

## **Growing in Righteousness**

### **3. A Bad Example**

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

What I am about to tell you may cause you to think I didn't love my father. I did. I loved him very much. My father died sixteen years ago, and I still miss him.

My father used to have a saying that he would quote to us fairly often. He would say, "No man is a total failure. He can always be used as a bad example." Sadly, my father lived up to that little saying. My father was a treasure hunter in life. He was always looking for buried treasure in a metaphorical sense. He was always looking for a job that would make him fabulously wealthy very quickly. He had little patience. He would try a job a few years, and if it didn't make him wealthy, he was gone. It never occurred to him that the way to succeed in life is to patiently build up a position over a period of years.

When my father died, he hadn't achieved the goal that he had set for himself. I guess he was a failure in that regard. But he wasn't a total failure. He made a great bad example for my brothers and me. We went to school on our father. All four of us studied his life and said, "I don't want to make the mistake he made." All of us chose our careers early in life and have stayed with them. When one of us would get frustrated and start thinking about starting over again in something new, the other three of us would say, "If you think a change will make you happy, go ahead. But don't expect miracles. Remember what happened to daddy." Now, all four of us are in our 50's. We have all been successful in our callings, although we have all had our struggles. Each of us has stuck it out in the hard times and are now enjoying the rewards.

And when we get together, we remember our father and thank him for showing us a mistake to avoid. As a bad example, he was a great success. Of course, there were many other things he showed us how to do well.

In the Bible there are some people who have been a great success as a bad example. They were the Hebrews that Moses led out of slavery in Egypt.

You may know that story. Moses was sent by God to lead the Hebrews out Egypt, where they had been enslaved by the Pharaoh. It was God's intention that Moses would lead them back to the Promised Land. However, out of the generation that left Egypt, only two entered

into the Promised Land—Joshua and Caleb. All the others died in the desert.

That generation has been lifted up ever since as a bad example. They failed to receive God's promises. They never made it to the Promised Land. The reason was they never learned to walk with God in trust and obedience.

They walked with God. There was never any doubt that God was with them. God appeared to them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God fed them manna every morning. God provided them water from a rock when they were thirsty. They had the tabernacle of God's presence with the Ark of the Covenant. God spoke to them regularly through Moses.

They walked with God. They followed God. But they never trusted God, and they only obeyed God when they were forced to do so. They knew their God, and they didn't like their God.

We have a tendency to think that if people just had a chance to get to know God, they would love God. We think the problem is that God seems far off and unreal to people. But, if God would just break through the barrier and come to us and be real to us, everyone would love God.

But that just isn't true. God was real to those Hebrews. And they wished God would just go away and leave them alone. They were constantly grumbling and complaining. They were constantly questioning Moses' leadership, although Moses was simply doing what God was telling him to do. Several times they wanted to turn their back on God and return to Egypt. They were always certain they would starve, or die of thirst, even though God had promised to provide for them. There were times when they worshipped idols. They gave in to sexual immorality. If God told them not to do it, they would do it.

And none of them reached the Promised Land. All that generation, except two, died in the desert.

But they were not total failures, because, ever since, they have been used as bad examples. Over and over, the writers of the Bible lift up that generation and warn us not to make their mistakes.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians and says to them, "Just because you have been baptized in the name of Christ and receive communion, don't think you have got it made. That generation was baptized when they passed through the Red Sea. They ate heavenly food and drank from the divine rock. Yet they didn't make it to the place God had prepared for them."

God is with us. There is no question about that. The question is: Are we with God? Are we walking with God in faith and obedience?

And we cannot answer, "Why, certainly. I'm here in church this morning, aren't I?" As someone has said, "Being in church doesn't make you anymore a Christian than being in a garage makes you a car."

When I was pastoring in Baytown, I was in a service club with a detective from the Baytown police force. One day he was telling me about a big drug bust they had just conducted. They had worked on this case for several months, working their way up the chain of dealers to catch the big one. Finally, they had him. This detective was there when they arrested this supplier. And this detective kept thinking to himself: I know this man. Where have I seen him before? Then it dawned on him. He had seen this man at church. They went to the same church, and this drug dealer was a regular attender.

Let me ask you something. Was that man saved? He had been baptized. He had professed his faith in Christ and accepted him as his Lord and Savior. Yet he was making his living selling drugs which were destroying people's lives. Was he saved?

Let's get a little more personal. Are you saved?

Has anyone ever asked you, "Brother, are you saved?" For a long time I didn't know how to answer that question. I could tell them about my baptism. I would tell them that I had publicly acknowledged Christ as my Lord and my Savior. I could tell them about the first time I experienced God's grace and love and truly understood God had forgiven my sins for Christ's sake. I would tell them about the first time I was aware of the Holy and God became real in my life. I could tell them about that and many other experiences. But I did not feel comfortable saying that I had been saved. Finally, I heard a preacher telling of his experience of being asked if he had been saved. His answer was, "I am being saved."

That's it. Salvation is a process that goes on throughout our lifetime. It is walking with God in deeper and closer communion as we grow in faith and obedience to God's will and God's ways.

At any time we can choose to turn away from God. That doesn't mean God is no longer with us. It does mean that we are no longer with God.

We must not point to any one experience and say, "That's it. I've been saved." That would be like the Hebrews crossing over the Red Sea and saying, "That's it, we've arrived." No, the journey has just begun. It will continue until we cross over Jordan and enter the Promised Land. We've got a long way to go and many battles to fight. However, God is with us. And if we will walk with God in faith and obedience, the journey will be glorious. God will lead us into the Promised Land.

That first generation of Hebrews never appreciated God's goodness to them. They never trusted God. They never accepted God. They never wanted to become a righteous and holy people. They never loved anyone except themselves. And they never found peace.

But they weren't a total failure. They did well as a bad example. Their children learned from their example. They walked with God in faith and obedience and God led them into the Promised Land.

We are doing the same. We will not make the same mistake they made. We will not take God's presence and God's grace and God's salvation for granted. We are determined to walk with God and to grow in righteousness so that we can enter into the Promised Land God has prepared for us to live in peacefully for all eternity.

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