides a stark example of some not completing the race. They all came out of Egypt, but most ended up dead bodies scattered over the Sinai Peninsula. They didn't enter the Promised Land.
- Secondly, the significant problem with the exodus

generation was they provoked God to jealousy. They did that through their idolatry. The way these Corinthians involved themselves in sacrifices to idols was likely to do exactly the same thing.

1. The Example of Israel

So what's Paul say about the Israelites. First, he says, they too had their own salvation experience:

- They passed through the sea and were baptised into Moses – that is, they were baptised under his leadership. When did that happen? It happened when they came out of Egypt.
- They ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink as part of God's people. As they journeyed under God's direction, so He provided for their physical needs – manna from heaven, water from rocks, a flock of quails. This gave them physical nourishment – it kept them physically alive. It also provided spiritual nourishment for them – a spiritual nourishment that came from Christ Himself.

Now we could get bogged down in the details of all that.

- How can they be baptised without getting wet?
- What's it mean to say this spiritual rock is Christ?
- How did the rock follow them?

There are difficulties in these verses. But the main point's crystal clear. When they came out of Egypt, God was saving them and they had spiritual sacraments.

Yet, though they had these things, God wasn't pleased with them. Verse 5:

Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Bit of an understatement, isn't it? How many of the exodus generation was God pleased with? Two – Caleb

and Joshua. The rest died in the wilderness. That shows how God was displeased with these people.

Paul says, these things are for us.

- Verse 6: *these things took place as examples for us*
- Verse 11: *these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction*

These Old Testament stories have application beyond that generation. They're written for our learning that we may take warning from them. They have application for these Corinthians in the first century. They apply to us.

The warning is: *that we might not desire evil as they did* (verse 6). When they desired evil, look what happened to them – destroyed in the wilderness. How did they desire evil? Four ways are set out here:

- idolatry (verse 7);
- immorality (verse 8);
- testing (verse 9); and
- grumbling (verse 10).

Idolatry – the incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32. Then, while they waited for Moses, Israel used a golden calf to worship God. They worshipped the true God in a false way by using a statue. It's idolatrous. Whatever the statue is, it's an inadequate representation of the true God. How can you use a golden calf to represent the God who made all the cows and the bulls? God's far greater than that. People say: I don't worship the statue, I worship what the statue represents. It's always been that way – nobody worships the statue itself. Yet, it's still idolatry. For any statue you use falsely represents God.

Immorality – the incident recorded in Numbers 25. The people of God – especially the males – associate themselves with the Moabites. They're involved in immorality, which also leads to idolatry. They chase the women, and take on their gods and bow down to their gods. God strikes them down with a plague.

Testing – the incident in Numbers 21:4-9 where Israel complains about wandering around in the wilderness and having nothing to eat except manna. Psalm 78:18 refers to the incident in this way:

They tested God in their heart

by demanding the food they craved.

Testing God is the opposite of trusting God. Israel did this many times.

Grumbling. It isn't completely clear which incident Paul means because Israel often grumbled and the word *destroyer* isn't used back in Numbers. Two main candidates:

- Numbers 14, where they grumble against Moses being their leader; or
- Numbers 16, where a significant number are killed in the revolt of Korah.

As you read Exodus and Numbers, you find the people grumbled often. They were often dissatisfied – lack of water, lack of food, going nowhere, taking so long to get there. They grumbled about what they perceived to be the inadequacies of God's provision for them.

These things remain problems for Christians today.

- Idolatry. Many find it easier to confine their worship to a form of ritual restricted to one hour on Sunday mornings than to do the hard work of thinking on God's word and wrestling with what God

reveals of Himself there and giving their entire lives as their worship of God.

- Immorality. Has there ever been a more immoral society than our own? Immorality is widely used in advertising and entertainment and parades itself on our streets.
- Testing. Still people demand that God jump to their tune. They demand signs and visions and special displays of God's affection. Instead of trusting what God's revealed, they want God to perform to their requirements.
- Grumbling. How easy it is to complain about God's lack of provision for us. And the more we have, the more we seem to grumble and complain about what we don't have.

We could profitably spend the whole sermon there, but let's move to Paul's three warnings. He said: Look what happened to them when they did those things. So be careful as those *on whom the end of the ages has come*.

The first warning: Take heed (verse 12).

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

These Israelites thought they stood. They were delivered out of Egypt. They had their spiritual sacraments. They fell in the wilderness. Some Corinthians likewise thought they stood. I'm baptised. I participate in communion. I belong to the Corinthian church. I'm on the church roll. I've got it made. Paul says: Watch out. Make sure you don't desire evil like they desired evil.

The second warning: Don't give in (verse 13).

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Most people use this verse as one of promise and comfort: God won't allow you to be tempted beyond your strength. And it is that – but that isn't its main function in this context. It's a warning. Why do you fail? Why do you sin? According to this verse, you can never say "I was pushed"; you'll always have to say "I jumped".

- You can't say: I can't help myself. I'm just caught up in this immoral way of life and I don't have the power to escape it.
- You can't say: I can't help myself. I've always lost control of my mouth and say things I regret later.
- You can't say: The situation's so bad I can't put up with it anymore. I just have to grumble about it.

Therefore, the third warning: Flee idolatry (verse 14).

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Run away from it. Escape it any way you can. Have nothing to do with it. Don't put God to the test in this way. God will provide a way out of trials – but if you're going to initiate a headlong pursuit of idolatry, that's a different matter altogether.

2. Fellowship with Jesus

That warning serves as a bridge into what Paul wants to say to them about sacrifices to idols. He moves from the example of Israel to their practice of sitting down to feasts in pagan temples. Paul considers this idolatry.

In some ways, these are difficult verses to understand –

probably because they deal with sacrificial practices not part of our culture. Yet, the overall direction's quite plain. Paul begins with the Lord's Table. When he wrote to the Corinthians, this involved more than a smidgeon of bread and a tiny glass of grape juice. It involved a full meal. He says to them: when you involve yourselves in this meal, you're involved in *fellowship*.

- You have fellowship with each other – you participate or share in the meal together.
- You have fellowship with God – for the meal is celebrated in His presence and expresses your special relationship with Him. You're partners with Him.

This meal celebrates your union with God and your union in the body of Christ. It speaks of the special bonds of fellowship that exist.

It was similar with Israel – verse 18. When they had sacrificial meals at the tabernacle or the temple, that illustrated certain things about their fellowship.

- They too had a special relationship with one another as part of God's chosen people.
- They too had a special relationship with God because God had chosen them as His people.

Again, there was fellowship at both levels.

Well, says Paul, it's the same with these feasts in pagan temples. Certainly, the food remains food created by the true God. And yes, the idols aren't really gods. As idols, they have no real existence. But the issue of fellowship at these feasts isn't neutral. There's a reality behind the idols. That reality isn't God – for the feasts aren't offered to God and aren't in accord with His wishes. The reality behind the idols is demons. Demons use idol worship for their own purposes. Deuteronomy 32:17 says that. So

when you involve yourself in these feasts in pagan temples, you involve yourself in fellowship with demons.

- The feasts express fellowship with the others who attend – others not part of your Christian community and with totally different values.
- The feasts express fellowship with the demons who are in opposition to God. They express partnership with them.

Thus, it's inconsistent for a Christian, who's given their exclusive allegiance or fellowship to God to turn round and participate in fellowship with demons. How can you partner with God and God's enemies at the same time? Any sensible person (verse 15) can see the inconsistency of that.

Will you provoke God to jealousy? Didn't Israel do that? What happened to Israel? Why do you think a different fate awaits you – if you persist on this disastrous course?

This is still relevant in exactly this form in many cultures today – but generally not in ours. Our neighbours don't ask us to join them in celebratory feasts in pagan temples. As our country becomes more multicultural and as more pagan temples are built, that may come. So does this passage have no relevance to us? Is this something our Christian ancestors successfully stamped out and we don't have to worry about it today?

What are the great idolatries of our culture?

- Sexuality.
- Pleasure and excitement.
- Leisure.
- Materialism.
- Sport.

They're a bit more sophisticated, aren't they? They don't have temples erected at street corners. They don't have altars at which sacrifices are made. They don't have celebratory feasts where people share sacrificial meals. Or do they? Is it possible that idolatry is so much part of our culture that we don't really recognise it?

We too need to flee the idolatries of our time. In themselves, each of those things isn't wrong. They're part of God's good creation. Yet, in our culture, they're used by demons to lure people away from worship of God – to have people give their ultimate allegiance to these things rather than God – to worship the creature rather than the Creator. Christians may also chase these things rather than God. Is it not possible for us to thus provoke the Lord to jealousy?

The Significance of Idol Meat

In verse 23, Paul returns to the other issue of eating meat offered to idols in a context other than idol worship. We can deal with this relatively quickly, for I don't think he says anything particularly new. That's not to say it's unimportant – merely to say that he's revising the things we've looked at over the last two weeks.

The idol in itself is nothing. He agrees with the Corinthians about that. Meat passing through pagan temples on its way to market is still meat. He agrees with them about that also. It doesn't pick up some contamination on the way. It remains part of God's good creation. It's no longer a context where it's part of fellowshiping with demons. Thus, you're free to eat it. Enjoy it as one of God's good gifts. That's a right and proper spiritual response.

Will you eat it? That depends on the circumstances. The fact you may be free to do something doesn't necessarily mean it's helpful for you to do it – either for yourself or for others. So, if there's someone present who objects to you eating the meat – don't eat it. Why not?

- Why should I refrain eating something for which I rightly give thanks to God?
- Why should I allow my liberty to be restricted by the weak conscience of someone else?

Simply because I'm set free from the sinful and self-centred bondage of having to please myself all the time.

- I'm set free to do things for God's glory.
- I'm set free to please others.

So for the sake of others – for the sake of the conscience of my Christian brother or sister – I refrain from exercising my rights on that occasion. I don't want to lead them to rebel against God by going against their conscience. I'm free to use my freedom that way. I don't seek my own good, but the good of the other person. I'm not set free to continued sinfulness; I'm set free to build others up and to work for their salvation.

Conclusion

In dealing with this issue, Paul follows a careful line between competing dangers. On the one hand, he avoids legalism. Legalism is where people believe the way to God and godliness is obedience to the law. Jesus has given us right relationship with God through His death on the cross. We're set free from keeping the law in some effort to earn sufficient merit points with God. So Paul doesn't simply introduce new rules that these Corinthian Christians must keep if they're to earn or maintain God's favour. They're free to eat this meat passing through pagan temples on its way to the meat market.

On the other hand, Paul doesn't go to the other extreme and say you're now free to sin as much as you like. There is some truth in legalism – the truth that God's interested in behaviour. Some actions are a denial of God and His character. Some actions express rebellion against God. Some actions are inconsistent with total allegiance to God. Getting caught up in idol worship is one of those things. How can you say you are a completely loyal fan of both Brisbane and Melbourne? As loyal servants of God, they aren't free to worship demons.

It's an area where the church has often struggled as we try to define spirituality in the church. Often we stumble over insignificant areas where God gives us freedom and ignore things inconsistent with our ultimate allegiance to Jesus. In the past, we've made rules about makeup and movies and dancing and drinking and perhaps prided ourselves on our great adherence to those rules. At the same time, we divided our allegiance between God and money and surrendered our distinctiveness from the culture around us.

It's important we get our categories right.

- It's so easy to fall back to the legalist's approach and make up new sets of rules and regulations – things that make us feel good about how well we're doing in achieving our own godliness. We must resist that heresy. In doing that we sometimes become distinctive or separate in ways God doesn't intend us to be distinctive or separate.
- It's so easy on the other hand to lose our distinctiveness as God's people by trying to share our allegiance between God and something less than

God. That's what happened to Israel time and time again as she fell into idolatry – perhaps pursued idolatry would be a better way to put it. It can happen to us when we adopt non-Christian cultural values and try to baptise them into the church. We must resist that compromise.

Both those things require God's wisdom and strength.