

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,¹ that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,³ and all ate the same spiritual food,⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For, they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.⁶ Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.⁷ Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play."⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.⁹ We must not put Christ¹ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.¹⁰ And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.¹¹ These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.¹² So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.¹³ No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

“The Thirst of Faith”

Agnosticism is a word that has gained in popularity the last 50 years. It is not the same thing as Atheism which denies the existence of God. Rather, agnosticism simply claims to have no evidence one way or the other as to the existence of God. The Agnostic is unknowing. There has been nothing in his world of experience that either proves or disproves the existence of God.

I mention this because Paul begins our reading from 1 Corinthians expressing the desire that he did not want them to be unknowing about God's actions towards the Hebrew people when they were wandering in the wilderness between slavery in Egypt and arriving at the Promised Land. Some people translate that word unknowing as ignorant, which is inappropriate. The word is actually the word from which we get agnostic. Paul does not want them left without evidence either way of God and his steadfast love and faithfulness while they themselves were going through the wilderness of disunity in their fellowship. He did not want them to become functionally agnostic.

Paul uses this idea of unknowing quite a bit. Most strikingly he uses it in Romans Chapter Ten where he explains why his fellow Jews were rejecting their Messiah. He says it is because they are unknowing or agnostic with respect to knowing God's steadfast love and faithfulness. The Jews of Paul's day were a generation or so of God's children who had not experienced the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. They had nothing real to base their faith on and unfortunately did not look back to their story which contains claims God's abiding presence, love, and faithfulness. They were functionally agnostic meaning they believed in God, but had no proof either way of God's existence. They were trying to serve a God they no longer knew and, thus turned their relationship to

God into a religion centered on their own faithfulness to God rather than God's faithfulness to them. That is why they couldn't/wouldn't see who Jesus is.

Many churches today are filled with functional agnostics. We've been taught to believe in God and things about God. We will serve God dutifully usually through serving the church because we know we are supposed to. But, with respect to having personally experienced God's acting on our behalf according to his steadfast love and faithfulness or felt his love for ourselves, we are functionally agnostic. We have no personal proof as to whether or not God is steadfastly loving and faithful. We wind up being Christians who place our faith in our beliefs and dutifully serve those beliefs which we institutionalize in the Church. Worse, some of us will regard those who say that they have experienced the steadfast love and faithfulness of God as if they were crazy. The worst cases wouldn't know an act of God in their lives if it bit them because they are too set in their beliefs and ways of doing their duty to allow themselves to be open to the possibility that God would and does act in our lives.

Whole congregations also fall into functional agnosticism. We forget or are just plain unknowing that God is acting in and through us and in turn just do what we believe churches are supposed to do. We do worship. We have Sunday School. We do fundraising. We help charities, visit one another, and have potlucks. Yet, somewhere in the mix of things we lose sight of what God is actually doing in and through us. God the Trinity works to build community in God's own image by pouring his Holy Spirit into us that we may love each other and the world outside as Christ Jesus has loved each of us. The sure sign of functional agnosticism in a church is that it winds up doing things for the sake of doing things rather than taking the risk to build deeper relationships.

Paul writes the Corinthians hoping to prevent them from falling into this functional agnosticism. Their churches were being torn apart by factions competing for control and the resulting disunity was causing them to lose sight of their Christ-mindedness. In actuality, they were slipping back into being just like all the other cult-like charismatic religions in Corinth. So Paul reminds them of how God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness. Together, they followed the cloud and passed through the sea. Together, they followed Moses, their leader. When, together, they hungered, God fed them with manna and quail. When, together, they thirsted, God gave them water from the rock. They had provision everywhere they went because Christ, the Rock, was with them.

Yet, regardless of the mighty acts of God's steadfast love and faithfulness and even though God was personally with them, many of the Israelites fell into a most tragic form of functional agnosticism by declaring that none of these mighty acts were for sure the acts of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So they made an idol of an Egyptian god and rose up to worship it with sexual immorality. They also put God to the test, routinely complaining and wishing to be back in Egypt where their food was better. Most strikingly, because of fear they refused to enter the Promised Land the first time they came to it. So, along the way God struck many of them down and prolonged their time in the wilderness. Like the Israelites, the Corinthians were in the wilderness of disunity having to learn faith.

In the wilderness God teaches us to rely on his steadfast love and faithfulness by letting us hunger and thirst for Christ so that he may provide what we really need and prove his love and faithfulness. The wilderness keeps us from becoming functionally agnostic. In the wilderness we can find ourselves tempted to carry on like the ancient Israelites. We can and do create false gods out of our perceived needs and serve them hoping that in so doing we will satisfy our hunger and thirst. We can go looking for love in all the wrong ways hoping that a significant other will quench our hunger and thirst. We will test God telling God to prove himself in a particular way and then we make the bargain that if God does it, we will believe. We complain at God because life in the wilderness isn't as fulfilling as doing our own thing was. We complain about what God provides us with thinking it doesn't really meet what we believe our needs to be.

God provides us with exactly what we need. Learning faith is learning that God can and does satisfy our thirst to have faith. God leads us into the wilderness of trials that are common to life, very painful trials where the test is to trust God and let him show us his living and healing way out. As Isaiah said, “God's thoughts are not our thoughts and our ways are not God's ways.” When we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness thirsty for faith, we just have to trust God is doing something for our good. Truly, when God speaks his word it accomplishes its purpose. Everything that happens in our lives good and bad is God working to establish our faith and to make us more Christ-like. When we come to the end of our time in the wilderness, and it does end, we truly do find that God has brought forth a new peace and joy in us that satisfies our thirsting. Somehow he speaks and things happen that teach us his love and faithfulness and we can't help but draw closer to him in faith.

So, my friends, when in the wilderness seek the Lord because it is there that he certainly can be found. Pray, read scripture, spend time with Christian friends, share your trials and most importantly avoid doing anything that you now is just an effort to meet what you perceive to be your needs. God is working way deeper in you than you can understand. Friends, if you are in the wilderness, seek the Lord for in the wilderness he can especially be found. Amen.