Seeing the Gospel Promises

Text: 1 Corinthians 10:1-4

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##### **Scriptures:** Exodus 14:19-31; 16:13-16; 17:1-17; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 201, 42, 62, 461, 530

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD25)

Theme: The Apostle Paul challenges the false security of some in the Corinthian Church who thought that the participation in the sacraments guaranteed their salvation so that they could attend idol temples.

Proposition: Thanks be to the Lord for the sacraments which enable us to see the gospel promises as we believe by faith that they point to the work of Christ

**Introduction**

Most of us have likely seen Microsoft Windows on computer screens, or have we? We don’t actually see the operating system itself, but rather the effects of this software on the device we are using. On start-up we see the Microsoft windows logo (a wavy flag in 4 colours). On the back of the personal computer there’s a Microsoft product key which authenticates the software. Both the logo on the screen and the sticker on the back point you to the reality that invisible software is in operation.

Similarly, the gospel is a message. It is information. Like computer software, the gospel itself is physically invisible. The gospel is “*the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*” (Rom 1:16) It is surer, more fixed, more solid than the earth under your feet; which will pass away to be re-made anew when Christ returns. But we cannot see the gospel with our physical eyes. Yet sight is such a valuable sense for confirming reality: for example:

1. “*And God* ***saw*** *all that He had made, and behold, it was very good*” (Gen 1:31).
2. “*When the woman* ***saw*** *that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes*” (Gen 3:6).
3. “*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we* ***saw*** *His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

How can you see the gospel if it is an invisible message? You cannot. However, God has provided physical, visible, pointers to the reality of His gospel promise: "*He who believes in the Son has eternal life*” (John 3:36a); or in the words of Heidelberg Catechism LD25: “*to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ's one sacrifice finished on the cross*”.

These visible pointers (or signs) are called sacraments from the Latin word “sacramentum” meaning “sacred thing”, a translation of the Greek word ‘mysterion’. We’re going to look the sacraments through the ‘lens’ of our text in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 under three headings:

1. Seeing the mighty works of God
2. Seeing the danger of idolatry

c) Seeing the certainty of salvation

1. **Seeing the mighty works of God**

When did the church begin? Some people would say on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. That would make the church in Corinth, to whom Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, no more than 5 years old. {Paul first visited the city in 49/50AD and stayed for 18 months (Acts 18:8-10); 1 Corinthians was written about 55AD}. Yet Paul identifies these Gentile believers in this Greek city as being the spiritual descendants of Israelites who were a congregation of God’s people in the wilderness during time of the Exodus.

The Corinthian Christians are part of the New Israel. God’s people are those in whom He fulfils his promises first made to the forefathers of national Israel: “*And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise*” (Gal 3:29). Paul writes in verse 1 of our text: “*I want you to know, brothers, 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*”. The ‘cloud’ he mentions in verse 2 was the means by which the Lord guided His people as He led them out to freedom; **“***The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way*” (Ex 13:21).

We do need to be wary of an allegorical approach to the interpretation of Scripture, as associated with Origen of Alexandria; a method which looks for hidden meaning in the text. For example, that the cloud represents the guiding Holy Spirit in New Testament Christian or the pre-incarnate Christ.

In contrast to allegory, typology identifies the pre-figuring of future events by people or objects in past redemptive history e.g. King David as a type of Christ; The Exodus deliverance as a type of salvation from sin.

Let’s see how the Apostle Paul uses a typological argument here. When he writes “*all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and the sea*” he identifies the Lord’s mighty act of rescue from slavery. This event was visible to all who saw the cloud leading them and the water of the Red Sea parting as Moses lifted up his staff and stretched out his hand (Ex 14:16). Similarly, the baptism of those believers who first heard the words of this letter was visible. Just as the church life of the Corinthian believers began with their baptism, so the deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt similarly began with a kind of baptism. Paul continues in v3-4: “*and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ”.* He’s referring to the manna in the wilderness with the term ‘spiritual food’. This does not deny the physical reality of the Lord’s miracle of provision, both with the divine sending of quail (Ex 16:11-13) and the dew-like manna.

‘Spiritual’ here does not mean “nonmaterial” but rather points to a divine source of sustenance beyond this physical creation. Similarly, the ‘spiritual drink’ refers to the miraculous provision of living-sustaining water. Remember that the Lord enabled the bitter water at Marah to become sweet (Ex 15:23-25), and brought forth water from the rock at Horeb (Ex 17:6). Again, employing typology, Paul connects the miraculous food and water which the Lord provided for the congregation of Israel in the wilderness with the food and drink of Lord’s Supper. Just as delivered Old Testament Israel were nourished by the Lord, so too are the Corinthian believers who are given food and drink from Christ as they partake in Lord’s Supper.

Old Testament Israel did not have “sacraments” in New Testament sense of “holy signs and seals, instituted by God, for us to see. However, they did have pre-figuring equivalents – or ‘types’. They saw visible pointers. The cloud, the parting sea, the manna, the water from the rock were all signs by which the people could see the mighty acts which pointed to the great work of God in delivering His people.

Similarly, sacraments are holy signs for us to see what is not visible: the provision of God for spiritual life in the gospel. Just as physical bread and water in the wilderness pointed to the promise of God to lead his people to the promised land: "*I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt… to a land flowing with milk and honey*"' (Ex 3:17), so, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of Lord’s Supper, point to the mighty acts of God in Christ to save His people. These ‘holy signs and seals’ are great blessings for the church, but there is a danger if we do not understand them rightly, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Seeing the danger of idolatry**

Someone wisely said, “*It’s not how you start that’s important, but how you finish*”. The Exodus started so well. The Lord acted to deliver His people, breaking the oppressive hold of Pharaoh on them and leading them to safety in a wilderness where they could only survive in daily dependence on Him. Yet, sadly, as we know, even though the Israelites could see the mighty works of God with their own eyes, yet the people turned away from their Saviour.

Notice Paul’s emphasis on the whole covenant community in the word “All” which he uses no less than 5 times in our short text: **All** were led from Egypt by God following a visible cloud; **All** passed through the visible sea; **All** eat visible manna & drank water from miraculous source; BUT: they did not **all** receive the grace of God in being delivered into the promised land.

The covenant community was a mixture of those who trusted in the Lord and those who did not. To use the language of Romans 9:6 “*Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel*”. Paul writes to the Corinthians: v5 “*Nevertheless, with* ***most of them*** *God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness*”. Notice the Apostles’ vast understatement “most of them”! Everyone apart from two men failed to enter the promised land! Approx. 600,000 men plus many women and children were “overthrown in the wilderness” – they died there.

Why did so few inherit the covenant promises, despite all having witnessed the signs which pointed to this inheritance? They did not see God as the One to whom the signs pointed, but instead they looked to visible gods of their own making. In v7 Paul quotes from Ex 32:6 “*So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play*”. The eating, drinking and playing here indicate activities typically associated with idol festivals.

We know that fornication, that is sexual immorality, was integral to much idol worship in the city of Corinth. Paul is here warning the Corinthians who insisted on using their right to eat in idol temples (10:14-22) that they cannot both be idol worshippers and receive any benefit from participation in the sacraments. It seems that some of Corinthians thought that their baptism and their participation in Lord’s Supper was guarantee of their salvation. This ‘sacramentalism’ (belief that the sacraments are automatically effective for all who receive them) is a form of idolatry.

In v12 Paul warns the church members against self-confidence: “*Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*”. There is a risk in our use of the sacraments; that we see them as conveying the grace of God irrespective of the heart condition of the person who receives them. As though eating manna or drinking water in wilderness ever guaranteed entry into the promised land for the Israelites. Our text points to the ever-present danger of being confident in our salvation because we have some magical (sacramental) view of the sacraments.

This ‘magical’, or to use a Latin phrase “ex opere operato” (which literally means “from the work done”) understanding of the sacraments is held officially by the Roman Catholic Church. This church convened the Council of Trent in 1545-1563 as a response to the Protestant Reformation. This ecclesiastical meeting was held in city of Trento in northern Italy. There was a great emphasis on the sacraments at this Council. The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church were reaffirmed: baptism, confirmation, mass, penance, marriage, holy orders, and last rights. The Mass, or Holy Communion, was confirmed as a true propitiatory sacrifice: “*If anyone say that grace is not conferred by the sacraments* ***ex opere operato****, but that faith in God’s promises is alone sufficient for obtaining grace, let him be anathema*”. An anathema is “*a person or thing accursed or consigned to damnation or destruction*”.

This background to the Roman Catholic defence of an unscriptural view of the sacraments led to significant emphasis on this topic in the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Days 25-30) when this document was written by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus between 1559 and 1576. The Roman Catholic church was in serious error. The sacraments had effectively become idols; viewed as automatic dispensers of grace apart from the Lord’s redeeming grace.

There is a danger in our churches of a ‘conveyor-belt’ mentality with respect to faith and the sacraments. {An assembly-line is a manufacturing process in which parts are added to a product in a sequential manner, generally on a ‘conveyor belt’. This method of production was developed by Ford Motor Company 1908-1915 for car production. Vehicle parts start at one end of the factory and automatically end up in fully functional cars which are driven away at the other end}.

By analogy, people do not end up as God’s people just because they have received baptism once, and partaken of Lord’s Supper many times. Baptised members (and their families) must not **presume** upon an infant baptism being a sign of salvation apart from true faith. Communicant members must not **presume** upon their union with Christ signified in Lord’s Supper, apart from true faith.

The sacraments become idols through the presumption of grace apart from faith. Jesus warned(Mat 3:9) “*And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”* Not all who are part of the covenant community share in the blessings of the covenant. The only true participation is by faith in God’s promises. We are warned from our text to beware of seeing the sacraments as being, in and of themselves, the source of God’s grace. However, these holy signs and seals do help us to understand more clearly the promise of the gospel which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **Seeing the certainty of salvation**

As we’ve seen, God gave visible benefits for Old Testament Israel. The guiding cloud showed the people the way out of slavery; The crossing of the Red sea provided escape from Pharaoh’s army. The miraculously supplied water and bread provided physical sustenance for the journey.

As we have also seen, these Old Testament miracles pointed forward to the two New Testament sacraments: baptism in water, Lord’s Supper as spiritual food and drink. Sacraments do provide spiritual benefit which can nourish faith. What then is the **substance** of the sacraments?? The Word of God gives the answer in v4b of our text “*For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ”.* Moses obtained water from rock both at the beginning and the end of the wilderness wanderings. You can read about this in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-13.

There was a Jewish legend that a rock travelled with the people. It was known as Miriam’s well and it was purportedly shaped like a rock. Rabbis said “*And so the well which was with the Israelites in the wilderness was a rock, the size of a large round vessel, surging and gurgling upward, as from the mouth of this little flask, rising with them up onto the mountains, and going down with them into the valleys. Whenever the Israelites would encamp, it made camp with them, on a high place, opposite the Tent of Meeting. The princes of Israel come and surround it with their staffs, and they sing a song concerning it: Spring up, O Well!*” (Num 21:17-18)

The Bible corrects the error of this view. The source of sustenance for the wandering Israelites was not some water-filled mythical hollow round rock but “*The rock was Christ*” (1 Cor 10:4b). Christ was the spiritual Rock from which Israel drank. Christ is the source of all blessings for God’s people. The visible physical sustenance Christ provided both in the wilderness then and in Lord’s Supper now points to the invisible spiritual sustenance He alone gives.

Can we be sure about the salvation to which the sacraments point? Yes! God Himself has confirmed their authenticity with His seal! The sacraments are visible pledges that the Word of God is true, they assure us that our entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice for us on the cross. Just as the work of God in the Exodus was confirmed as His promise of deliverance being fulfilled through the parting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven and the water from the rock.

When you see the Microsoft logo this sign shows that you are running the genuine Windows operating system. Your product key shows that you have a bona fide operating system on your computer. Similarly, but much more importantly, the two sacraments: Lord’s Supper and Baptism visibly show and confirm that Christ alone is most certainly the Rock of our salvation. By faith we see the gospel promises in the sacraments, visible signs and seals of God’s grace. Thanks be to the Lord for His gift of sacraments in which we can visibly see the gospel promises with our eyes. AMEN.