



The Wilderness Then and Now

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness...Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

— 1 Corinthians 10:1–5, 11

In the example of Israel being led out of Egypt to the Promised Land, one of the most vivid scriptural illustrations of being saved out of the old life for the new, a very tragic thing occurs along the way. A significant number within the ranks of God's people so large that it is difficult to fully comprehend became so spiritually corrupt that God forbade them admittance into the Promised Land. Only a very few of the original group gained entrance. Some today would assert, "Well, it is obvious they were never saved to begin with", yet the Apostle Paul says "*all were baptized into Moses*", "*all ate the same spiritual food...the same spiritual drink*", and that they were all following the Old Testament incarnation of Christ. At the very least it seems problematic to state they were spiritual counterfeits with such impeccable qualifications. I would suggest there is much in this example to teach us about this present age in the final hours leading up to Christ's Return which illuminates the working of the apostasy – the "great falling away" – we are witnessing within the Body of Christ.

How could a group of Believers saved, baptized, and continually fed and led by Christ ultimately not be welcomed by God into His promised rest? How could things go so wrong that only the tiniest fraction of a

remnant were allowed entrance? They would appear to have possessed everything, even by today's standards, spiritually required to confirm a member of the one true scriptural faith which we would assess could only be possessed by a true believer. How could someone living through the salvation experience, submitting to the process of baptism from death to life, and being nurtured by God's provision unsuccessfully complete the journey of God's work in their life? I believe we are seeing an exact replay of that very same set of circumstances in the shadow of the Last Days. The falling away of God's people in the wilderness foreshadows the great falling away of God's people in the Last Days because, as Paul puts it, they are an example to us "*upon whom the ends of the ages have come*".

Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.

— 1 Corinthians 10:6

Believers during every age of history have, are, and will be tempted by evil, and to be sure there is a constant tension trying to live in a world which is by definition itself evil. But something happens when instead of battling and struggling **against** evil, a person begins to **embrace** it, to actually "*crave evil things*". It is an extension of covetousness. Most of Israel's original generation coming out of Egypt did not see the Promised Land because they began to desire, to long for, to eventually lust after the evil things of this life instead of the holy things leading to the next.

But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

— James 1:14–15

This overtaking of personal craving is most evident in the example of Israel when it comes to God's supply for Israel's nourishment. Although God supplied them with "*spiritual food*" and "*spiritual drink*" (1 Co. 10:3-4), this is one of the earliest examples of where personal lust took over.

"The Wilderness Then and Now", Page 2 of 12

“We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.”

— Numbers 11:5–6

Throughout Scripture, food is one of the most oft-used symbols of God’s Word. What began with the lesson of manna was ultimately realized in Christ Himself as the “Bread of Life”. (Jn. 6:35) Moses specifically and plainly explained the greater meaning of the manna.

“He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.

— Deuteronomy 8:3

Where does it all begin to go wrong for God’s people? When do they begin to cross the line so as to actually begin a craving for evil things? When they abandon His Word, when they no longer see His nourishment by the Word as sufficient, when they seek to be fed by the things of this world instead of the things of the Spirit.

This is already happening with those who have begun to embrace Emergent Church practices of contemplative prayer, ecumenical union, and false worship. It is already happening with the pursuit of psychologized marketing techniques through the Church Growth Movement and Purpose Driven as a replacement for scriptural practices. It is already happening with the true Gospel of salvation through Christ being supplanted with a social gospel and the insistence that all religions are somehow worshipping the same god. All these and many more “movements” within the Church all have the same thing in common: at their core they all abandon the plain teaching of Scripture, and instead of bringing the Gospel to the world, they bring the world

[“The Wilderness Then and Now”, Page 3 of 12](#)

into the Gospel. The craving has already begun on many different levels and through many different fronts.

Paul further elaborates on how this craving develops into four identifiable behaviors of which "*God was not well-pleased*". These are what led to so many never seeing the Promised Land.

*Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written,
"THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP
TO PLAY."
— 1 Corinthians 10:7*

What was the very first act of apostasy – "falling away" – engaged by Israel? It was the incident of the golden calf. (Ex. 32) The key point to understand about this event is that they were not going after another god nor outright forsaking God, but creating a substitute way to worship the One True God. How did Aaron present the golden calf? As if it represented the actual God of Israel!

*"They have quickly turned aside from the way which I
commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten
calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said,
'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land
of Egypt!'"
— Exodus 32:8*

They "*turned aside from the way which I commanded them*" – that is, they abandoned God's Word and ways, and substituted something else while still trying to say it represented the God of Israel.

This is why the embrace of all the aforementioned things – the Emergent Church, the Purpose Driven agenda, Ecumenism, and so forth – are idolatry. None of them say they are rejecting Christ for another Savior. In fact, they all claim to not only retain Christ as the focus but to represent the best way of worshiping Him! Just as Israel did not stop invoking the name of Yahweh in their worship of the calf, neither do modern equivalents cease to use the name of Christ. But in truth they are all varying forms of the scriptural definition of idolatry.

"The Wilderness Then and Now", Page 4 of 12

These are not things which characterize a difference of opinion about how to “do” church, but an evil craving for the incorporation of the things of this world to such a degree that they lead to worship and service of something so foreign in God’s estimation that it becomes the very definition of “idolatry”.

Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.

— 1 Corinthians 10:8

To fully understand the explicit meaning, add the qualifier “*sexually*” to “*immorally*”. A second reason for apostasy is related in the account of “The Sin of Peor”. (Num. 25) Through sexual corruption they were led by the Midianite women into false worship incorporating sexual practices, culminating in the famous account of Phinehas’ zeal to bring an end to the situation.

Throughout Scripture the repeated illustration teaching about unfaithfulness is adultery and sexual immorality. God repeatedly explains that faithful physical relationships mirror a faithful spiritual relationship with Him. In fact, no one unfaithful in their earthly relationships can attain to a right spiritual relationship with God. (Revisit David and Bathsheba if you have doubts.) And the repeated teaching of Scripture is that the inevitable destination of sexually immoral behavior is itself idolatry. They are always connected in Scripture. Just as such behavior resulted in separation from God in the Old Testament, so it is again affirmed as true in the New Testament.

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

— Ephesians 5:5

We live at a time when there is no longer any statistical difference on any sexual topic, behavior, or attitude between those who go to church and those who do not. There is no difference in the incidence of divorce, adultery, attitude toward homosexuality, or any other

category of sexually immoral behavior described by scriptural standards. A significant factor in the present level of apostasy is that the Church is no longer visibly different from the rest of the world in this regard. Just as it produced lethal consequences for the children of Israel in the wilderness then, so it is working the same in the Church today.

Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.

– 1 Corinthians 10:9

A third staple of apostasy is found in the example of the bronze serpent. (Num. 21:4-9) It is but one of a number of times when the people tried the Lord, the word “try” actually meaning something more akin to “wearing out”, a repeated behavior rather than just a one-time complaint. In the scriptural account it specifies, *“and the people became impatient because of the journey”*. (Num. 21:4) Because things were not progressing according to their personal preference, because they no longer desired to submit to God’s time table and purpose, they sought alternatives to God’s Word and ways.

I could drone on for hours about how I believe one of the core Christian values completely lost today is a life-long devotion to the work of sanctification. This is most visible in our local Christian bookstores where the largest section is probably “Christian Living” and the titles are dominated with things like “Five Steps to Prosperity”, “Ten Rules for a Happy Life” and on and on with the “quick-and-easy” approach. Discipleship is a lifetime process, but it is rarely taught as such and even less so pursued.

But I also believe this is reflected in the current tides of apostasy when it comes to the End Times itself.

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."

— 2 Peter 3:3–4

Notice how such mocking is the inevitable result of "*following after their own lusts*"? (The Holy Spirit affirms the same pattern through **both** Peter and Paul.) The same bookstores which today are filled to the brim with contra-scriptural "do-it-quick" materials were once populated with a seemingly endless selection of books on the Last Days. In many of our lifetimes the pendulum has swung from a Church universally fixated on the Return of Christ to one which not only largely ignores it, but whose most popular leaders actually advocate **against** the need to know about it.

According to Paul this is behavior engaged by people who "*try the Lord*". Just as you might have heard Israelites saying, "What is taking so long? We're never going to get there!", so we hear the same thing today. And just as those hearts began to look back at the old life in Egypt, likewise many hearts today look back and set their eyes on bringing back "the good ol' days".

Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

— 1 Corinthians 10:10

Paul's final mark of apostasy is grumbling, a problem so commonly repeated amongst the wilderness generation that I have proposed the Book of Numbers be renamed, "The Book of Those Grumbling Ingrates". There are seven incidences in Numbers alone, thirteen throughout the books of Moses' writings. Paul specifically cites the instance which occurred in the course of Korah's rebellion. (Num. 16)

This event sheds light on what "*grumbling*" is really all about. Korah and those who stood with him against Moses and Aaron were trying to make the case that they should become the leaders of God's people in

["The Wilderness Then and Now", Page 7 of 12](#)

their place. The issue was what has become the eternal struggle for every age of Believer between the true shepherds and the false shepherds. This is really about control of the flock.

One of the surest signs of apostasy is when the grumbling starts and accusations accumulate against the true shepherds. When things don't seem appealing enough? Grumble out the true shepherds and get the shepherds who preach the Emergent approach. Want things to be more culturally relevant and less spiritually threatening? Grumble out the true shepherds and get the shepherds who preach Purpose Driven. Want all religions to live and become as one? Grumble out the true shepherds and get the shepherds who preach Ecumenism and New Age. Why is the present-day Church no longer salt and light to the world? They have grumbled out the faithful shepherds of God's Word and ways in favor of those who will tell them what they want to hear.

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires,

– 2 Timothy 4:3

We are provided with four chief characteristics – behaviors, if you will – which define the apostasy originally experienced by the Israelites in the wilderness which exists today with far greater influence and effect:

- *"Do not be idolaters..."* (v.7) in the character of the golden calf.
- *"Nor let us act immorally [sexually]..."* (v.8) in the character of the sin of Peor.
- *"Nor let us try the Lord..."* (v.9) in the character of the bronze serpent.
- *"Nor grumble..."* (v.10) as in the character of Korah's rebellion.

Paul specifically assigns an End Times meaning to his teaching in the verses immediately following...

*Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, **upon whom the ends of the ages have come**. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.*

– 1 Corinthians 10:11–12

Just like the Israelites, a great many began the journey but only a remnant is going to complete it. I am not speaking about the prophetic End Times judgments which will come against those who refuse to believe; I am restricting the discussion to where judgment always scripturally begins first: God's House. What will happen in the "great falling away"?

- It will all begin with a falling away from God's Word. Some will forsake it completely, others will embrace alternate versions (e.g., *The Message*, *The Voice*, etc.), yet many more will elevate books and writings such as *Purpose Driven* to equal or higher authority. They all have in common a dilution of the Word through incorporation of the world's ways.
- Many within the Church will worship and serve God in name only, believing they can incorporate practices from other religions and beliefs with impunity, even asserting that all religions worship the same god.
- Many within the Church will pursue sexual behavior contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture so as to be indistinguishable from the world.
- Many within the Church will become impatient and seek short-cuts which undermine Scripture, become mockers of End Times doctrine, or engage in the crazy notion they can "hasten" the Return of Christ by conquering the world on His behalf.

- Many within the Church will grumble out the true shepherds in favor of the false ones who will feed the flock all of the aforementioned lies and deceptions.

If the wilderness experience foreshadows the apostasy of the Last Days, can you see how it has already begun to take hold? It is not “coming”, it is already here.

What do all four of these behaviors have in common? How could people who have witnessed a salvation experience, been baptized from death to life, and at one time been fed and guided by Christ end up so dramatically far afield? Choice. Having at one time **chosen** to live in obedience to God’s Word and ways, they all subsequently **chose** to alter direction by incorporating the ways of the world. It is the inevitable destination of someone who relinquishes the authority of God’s Word as a gateway toward substituting worldly ways and lies while still calling it “Christian”. That is the textbook definition of “apostasy”, the “great falling away”. It is impossible to “fall away” from something never attained in the first place.

But having worked through Paul’s teaching verse by verse, let us now look at the very **next** verse in the sequence, the one which every Christian in history past and present all know by heart.

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

— 1 Corinthians 10:13

We so often lift this verse out separately from the greater teaching in which it sits that we fail to get the primary issue this is trying to address. While this verse may be **generally** true for any and all temptation in life, the **specific** application in the context of Paul’s teaching is addressing the temptation to engage in idolatry, the temptation to participate in something sexually immoral, the

“The Wilderness Then and Now”, Page 10 of 12

temptation to try the patience of the Lord, the temptation to grumble against the true shepherds! The promised escape is specifically associated with remaining faithful! The icing on the cake is in the verse that follows this one to put the whole enchilada of context together...

***Therefore**, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*

— 1 Corinthians 10:14

As the old time theologians say, "When you see the word 'therefore' in Scripture, stop to see what it is there for". All of the behaviors highlighted are variations of idolatry. The very essence of any "falling away" whether it be in the example of Israel in the wilderness or the prophetic final one unfolding at this very hour is allowing something to replace the exclusive service and worship of Christ alone. And the most potentially harmful temptation every Believer is presented with is the propensity toward idolatry. This verse is actually a call for endurance against the evil cravings which undermine faithfulness.

There is a false notion that spiritual discernment is something exclusively devoted to the identification of false apostles, false prophets, and false shepherds in general. While that is a part of the work assigned to that discipline, God's Word, however, spends much more time applying it to the work of ordinary Believers. All of the things Paul warns about and promises an escape from are behaviors engaged by the common rank-and-file. While we cannot give ground to the leading purveyors of such false doctrine, the truth is that the battle really needs to take place among those who are embracing idolatry, those acting immorally, those testing the Lord's patience, and those grumbling against the true shepherds. This is where the true battle of apostasy exists, where the most difficult temptation resides: **within** the walls of the Church. The promise is that God "*will provide the way of escape*", but whenever such an avenue is presented we are vigorously admonished, "*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry*". This is actually what we need to encourage in our local fellowship.

In His Love,

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"The Wilderness Then and Now", Page 12 of 12

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