

## 1 Corinthians 10:12

Driving out to visit the Grand Canyon is a little like living as a Christian in this world. Hardly anyone stays in their car at the Grand Canyon. The desire to walk up to the rim and look out over the vast expanse is too overwhelming. And for us in this world, we don't go through life with blinders on looking only straight ahead toward heaven. We get out and enjoy this world in which we live. We make use of it. We are engaged in it and involved with it.

But there are warnings. At the Grand Canyon signs are posted all along the rim. "Stay behind the rail!" "Stay on the trail!" "Danger, steep drop-off!" We as Christians are given warnings as well. We are warned not to get too close to this world; not to fall in love with it; to remember that we are only visitors here, this is not our permanent home. St. Paul gives us one such warning in our text for today, "Let anyone," he says, "Who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall."

These words are not written for those outside the church. This is a warning for Christians; for those who are standing upon Christ right now. These words of warning are for us. And yet it is part of our sinful nature to ignore warning signs. This is true of visitors to the Grand Canyon. It is true of us Christians living in this world. Over the years, millions of people have visited the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and many hundreds of these people have died--died by falling off the edge, plummeting hundreds of feet to the rocks below. Just as the Apostle Paul gives us examples in our text of Christians in the Old Testament who perished by falling from grace, so it may be helpful for us to hear some of the stories of these people who died in the Grand Canyon. The parallel is rather amazing.

"Carelessness, ignoring warning signs." Park Rangers say that nearly every death at the Grand Canyon is due to these reasons. "The one common thread," we're told, "is a complete lack of regard for personal safety." Dozens of visitors have ignored signs over the years, and posed for pictures on the danger side of the rail. That's why they fell. Like Fern Shelton of St. George, Utah who asked her husband to take her picture on November 23, 2001. She stepped outside the rail and fell over 600 feet to her death.

"Take heed," says the Apostle Paul, "Lest you fall." To stand upon Christ means to stay on the right side of the rail. It means to be in church when His Word is preached; to be at His Table when His Sacrament is given. It means to open our ears, our eyes, our minds to that which our Savior is giving us. Visitors to the Grand Canyon do not realize that the ground beyond the rail can give way without warning. The edge upon which someone is standing for a photo can crumble in an instant and plunge that person to their death. This is true of any Christian who lives life on the edge--who ignores what they were taught in Catechism class; who pays no attention to the warnings that the Church Elders give; who stands outside the rail by often standing apart from the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

Many people at the Grand Canyon have fallen to their deaths because they became disoriented. Looking out over a canyon thousands of feet deep can cause dizziness and mess with the balance within the inner ear. As a result, visitors who thought they were being careful fell off the edge because they fainted, or became confused. Like Edith Kindig, age 63, who walked up to the rim and was so shocked by the view that she fainted and collapsed and fell 500 feet.

"Take heed," says Paul, "Lest you fall." Too many Christians think they stand upon Christ, but they trust too much in their own strength. "I'm a good church-goer, a good giver, a good church-worker."

But the emphasis is on what they are doing, not on Christ. Too many Christians like this fall and perish. Like some visitors to the canyon, they're sure of themselves, but when we trust in ourselves, our accomplishments, our works for God, we become like those people who bravely walk up to the rim of the canyon and fall thinking they can stand. This world, like the Grand Canyon, can disorient us, it can confuse us, it can throw us off balance, pull us away from Christ and plunge us into destruction. "Take heed lest you fall."

A number of visitors to the canyon fell because they were reckless, even drinking to excess by the rim; sometimes showing off by jumping from rock to rock along the edge. Like Donald Mark, age 43, who was rock-climbing. A crowd gathered to watch and he began putting on an act, but he lost his footing and fell 300 feet, the crowd gasping in horror. Or Larry Jackson who, in 1993, had been drinking alcohol and slipped near the edge and fell to his death. "Take heed," says Paul, "Lest you fall." It is foolishness for us who are Christians to be reckless with our faith; to play around with sexual temptation; to allow alcohol to control us; to think nothing can hurt us, nothing can plunge us into destruction because we're Christians, after all. But a reckless Christian may soon be no Christian at all.

Many hikers at the Grand Canyon fell because they went solo. Hikers are warned to stay together as they climb down, but some always think they can go off on their own, and many such solo hikers fall to their deaths. They often fall because they become lost, and in trying to find the safe trail again, take an unsafe path upon which they slip and fall. Like Eugene Gavigan, age 30, who in hiking by himself ran out of water, tried to take a shortcut and fell to his death.

"Take heed," says Paul, "Lest you fall." As Christians we need to stay together. Standing together upon Christ we help each other, encourage each other, warn each other as needed. To go off by yourself is foolish. To think, "I don't need to confess my sins with the congregation; I don't need to gather with the congregation for worship; I don't need the church," is to stand on dangerous ground. The church is not made up of individual Christians doing their own thing. The church are Jesus' sheep who gather together to hear the voice of their Shepherd, to be nourished by His rich food and living water.

It's sad when anyone dies at the Grand Canyon, but what is especially sad is when they are innocent victims. In June of 1958 James and Harold Qualls, ages five, and fifteen months, were visiting with their family from Brownsville, Texas. The boy's father parked the sedan, with both boys in it, by the rim and got out to take a picture. He left the transmission in gear but did not set the parking brake. While he and the other adults were off admiring the view 200 feet away, the car rolled the 25 feet to the rim, the boys still in it, and plunged into the canyon exploding into flames.

How sad when, today, parents do not keep their children standing safely upon Christ. When they do not set the parking brake by giving their children a love for God's Word. When they allow the car to roll toward the edge by not bringing their children to church and Sunday School, by not putting Christ at the center of their home.

Now let me ask you, if your loved one was standing outside the rail at the Grand Canyon, would you say nothing? If your children were running along the edge of the rim, would you think, "They'll be fine?" Or would you act quickly out of love and concern? And if you would, then wouldn't you also say and do something if, as Christians, they are living on the edge? Richard Pena's son tried to warn his dad. Richard was standing outside the rail in 1985. His young son cried, "The sign says you're not to go past the rail!" Richard turned to his son and said, "You gotta take some chances in life."

Then stepping on some snow which had nothing beneath it except hundreds of feet of air, he vanished from view and plummeted to the rocks below. That boy lost his father because he did not stand upon safe ground. If we care for each other here, can we not encourage, warn, plead, do whatever we can to stand upon Christ and help each other do the same? Or will we, like Richard, take chances when it comes to our soul's salvation?

Now there is good news through all of this. Some people who fell did not die. They were rescued out of crevices in the rocks, hanging by roots of trees. Park Rangers every year are able to save some who fall. Jesus is your Savior. He's been to the canyon and back. He fell into the depths for you. He died and rose to life again. The good news is that He is strong where we are weak. He is wise where we are foolish. Where we stumble and fall He is merciful and forgiving.

Today Jesus calls us to remain standing upon Him. He knows how easily swayed we are. He knows that we are tempted to live life on the edge. And so He gives His body and blood here for you to strengthen you. He gives you His wisdom by putting His words and Spirit into your ears and heart. Let us not be reckless with our faith, but for all those times when we were, He forgives you. And there have been times for all of us when, after falling, He has climbed down after us and pulled us back up into His church again where we are safe with Him.

I am not telling you today to never visit the Grand Canyon. But when you go, listen to the Park Rangers. They are there to keep you safe. And so as you live in this world, you are not here alone. Jesus is with you to keep you safe. He was stood up on a cross for you so that you can stand in His mercy; so that you can remain close to Him believing that He loves you. And as you faithfully hear His words and trust His promises to you, believing that you are forgiven for He died for you, you are standing not outside the rail, but safely upon Christ Jesus. Amen.