

HE WAS LOST

Paul Maxwell received the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He taught philosophy at Moody Bible Institute, and he was a writer for Piper's *Desiring God* ministry. Nearly one year ago, he published on social media the following statement:

I love you guys, and I love all the support and friendships I've built here...I think it's important to say that I'm just not a Christian anymore, and it feels really good. I'm really happy...I'm really happy. I can't wait to discover what kind of connection I can have with all of you beautiful people as I try to figure out what's next. I love you guys. I'm in a really good spot. Probably the best spot of my life. I'm so full of joy for the first time. I love my life for the first time...and I love myself for the first time.

Maxwell is not alone, of course. Others have abandoned the faith. This is what the church has traditionally called 'apostasy.' Some, however, euphemistically call it 'deconversion.'" The methodological doubt that leads to deconversion they call 'faith deconstruction.' In Faith Deconstruction, the Christian critically examines every tenet of the Christian faith. In some cases, after deconstructing his Christian faith, he reconstructs something with a weak resemblance to Christianity. In many cases, however, he abandons the Christian faith altogether. By the grace of God, some who have fallen away return. Men are sinners, and they need forgiveness and new life. Whether they've never come to Christian faith, or they have forsaken it, they need to be reconciled to God.

When God made a covenant with Abraham, He promised him that he would make of him a great nation, and He promised that he would give them a land in which to dwell, the land of Canaan. God warned Abraham his descendants would be taken into bondage in a land that was not their own, and He promised Abraham that He would bring them out of that land, and to the land of promise. (Genesis 15:13–16) God gave Abraham a sign of the promise, namely, circumcision, and commanded that every male in his household receive it.

Abraham's descendents, Israel, were taken in bondage in Egypt, and the Lord did deliver them from their bondage. He parted the Red Sea, enabling them to cross, and he closed it over Pharaoh and His army, causing them to die.

After the Exodus, the Lord led them to Mount Sinai. There He made a covenant with them, and there He gave them His law. They immediately violated His law, however, and so the Lord said He would destroy them all. He said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation." ((Exodus 32:9, 10) Moses interceded for the people. He said to the Lord:

LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever. (Exodus 32:11–13)

God had delivered Israel from Egypt so that He might make His name great, and so that He might keep His promise to the patriarchs. If, after delivering them, He then destroyed them, then His enemies the Egyptians would ground for reproach. So, after hearing Moses's appeal, God relented of the disaster He said He would bring upon His people. (Exodus 32:14)

When the Lord commanded Moses to lead the people from Sinai to the Promised land, Moses asked the Lord for reassurance. He asked the Lord to reveal His glory. The Lord did reveal to Moses His glory, and said to him:

The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

The Lord does not overlook sin, but He does show mercy to those that repent. Moses did lead the people to the promised land, and, in all their journeying, the Lord proved His faithfulness to them by providing for them manna for food.

When Israel came to the border of the promised land, Moses sent in twelve spies to reconnoiter. When they returned, ten of them were faithless, and said Israel could not take the land from its inhabitants. Only two, Joshua and Caleb, trusted in the Lord. Although the Lord had many times proven His faithfulness to the people, the people believed the ten faithless spies, and they rebelled against God. They complained that God had led them to the promised land to die, and they would rather return to Egypt. So, because of their unbelief and rebellion, God said that they would not enter into the promised land. They would wander in the wilderness for forty years until they died there. The Lord was again angry with the people, and He said to Moses:

How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they. (Numbers 14:11, 12)

Moses again interceded. He said:

Then the Egyptians shall hear it, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them;) And they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land: for they have heard that thou LORD art among this people, that thou LORD art seen face to face, and that thy cloud standeth over them, and that thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying, Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he sware unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness. And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying, The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. (Numbers 14:13–19)

Moses told the Lord that, if He destroyed the people, then the Egyptians would hear of it, and would say that the

Lord was not Almighty, because He could not bring His people into the promised land. Moreover, Moses appealed to God's revelation of His glory. On the ground that the Lord is long-suffering and merciful, he pleaded with the Lord to pardon the sins of the people. (Numbers 14:13–19; Deuteronomy 9:7–29) The Lord did not destroy them, but He did punish them. He told them that they would never enter the promised land. He said to them:

And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness. After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise. (Numbers 14:33, 34)

Israel had broken faith with God, and so they would not receive the promises He made to them. It seems that, as God would not give them the promise, neither would He give them the sign of it. He withheld from them the rite of circumcision.

The Lord did not destroy His people when they rebelled, but the suspension of the rite of circumcision in Israel, and their wandering in the desert, did bring upon them the reproach of the Egyptians. The Egyptians said that the God of Israel was not able to bring them into the land He promised them.

When the unfaithful generation died out, Israel, led by faithful Joshua, finally came to the promised land. As God did with the Red Sea, so He did with the River Jordan: He parted the waters so that His people might safely cross over. After they crossed, God commanded the circumcision of every Israelite who had not yet received it. God had suspended the rite; with the unfaithful generation gone, and the next generation in the promised land, God resumed the rite. (Joshua 5:4-7) After all had been circumcised, the Lord said to Joshua, "This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you." (Joshua 5:9) The resumption of the rite of circumcision meant that the Lord had renewed His covenant with His people, and that He would fulfill His promises. Because, at that place, the Lord rolled away the reproach of the Egyptians, they called it, *Gilgal*, which in the Hebrew tongue means, *rolling*.

The Scriptures say:

And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal, and kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month at even in the plains of Jericho. And they did eat of the old corn of the land on the morrow after the passover, unleavened cakes, and parched corn in the selfsame day. And the manna ceased on the morrow after they had eaten of the old corn of the land; neither had the children of Israel manna any more; but they did eat of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year. (Joshua 5:10–12)

No longer were the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. No longer did they have to rely on the Lord's miraculous provision of the manna. They ate the produce of the land of promise, the land the Lord gave to them. Concerning the Passover, the law of God says, "No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof." (Exodus 12:48) Before Gilgal, the Israelites had twice observed the Passover: once in Egypt, when the Lord delivered them, and once at Mount Sinai, when the Lord had brought them to Himself. (Numbers 9:1–14; Exodus 19:4) As the rite of circumcision had been suspended, so had the rite of Passover. (Amos 5:25) Now that they were in the promised land, both rites resumed. In Gilgal, the people first received circumcision, the sign of the beginning of the covenant; then they observed the Passover, the sign of continuation of the covenant. Circumcision was the sign that they had entered into God's good graces; Passover the sign that they remained His good graces. In the

same way, in the New Covenant, baptism, which replaces circumcision, precedes the Lord's Supper, which replaces the Passover, Christ being the fulfillment of both circumcision and Passover. Saint Luke records in the Acts of the Apostles, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:41, 42) On the fourteenth day of the month, the people observed the Passover. On the fifteenth day, they ate the old corn. On the sixteenth day, the manna ceased. The manna first fell for Israel on the sixteenth day of the second month of their first year after the Exodus. It ceased falling on the sixteenth day of the first month of the first year in the promised land. For nearly forty years, the manna fell every day, except the Sabbath Day. In Gilgal, the manna had its rest, not on the Sabbath Day, the day of Christ's crucifixion, but two days later, on the day of His resurrection. Jesus said He is the true bread from heaven, which, if any man eat of it, then he shall have eternal life. (John 6:32, 54)

On one occasion in Jesus's earthly ministry, tax collectors and sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. The Pharisees and scribes grumbled about Jesus, saying that He receives sinners and eats with them. In response Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son: A man had two sons, and one day, the younger asked for his share of the estate, so his father gave it to him. The son took the money, and traveled to a far off land, and there squandered it on wild living. A famine came over the land, and the man had no food. So, he found work feeding pigs. He was so hungry, he would have liked to eat the pig's food. Finally, he came to his senses. He would return to His father, confess to him his sins, and ask to be his servant. When his father saw his son at a distance, he had compassion on him. He ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him. The son did as he had planned: he confessed his sins, and asked to be his father's servant. His father would have none of it. He ordered his servants to dress his son in fine clothes, and to prepare a feast. He said, "Let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." (Luke 15:23, 24) The elder son was working in the field at the time, and, when he came near the house, he heard singing and dancing. He asked one of the servants about it, and the servant told him that his brother had returned, and that his father had ordered a celebration. The elder son was angry, and refused to join in. When the father pleaded with him to go in, his son complained that, although he had always been faithful to his father, his father had never ordered such a celebration for him, but had ordered one for his prodigal and sinful brother. His father answered him, "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found." (Luke 15:31, 32) The father would withhold nothing from his elder son, but the return of his younger son was reason for celebration. The sinners that came to Jesus had broken God's covenant, but they wished to be reconciled to him. He with compassion received them, and the religious leaders resented Him for it. The religious leaders ought not to have resented Him, but rather rejoiced with Him. Jesus later said that He came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost. His is a ministry of mercy to penitent sinners. His is a ministry of reconciliation. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of man's reconciliation to God. It is never too late for a man to repent and return to God.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead,

be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. (2 Corinthians 5:16–21)

Saint Paul means that Christians don't regard each other primarily from an earthly point of view, but from a spiritual one. If a man is in Christ, he is a new creature. God has forgiven his sins, and made him a new man. Christians know each other, first and foremost, not as Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, but as Christians, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as members of the body of Christ. Being in Christ is the Christian's primary identity. Apart from Christ, God and man are enemies; in Christ, they are friends. In Christ, God has reconciled sinners to Himself, and he entrusted to the apostles, and to all ministers of the gospel, the ministry of reconciliation. In this ministry, the minister proclaims the good news that, in Christ, God has reconciled the world to Himself by not imputing to men their sins; this is to say, God and men are reconciled to each other because God in Christ forgives Christ forgives their sins. So, as Christ's ambassadors, and his official representatives, ministers of the gospel implore people to be reconciled to God. A man can in Christ be reconciled to God because, although he is a sinner, God has made Christ, who never sinned, an offering for sin, an atoning sacrifice, so that sinners, having their sins forgiven in Christ, are reckoned righteous by God.

Let us understand God's covenant faithfulness. Let us repent of our sins, and be faithful to God. Let us implore sinners to be reconciled to God.

Now unto the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, be glory and dominion, for ever and ever. Amen.