

“On Spiritual Autopilot” 2016
Isaiah 29:13-16, 1 Corinthians 10:1-12

Autopilot was first shown at an aviation safety contest in 1914, as a system used to control a vehicle that does not require constant attention by a human operator. That same idea is behind the “Google Self-Driving Car Project”, and there are already some prototypes being tested that may actually go into production as early as 2020. There is no steering wheel, accelerator or brake-peddle in the car, instead you set the destination and let the software and sensors handle all the driving. The self-driving car processes both map and sensor information to determine the best and safest speed and trajectory and you travel without having to give it another thought. Now there is some appeal in not having to focus or pay attention and simply arriving safely at your desired destination... **but that really doesn't apply to our spiritual journey and walk of faith with God ... and that is the issue at stake in the Isaiah 29 passage we read.**

When the Lord rescued the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, guided and provided for them all along their journey to the Promised Land, it involved far more than simply traveling from point A to point B. During their journey through the wilderness, they were learning about the steadfast nature and loving compassion of the Lord, as they developed a special covenant relationship with God. **More than just travel, the journey was also about experiencing how to live as the beloved, the chosen and blessed people of God.** And once they were living in the Promised Land, it was critical that they remember the amazing things God had done for them, to continue in their covenant relationship with the Lord, and to pass along that knowledge of God down through the ages, generation to generation... which is why God commanded religious rituals and forms of worship to help remember their history and relationship with the Lord. But over the generations of living well in the Promised Land, they increasingly strayed toward pagan corruption & compromise and their worship degraded into empty & meaningless rituals that no longer honored or truly focused on the Lord. Like a Google-car on autopilot, they complied outwardly, by just going through the motions of religious practice, while giving little thought or consideration to God... and speaking through the prophet Isaiah,

vs. 13-14

The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. shocking and amazing

in this case was not a good or wonderful thing. The Lord knew their worship was a lie with no truth or integrity and was not focused on faith or their relationship with Him... **and so God warned of a shocking and amazing surprise for them**, because their insincere worship was **just an outward symptom** of their distracted lives and rejection of God's ways in favor of the corrupt ways of their pagan neighbors. God send the prophet Isaiah to announce the coming disaster: that the nation would soon be defeated, Jerusalem destroyed, and the people taken in chains into captivity in Babylon. In their smug insincerity and foolish arrogance, they had assumed their worship rituals would save them, and that God wouldn't notice **their external-only, hypocritical and false religion that did not penetrate and transform the human heart.**

In the movie, Godfather III, there is a remarkable scene in which one of the characters is telling a cardinal, about a corrupt archbishop who was involved in a massive bank fraud and theft of trust funds ... and questions how such a high ranking church official can possibly be so corrupt and doing such an evil thing. In answer, he takes a small stone out of a nearby fountain, and says: "**Look at this stone. It has been lying in the water for a very long time, but the water has not penetrated it.**" Then the cardinal breaks the stone in two, points toward the inside of it and continues, "**Look. Perfectly dry. The same thing has happened to men in Europe. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity, but Christ has not penetrated. Christ doesn't live in them. Christ doesn't breathe within them.**" Jesus warned about that same thing in

Matthew 23:27-28

"Woe to you hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Yes, it is possible to be surrounded by God's grace and Spirit, and yet, not permit it to touch or penetrate the human heart. Spiritual autopilot is when we're focused on outward appearances more than our relationship and affections of the heart... which is also the issue Paul addresses in the Corinthians text. The church in Corinth was a remarkably gifted congregation, having received all the spiritual gifts and advantages, but they were struggling with

divisive conflict, **and missing the point of God's grace and call to walk in faithfulness with God and neighbor.** They assumed that by doing all the outward religious stuff, that God would be impressed, delighted and pleased with them, **so they could coast along on spiritual autopilot.** So Paul described a connection between the Israelites of the Exodus with their wilderness journey toward the Promised Land, and the spiritual journey of Christians through the wilderness of this world's trials toward our hope, the truth and promises of Jesus. Paul relates the familiar stories of the Exodus to our walk of faith with the Lord as a warning **that the Christian life is more than just external religion.** Like the nation of Israel being warned through the prophet Isaiah, some of the Corinthians were also so focused on appearances, **and feeling quite safe and secure in the sacraments, that they assumed because of grace, God wouldn't notice or care about their sin and insincerity.**

So Paul points out that the Israelites were blessed by God in countless ways, just as the Church of Corinth along their spiritual journey was also blessed by God in countless and abundant ways. When Pharaoh's army came in pursuit of the escaping Israelites and their backs were to the sea with no possible escape - by the gracious and mighty act of God, the sea was parted, and the people passed through the waters ... and they emerged from the waters to a new life... **claimed and rescued by God toward new life in the Promised land.** Paul relates that to the sacrament of baptism in which **we are claimed and rescued by God,** passing through the water toward a new life through Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God. Then Paul makes another theological connection between the Israelites receiving and eating manna, bread from heaven, and the sacrament of Communion, when we receive and eat the bread of life. Here is Paul's point and message,

vs. 2-3, 5

all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food... Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Paul is very clear and direct that the ancient Israelites obviously received tremendous spiritual blessings and gifts, and yet their bones were left strewn across the Sinai Desert. So too for the Christians of the church in Corinth, despite all of their spiritual advantages of having been baptized and sharing the Lord's Table, they were not guaranteed immunity against temptation or sin nor assured their lives were automatically pleasing to God. The stories of the Exodus, of God's faithfulness and judgment are given as **a warning against complacency and overconfidence.**

vs. 6, 11-12

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did... These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, ... so if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

That is also a most critical message for us to hear during Lent. Just because we've received the sacraments – baptism, Communion, just because we've had some wonderful worship experiences and we have felt the gracious love and intimacy of God, - **that does not mean that we're spiritually all done and all set.** * **The point is, we still need to be on guard against the dangers of self-righteous complacency or going on spiritual autopilot.** The season of Lent represents our spiritual journey toward the message of Easter, through this life's wilderness of trial and temptation... something like the Israelites journey through their wilderness. Paul's message certainly agrees with my own life and experience. I am most likely to say or do something foolish or destructive when I am most sure and confident in my own strength & wisdom... or suppose that **I can just sit back, and go along with the flow of culture on spiritual autopilot.** Paul's message is that it's not about our spiritual advantages, or having had some incredible experiences of grace in the past, but, the authenticity and joy of our walk with God, today, **and being drawn nearer to God all the days of our lives.** In April, I am officiating at the wedding of a young woman who grew-up in our youth group, and I will remind the couple that a beautiful wedding does not guarantee a long and wonderful marriage... * ... you still have to work and build, for that relationship to last. **A healthy relationship is never static and unchanging, but is either growing and deepening, or it is fading.**

Though a Christian I continue to be vulnerable to sin & temptation. I still have a very, very long way to go; and somehow, my faith must remain fresh, growing and be constantly invigorated, **and so my faith needs to be constantly fed, nurtured and exercised.** ** **I want to be very clear, that this is not a message that we're not trying hard enough,** but am I making room for God's grace to grow & transform my life? ... by seeking to develop an authentic & growing intimacy with God, that can **penetrate my heart and make a real difference.** Lent is a lot like preparing my garden each Spring, when I turn the soil over and fertilize it, toward building a good environment for growing my plants. Similarly, I need to consider my internal & spiritual environment: - **my exposure to Scripture, and actually think deeply about it** - what are my true and secret motivations and attitude, and where is there cynicism,

arrogance or hypocrisy? - **to reflect on my day each day, and my walk with the Lord** - my relationships and participation in the body of Christ are they authentic, grace-driven and healthy? **This is our hope:** that because our Lord who loves us with infinite grace, we are promised that God will never give up on any of us, and however much any one of us may stray, sin or get it all wrong, yet we remain, always, well within the circling boundary of God's gracious care, mercy and redeeming love. Hear the hopeful promise of

Psalm 34:15, 8

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.