

them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.'

"Do not be idolaters" – Paul is alluding to the shameful golden calf incident, Exodus 32:5-6, 17-19. The idolatry for the Corinthians is their double-mindedness in participating in pagan temple banquets, 1 Cor. 8-10.

8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.

"Sexual immorality" – Paul compares Corinth's immoral customs with the time Midianite women seduced Israelite men into idolatry, bringing the judgment of a plague, Numbers 25:1-9 and 31:16

9 We should not test Christ, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes.

"Should not test Christ" – again seeing Christ in the desert wanderings. Israel complained about the manna and suffered the judgment of deadly snakes – but by gazing at a bronze snake on a pole were miraculously delivered, Numbers 21:8-9.

10 And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel.

IN PRACTICE The Corinth church was richly blessed with the experience of Jesus through an openness to His Spirit, and the flow – which was messy at times – of all the spiritual gifts. However, Corinth was a cosmopolitan city with all sorts of temples and beliefs, and to belong to a trade guild or just participate in Corinthian society presented Christians with difficult choices. Some believers seemed to have a spiritual pride, that they were immune to the dangers. Paul reminds them about the judgment of the Israelites in the desert who had lost sight of their pledge to worship the Lord God only. To mock God is no light matter, as he told the Galatian church in a different letter. We can all make poor choices and be tempted to compromise with the values of the world system around us. To believe we are "standing firm" against temptation, is the time of greatest danger.

QUESTION *What are some common compromises that are harmful spiritually, in our world? Freemasonry is an obvious prime candidate...*

PRAYER Father God, as we come to you in Jesus we ask Your Holy Spirit to reveal to us areas of our life practice and thinking which have slipped into unholy ruts. Help us in this preparation season to come back to You with a renewed commitment. Amen.

11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

"Culmination of the ages" – Jesus fulfilled God's promises and initiated the last days, Heb. 9:26.

• **For further study**, read 2 Cor. 5:1-5, 1 Thess 5:4-8, Hebrews 1:2, 1 Peter 1:20.

12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

"Be careful" – Paul warns Corinthian believers, surrounded by temples and Aphrodite worshippers, against the compromise of joining in pagan functions, but he also reminds them of God's overarching grace and protection.

13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

"No temptation" – temptation is not sin but yielding to temptation, or testing is, Matt. 6:13.

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **March 24** in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **"One more chance" to seek the Lord while He is near**

Isaiah 55:1-9 – Come back to God while He may be found

Luke 13:1-9 – Come back to God with a changed heart

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 – Come back to God and live His way as His witness

Read also: Psalm 63:1-9

Isaiah 55:1-9 – Come back to God while He may be found

Don't pay for what can't satisfy, when the Lord offers real goodness for the asking

The imagery – full of allusions – is of the market water seller, with other vendors in the background. It is an invitation to God's people to "buy" His forgiveness – the point being, that it is free.

1 'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

"Come... come... come" – expressed with urgency, and applied to all hearers. Water stands for spiritual refreshment, Prov. 9:5, wine and milk for abundance and nourishment.

"Buy... without cost" – it is all free, following on from the Suffering Servant whose death paid for the gift of life, Isaiah 53:5-9.

• **For further study**, Christ offering the water of life, John 4:14, 7:37; also Rev. 22:17.

2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?

"What is not bread" – the exiles were urged not to meet spiritual needs with empty pagan practices.

Listen, listen to Me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

3 Give ear and come to Me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, My faithful love

promised to David.

"Everlasting covenant" – a reminder that the broken covenant that resulted in exile, is on God's side an enduring promise of faithful love (chesed), pointing also to the new covenant through David's descendant, Jesus Christ.

4 See, I have made Him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples.

5 Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for He has endowed you with splendour.'

"Witness to the peoples" – the Messiah was, and is, a light to the nations, Isaiah 42:6, 49:6.

"Nations... will come" – promises to David are here extended beyond the Jewish nation, to other nations, fulfilling the "all nations will be blessed by you" promise to Abraham, Genesis 12:3.

6 Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near.

"Seek the Lord" – This is God's offer for this time, and people should not delay, Psalm 32:6.

• **For further study**, the prophets' frequent call to seek the Lord, e.g. Jer. 29:13-14, Hosea 3:5, Amos 5:4,6,14.

7 Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on them, and to our God, for He will freely pardon.

"Let them turn" – or repent. Saving relationship comes by seeking God's ways, turning from what is unrighteous, and humbly receiving mercy and pardon.

8 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord.

IN PRACTICE Isaiah's message is a follow on from the Suffering Servant prophecy. The Servant in the earlier passage will enable people to do what the later passage urges. It is about coming back to God, calling on Him and listening. His ways are higher, and He has a 'higher' way for us to approach Him which is not about labouring on what does not satisfy. Then as now, a religious approach that simply works to please God is easier to grasp than finding the path to a relationship with someone holy and majestic. Yet the call to "Listen... give ear... come to Me" tells us that what God wants most is our response to His love. And Jesus, the Servant, makes that connection for us.

QUESTION *In what ways do we "labour on what does not satisfy" and "spend money on what is not bread"?*

Luke 13:1-9 – Come back to God with a changed heart

Everyone needs the new start Jesus offers us

Jesus continues to call people to repent and discern the times. In the context of two local calamities He emphasises that everyone needs to repent.

1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

"Galileans whose blood" – apparently Pilate killed Galileans offering sacrifices at a major festival. Like the Tower of Siloam collapse, this is not known outside this account.

2 Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?

3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

"My thoughts... not your thoughts" – our desire to reduce God's work in our salvation to something we can understand and perform.

9 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'

"So are My ways higher" – Jesus came to make a way of grace and new life for us, commanding simply "Believe in Me", John 11:25.

4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

"Tower in Siloam" – the tower was probably part of the southern wall near the Pool of Siloam.

"More guilty?" – those unscathed by recent calamities were not to see themselves as innocent and immune from judgment. Suffering does not always correspond to God's wrath, John 9:1-3.

5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'

"Unless you repent" – everyone has to make their own decision to turn to Christ and part of that is turning from independence to live for Him.

6 Then He told this parable: 'A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any.

"In his vineyard" – God is the owner of the vineyard and its fig trees, representing the nation of Israel.

7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig-tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

"Cut it down" – as God's judgment in Ps. 105:33

"If it bears fruit" – a limited time of grace and opportunity for Israel to show the fruit of repentance by receiving Jesus' miracles and message.

IN PRACTICE Like us, the people Jesus addressed were too quick to find reasons why they did not need to repent. Being untouched by two local disasters was, for some, a sign of God's favour and blessing. Jesus was forthright in demolishing their complacency, repeating the phrase "unless you repent, you too will all perish."

"Repent" is often seen as a difficult word, implying a judgment that offends our pride. Yet turning from what offends God, is also a turning towards Him and experiencing His love and gracious enabling. When we learn to see repentance as the realignment with God's purposes, and the way to connect with and receive the undeserved blessing He wants to give us, a 'difficult' word becomes an enabling one.

QUESTION *This Lent season is an opportunity to realign with God by taking hold in a deeper way of Jesus' lordship of us. What does that look like for you?*

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 – Come back to God to live and witness for Him

If you think you are strong spiritually, be especially careful you don't fall off

Warnings from Israel's history: Paul uses the example of the judgment on God's people in the desert for putting their trust other than in God.

1 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.

2 They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

"Our ancestors" – Paul draws a continuity between the mainly Gentile Corinthians and OT Israel, delivered from Egypt's slavery by miraculous passage through the sea and the cloud's leading in the wilderness, Exodus chapters 12-17.

3-4 They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for

they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

"Drank from the spiritual rock" – Paul interprets the miracles of water from the rock, at beginning and end of the desert journey, Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:7-11 as Christ being with them.

5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

"Not pleased" – their spiritual food and drink did not prevent bad choices and consequent judgment then, vv.8-10. Spiritual food now, does not absolve us from poor choices, vv. 16-17, 6, 11.

6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

7 Do not be idolaters, as some of

8-9 "Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

"I'll dig round it" – human sinfulness deserves judgment but God's mercy prevails and maybe 'water' will reach the roots and stimulate change...

Jesus urges people to repent while there is time.

• For further study, Jesus urges repentance, Luke 10:13-16; 11:29-32; 12:13-21; 13:1-5, 31-35.