

Limited-time offer: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

by [A. Katherine Grieb](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

God will forgive my sins,” quipped Heinrich Heine on his deathbed. “It’s his job.” How different are the viewpoints of Isaiah, Paul and Luke! They note an ongoing theological tension between the assurance of God’s kindness and the call to immediate repentance. Yes, God is merciful, not punishing as we deserve, not automatically correlating our misdeeds with disasters. But there is no room for complacency: if we think we’re standing, we should watch that we do not fall.

Isaiah announces God’s gracious invitation to anyone who thirsts: “Come to the waters!” There’s no admission charge. Imagine a feast where the poor receive special invitations! Blues singer Esther Mae Scott reworked a Beatles’s song into gospel when she sang, “God don’t care too much for money and money can’t buy his love.”

But then comes God’s challenge for discernment: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Three times we are told to listen. Listen to what? To the deliberately double message of assurance and call to repentance. First the promise: “I will make with you an everlasting covenant,” then the warning: “Seek the Lord while he may be found.” God is available now, but we may not presume that God will always be available. We sinners must act quickly, while the door is open, while mercy and pardon are offered in abundance. For who knows the thoughts and ways of God, which are as high above ours as the heavens are high above the earth?

A rare opportunity is offered—now! God’s grace, like a banquet for the poor; God’s mercy, given abundantly to those in need. How careless it would be to assume that God’s gracious gift could be accepted sometime later when it suited us better. How foolish it would be to keep spending our money and labor on trifles when the most valuable thing we could ever imagine is offered as a gift, today!

Paul is similarly concerned both with God’s covenant faithfulness and with the dangers of taking it for granted. He does not want his congregation at Corinth to be “uninformed,” he says, and teaches them God’s ways by retelling the story of

Israel's temptations in the wilderness.

If the Corinthians suppose that they are somehow (magically) protected from sin and its consequences because they have been baptized into Christ and partake of Christ in the Eucharist, remember, says Paul, that the Israelites had their sacraments, too. They were “baptized into Moses” (Paul’s reading of the Red Sea and the pillar of cloud). They had their own spiritual food and drink in the manna and the water from the rock, which Paul does not hesitate to identify with Christ. Did these sacraments protect them from sinning against God? No—and they were struck down in the wilderness. That generation did not enter the promised land.

Paul’s interest in the wilderness experiences of the Israelites is not merely historical curiosity. He says their sins (desiring evil, idolatry, sexual immorality, putting the Lord to the test, grumbling) and the consequences God visited upon them happened not only historically to them but also prophetically or typically (as types) for the Corinthians. “These events were written for our instruction.” Paul’s own endtime churches, those upon whom “the ends of the ages” have come, are indeed blessed to have been given this warning. He underlines the conclusion for them: “If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

If there is danger in spiritual complacency—any who assume they have advanced beyond temptation should think again—there is also danger in granting too much power, even glamour, to temptations. Temptation is common, says Paul, and also avoidable, thanks to God’s mercy. There is, as he says elsewhere, “no excuse” since God who is faithful will not allow us to be tested beyond our strength. With the temptation comes the way out. We should underestimate neither the reality of temptation nor the power of God.

Luke’s take on the relationship between God’s mercy and our repentance is similar. He describes Jesus responding to headlines reporting political murder and natural disaster (“Pilate Mingles Galileans’ Blood with Their Sacrifices,” “Tower of Siloam Falls on 18 in Jerusalem”) with another deliberately double message. Jesus asks the rhetorical question, “Were they worse sinners than all the rest?” and answers it with a resounding “No!” then adds, “but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

At least two temptations are at work here. One is to blame the victims (if they’re suffering, they must have sinned) and so attempt to distance ourselves from them.

Jesus will not allow this move: they were no more sinful than anyone else. Oh, says the second temptation, then everything's random; there's no connection between the sin we commit and God's actions in the world. But Jesus will not allow that inference either. There is a reckoning, but since God's ways and thoughts are not like ours, we err both when we assume God always punishes sin with disaster and when we assume God never does.

Jesus' parable about the fig tree refuses to resolve that tension. God's unaccountable mercy provides additional time for repentance. The door is open—for a while. Yet there will be a reckoning, and human presumption can push even God's patience too far.