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## Chapter 5

# Examples from the Past

**1 Corinthians 10**

**UNDERSTANDING**

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read 1 Corinthians 10*

## The Big Picture

Lessons from history can help us understand the present.

St. Paul continues his response on the subject of idol worship. The example of the Israelites is very similar to the Corinthians' current situation; by seeing the causes and effects of the Israelites' destruction, maybe the Corinthians can properly see what they are doing and where it might lead them. It takes some time to sort out all the similarities between the Israelites and Corinthians, but once we do, we are able to see ourselves in the story as well.

## Corinthians of the Past (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

Even though he is speaking to a primarily Gentile audience, St. Paul calls the Israelites "our fathers" (v. 1). St. Paul sees the new Christian Church as grafted onto the covenant God established with the Israelites. Just as the Corinthians were baptized in water and the

spirit, the Israelites were baptized, in a way, through their crossing of the Red Sea, under the direction of a cloud of fire that prefigured the Holy Spirit (v. 2).

The Israelites and the Corinthians have a number of similarities. The Corinthians are set apart in a new family of God through baptism; the Israelites were set apart from the Egyptians into a new nation through their crossing the Red Sea. Furthermore, the Eucharistic meal that the Church partakes in was prefigured by miraculous manna and water that were supernaturally provided by God.

### **The Fall of the Israelites (1 Corinthians 10:5–13)**

Despite these supernatural privileges, the Israelites still failed to be faithful to God. St. Paul cites a couple of examples: First, in verse 7, he mentions the episode where the Israelites worshipped the golden calf in the desert (Ex 32:4, 6). St. Paul quotes Exodus 32:6: “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance.” “Rose up to dance” is a euphemism that refers to the sexual orgies that occurred during the worship of false idols. In verse 8, St. Paul alludes to Numbers 25:1–9, which tells of how the Moabites sent women over to the Israelite men to influence them to worship their pagan gods.

### **For Our Instruction**

As St. Paul points out in verse 6, these things are warnings for us. The original Greek translation uses the word *typoi*, which can be translated as “type” or “pattern.” The reason for this story is clear: St. Paul wishes the Corinthians to “shun the worship of idols” (v. 14). This story of the Israelites and the golden calf isn’t just a nice example; it is very similar to the Corinthians’ current situation.

1 Corinthians 6:12–20 gives us an insight in the Corinthians' struggle with the sexual immorality of prostitution. In the Roman Empire, prostitution was both legal and a positive way to engage in worship, especially of fertility gods. Furthermore, the Roman and Greek culture separated the body from the soul, such that satisfying a sexual desire was as morally acceptable as eating to deal with hunger pangs. On top of this, the Corinthians are using the slogan "all things are lawful to me" (6:12) to give themselves the freedom to continue their pagan worship, including prostitution. (Note: 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 can be a confusing passage. Apparently, St. Paul is trading barbs with the Corinthians in a mock conversation back and forth, with St. Paul's reply coming after the Corinthian quotation, in the RSV-CE. Since the Greek does not include quotation marks, translators have to guess where they should go.)

Historically, we know that the pagan temples of Corinth followed a course similar to the sexual immorality of the Israelites during their worship of the golden calf, with the same pattern of eating, drinking, and "rising up to dance." It was a common custom to have celebratory meals in the pagan temples that included heavy eating and drunkenness. But the party did not stop there: Many temples employed women who served both as hostesses and priestesses, and orgies would sometimes follow the meal.

St. Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 6 and the example in Numbers 25:1–3 show that sexual immorality and the worship of pagan gods are intimately connected. Rather than presenting us with a weak view of the body, St. Paul shows us that our bodies are members of Jesus Christ Himself (1 Cor 6:15–16). Just as the Spirit of God dwelled in the Jewish temple, the Spirit of God resides in us—not abstractly, but in our very bodies (v. 19). We need to avoid defiling this holy place, which belongs to Jesus Christ Himself (vv. 19–20).

## **Application to Jesus**

Do we treat our bodies like they are members of Jesus Himself?

## **An Idol or a Demon? (1 Corinthians 10:14–22)**

St. Paul then moves from this warning to the reality of the idol meat. While it is true that the gods that the pagans worship are not real, demonic forces are present in the pagan temples (v. 20). The pagans partner with demons through meat offered to idols (v. 16); the Corinthian Christians, on the other hand, partake in Christ through the body and blood of the Eucharist. We cannot partake in both sacrifices. Just as in the example of Israel, the Corinthians must not provoke God, who doesn't want us to chase other, false gods (v. 22; Ex 20:4–6).

## **Practical Issues with Meat (1 Corinthians 10:23–31)**

After breaking down the spiritual reality of idol meat, St. Paul adds some practical advice. The Corinthians are free to eat meat sold in the market, because the connection to pagan temple rituals and demonic forces is minimized (v. 25). But if the Corinthians are told where the meat comes from, they must abstain from it for the benefit of the consciences of others (v. 28).

## **American Idol**

The words in 1 Corinthians and Scripture as a whole were written for our instruction (CCC 115–18). The actions and consequences of Scripture have much to tell us about our own struggles. American culture can fall into the same patterns found in chapter 10. As Christians, it is easy to tell ourselves that we are strong enough to handle the influences of the world and that we are mature enough, or know enough, not to fall into sin. This can apply to the parties we attend, the media we consume, and the way we conduct ourselves with others, in real life or on a computer screen. Plus, as St. Paul shows, it is not always about the action but the example we set for other Christians. In all things, we would do well to follow St. Paul's advice: "Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10: 12).

### **Application to Our Lives**

What do the lessons of Scripture have to say about our lives today?



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

## *1 Corinthians 10*

### **STEP 1: OPENER**

Have you ever heard or read a passage of Scripture that seemed like it was written just for you in that moment?

### **STEP 2: BACKDROP**

St. Paul continues his response about idol worship in chapter 10. He starts off with a story from the Old Testament about Moses and the Israelites in the desert. The story is similar in many ways to the Corinthians' current situation. By seeing the causes and effects of the Israelites' destruction, perhaps the Corinthians can properly see what they are doing and where it might lead them. It takes some time to sort out all the comparisons between the Israelites and Corinthians, but once we do, we are able to see ourselves in the story as well.

### **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Today's passage is 1 Corinthians 10. Start by reading 1 Corinthians 10:1-5.

### **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.



**1. St. Paul begins with a comparison between the Israelites and the Corinthians. What are some key similarities?**

*Answer: See the "Corinthians of the Past" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"*

**Read 1 Corinthians 10:6–13.**

**2. Read Exodus 32:1–7 and Numbers 25:1–3 for background on 1 Corinthians 7–8. What is going on in these passages?**

*Answer: See "The Fall of the Israelites" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"*

**3. In reference to verse 10, read Numbers 11:4–6. Why do the Israelites grumble?**

*Answer: They grumble about the lack of meat.*

**4. How does this apply to the Corinthians?**

*Answer: This is what the Corinthians did earlier in the letter (1 Cor 8:1–13).*

**5. How do the sins of the Israelites compare to the sins of the Corinthians?**

*Answer: See the "For Our Instruction" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"*

**6. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. Why are the Corinthians struggling with sexual immorality?**

*Answer: See the “For Our Instruction” section in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”*

**7. What is the logic behind making a comparison like this?**

*Answer: If the Corinthians can see how God judged the Israelites for their actions, maybe they will be able to see the consequences of their own actions.*

**8. Read CCC 115–18. Why is it important to see our lives in light of Scripture?**

*Answer: Just like the Corinthians, we can examine our lives through the lives of those in Scripture. What were they tempted by? How did they react, in good ways and bad? How did this affect their relationship with God?*

**9. Practically, how can we allow the story of Scripture to influence the story of our own lives?**

*Answer: Using Scripture in our prayer is helpful. If we examine the stories closely, many times we can see our own lives in ways we never thought possible.*

**Read 1 Corinthians 10:14–22.**

**10. What is St. Paul's real concern when the Corinthians eat the meat offered to idols?**

*Answer: The real concern is that the Corinthians are worshipping demons in the pagan temples or even falling into sexual immorality.*

**11. Practically, what instructions does St. Paul give them?**

*Answer: See the "Practical Issues with Meat" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"*

**12. In what ways will these instructions help the problem?**

*Answer: It will keep the Corinthians out of the temple while also helping show both Christians and non-believers that Christians do not worship pagan gods.*

**13. How does this passage apply to our lives?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**14. What do you think tempts us the most in our culture?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**15. How does the analogy of our bodies as members of Jesus Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit help us see the spiritual implications of our actions?**

*Answer: Being members of the Body of Christ helps us see the effects of our sins outside of ourselves—both in our relationship with Jesus and the community. The temple analogy also helps us see what we are truly made for.*

**16. How do our actions in these matters affect others?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**17. What lessons can we learn from the Israelites and the Corinthians?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*



