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BACKSLIDING

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THE NATURE AND SYMPTOMS OF BACKSLIDING

Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)

“I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction”—Proverbs 24:30-32.

WHETHER THE PRESENT AGE BE WORSE than others which have preceded it, I shall not determine. But this is manifest, that it abounds not only in infidelity and profligacy,¹ but with great numbers of loose characters among professing Christians. It is true, there are some eminently zealous and spiritual, perhaps as much so as at almost any former period: the disinterested concern, which has appeared for the diffusion of evangelical religion, is doubtless a hopeful feature of our times. Yet it is no less evident that others are in a sad degree conformed to this world instead of being transformed by the renewing of their minds. Even of those who retain a decency of character, many are sunk into a Laodicean lukewarmness (Rev 3:14-22). Professors are continually falling away from Christ, either totally, so as to walk no more

¹ **infidelity and profligacy** – atheism and self-abandonment to reckless immorality.

with Him, or partially, so as greatly to dishonor His name. Alas, how many characters of this description are to be found in our congregations! If we only review the progress of things for twenty or thirty years past, we shall perceive many who once bid fair² for the kingdom of heaven now fallen a prey to the temptations of the world. Like the blossoms in the spring, they for a time excited our hopes; but a blight has succeeded. The blossom has gone up as the dust, and the “root” in many cases appears to be “rottenness” (Isa 5:24).

It is one important branch of the work of a faithful pastor to strengthen the diseased, to heal the sick, to bind up the broken, to bring again that which is driven away, and to seek that which is lost (Eze 34:4). If these pages should fall into the hands of but a few of the above description and contribute in any degree to their recovery from the snare of the devil, the writer will be amply rewarded. It is a pleasure to recover any sinner from the error of his way, but much more those of whom we once thought favorably. The place, which they formerly occupied in our esteem, our hopes, and our social exercises, now seems to be a kind of chasm, which can be filled up only by the return of the party. If a child depart from his father’s house and plunge into profligacy and ruin, the father may have other children and may love them. But none of them can heal his wound, nor can anything satisfy him, but the return of “him that was lost.”

ON THE GENERAL NATURE AND DIFFERENT SPECIES OF BACKSLIDING: All backsliding from God originates in a departure of heart from Him; herein consists the essence and the evil of it. “Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord GOD of hosts” (Jer 2:19). But the degrees of this sin and the modes in which it operates are various.

The backsliding of some is total. After having made a profession of the true religion, they apostatize from it. I am aware it is common to consider a backslider as being a good man, though in a bad state of mind; but the Scriptures do not confine the term to this application. Those who are addressed in the passage just quoted had not the fear of God in them, which can never be said of a good man. Backsliding, it is true, always supposes a *profession* of the true religion; but it does not necessarily suppose *the existence of the thing professed*. There is a “perpetual backsliding” and a “draw[ing] back unto perdition” (Jer 8:5; Heb 10:39). Such characters were Saul, Ahithophel, and Judas. Many persons have in a great degree declined the practice of religion who yet comfort themselves with an idea that they shall be brought to repentance before they die; but this is presumptuously tempting God. Whosoever plunges into this gulf or continues easy in it, under an idea of being recovered by repentance, may find himself mistaken. Both Peter and Judas went in, but only one of them came out! There is reason to fear that thousands of professors are now lifting up their eyes in torment, who in this world reckoned themselves good men, who considered their sins as pardonable errors, and laid their accounts with being brought to repentance. But, ere³ they were aware, the Bridegroom came, and they were not ready to meet him (Mat 25:1-13).

The nature and deadly tendency of sin is the same in itself, whether in a wicked or in a righteous man. There is an important difference, however, between the backsliding of the one and that of the other. That of the hypocrite arises from his having “not root in himself” (Mat 13:21). Therefore, it is that in the time of temptation he falleth away. But that of the sincere Christian respects the culture of the branch and is owing to unwatchfulness or remissness⁴ in duty. The former, in turning back, returns to a course which his heart always preferred; the latter, though in what he does he is not absolutely involuntary, for then it were innocent; yet it is not with a full or perfect consent of his will. He does not sin willfully; that which he does he allows not. It is against the habitual disposition of his soul. He is not himself, as we should say, while so acting. Finally, the one, were it not for the remorse of conscience which may continue to haunt him and disturb his peace, would be in his element in having made a full riddance of religion; but this is not the case with the other. A life of deviation and distance from God is not his element, nor can he enjoy himself in it. This difference is remarkably exemplified in the cases of Saul and David. The religion of the former never appears to have fitted him; he was continually acting awkwardly with it and presently threw it aside. If, in addition to this, he could have forgotten it and lived without being terrified by the apprehension of consequences, he would doubtless have been much the happier for having cast it off. But when the latter had sinned, he was not like the raven which went forth of the ark and came no more; but like the dove which could find no rest for the sole of her foot till she returned. The thirty-second and thirty-eighth Psalms express the wretchedness of his mind until he confessed his sin and obtained mercy.

But whatever difference there be between a partial and a total departure from God, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the party himself at the time to perceive it. So long as any man continues in a backsliding state, the reality of his religion must remain uncertain. He may not be without hope, nor ought he to be without fear. The Scriptures know

² **bid fair** – seemed or appeared likely.
³ **ere** – before.
⁴ **remissness** – carelessness; negligence.

nothing of that kind of confidence, which renders men easy in their sins. Paul stood in doubt of the Galatians, and they ought to have stood in doubt of themselves. The species of backsliding are various; some respect doctrine, others practice; but all are the operations of a heart departing from the living God.

In some, a backsliding spirit first appears by a relinquishment of evangelical doctrine. Where truth is treated merely as a matter of speculation or as an opinion of no great moment, it is not held fast. And where this is the case, it is easily surrendered. If a plausible book in favor of deism,⁵ or any of those vain systems, which nearly approach it, fall in their way, they are ready to yield. And by reading the performance a second time or conversing with a person who favors it, they make shipwreck of their faith and are driven on the rocks of infidelity. Such was the process in the days of the Apostles: those who “received not the love of the truth” were given up to “believe a lie” (2Th 2:11). If these departures from evangelical principles were closely examined, it would be found that they were preceded by a neglect of private prayer, watchfulness, self-diffidence,⁶ and walking humbly with God; and every one may perceive that they are followed with similar effects. It has been acknowledged, by some who have embraced the Socinian⁷ system, that since they entertained those views they had lost even the gift of prayer. Perhaps they might draw up and read an address to the Deity, but they could not pray. Where the principles of the Gospel are abandoned, the spirit of prayer and of all close walking with God will go with it. The confession of Peter that Jesus “was the Christ, the Son of God” is thought to be that which our Lord denominates the rock on which He would build His church (Mat 16:18). We are sure that the belief of this article of faith was required as a kind of test of Christianity; and who can look into the Christian world with attention and not perceive that it still continues a sort of keystone⁸ to the building? If this give way, the fabric falls. Backslidings of this nature are infinitely dangerous. He that declines in holy practice has to labor against the remonstrances⁹ of conscience; but he that brings himself to think lightly of sin and meanly¹⁰ of the Savior (which is what every false system of religion teaches) has gone far towards silencing the accusations of this unpleasant monitor. He is upon good terms with himself. The disorder of his soul is deep; but it is of a flattering nature. The declension of serious religion in him is no less apparent to others than that of the constitution by a consuming hectic;¹¹ yet, as is common in such cases, the party himself thinks he shall do well. In short, “the light that is in [him is] darkness” (Mat 6:23); and this is the greatest of all darkness!

In others, a departure of heart from God is followed by falling into some gross immorality. There are instances in which a sudden misconduct of this sort has been overruled for the awakening of the mind from its stupor and divesting it of its self-confidence. It was manifestly thus with the Apostle Peter. The stumbling of such persons is not that they should fall; but rather that they should stand with greater care and firmness. But the greatest danger arises from those cases where some lust of the flesh has gradually obtained an ascendancy over the heart; so that when the subject of it falls, in the eyes of the world, it is only appearing to be what he has long been in secret. And the first wrong step that he makes, instead of alarming him and occasioning his going aside to weep bitterly, is only the prelude to a succession of others. This is not the fall of one who is “overtaken in a fault” (Gal 6:1), but of one who is entangled in the net of his own corruptions. One sin prepares the way for another. Like the insect infolded in the spider’s web, he loses all power of resistance and falls a prey to the destroyer.

Some have fallen sacrifices to intemperance,¹² not by being overtaken in a single act of intoxication, but by contracting a habit of hard drinking. First, it was indulged in private, perhaps under some outward trouble, instead of carrying it to a throne of grace. In a little time, its demands increased. At length, it could no longer be kept a secret; reason was enslaved to sense, and the Christian professor sunk below the man! Others have indulged in impurity. Intimacies which may have arisen from nothing worse than a few improper familiarities—yea, which in some instances have originated in religion itself, have been known, through the corrupt propensities¹³ of the human heart, which turns everything it touches into poison, to produce the most fatal effects. Passions of this sort once kindled will soon possess all the soul. They leave no room for any thing that should resist them; not only consuming every spiritual desire and holy thought, but banishing from the mind even the sober dictates of reason, reducing the most exalted characters to the rank of

⁵ **Deism** – the belief in the existence of a supreme being that created the universe but left it to run on its own and does not intervene in it; a “natural religion” grounded in reason, it rejects special revelation (the Bible) and the supernatural doctrines of Christianity.

⁶ **self-diffidence** – self-distrust.

⁷ **Socinian** –the 16th and 17th century movement of Faustus and Lelio Socinus, who professed belief in the God of Scripture, but denied original sin, the substitutionary aspect of Christ’s atonement, the deity of Christ, and consequently the Trinity.

⁸ **keystone** – the stone at the summit of an arch, looked upon as locking the whole together.

⁹ **remonstrances** – protests.

¹⁰ **meanly** – to characterize in one’s thoughts as of little worth.

¹¹ **hectic** – fever accompanying tuberculosis.

¹² **intemperance** – excessive use of intoxicating drink.

¹³ **propensities** – tendencies to demonstrate particular behaviors; inclinations.

fools in Israel. Near these rocks are seen many a floating wreck, and among these quicksands numbers who once bade fair for the haven of everlasting life.

Another way in which a departure from God very often operates is by the love of the world. It is not uncommon for persons who once appeared to be zealous, affectionate, and devoted to God, when they come to be settled in life and to enter into its necessary avocations,¹⁴ to lose all heart for religion and take no delight in anything but saving money. This, it is true, is not generally considered by the world as disreputable. On the contrary, provided we be fair in our dealings, it is reckoned a mark of wisdom. “Men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself” (Psa 49:18). Such a one, say they, is a discreet man, and one that knows how to secure the main chance. Yet the Scriptures are very decisive against such characters.

This is the sin which they denominate “the lust of the eyes” (1Jo 2:16). The cares, riches, and pleasures of this life are described as choking the Word and rendering it unfruitful. It is worthy of special notice that when our Lord had warned His followers to “take heed, and beware of covetousness” (Luk 12:15), the example which He gives of this sin is not of one that was a plunderer of other men’s property, an unfair dealer, or an oppressor of the poor, but of a “certain rich man” whose ground “brought forth plentifully” (Luk 12:16-21). [His] only object appeared to be, first, to acquire a handsome fortune and then to retire from business and live at his ease. This also appears to be the character which is blessed by wicked men, but abhorred of God (Psa 10:3). A man who deals unfairly with men gains not their blessing, but their curse. Men, in general, regard only themselves. So long, therefore, as any person deals justly with them, they care not what his conduct is towards God. But it is affecting to think that the very character which they bless and envy, God abhors. The decision of Heaven is nothing less than this: “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1Jo 2:15)...

It has long appeared to me that this species of covetousness will, in all probability, prove the eternal overthrow of more characters among professing people than almost any other sin; and this because it is almost the only sin which may be indulged and a profession of religion at the same time supported. If a man be a drunkard, a fornicator, an adulterer, or a liar—if he rob his neighbor, oppress the poor, or deal unjustly—he must give up his pretensions to religion. Or, if not, his religious connections, if they are worthy of being so denominated, will give him up. But he may “love the world, and the things of the world” (1Jo 2:15) and at the same time retain his character. If the depravity of the human heart be not subdued by the grace of God, it will operate....Thus it is with religious professors whose hearts are not right with God. They cannot figure away¹⁵ with the profane nor indulge in gross immoralities; but they can love the world supremely, to the neglect of God, and be scarcely amenable¹⁶ to human judgment...

Further, many have fallen sacrifices not only to the love of the world, but to a conformity to it. These are not the same thing, though frequently found in the same person. The object of the one is principally *the acquisition of wealth*; the other respects *the manner of spending it*. That is often penurious;¹⁷ this wishes to cut a figure¹⁸ and appear like people of fashion. The former is “the lust of the eye”; the latter is “the pride of life.” We need not affect singularity in things indifferent; but to engage in the chase of fashionable appearance is not only an indication of a vain and little mind, but is certainly inconsistent with pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The desire of making an appearance has ruined many people in their circumstances, more in their characters, and most of all in their souls. We may flatter ourselves that we can pursue these things and be religious at the same time; but it is a mistake. The vanity of mind, which they cherish, eats up everything of a humble, serious, and holy nature, rendering us an easy prey to temptation, when solicited to do as others do in an evil thing.

A Christian’s rule is the revealed will of God; and, where the customs of the world run counter to this, it is his business to withstand them, even though in so doing he may have to withstand a multitude, yea, and a multitude of people of fashion. But if we feel ambitious of their applause, we shall not be able to endure the scorn which a singularity of conduct will draw upon us. Thus, either we shall be carried down the stream by the course of this world and shall fall into the gulf of perdition, or, if any good thing should be found in us towards the Lord God of Israel, it will be almost indiscernible and useless. In short, such characters are certainly in a backsliding state, whether they be ever recovered from it or not. The case of the Laodiceans seems to approach the nearest to theirs of any thing which in Scripture occurs to me. They were “neither cold nor hot”; neither the decided friends of Christ, nor His avowed enemies. They could not relinquish the world in favor of religion, yet neither could they let religion alone. They were vainly puffed up, with a notion of their wealth, their wisdom, and their finery, saying, “I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing”; but, in the account

¹⁴ **avocations** – distractions; diversions.

¹⁵ **figure away** – be conspicuous; show off.

¹⁶ **amenable** – required to account for behavior; answerable.

¹⁷ **penurious** – indicating stinginess.

¹⁸ **cut a figure** – show off.

of the Faithful and True Witness, they were “poor, and wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked.” Such a decision ought to make us tremble at the thought of aspiring to imitate people of fashion.

SYMPTOMS OF A BACKSLIDING SPIRIT: The Apostle Paul speaks of a certain state of mind which he feared he should find in the Corinthians, that of their having sinned and not repented of their deeds (2Co 12:21). *This it is which denominates a man a backslider*, and which, so long as it continues, deprives him of any scriptural foundation for concluding himself interested in forgiving mercy. What are the particular symptoms of this state of mind is the object of our present inquiry.

If our departing from the Lord have issued in some outward misconduct, there is no need of inquiring into the proofs of it, as the thing speaks for itself. But if its operations have been at present only internal, the inquiry may be highly necessary, that we may become acquainted with our condition, and that the disease may be healed ere it finishes its operations. Further, though it may be out of all doubt that we have sinned, yet it may be a matter of uncertainty whether or not we have repented. If we imagine we have when we have not, the consequence may be of the most serious nature. Let the following observations then be attended to.

First, if religious duties are attended to rather from custom or conscience than from love, we must never have known what true religion is or in a great degree have lost the spirit of it. It is possible that we may have been guilty of no particular outward evil, so as to have fallen under the censure¹⁹ of the world or of even our nearest connections, and yet have so far lost the spirit of religion as to be really in a backsliding state. The exercises of prayer, reading the Scriptures, hearing the Word, and giving something to the poor may be kept up in form, and yet be little, if any thing, more than a form. The church of Ephesus was not accused of any particular outward misconduct, but they had “left their first love” (Rev 2:4). Where this is the case, however, much will be neglected, especially of those parts of duty which fall not under the eye of creatures. It is supposed of the church just referred to that they had relaxed, if not in the actual performance, yet in the manner of performing their religious exercises. Therefore, they are exhorted to “repent, and to do their first works” (Rev 2:5). A departure from our first love is commonly the first step of a backsliding course. *Perhaps, if the truth were known, there are few open falls but what are preceded by a secret departure of heart from the living God.*

Secondly, if we have fallen into any particular sin, which exposes us to the censures of our friends, and instead of confessing it with sorrow are employed in defending or palliating²⁰ it, it is a certain proof that we are at present under the power of it. There are some sins that cannot be defended. But there are others which will admit of much being said on their behalf, and it is admirable with what ingenuity men will go about to find excuses where self is concerned. People that you would hardly think possessed of common sense, will in this case be singularly quick-sighted, discerning every circumstance that may make in their favor or serve to extenuate their fault. The cunning of the old serpent, which appeared in the excuses of our first parents, seems here to supply the place of wisdom. This self-justifying spirit is a very dangerous symptom: while it continues, there is no hope of a good issue. We read of the deceitfulness of sin, and truly it is with great propriety that deceit is ascribed to it. Perhaps there are few persons who are employed in justifying their failings, but who are first imposed upon or brought to think somehow, that they are, if not quite justifiable, yet very excusable. Sin, when *we* have committed it, loses its sinfulness and appears a very different thing to what it did in others. David’s indignation could rise against the man that had taken an ewe-lamb, while to his own conduct, which was much more criminal, he was blinded! When we commit any sin, it is common for it to assume another name. By means of this, we become easily reconciled to it and are ready to enter on a vindication of it. *Covetousness* will admit of a defense under the names of prudence, industry, or frugality. *Conformity* to the world may be pleaded for as an exercise of sociability and good breeding; unchristian *resentment*, as necessary self-defense; foolish *levity*, as innocent mirth; malignant *contentions*, as zeal for the truth...

Thirdly, though we do not defend or palliate our sin in words, yet, if we continue in the practice of it, we may be certain we have not repented. *All true repentance is followed by a forsaking of the evil.* Where this effect is not produced, there can be no Scriptural ground to hope for forgiveness. There are sins, as before observed, which will admit of no defense. If a person be convicted of them, he can do no other than own himself in the wrong or at least be silent. Yet he may feel no sorrow on their account, nor scarcely any intention to forsake them. When Samuel reproved Saul for his rebellion against the commandment of the Lord, assuring him that God had rejected him from being king and had given the kingdom to a neighbor of his that was better than he, he was confounded and compelled to say, “I have sinned” (1Sa 15:24). Yet the only concern he discovered was on account of having lost his honor. As soon as he suspected who his rival

¹⁹ **censure** – expression of disapproval or condemnation.

²⁰ **palliating** – making an offense seem less serious by excuses.

was, he sought to slay him....A sullen silence under reproof and a perseverance in the evil are certain signs of a hard and impenitent heart.

Fourthly, though we should refrain from the practice of the evil, yet if it be only a temporary effect of conviction, there is no true repentance. It is very common for persons, when they first fall into any gross sin, to feel ashamed and alarmed, to wish they had not acted as they have and to resolve that they will do so no more. And this, though the love of the evil be the same and on the first temptation that returns it is committed again, is nevertheless frequently mistaken for repentance. When Saul's life was spared by David, and his groundless malice against him detected, his heart seemed to relent. He felt ashamed, owned his sin, lifted up his voice and wept, and promised to do so no more. But this was not repentance. David appears to have suspected it at the time; for he would not trust himself in his hands, but gat him up into the hold. The event justified his conduct. The first opportunity that offered, Saul returned to the folly that he had condemned.

A temporary abstinence from evil may also be produced by some alarming providence. When judgments overtake us and conscience tells us that it is the hand of the Lord stretched out against us for our sin, the mind is appalled with fear and so ceases to be in a state to pursue its favorite devices. But if, as soon as the pressing hand of Providence is removed, the heart returns like a spring to its former position, there is no reason to consider its temporary depression as containing any true repentance...

When a professor of religion has fallen into some odious²¹ vice, and wishes to shelter himself from the censures of his connections, you will often hear him allege, "I have repented," whereas it amounts to little more than the shame and alarm...as his after-conduct very frequently proves. Indeed, it is not of the nature of true repentance to talk of having repented, and especially for the purpose of evading a faithful censure.

Fifthly, though we should refrain from the open practice of the sin, and that for a continuance, yet if it be merely from prudential²² or selfish considerations, we may be certain that we have not yet repented it. Though we had no religion and pretended to none, we might find various inducements to refrain from gross immoralities. They affect our interest, our health, and our reputation. It is on such principles that mere worldly men will guard against them; and, if we act from the same motives, wherein are we better than they? Or if the dread of future punishment may be supposed to have some influence upon us, this is a very different thing from the fear of the Lord, *which is to hate evil*. And where the motives for abstaining from any evil are merely prudential or selfish, we shall abstain from very little more than that which falls under the eye of creatures. Our watchfulness will respect little, if any thing, more than outward actions. The daily care of our lives will be, not how we shall please God, but how we shall conceal the prevailing dispositions of our hearts from those about us—a task as difficult as it is mean; for whatever occupies our thoughts and affections will on various occasions, notwithstanding our utmost care, escape us. Looks, gestures, manner of speaking and acting, as well as words and deeds themselves, betray what is predominant within. Hence, it is that we generally deceive ourselves in these matters. We often fancy our character to be *unknown* when it is *well-known*; and if it were otherwise, all is naked and open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. Of this we may be certain, that while our chief concern is to hide our sins from those about us, should we be summoned to give an account of our stewardship, it will appear that we have sinned and not repented of our deeds. Wherein this differs from going down to the grave with our guilt upon our heads, it is difficult to say.

Sixthly, if we take pleasure in talking of the evil or in dwelling upon it in our thoughts, it is a certain sign of the same thing. True repentance works in a way of silent shame and self-abasement: "That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord GOD" (Eze 16:63). When men can talk and even write of their former wicked courses with lightness, it is a certain proof that, whatever repentance they have had, they do not at present repent of it. And though nothing be said or written, yet if such things occupy our thoughts, imaginations, and affections, it is much the same. A mind full of this must needs be lacking of those spiritual exercises, which render us that we shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Those that are such are fitly enough described as having forgotten that they were purged from their old sins (2Pe 1:9). If old sins are thought of with new delight, they are reacted and persisted in. And where this continues to be the case, the guilt of them must remain upon us and may be found upon our heads when we go down to the grave.

Lastly, if we trifle with temptation or be not afraid of putting ourselves in the way of it or even of being led into it, we may be certain that at present we have not repented of our sin. It is a saying almost grown into a proverb, "He

²¹ **odious** – deserving hatred; repulsive.

²² **prudential** – that which arises from cautious practical wisdom.

that is not afraid of temptation is not afraid of sin; and he that is not afraid of sin must needs be in danger of being destroyed by it.” If, after having been repeatedly drawn into sin by associating in certain companies or certain pursuits, we can, nevertheless, run into them again without fear, *we cannot possibly have repented of our deeds*. Nay more, though we should fear to plunge ourselves into temptation, yet if, when Providence brings us into such situations and companies, our hearts secretly rejoice in it, this is no less an evidence of our impenitent state than the other. *True repentance will not only teach us to shun the way of evil, but to be averse to every avenue that leads to it*. If, therefore, we either run into temptation or are glad when we are led into it, we are beyond all doubt under the power of it.

From “The Backslider” in *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, Vol. III, reprinted by Sprinkle Publications.

Andrew Fuller (1754-1815): powerful Baptist preacher and prolific author; helped create what was to become the Baptist Missionary Society. Born in Wicken, Cambridgeshire, England.

STEPS TO BACKSLIDING

William S. Plumer (1802-1880)

THE DANGER OF DECLENSION is very great. Many think not so. Their words and lives prove that they think it a small matter to offend God and grieve His Spirit. They are cold and heartless in His service. Their fear of offending God is a weak principle. It controls them not. It has not the force of law. We are always in danger when we have slight thoughts of the evil of sin and have not our loins girt about. To depart from God is to seek darkness.

LET US THEN INQUIRE WHO BACKSLIDERS ARE: This is a point of high importance. Like all matters of practical religion, it demands candor, seriousness, and discrimination. He who wishes to deceive himself can commonly do so.

It is no conclusive evidence that one is not a backslider, that he is not himself convinced of the fact. A truly pious man in a state of declension usually has some fears respecting himself; but many grievously depart from God without being fully convinced of their error. It is a sad truth, that all sin blinds the mind and hardens the heart. It is very difficult to convince any man of his guilt. We have an account of a primitive church that was in a sad declension, neither cold nor hot and ready to be spewed out. And yet, far from having any just sense of her state, she said, “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,” and knew not that she was “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17).

Many are kept from owning their backslidings because they are mercifully restrained from open sins. Had they publicly fallen into overt iniquity, they would blush and be ashamed; they would bewail their wickedness before God and men. But as yet all is secret. They are merely backsliders in heart. No man knows of their spiritual wickedness. No man can accuse them of living in coldness or in iniquity. Hence, they conclude that all is well. But they are mistaken. It may all come to the knowledge of men in a short time. It was so with David. To him God said, “For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun” (2Sa 12:12).

It should also be stated that it is easy to backslide from God. We go astray from the womb, speaking lies (Psa 58:3). It is as natural for us to do wrong as for the sparks to ascend. In our voyage heavenward, wind and tide are both against us. If we do nothing to overcome their action, they will carry us away. We can go to hell without intending to do so, without putting forth any efforts to that effect...

ALL SERIOUS DECLENSION IN RELIGION BEGINS IN NEGLIGENCE OF CLOSET DUTIES: These are meditation, self-examination, reading the Scriptures, praise, and prayer. A close walk with God insures regularity and alacrity²³ in performing these duties. But an indisposition²⁴ for them is one of the first signs that spiritual health is failing. This symptom should produce alarm. Sometimes it does; and then the enemy gains no permanent advantage. But often the soul is made quite at ease, is thrown quite off its guard, and allows the public duties of religion to supersede the secret. A true Christian can hardly live without any secret prayer; but he may be in such a state as sadly to slight the means of personal

²³ **alacrity** – cheerful readiness; liveliness.

²⁴ **indisposition** – a condition of not being inclined to do something; reluctance.

communion with God. Trains of pious meditation may be few. The Scriptures may cease to be to the soul the lively oracles, honey and the honeycomb. Self-examination may prove a hard task and a revealer of unlooked-for wickedness. Praise and thanksgiving may become strange things, and He who gave songs in the night may leave the soul to sighings and tossings. Then prayer will be regarded rather as an exaction²⁵ to be granted than as a privilege to be enjoyed. When piety flourished in the soul, it was not enough to perform closet duties statedly²⁶ and formally. Without having set a particular time for them, the soul would occasionally pursue its pious reflections, its self-examinations, its earnest inquiries, its grateful trains of thought. It would sing some notes of praise. It would cry out after God, even when removed from the usual place and circumstances of devotion. Yes, in the midst of worldly business, devout aspirations would ascend to the Father of mercies; the events of providence successively occurring would be piously contemplated; the tear of penitence would often trickle down, and hope would rouse the soul to great animation.

But when such a one backslides, religion is gradually excluded from a place in the common affairs of life. Its duties are shoved into a corner or removed from hourly attention. Then one will go from his closet, quieting his conscience with the reflection that he has spent some time in the set observance of secret duties, and *now he feels more free to welcome the affairs of the world.* He follows the Lord, but not fully nor heartily. *Here the sad work of declension begins.* Sin advances apace.²⁷ Thralldom²⁸ and bewilderment commence. The soul is already in a net. Blessed is he who now takes the alarm, returns to duty and to the Savior, and is restored to peace, a good conscience, and the light of God's countenance. Sometimes this is done. In every case, it should be attempted. But often sin gains strength. The backslider proceeds to greater lengths.

THE NEXT STEP IS THE NEGLECT OF FAMILY AND SOCIAL RELIGION: This may not soon be taken, but it is well nigh impossible to be cold and formal in the closet and lively and punctual in the social duties of devotion. Hypocrisy may go very far, but rarely as far as this. Men are affected by temptations to slight or omit family worship or social prayer, according to the state of their hearts. To the lively growing Christian the adversary comes, but has nothing in him. His allurements take not effect. But to the neglecter of his spiritual duties, the enemy approaches boldly. He finds his reasonings vainly resisted and finally yielded to. The stones of the domestic altar begin to be loose and ready to tumble down, and the little praying circle is quite forsaken. How sad a state is this. How blind the mind becomes under the power of sin. None but God can effectually check this painful declension.

In this state, ere long²⁹ one feels uneasy and guilty. Therefore, to quiet conscience and keep up appearances with himself, he may for a long time be unusually strict and punctual in some of the public duties of religion. So his seat will seldom be vacant in the more public worship of God. For like reason, he will become quite zealous about some of the externals of religion. Or he may insist much on the system of doctrine which he has embraced, having learned the art of holding the truth in unrighteousness. Or he may talk of experimental religion, deceiving himself with the belief that if he talks on the subject, it is a sign of some right feeling. He is now sadly blind to his own wretchedness. If he has gone thus far, it will probably not be long until he will be detained from the house of God by causes that once could have had no hindering effect. His zeal even for forms and externals will probably soon betray weakness, or fierceness, or a spirit of contention. His love for truth will be substituted by a desire for controversy. Practical and experimental religion will engage but few of his words or thoughts. His heart has gone after other things. Sometimes indeed one acquires the evil habit of speaking fluently of things not felt nor loved. In this case, recovery is less and less to be expected. All insincerity is unfriendly to our recovering ourselves out of the snare of the devil.

Such a soul will find duties and ordinances unprofitable. He will go away from prayer, from reading, from preaching, and even from the Lord's Table, and be no more holy, no more humble, no more watchful, no more spiritually-minded, no more able to resist temptation than before. Sometimes he hopes that he is receiving profit, but his conduct soon shows that he is mistaken. His expectation deceives him. He looks "for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us" (Isa 59:11). He says, "What profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?" (Mal 3:14). It is with him even "as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh; but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his soul hath appetite" (Isa 29:8). Sometimes the ordinances are like the fruit which Milton's serpents ate. To the eye, it was beautiful and inviting, but in the mouth it turned to ashes, was bitter, and increased thirst. Or they are like the book the prophet ate, sweet in the mouth, but bitter afterwards. So sin often embitters the most precious privileges. Backsliders are made miserable by an approach to God. They are not prepared for it.

²⁵ **exaction** – the act of forcing the performance of a task.

²⁶ **statedly** – with regularity; constantly, not occasionally.

²⁷ **apace** – at a considerable or good pace; swiftly.

²⁸ **thralldom** – the condition of being controlled by a more powerful force; bondage.

²⁹ **ere long** – it will not be long before.

As piety thus dies in the soul, charity diminishes and censoriousness³⁰ takes its place. A backslider will be more than formerly disposed to doubt the good motives, the upright intentions, and sincere professions of others. He will not be slow in entertaining severe judgments of others. Sometimes he will express harsh opinions of his fellow men. Attaching great value to any little shreds of piety still about himself, he expresses surprise that others have not his seeming virtues. He wonders how a Christian can act so and so, while he himself is doing worse. His heart does not lead him instantly and spontaneously to cast a cloak over the faults of others. This spirit marks also his treatment of sinners. Reproach rather than persuasion, contempt rather than affection, mark his conduct towards them that are without. It cannot now be said of him that he “thinketh no evil” and “is kind” (1Co 13:4, 5). He shows much of the temper of those who make a man an offender for a word.

SOON YOU MAY FIND HIM VAIN AND TRIFLING IN HIS PLANS AND CONVERSATION: He prefers vain company. He selects unprofitable reading. He seeks amusement, not profit. Things must be found to suit his taste. When lively in religion, his conversation was seasoned with salt; but now any thing rather than religion is congenial to his feelings. On that topic, he is cold. On temporal things, he speaks with zest and animation. He may not wholly forsake the society of spiritual Christians, but he will not always shun the fool and the scorner. Mere works of taste or fancy will very much supersede the sound and solid treatises on religion, which once feasted his soul. The Bible does not refresh his spirit as once it did. His pious friends are often alarmed at his state and weep over it in secret...

In this state, he will often exhibit a painful degree of indifference to the honor of Christ. An apostasy, which once would have cost him bitter tears, hardly awakens a transient pang. He may not grossly profane the name, the Word, or the Sabbath of the Lord, but he is far less than formerly grieved at such sins in others. When he sees people sunk in sin, his spirit is not stirred within him. He is not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. He does not weep between the porch and the altar as he once did, crying, “Spare thy people, O LORD” (Joe 2:17).

Nor does he rejoice as formerly in hearing of the spread of truth, the conversion of sinners, the progress of the Gospel. Once his soul was inflamed with love and leaped for joy when he heard of the revival of religion....A lively Christian unites with angels in rejoicing over even one sinner that repenteth. But the backslider has little interest in such events. It is doubtful whether he loves himself or his Savior the most. It grieves him more to hear himself reviled than to hear his Savior blasphemed. It rejoices him more to hear himself praised than to hear his Savior commended. Such things render it doubtful whether he ever knew the Lord...it is a bad sign if they do not shake his confidence in his own conversion.

These things lead to a great diminution³¹ of solid religious comfort. He has few songs of holy joy. His heart is too cold to relish religious duties. He looks on the past with no real pleasure. It reminds him of time wasted, of vows broken, of opportunities lost, of comforts decayed, of mercies slighted. Of the future, he is much afraid. He remembers God and is troubled. He is afraid of evil tidings. He is looking out for some sore chastisement.

His old besetting sins revive with great power. Levity³² takes the place of seriousness; fretfulness expels gentleness. Ambition begins to burn in the bosom where formerly dwelt lowliness and contentment. Covetousness resumes her iron despotism; or prodigality breaks out afresh. The heavenly racer takes up one by one the weights, which he had formerly laid aside. He runs, but as uncertainly. He fights, but with great feebleness.

Those who have thus departed from God are left to see what they can do alone. God permits them to try their own power and resources. Of such the Comforter says, “I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early” (Hos 5:15). Samson is now shorn of the locks of his strength. It will be well if he be not forced to make sport for the Philistines. How long one may remain in this state none can tell. To escape from such error and sinfulness is no easy thing. It pleased God at once to restore Peter after he had denied his Lord. But it seems to have been months before David shed for his crimes the tears of true repentance. It is no easy matter to escape from the snare of the devil when we have once been led captive by him at his will.

Now is fulfilled that Scripture: “The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways” (Pro 14:14). He forsook God, the fountain of living waters. This was his first error. The second was like unto it: he hewed out to himself broken cisterns, which could hold no water (Jer 2:13). God may now let loose his corruptions upon him or send a messenger of Satan to buffet him. He is afflicted. He is tossed with tempest and not comforted. He is so “ashamed that he cannot look up.” He is convinced that he deserves rejection....The pangs of a backslider’s recovery often exceed those of a first conversion.

³⁰ **censoriousness** – the quality of being severely critical.

³¹ **diminution** – lessening; decrease.

³² **levity** – behavior intended to be amusing, but inappropriate for serious occasions.

AND NOW ARE YOU A BACKSLIDER? Are you cold, formal, or negligent in the secret duties of religion? Do you feel the uneasiness of guilt? Are you “afraid of evil tidings?” Do you live in constant apprehension of sore calamities? Are ordinances unprofitable to you? Are you in the constant exercise of charity, or do you indulge in a censorious spirit? Are you vain, light, trifling? Do you prefer the society of the devout? What books do you select? Are you alive to the honor of Christ? Do you enjoy religion? Let these solemn questions be asked frequently and answered honestly, as you shall give account to God.

From *Vital Godliness* reprinted by Sprinkle Publications.

William S. Plumer (1802-1880): American Presbyterian minister; described as “doctrinally sound, experientially searching, and practically realistic.” Author of *Vital Godliness*, *The Grace of Christ*, *The Law of God*, and many others.

THE SAD DECLINE OF LOVE

Octavius Winslow (1808 - 1878)

“The love of many shall wax cold”—Matthew 24:12.

THE SUBJECT NOW BEFORE US FOR REFLECTION is the humbling and affecting truth that the grace of love in a child of God may greatly and sadly decline. We speak, let it be remembered, not of the destruction of the principle, but of the decline of its power. This spiritual and influential truth cannot be too frequently nor too strongly insisted upon—that though faith, love, hope, zeal, and their kindred graces may greatly decline in their vigor, fervor, and real growth; yet that they may entirely fail even in their greatest decay or severest trial, the Word of God assures us can never be. To believe the opposite of this is to deny their Divine origin, their spiritual and immortal character, and to impeach the wisdom, power, and faithfulness of God. Not a grain of the true wheat can ever be lost in the sifting, not a particle of the pure gold in the refining....The following may be considered as forming some of the marked characteristics of the decay and declension of this principle.

When God becomes less an object of fervent desire, holy delight, and frequent contemplation, we may suspect a declension of Divine love in the soul. Our spiritual views of God and our spiritual and constant delight in Him will be materially affected by the state of our spiritual love. If there is coldness in the affections, if the mind grows earthly, carnal, and selfish, dark and gloomy shadows will gather round the character and the glory of God. He will become less an object of supreme attachment, unmingled delight, adoring contemplation, and filial³³ trust. The moment the supreme love of Adam to God declined, the instant that it swerved from its proper and lawful center, he shunned converse³⁴ with God and sought to embower³⁵ himself from the presence of the Divine glory. Conscious of a change in his affections—sensible of a divided heart, of subjection to a rival interest—and knowing that God was no longer the object of his supreme love nor the fountain of his pure delight, nor the blessed and only source of his bliss—he rushed from His presence as from an object of terror and sought concealment in Eden’s bowers.³⁶ That God Whose presence was once so glorious, Whose converse was so holy, Whose voice was so sweet became as a strange God to the rebellious and conscience-stricken creature...

And whence this difference? Was God less glorious in Himself? Was He less holy, less loving, less faithful, or less the fountain of supreme bliss? Far from it. God has undergone no change. It is the perfection of a perfect Being that He is unchangeable; that He can never act contrary to His own nature, but must ever be, in all that He does, in harmony with Himself. The change was in the creature. Adam had left his first love, had transferred his affections to another and an inferior object; and conscious that he had ceased to love God, he would fain³⁷ have veiled himself from His presence and have excluded himself from His communion. It is even so in the experience of a believer, conscious of declension in his love to God. There is a hiding from His presence; there are misty views of His character, misinterpretations of His

³³ **filial** – having the relationship of a child to a parent.

³⁴ **converse** – social interaction with someone.

³⁵ **embower** – enclose; seclude.

³⁶ **bowers** – a place closed in or overarched with branches of trees, shrubs, or other plants.

³⁷ **fain** – gladly.

dealings, and a lessening of holy desire for Him. But where the heart is right in its affections, warm in its love, fixed in its desires, God is glorious in His perfections and communion with Him the highest bliss on earth...

Not only in the declension of Divine love in the soul, does God become less an object of adoring contemplation and desire, but there is less filial approach to Him. The sweet confidence and simple trust of the child is lost; the soul no longer rushes into His bosom with all the lowly yet fond yearnings of an adopted son, but lingers at a distance. Or if it attempts to approach, [it] does so with the trembling and the restraint of a slave. The tender, loving, child-like spirit that marked the walk of the believer in the days of his espousals, when no object was so glorious to him as God, no being so loved as his heavenly Father, no spot so sacred as the throne of communion, no theme so sweet as His free grace adoption has in a great degree departed. Distrust, legal fears, bondage of spirit have succeeded it. All these sad effects may be traced to the declension of filial love in the soul of the believer towards God.

Hard thoughts of God in His dispensations may be regarded as another undeniable symptom. The mark of a vigorous love to God is when the soul justifies God in all His wise and gracious dealings with it; rebels not, murmurs not, repines not, but meekly and silently acquiesces in the dispensation, be it never so trying. Divine love in the heart, deepening and expanding towards that God from whence it springs, will in the hour of trial exclaim, "My God has smitten me, but He is my God still, faithful and loving. My Father has chastened me sore, but He is my Father still, tender and kind. This trying dispensation originated in love, it speaks with the voice of love, it bears with it the message of love and is sent to draw my heart closer and yet closer to the God of love, from Whom it came." Dear reader, art thou one of the Lord's afflicted ones? Happy art thou if this is the holy and blessed result of His dealings with thee. Happy if thou heardest the voice of love in the rod, winning thy lone and sorrowful heart to the God from whom it came. But when love to God has declined, the reverse of this is the state of a tried and afflicted believer.

When there is but little inclination for communion with God, and the throne of grace is sought as a duty rather than a privilege, and, consequently, but little fellowship is experienced, a stronger evidence we need not of a declension of love in the soul. The more any object is to us a source of sweet delight and contemplation, the more strongly do we desire its presence, and the more restless are we in its absence. The friend we love we want constantly at our side. The spirit goes out in longings for communion with him—his presence sweetens, his absence embitters every other joy. Precisely true is this of God. He who knows God, who with faith's eye has discovered some of His glory and by the power of the Spirit has felt something of His love, will not be at a loss to distinguish between God's sensible presence and absence in the soul. Some professing people walk so much without communion, without fellowship, without daily filial and close intercourse with God; they are so immersed in the cares, and so lost in the fogs and mists of the world; the fine edge of their spiritual affection is so blunted, and their love so frozen by contact with worldly influences and occupations—and no less so, with cold, formal professors—that the Sun of righteousness may cease to shine upon their soul, and they not know it! God may cease to visit them and His absence not be felt! He may cease to speak, and the stillness of His voice not awaken an emotion of alarm! Yea, a more strange thing would happen to them, if the Lord were suddenly to break in upon their soul, with a visit of love, than were He to leave them for weeks and months without any token of His presence. Reader, art thou a professing child of God? Content not thyself to live thus; it is a poor, lifeless existence, unworthy of thy profession, unworthy of Him whose name thou dost bear, and unworthy of the glorious destiny towards which thou art looking. Thus may a believer test the character of his love: he in whose heart Divine affection deepens, increases, and expands finds God an object of increasing delight and desire, and communion with Him the most costly privilege on earth: he cannot live in the neglect of constant, secret, and close fellowship with his God, his best and most faithful Friend.

When there is a less tender walk with God, we may be at no loss to ascertain the state of our love. What do we mean by a tender walk? When a believer walks in holy circumspection,³⁸ in uprightness, integrity, close vigilance, and prayerfulness before God, he then walks softly: "I shall go softly all my years" (Isa 38:15). When with filial tenderness, he trembles to offend his Father, his God, his best Friend; when he increasingly delights himself in the precepts and commandments of the Lord; when he would rather pluck from himself the right eye and sever the right hand than willfully and knowingly offend God and grieve the Spirit; then his walk is tender, soft, and close with God. And what constrains a believer to this glorious life, this holy, hidden walk, but the love of God shed abroad in his heart? (Rom 5:5). Imagine then what dangers must throng the path, what temptations must beset the soul, in whom the precious and influential grace of love is in a state of declension and decay!

Need we add, when Christ is less glorious to the eye, and less precious to the heart, Divine love in the soul of a believer must be on the wane? It cannot be otherwise. Our views of Jesus must be materially affected by the state of our

³⁸ **circumspection** – unwillingness to act without first weighing the risks or consequences.

affections towards Him. When there is but little dealing with the atoning blood, leaning upon the righteousness, drawing from the fullness, and bearing daily the cross of Christ, the love of a believer waxeth cold. We would judge the depth of a man's Christianity by his reply to the question, "What think ye of Christ? (Mat 22:42). Is He lived to, is He lived upon? Is His name your delight, His cross your boast, His work your resting place?" This will be your blessed experience, if the pulse of Divine love beats strong in your breast for Christ.

A decay of love to the saints of God is a strong evidence of a decay of love to God Himself. If we love God with a sincere and deepening affection, we must love His image wherever we find it. It is true, the picture may be but an imperfect copy, the outline may be but faintly drawn. There may be shades we cannot approve of. Yet, recognizing in the work the hand of the Spirit and in the outline some resemblance to Him whom our souls admire and love, we must feel a drawing out of our holiest affections towards the object. We shall not pause before the surrender is made to inquire to what section of the church of Christ he belongs, what name he bears, or what the color of his uniform; but, discovering the man of God, the meek and lowly follower of Jesus, our heart and our hand are freely offered. O what a passport to our hearts is the image of Jesus in a child of God! Do we trace Christ in the principles that guide him, in the motives that govern him, in the spirit, in the very looks of the man? We feel that we must take him to our bosom for Jesus' sake. O, it marks the decay of love to God in the soul, when the heart beats faintly, and the eye looks coldly, towards any dear saint of God because he belongs not to our party and wears not our badge, when bigotry, narrow-minded selfishness warps the mind, congeals the current of love, and almost unchristianises a believer. The Word of God is solemn and decisive on this point: "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also" (1 Jo 4:20, 21). "By this," says Jesus, "shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (Joh 13:35). If we love not the visible resemblance, how can we love the invisible Archetype?³⁹

When love to God declines, with it will decline an interest in the advancement and prosperity of His cause: the one invariably follows the other. We do not say that outward zeal may not continue long after a process of concealed declension has advanced in the soul and secret duties have become neglected. This is the lamentable case with many. But a true, spiritual, and lively interest in the increase of Christ's kingdom, in the diffusion of His truth, the deepening of holiness in the church, the conversion of sinners will invariably decline with the declension of love to God.

From *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*
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Octavius Winslow (1808-1878): nonconformist pastor and one of the most valued ministers of the nineteenth century. Author of more than forty books, in which he promoted an experimental knowledge of the precious truths of God. Buried in Abbey Cemetery, Bath, England.

INJURIOUS EFFECTS OF BACKSLIDING

Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)

FIRST, IT WILL NECESSARILY DEPRIVE US of all true enjoyment in religion, and by consequence of all that preservation to the heart and mind, which such enjoyment affords. The principal sources of enjoyment, to a Christian that walketh spiritually, are communion with God and His people. But to him that is out of the way, these streams are dried up; or, which is the same thing in effect to him, they are so impeded as not to reach him. Guilt, shame, darkness, and defilement have taken possession of the soul. Love is quenched, hope clouded, joy fled, prayer restrained, and every other grace enervated.⁴⁰ It becomes the holiness of God to frown upon us in such a state of mind by withholding the light of His countenance; and, if it were otherwise, we have no manner of desire after it.

Such was the state of David after he had sinned and before he had repented: the joys of God's salvation were far from him. The thirty-second and thirty-eighth Psalms appear to have been written...after his recovery. But he there describes what was the state of his mind previously to it. There is much meaning in what he sets out with in the former of these Psalms: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD

³⁹ **Archetype** – the original model or type from which similar things are patterned.

⁴⁰ **enervated** – deprived of nerve and strength.

imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile” (Psa 32:1, 2). He knew the contrary of this by bitter experience. Guilt and defilement had eaten up all his enjoyment. “When I kept silence,” saith he, “my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer” (Psa 32:3, 4). It does not appear that he fully desisted from prayer; but there was none of that freedom in it, which he was wont⁴¹ to enjoy. It was roaring rather than praying; and God is represented as disregarding it. In the thirty-eighth Psalm he speaks of the rebukes of God’s wrath, and the chastening of His hot displeasure; of His arrows sticking fast in him, and His hand pressing him sore; of there being no soundness in his flesh, because of His anger; nor rest in his bones, because of his sin. There is one expression exceedingly appropriate: “My wounds stink and are corrupt, because of my foolishness.” A wound may be dangerous at the time of its being received; but much more so if it be neglected till the humors of the body are drawn towards it. In this case, it is hard to be healed; and the patient has not only to reflect on his heedlessness in first exposing himself to danger, but on his foolishness in so long neglecting the prescribed remedy. Such was the state of his mind, until, as he informs us, he “acknowledged his transgressions” and was “sorry for his sin.”

And as there can be no communion with God, so neither can there be any with His people. If our sin be known, it must naturally occasion a reservedness, if not an exclusion from their society. Or, if it be unknown, we shall be equally unable to enjoy communion with them. Guilt in our consciences will beget shame and incline us rather to stand aloof than to come near them; or, if we go into their company, it will prove a bar to freedom. There is something at first sight rather singular in the language of the Apostle John; but upon closer inspection it will be found to be perfectly just: “If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another” (1Jo 1:7)...

Nor shall we be deprived merely of the enjoyments of religion, but of all that preservation to the soul, which they afford. The peace of God is represented as that which keeps or fortifies our hearts and minds. Without this, the heart will be in perpetual danger of being seduced by the wiles or sunk by the pressures of this world and the mind of being drawn aside from the simplicity of the Gospel.

Secondly, it will render us useless in our generation. The great end of existence with a good man is to live to Him, Who died for us and rose again. If God bless us, it is that, like Abraham, we may be blessings to others. Christians are said to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world; but while we are in the state above described, we are as salt that has lost its savor, which is “good for nothing,” or as a light that is hid under a vessel (Mat 5:13, 15).

Of what use, with respect to religion, are we in our families, while this is the case? Neither servants nor children can think well of religion, from anything they see in us. And when we go into the world and mingle among mankind in our dealings, in whose conscience does our conversation or behavior plant conviction? Where is the man who, on leaving our company, has been compelled by it to acknowledge the reality of religion? Or, if we occupy a station in the church of God (and this character may belong to a minister no less than to another man), we shall do little or no good in it...There is a threatening directed against vain pastors which ought to make a minister tremble: “Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened” (Zec 11:17). Perhaps one of the greatest temptations to backsliding in ministers may lie in this way: being selected from their brethren and chosen to the office of public instructors, they are in danger of indulging in self-valuation.⁴² A man may labor night and day in his study and all to get accomplished that he may shine before the people. Where this is the case, the preacher is his own idol, and it may be that of the people....This character may respect ungodly preachers, such to whom the Jewish nation were given up for their rejection of Christ; but there is no sin committed by the most ungodly man of which the most godly is not in danger.

Thirdly, we shall not only be useless, but injurious to the cause of Christ. Indeed, it is impossible to stand neuter in this cause. If we do no good, we shall do harm, not only as cumberers of the ground⁴³ (Luk 13:7), occupying that place in society which might be better filled by others, but as giving a false representation of religion and diffusing a savor of death among mankind. If our domestics infer nothing favorable to religion from our conduct in the family, they will infer something unfavorable; and if there be but little good to be seen in our example, it is well if there be not much evil; and this will surely be imitated. Who can calculate what influence the treachery, unchastity, and murder, committed by David, had upon his family? We know that each was acted over again by Amnon and Absalom. And thus many a parent has seen his own sins repeated in his posterity. And perhaps, if he had lived longer, might have seen them multiplied still more to his shame and confusion.

⁴¹ **wont** – accustomed.

⁴² **self-valuation** – appreciation of one’s self.

⁴³ **cumberers of the ground** – those who use up or waste the ground.

The servants of God are called to bear testimony for Him: “Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD” (Isa 43:10). This is done not merely by words, but by deeds. There is a way of bearing witness to the *reality* and *importance* of religion, by a zealous perseverance in it; to its *dignity*, by our firmness; to its *happy influence*, by contentedness and cheerfulness; and to its *purity*, by being holy in all manner of conversation: and this is a kind of testimony, which is more regarded than any other. Men, in common, form their opinion of religion more by what they see in the professors of it than by the profession itself. Hence, it was that David by his deed is said to have given “great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme” (2Sa 12:14). They were not contented with reproaching him, but must speak against God and religion on his account.... Things operate much the same to this day. Whatever evil is done by a professor, it is ascribed to his religion. In this view, we may justly consider our unchristian conduct as bearing false witness of God. For it is giving false representations of His Gospel and government to the world.

A grasping, selfish spirit is saying to those around us, that, after all which we have professed of living by faith in a portion beyond death, the present world is the best, and therefore we are for making sure of that, and running all hazards as to the other. In like manner, a cruel and revengeful disposition towards those who have offended us is saying that Christianity, after all its professions of meekness and forgiveness of injuries, renders its adherents no better than others. And when a Christian professor is detected of having privately indulged in the lusts of the flesh, the conclusion that is drawn from it is, that there is nothing in religion but outside appearance, and that in secret, religious people are the same as others. It is impossible to say how much such conduct operates to the hardening of men in sin, to the quenching of their convictions, to the weakening the hands of God’s servants, and to the stumbling of persons who are inquiring the way to Zion...

Fourthly, we are in the utmost danger of falling into future temptations, and so of sinking deeper and falling further from God. So long as sin remains upon the conscience unlamented, it is like poison in the constitution. It will be certain to operate, and that in a way that shall go on more and more to kill all holy resolution, to harden the heart, and to defile the imaginations and desires. “Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart” (Hos 4:11). It was from sad experience of the defiling nature of past sin that David, when he came to himself, prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Psa 51:10).

A mind thus enfeebled, stupefied, and defiled, must needs be in a very unfit condition to resist new temptations. The inhabitants of a besieged city, who are weakened by famine and disease, and discouraged by a number of disaffected persons within their walls, have no heart to resist, but stand ready to listen to the first proposals of the besiegers. And in proportion as we are disabled for resistance, it may be expected that the tempter will renew his attempts upon us. If Satan has any influence upon the human mind, it may be supposed that he acts with design and knows how to avail himself of the most favorable seasons to effect his purpose. And this we find to be true by experience. In proportion as we have yielded to temptation, it will rise in its demands. Solicitations, greater in number and in force, will ply our minds. As a resistance of the devil will be followed by his fleeing from us, so on the contrary, a non-resistance of him will be followed by renewed and stronger attempts upon us. One sin makes way for another and renders us less able to resist or to return to God by repentance... Samson first yielded to his sensual desires. After this, to the entreaties of his Delilah, who, in proportion as she saw him pliant to her wishes, increased in her assiduousness⁴⁴ until at length he lost his hair, his liberty, his eyes, and his life...

Fifthly, so long as sin remains upon the conscience unlamented, we are in danger of eternal damnation. It may be thought by some that such language is inconsistent with the final perseverance of believers; but it is manifest that our Lord did not so teach the doctrine of perseverance as to render cautions of this nature unnecessary. He did not scruple⁴⁵ to declare, even to His own disciples, that whosoever should say to his brother, “Thou fool,” should be in danger of hell-fire (Mat 5:22)—that if they forgave not men their trespasses, neither would God forgive theirs (Mat 6:15)—and if a right hand, or a right eye, caused them to offend, it must be cut off, or plucked out, and that lest the whole body should be cast into hell (Mat 5:29).

The object at which sin aims, whether in believers or unbelievers, is death—*eternal death*. To this, it has a natural and direct tendency.... If it does not in all cases come to this issue, it is not because of its being different as to its nature or tendency in some persons to what it is in others, but because a timely stop is put to its operations. Only let it go on without repentance until it has finished its work, and eternal death will be the issue.

Whatever we are, so long as sin lies unlamented upon the conscience, we have no scriptural foundation to conclude that we are Christians. No real Christian, it is true, will prove an apostate; yet while we are under the influence of sin, we are

⁴⁴ **assiduousness** – persistence.

⁴⁵ **scruple** – hesitate.

moving in the direction which leads to apostasy. If we are contented with a relapsed state of mind, what ground can we have to conclude that it is not our element or that we have ever been the subjects of true religion?

From *The Backslider*.

SIGNS OF BACKSLIDING CHURCHES

Joel R. Beeke

“And my people are bent to backsliding from me”—Hosea 11:7.

IS THE PRESENT-DAY CHURCH following the Word and ways of the Lord and abhorring all that is otherwise? Is the fear of God, the love for truth and for God’s glory, and the desire to walk according to all God’s commandments prospering among God’s church? Before God and men, we must confess that, honestly, the answer is no. True, there may still be some outward truth, outward growth, and even outward spiritual privileges to an extent that the church of former ages scarcely possessed. But Israel could claim the same things—outward truth, outward growth, outward privileges—and yet they were backsliding...

A church tends to slide from a strong foundation. Therefore, God calls His church to be aware of how backsliding begins, how it thrives, and how it ends. We must be acquainted with Satan’s devices and methodical plans to bring the church into an abominable, backsliding condition. Under the light of the Holy Spirit, the history of Israel and the church reveals a clear pattern of step-by-step backsliding, a pattern we will consider in closer detail.

1. When the church begins to backslide, the first visible sign is usually an increase in worldliness. In everyday lives, in conversation, and even in dress and fashion, the spirit of the world begins to infest church circles. What crept ashamedly into the church before begins to walk in freely, often covered or overlooked instead of exposed and admonished. The black and white line separating godliness and worldliness becomes increasingly grayer.

Instead of walking in opposite directions, the world and the church begin to have more in common with each other, much to the church’s detriment.⁴⁶ Some of its members begin going to worldly places, taking part in its entertainment, and befriending its people. Some take all kinds of modern media into their homes without even considering what controls they should exercise; consequently, they quickly become addicted to today’s worldly mentality.

Worldly people, worldly entertainment, worldly customs, worldly places—is this not what Hosea warned against when the Spirit directed him to write, “Ephraim hath mixed himself among the people” (Hos 7:8)? The sin of increasing worldliness is the church’s first downward and tragic step in the spiral of backsliding.

2. Worldliness bends the church towards further backsliding and into a hardening condition of unbelief. Jesus Himself complained of His generation, “But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented” (Mat 11:16, 17).

Is this not a picture of the church today? If the funeral tune of the Law is preached, how many sinners are mourning? If the wedding tune of the Gospel is proclaimed, how many mourning sinners are brought to rejoicing? In general, we can say that the Law no longer seems to cause trembling, and the Gospel no longer seems to provoke jealousy....Could we confess, “I have become hardened to the Law and to the Gospel—I fear even to hell itself”?

Even the preaching of hellish damnation is making less and less impression. And heaven? By nature, we do not want that either. An atheist once said, “You can keep your heaven and your hell. Only give me this earth.” We may not dare to voice that, but do we live it with our lives? Unbelief makes us practical atheists. Hell is no longer hell, heaven is no longer heaven, grace is longer grace, sin is no longer sin, Christ is no longer Christ, God is no longer God, and the Bible is no longer the everlasting Word of God.

⁴⁶ **detriment** – loss or damage.

Unbelief also makes us hardened to the truth. We may know the truth in our minds, but it will burn us eternally if it does not become engrafted into our hearts...

3. Unbelief leads the church to backslide further into a hardened condition of indifference. It leads us to lose all concern for the truth. How many are truly concerned to hear true doctrine from the pulpit, to hear about *death* in Adam and *life* in Christ? Are we concerned about guarding the foundational doctrines of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility? Do we delight to hear both of them preached fully as they flow out of the biblical text being expounded?

We should desire to hear all the rich doctrines of Scripture preached in their fullness, all of which are grounded in the heart of the Gospel, Jesus Christ and Him crucified, as spokes are grounded in the hub of a wheel. Are we interested in the doctrines of God's never-ending love and full redemption through the blood of Christ? Do we care to understand the necessity of the Holy Spirit, justification, sanctification, and perseverance?

We need to cherish experimental doctrine rather than being indifferent to it. Does it concern us whether we hear about the necessity of saving grace, the fullness of it, and its fruit?

Finally, we must not be indifferent to hearing about the marks of grace—marks that separate the work of God from the work of man, saving faith from temporary faith, true trembling (Phi 2:12) from devilish trembling (Jam 2:19), and abiding convictions from common convictions.

We live in a fearfully indifferent and careless time. We must acknowledge that true doctrine is fading more and more in our world and in our hearts. Concern for the truth is disappearing, and most of the distinctions mentioned above are becoming increasingly unknown, even in the minds of church members....Some can no longer see the difference between biblically experiential and outwardly historical marks of grace. They do not take the time to read the works of our forefathers and study the differences; they hear no difference, being indifferent.

By nature, we care for none of these things. We live on the same level as beasts. Our lives seem to be little more than work, eating, sleeping, and dying. We are bent toward backsliding for our own names' sake and our own lives. We place self above true doctrine, and this is why we can go on living unconverted.

God's people love preaching that is searching, experimental, and discriminatory, no matter how difficult or stressful it may be. By nature, we prefer a false assurance or a presumptuous claim, but God's people would rather be killed than deceived. They know by experience that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). They know, too, that it is far easier to be deceived than to know truth. Therefore, no flood of tears, no nights of prayer alone with God, and no counterfeit message (no matter how close it is to the genuine) will satisfy them. God's people need more than tears, prayers, repentance, unworthiness, and humility. They need something and someone outside of themselves. They need Christ. They need Christ and His real doctrine burned onto their souls by the Holy Spirit. God's people can never experience it enough. They cry, "Lord, seal it home with Thy Divine stamp of approval that I may know it is Thy doctrine inscribed on the walls of my soul, and not my own doctrine—not my own inscriptions, tears, and works."

Their lives are characterized by seeking more and more doctrine worked by the Spirit, experienced by the soul, and blessed by heaven. They yearn for the truth that will set them free and drive away doubt with its overwhelming power—a truth that will soften and bless their souls. Such truth comes down from God and leads back up to Him. Is this your desire also, or is your religion nothing but tradition mixed with common convictions now and then? Does a little religion, a little knowledge, satisfy your conscience, and then do you set your soul aside? Are you content with the scaffolding of religion without knowledge of the heart?

If you honestly must answer yes, then you are backsliding further every day, every sermon, every Sabbath. It is a hard but real truth: by nature, we are asking the Lord for the shortest way to condemnation. We are bent toward backsliding ourselves directly into hell. May the Lord open our eyes before it is too late!

4. Indifference produces its close companion on the road of backsliding: ignorance. When we look back to Edwards, Whitefield, Owen, Bunyan, and dozens more of our forefathers and consider that their sermons were understood by the common people, we must fear that what the Lord said of Israel is also true of the church today: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos 4:6).

5. Spiritual and intellectual ignorance of the truth leads to the fatal plague of spiritual deadness in the church. God's people must begin with themselves. What happened to the times when people were often weekly moved, shaken, and convicted by the Lord? Should they not confess today, "Oh, that it could happen once a month or once a year"?

Where are the active, current exercises of spiritual life? “Oh,” they confess, “It is so dead! And the rest is all spoiled manna.”

6. Spiritual deadness bends backsliding into man-centeredness. If man is the center of the church, man becomes the subject of all talk, either idolized or criticized, and God and His Word are set aside. Conversation centering on office-bearers and ministers multiplies, and we judge others. One minister is good; another, fair; a third, not good at all. We live in a day when ministers are evaluated according to man-made scales, rather than the divine scales of God’s Word and testimony....Man-centeredness is an awful curse on the church, a dreadful blasphemy of God’s Name, the fruit of spiritual deadness, and a sure guarantee for no personal blessing unless the Lord breaks it down! This is clearly illustrated by the story of a woman who received a blessing under the first sermon she heard by Ebenezer Erskine...she traveled many miles to hear him again, but received no blessing. Erskine received the grace and wisdom to reply, “Woman, that is easy to explain. Yesterday you came to hear the Word of Jesus Christ, and today you came to hear the words of Ebenezer Erskine.”

7. This brings us to the last step of a backsliding church: man-centeredness yields the fruit of an unholy or no holy expectation from God. *Unholy* expectation is based on man’s activities and created by attaching God’s Name and blessing to them. In this, we do not realize that we have forfeited all expectation from our side. *No holy* expectation is usually the fruit of a pious, man-centered unworthiness, which drags God down to the level of man.

Oh, for churches overflowing with souls who are filled with holy expectation in God and a proper realization of their own unworthiness! The Spirit alone works holy expectation, which looks beyond self and man. Although our sins pile up to heaven, holy expectation sees that Christ’s satisfying and substitutionary righteousness ascends still higher to the very throne of God with His Father’s own stamp of approval. On that basis, holy expectation pleads and intercedes at the throne of grace—not with a small god, but with the great triune God of heaven and earth! Holy expectation cannot be content with worldliness, unbelief, indifference, and ignorance. It abhors backsliding and seeks the honor of God, the conversion of poor sinners, and the welfare of the church!

The church’s only hope is God, for He alone can revive His backsliding church. Pray that He would remember us in Christ Jesus, the only pleading and expectation ground! May He send forth His Spirit and revive both our churches and us...may man be crucified, the world despised, Satan shamed, and interceders at the throne of grace multiplied. May God Himself receive His rightful place among us by Divine conquest: “He, all in all; we, nothing at all!”

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STEPS TO REVIVAL IN THE SOUL

Octavius Winslow (1808 - 1878)

WHATEVER BE THE DEPARTURE of a backsliding child of God, it is recoverable. Not a step has he lost but may be retraced; not a grace has decayed but may be restored; not a joy has fled but may be won back. Alas! For us, when the day comes that shall close up every avenue to the return of a backsliding soul! That tells us that the Father no longer welcomes home the prodigal; that the blood of Jesus no longer heals a wounded spirit; that the Holy Ghost no longer restores the lost joys of God’s salvation! But we desire now to show, that for every poor, self-condemned, heart-broken, returning soul, there is a lingering affection in the heart of the Father, a welcome in the blood of Jesus, and a restorative power in the operation of the Spirit, and therefore *every encouragement to arise and come to God.*

The first direction, which we would give in the way of recovery, is acquaint yourself thoroughly with the real state of your soul as before God. As the first step in conversion was to know yourself to be a lost, helpless, condemned

sinner; so now, in your reconversion⁴⁷ to God, you must know the exact state of your soul. Be honest with yourself. Let there be a thorough, faithful examination of your spiritual condition. Let all disguise be removed, the eye withdrawn from the opinion of men, and the soul shut in with God in a close scrutiny of its worst state. Your minister, your church, your friend may know nothing of the secret state of your soul. They may not even suspect any hidden decline of grace, any incipient backsliding of heart from God. To their partial eye, the surface may be fair to look upon; to them your spiritual state may present the aspect of prosperity and fruitfulness; but the solemn question is between God and your own soul. You have to do with a God that judgeth not as man judgeth—by the outward appearance only—but who judgeth the heart. “I the LORD search the heart” (Jer 17:10). The “backslider in heart” may deceive himself; he may deceive others; but God he cannot deceive. Seek then to know the real condition of your soul. Search and see what graces of the Spirit have declined, what fruits of the Spirit have decayed. My reader, this is a solemn and a great work we have set you upon, but it is necessary to your recovery.

We would bring you into the court of your own bosom to examine fairly and strictly the spiritual state of your soul. It is a solemn process! The witnesses summoned to testify are many: *conscience* is a witness—how often it has been silenced. The *Word* is a witness—how sadly it has been neglected. The *throne of grace* is a witness—how frequently it has been slighted. *Christ* is a witness—how much He has been undervalued. The *Holy Spirit* is a witness—how deeply He has been grieved. God is a witness—how greatly He has been robbed. All these testify against the soul of a backslider in heart, and yet all plead for its return!

The second step is to discover and bring to light the cause of the soul’s declension. “Is there not a cause?” (1Sa 17:29). Search and see what has fallen as a blight upon thy soul, what is feeding at the root of thy Christianity. The Apostle Paul, skilful to detect and faithful to reprove any declension in the faith or laxity in the practice of the early churches, discovered in that of Galatia a departure from the purity of the truth and a consequent carelessness in their walk. Grieved at the discovery, he addresses to them an affectionate and faithful epistle, expressive of his astonishment and pain, and proposing a solemn and searching inquiry. “I marvel,” he writes, “that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ...after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements...I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain...Where is then the blessedness ye spake of?...I stand in doubt of you. Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you” (Gal 1:6; 4:9, 11, 15a, 20b; 5:7, 8). To the reader, conscious, as he hangs over this page, of secret declension in his soul, we propose the same searching and tender inquiry. Ye did run well; who did hinder you? What stumblingblock has fallen in your way? What has impeded your onward course? What has enfeebled⁴⁸ your faith, chilled your love, drawn your heart from Jesus, and lured you back to the weak and beggarly elements of a poor world? You set out fair. For a time you ran well. Your zeal, love, and humility gave promise of a useful life, of a glorious race, and of a successful competition for the prize; but something has hindered. What is it? Is it the world, creature love, covetousness, ambition, presumptuous sin, unmortified corruption, the old leaven unpurged? *Search it out.* Rest not until it be discovered....You are not as you once were. Your soul has lost ground. The Divine life has declined, the fruit of the Spirit has withered, the heart has lost its softness, the conscience its tenderness, the mind its seclusion, the throne of grace its sweetness, the cross of Jesus its attraction. Oh, how sad and melancholy the change that has passed over you! And have you not the consciousness of it in your soul? Where is the blessedness ye spake of? Where is the sunlight countenance of a reconciled Father? Where are the rich moments spent before the cross?...Is it all gone? Is it winter with thy soul? Ah! Yes. Thy soul is made to feel that it is an evil and a bitter thing to depart from the living God. Yet there is hope.

The next step in the work of personal revival is to take the cause of the soul’s declension immediately to the throne of grace and lay it before the Lord. There must be no parleying⁴⁹ with it, no compromise, no concealment. There must be a full and unreserved disclosure before God without aught of palliation⁵⁰ or disguise. Let your sin be confessed in all its guilt, aggravation, and consequences. This is just what God loves—an open, ingenuous⁵¹ confession of sin. Searching and knowing, though He does, all hearts, He yet delights in the honest and minute acknowledgment of sin from His backsliding child. Language cannot be too humiliating; the detail cannot be too minute. Mark the stress He has laid upon this duty, and the blessing He has annexed to it. Thus He spake to the children of Israel, that wandering, backsliding, rebellious people: “If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they

⁴⁷ **reconversion** – turning back to a previous state. The author does not mean that a backslider must be “saved again” in the sense of being born again and justified a *second* time as some teach; he means that one must repent and turn back to God’s ways.

⁴⁸ **enfeebled** – made weak.

⁴⁹ **parleying** – discussing or negotiating.

⁵⁰ **palliation** – cloaking or concealing by excuses and apologies.

⁵¹ **ingenuous** – honest and direct.

trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land” (Lev 26:40-42). Truly may we exclaim, “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy” (Mic 7:18). This, too, was the blessed experience of David, God’s dear yet often backsliding child: “I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah” (Psa 32:5)...Nor is the promise of pardon annexed to confession of sin, unfolded with less clearness and consolatoriness⁵² in the New Testament writings: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jo 1:9). How full, then, the blessing, how rich the consolation connected with an honest, heartbroken confession of sin? How easy and how simple, too, this method of return to God! “Only acknowledge thine iniquity” (Jer 3:13). It is but a confession of sin over the head of Jesus, the great sacrifice for sin. O, what is this that God says? “Only acknowledge thine iniquity!” Is this all he requires of his poor wandering child? This is all! “Then,” may the poor soul exclaim, “Lord, I come to thee. I am a backslider, a wanderer, a prodigal. I have strayed from thee like a lost sheep. My love has waxed cold; my steps have slackened in the path of holy obedience. My mind has yielded to the corrupting, deadening influence of the world, and my affections have wandered in quest of other and earthly objects of delight. But, behold, I come unto thee. Dost thou invite me? Dost thou stretch out thy hand? Dost thou bid me approach thee? Dost thou say, ‘Only acknowledge thine iniquity?’ Then, Lord, I come. In the name of thy dear Son, I come; ‘Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.’ ”

The true posture of a returning soul is beautifully presented to view in the prophecy of Hosea 14:1, 2: “O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips.” Here are conviction, godly sorrow, humiliation, and confession, the essential elements of a true return to God...O blessed evidences! O lovely posture of a restored soul!

Essentially connected with the discovery and the confession, there must be the entire mortification and abandonment of the cause of the soul’s secret declension. Apart from this, there can be no true revival of the work of Divine grace in the heart. The true spiritual mortification of indwelling sin and the entire forsaking of the known cause, whatever it is found to be, of the heart’s declension, constitute the true elements of a believer’s restoration to the joys of God’s salvation. And when we speak of the mortification of sin, let not the nature of this sacred work be misunderstood. It has been in the case of many, why may it not in yours? There may exist all the surface marks of mortification, and still the heart remain a stranger to the work. An awakening sermon, an alarming providence, or a startling truth may for a moment arrest and agitate the backsliding soul. There may be an opening of the eyelid, a convulsive movement of the spiritual frame, which to a superficial observer may wear the appearance of a real return to consciousness, of a true waking up to new life and vigor of the slumbering soul. Yet these may be but the transient and fitful impulses of a sickly and a drowsy spirit. The means of grace, too, may be returned to—the secret declension felt, deplored and acknowledged, but the hidden cause remaining unmortified and unremoved, all appearance of recovery quickly and painfully subsides. It was but a transient, momentary shock, and all was still—the heavy eyelid but feebly opened and closed again, the “goodness” that promised so fair was but as the morning cloud and the early dew. And the reason is found in the fact *that there was no true mortification of sin...*until the hidden cause of decay be mortified, removed, and utterly extirpated,⁵³ the surface revival does but end in a profounder sleep and a more fearful deception of the soul. Again and yet again would we repeat it—*there cannot possibly be any true, spiritual, and abiding revival of grace in a believer, while secret sin remains undiscovered and unmortified in the heart.* True and spiritual mortification of sin is not a surface work. It consists not merely in pruning the dead tendrils that hang here and there upon the branch. It is not the lopping off of outward sins and an external observance of spiritual duties. It includes essentially far more than this: it is a laying the axe at the root of sin in the believer. It aims at nothing less than the complete subjection of the principle of sin. Until this is effectually done, there can be no true return of the heart to God.

Christian reader, what is the cause of thy soul’s secret declension? What is it that at this moment feeds upon the precious plant of grace, destroying its vigor, its beauty, and its fruitfulness? Is it an inordinate attachment to the creature? *Mortify it.* The love of self? *Mortify it.* The love of the world? *Mortify it.* Some sinful habit secretly indulged? *Mortify it.* It must be mortified, root as well as branch, if you would experience a thorough return to God. Dear though it be, as a right

⁵² **consolatoriness** – suitability to give comfort.

⁵³ **extirpated** – rooted out, exterminated, or totally destroyed.

hand, or as a right eye, if yet it comes between thy soul and God, if it crucifies Christ in thee, if it weakens faith, enfeebles grace, destroys the spirituality of the soul, rendering it barren and unfruitful, rest not short of its utter mortification.

Nor must this great work be undertaken in your own strength. It is preeminently the result of God the Holy Ghost working in and blessing the self-efforts of the believer: “But if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom 8:13b). Here is recognition of the believer’s own exertions in connection with the power of the Holy Ghost: “If ye (believers, ye saints of God) through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body.” It is the *work* of the believer himself, but the *power* is of the Spirit of God. Take then your discovered sin to the Spirit. That Spirit, bringing the cross of Jesus with a killing, crucifying power into your soul, giving you such a view of a Savior suffering for sin, as it may be you never had before, will in a moment lay your enemy slain at your feet! O yield not to despair, distressed soul! Art thou longing for a gracious revival of God’s work within thee? Art thou mourning in secret over thy heart-declension? Hast thou searched and discovered the hidden cause of thy decay? And is thy real desire for its mortification? Then look up, and hear the consolatory words of thy Lord: “I am the Lord that healeth thee” (Exo 15:26). The Lord is thy Healer; His love can restore thee; His blood can heal thee; His grace can subdue thy sin. “Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.” and the Lord will answer, “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him” (Hos 14:2, 4).

Endeavor to enrich and enlarge your mind with more spiritual apprehensions of the personal glory, love, and fullness of Christ. All soul declension arises from the admission of things into the mind contrary to the nature of indwelling grace. The world—its pleasures, its vanities, its cares, its varied temptations—these enter the mind, disguised in the shape often of lawful undertakings and duties and draw off the mind from God and the affections from Christ. These too weaken and deaden faith and love and every grace of the indwelling Spirit: they are the “foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes” (Song 2:15).

The world is a most hurtful snare to the child of God. It is impossible that he can maintain a close and holy walk with God, live as a pilgrim and a sojourner, wage a constant and successful warfare against his many spiritual foes, and at the same time open his heart to admit the greatest foe to grace—the love of the world. But when the mind is preoccupied by Christ, filled with contemplations of His glory and grace and love, no room is left for the entrance of external allurements: the world is shut out, and the creature is shut out, and the fascinations of sin are shut out; and the soul holds a constant and undisturbed fellowship with God, while it is enabled to maintain a more vigorous resistance to every external attack of the enemy. And O, how blessed is the soul’s communion, thus shut in with Jesus! “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20). “I would come in,” says the dear Lamb of God, “and dwell in you, and take up my abode with you, and sup with you and you with me.” This is true fellowship! And O, sweet response of His own Spirit in the heart, when the believing soul exclaims, “When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek” (Psa 27:8). “Enter, thou precious Jesus; I want none but Thee. I desire no company and would hear no voice but Thine; I will have fellowship with none but Thee; let me sup with Thee. Yea, give me Thine own flesh to eat and Thine own blood to drink.” Ah! dear Christian reader, it is because we have so little to do with Jesus—we admit Him so seldom and so reluctantly to our hearts, we have so few dealings with Him, travel so seldom to His blood and righteousness, and live so little upon His fullness—that we are compelled so often to exclaim, “My leanness, my leanness!” (Isa 24:16). But, if we be “risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Col 3:1), let us seek to know Christ more, to have more spiritual and enlarged comprehensions of His glory, to drink deeper into His love, to imbibe more of His Spirit, and conform more closely to His example.

But that which forms the great secret of all personal revival is yet to be disclosed: we allude to a fresh baptism⁵⁴ of the Holy Ghost. This a declining soul needs more than all beside. Possessing this in a large degree, he possesses every spiritual blessing: it includes and is the pledge of every other. Our dear Lord sought to impress this, His last consoling doctrine, upon the drooping minds of His disciples: His bodily presence in their midst, He taught them, was not to be compared with the spiritual and permanent dwelling of the Spirit among them. The descent of the Holy Ghost was to bring all things that He had taught them to their remembrance; it was to perfect them in their knowledge of the supreme glory of His person, the infinite perfection of His work, the nature and spirituality of His kingdom, and its ultimate and certain triumphs in the earth. The descent of the Spirit, too, was to mature them in personal holiness, and more eminently fit them for their arduous and successful labor in His cause by deepening their spirituality, enriching them with more grace, and enlarging them with more love. And fully did the baptism of the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost accomplish all this: the Apostles emerged from His influence like men who had passed through a state of re-conversion.

⁵⁴ **baptism of the Holy Ghost** – the author wrote before the advent of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. He means a fresh, renewing empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

And this is the state, dear reader, you must pass through, would you experience a revival of God's work in your soul: you must be reconverted, and that through a fresh baptism of the Holy Ghost. Nothing short of this will quicken your dying graces and melt your frozen love. Nothing save this will arrest your secret declension and restore your backsliding heart. You must be baptized afresh with the Spirit. That Spirit Whom you have so often and so deeply wounded, grieved, slighted, and quenched, must enter you anew, and seal, and sanctify, and reconvert you. O arise, and pray, and agonize for the outpouring of the Spirit upon your soul. Give up your lifeless religion, your form without the power, your prayer without communion, your confessions without brokenness, your zeal without love...

One word more: Be not surprised if the Lord should place you in circumstances of deep trial in order to recover you from your soul declension...if the sanctified trial works the recovery of your soul, the restoration to Christ of your wavering heart, the revival of His entire work within you, you shall adore Him for the discipline...“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept thy word...It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes!” (Psa 119:67, 71).

Lastly, set out afresh for God and heaven, as though you had never started in the way before. Commence at the beginning; go as a sinner to Jesus; seek the quickening, healing, sanctifying influence of the Spirit. Let this be your prayer, presented, and urged until answered at the footstool of mercy: “O Lord, revive thy work! Quicken me, O Lord! Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation!” In answer to thy petition, “He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth” (Psa 72:6); and thy song shall be that of the church, “My Beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song 2:10).

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FIVE WORDS OF HEALING

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

“I will heal their backsliding”—Hosea 14:4.

WE SHALL CALL YOUR ATTENTION FIRST to a word of humiliation—backsliding. The very sound of it ought to arouse our spirits, and the consciousness of having fallen into it should make us lay our mouths in their dust and confess that we are unclean. Backsliding is among God's people very common; not common perhaps in its highest degree, God forbid it should be! But in its earlier forms: from its commencement in backsliding, of thought and heart, on to backsliding in act, I fear the disease is so rife among the people of God that there is scarcely one of us who has not at some time or other suffered from it. And I fear that the most of us might confess if we judged our own hearts rightly, that in some measure we are backsliding even now. The proper condition for a child of God is walking in the light as Christ is in the light, and so having fellowship with Jesus. Our right condition, and our only safe standing is to abide in Him, and to have His words and Himself abiding in us. But too often we follow afar off; we are living in very limited and remote fellowship with our Redeemer. These things ought not so to be...

Think, beloved, each one of you who are Christ's, how much you may have backslidden of late. Have you not become lax in prayer? You maintain the habit of it, and you could not give that up, but you have not that power in prayer you once had. You still read the Word, but mayhap the Scripture is not so sweet to you as it was aforesaid. You come now to the communion table, you have not learned to forsake the assembling of yourselves together there. But oh, the face of the King in His beauty, have you seen that as once you did? Perhaps you still are doing a little for His cause, but are you doing what you once did or all you might do? Instead of going on unto perfection, is not your growth stunted? Must you not confess that you are not a runner towards heaven so much as a loiterer in the road thither? Do these accusations evoke no confessions? I fear the most of us, if we came to search, would have to say, “I do remember when the love of my espousals was upon me, and my heart was warm with love to Christ; but now, alas! How slow are my passions in moving towards Him! O that I could feel once again the glow of my first love, and that my spirit did rejoice in Him as on the day of my conversion.”

I ask you, brethren, if you have to make such acknowledgments, whether you would have believed such things of yourselves when you first came to Christ? If a prophet had told me that I should be so ungrateful to the dear Lover of my

soul, I should have said, “Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?” Bought with His precious blood, and delivered from going down to the pit in those younger days of our attachment, we thought we should evermore closer and closer cleave to our Deliverer. No sacrifice appeared too great, no duty too irksome, if Jesus did but command. Yes, we have sorrowfully failed in many respects and had need with deepest heart-sorrow [to] confess our backsliding and bemoan ourselves before God...

The next word, which we shall consider, is a word of consolation — *heal*. There is consolation in the very fact that the Lord here looks upon the grievous sin of backsliding under the image of a disease. It is not said, “I will pardon their backsliding,” that is included in the term, but “I will heal” it—as though He said, “My poor people, I do remember that they are but dust. They are liable to a thousand temptations through the fall, and they soon go astray; but I will not treat them as though they were rebels, I will look upon them as patients, and they shall look upon Me as a physician.” Why, there is consolation in that very fact, that God should condescend, for Jesus’ sake, thus to look upon our loathsome, abominable, ill-deserving, hell-deserving sin, as being, not so much a condemning iniquity in His sight, as a disease upon which He looks, pitying us that we should endure the power of it.

Then observe, having looked at backsliding as a disease, He does not say, “I will put this diseased one away.” Under the legal dispensation, he who had leprosy or any contagious disease must be put without the camp, but it is not here said, “I will banish them for their backsliding.” O my dear friends, if we had been put out of God’s church, if we had never been suffered again to come to His Table, we confess we have richly deserved to have it so; but it is not so written here. It is not, “I will put them in quarantine. I will expel them out of the goodly land and from amongst My people.” No, but, “I will heal their backsliding.” Much less does He say, “I will destroy them because of their backsliding.” Some will have it that God’s people may sin, partially and finally, so as never to be the Lord’s beloved again: they sin themselves out of the covenant. But we have not so learned Christ, neither have we so understood the Fatherhood of our God...

The next is a word of majesty. It is the first word of the text—I. It is Jehovah Himself Who here speaks, the Omnipotent to Whom nothing is difficult, the All-wise, to Whom nothing is secret. He has not promised that their backsliding shall be healed by unknown means, but that He Himself will heal it. Suppose He had said, “I will let them alone, and see to what their backsliding will turn. It may be perhaps after a period it will work out all its venom, and the wound will be cured.” No, my brethren, had we been left to ourselves, our wounds have become corrupt, and our spirit would have perished utterly. We have gone astray like lost sheep, and one of the ways in which lost sheep go astray is this: they never think of returning. The shepherd must seek them, or else they will wander further and further from home.

Note well that the Lord does not say in the text, “My Word shall heal their backsliding,” or, “I will send My minister to heal their backsliding.” He graciously uses His Word. It is His ordained means of blessing His people. And He condescendingly employs His ministers, unworthy though they be, to do much service for His children. But after all, it is neither the Word nor the minister that can do anything. Only when the Lord puts His hand to the work is it done effectually....Just as Jesus Himself going among the sick folk scattered healing here and there and made yonder lame man leap as a hart, and yonder dumb tongue to sing, opened blind eyes, drove out fevers, and chased away devils, even so it is *Thy touch*, Immanuel, it is *Thy presence*, Thou Savior of sinners, that doth heal us of all our sins. He Himself took our sicknesses, and hence He knows how to deliver us from them. Is not His name *Jehovah-Rophi*—“the Lord that healeth thee”? And hath He not said, “And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity” (Isa 33:24)? It is Jehovah that saith it; rest assured the work *will* be done. Hath He said, and shall He not do it? It is Jehovah that saith it. Then, however desperate our soul-sickness, it shall be recovered; for is anything too hard for the Lord? “*I will heal their backsliding.*” Blessed be His name!

When you and I feel our backsliding, if it had been said that the backsliding should be healed by any ordinary means, we should have replied, “Not mine! Nay, Lord, mine is a case beyond all others, hopeless, helpless, incurable.” But when it is said, “*I will heal,*” how it takes away all power to be unbelieving! For what cannot the Lord do? What diseases cannot He chase away? He can speak even to the dead and make them live. Therefore, let us have hope in Him, for however far we may have gone, and however broken our heart may be concerning it, *He* can bind up all our wounds and make each broken bone to sing. This shall be the song, “Lord, who is like unto Thee, passing by transgression, iniquity, and sin, and remembering not the backslidings of Thy people?”

Another word is in the text, which I shall venture to lift up out of the background in which it dwells ordinarily. Here is a word of certainty—I will. But why *will* He heal? Why does He say so positively that He *will*? Here is no “perhaps,” no “peradventure.” The men of Nineveh went to God with nothing to encourage them, but “who can tell?” (Jon 3:9). But the children of God come to Him with *shalls* and *wills* to plead. I pray thee, backslider, if thou desirest to return to the Lord this morning, observe the certainty of the text, and plead it! God Who saith, “I will,” is not a man that He

should lie, nor the son of man that He should repent (Num 23:19). If *He* saith, “I will,” do *thou* say, “Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope” (Psa 119:49). But why *will* God heal His people?

He will because He has assumed the office of physician, and for a physician to fail in his attempts reflects upon him no honor. Every patient that the physician loses is so much loss to the fame of his skill. “I *will* heal their backsliding,” saith He. “I have undertaken to save them, and I will go through with it. I have made with them in Christ a covenant, ordered in all things and sure, and I will not suffer one of these my little ones to perish, and I will heal their backsliding.” Are they not His children? Now, if a physician failed to exercise his skill on a stranger, yet surely not upon his own child. There is nothing in the whole compass of pharmacy that the child should not have, there is nothing in all the art of surgery, which the surgeon would not exercise upon his own beloved child if he hath need of it. Of *all* His children the divine Father saith, “I *will* heal their backsliding.”

Beloved, we have cost our God too dear for Him to suffer us to perish; and perish we must without healing. Therefore, He *will* heal us. On every child of God, the Father sees the marks of the Redeemer’s blood. Every heir of heaven carries about with him mementos that touch the Father’s soul, for He remembers well the bloody sweat of Gethsemane and the groans and cries of the Well-beloved. Ye who believe in Jesus cost too much: He cannot let you die. The Lord has loved you too long to let you perish, for before the foundation of the world His heart went out towards His chosen. From of old, His delights were with the sons of men. Ere you were fashioned and curiously wrought in the lower parts of the earth, you lived in the heart of God and lay upon the bosom of your Redeemer with Whom even then you were accounted as one in the covenant of grace....“No disease shall slay them, no sin shall fester in them so as to destroy them. *I, Jehovah, Who have chosen them, Who have redeemed them and called them by My grace, I will heal them.*” Heaven and earth may pass away, but this word shall not pass away. Oh, the blessed certainty of the divine word!

There is yet a fifth word in the text, and that is a word of personality—their. He is speaking of Israel, His own peculiar people, His own elect ones. Himself shall and will heal *them*. He will not suffer *one* of them so to become sick with sin that sin-sickness shall be fatal to them. That we may know whether we share in this promise we may judge from other words, which precede the text. Those of whom He spoke were willing to come to Him and say, “Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously” (Hos 14:2). If there be any man here who desireth to be forgiven for Christ’s name’s sake because of the free grace of God; if there be any here bemoaning his iniquity and desirous to return unto his God; if there be any soul who now sincerely closes in with God’s way of salvation and would fain find deliverance from every sin, such a man may be assured that he is one of those of whom God hath said, “I will heal *their* backsliding.” Dost thou hate *thy* backsliding? Do your sins pain *you*; have they become a very plague to *your* heart? Oh! Then He will heal *your* backslidings. Are you earnest in prayer? Do you cry out that He would have pity upon you? Can you weep the penitential tear?...If so, He that breaks hearts always means to heal them. He never yet did give a wounded and a contrite spirit, but what He was sure ere long to bring to it a better balm than Gilead ever knew, and to let the blood of Jesus speak better things than that of Abel, even peace eternally within that wounded spirit. “*Their* backsliding”—take the word and turn it to the singular and make it in the first person. Say, “Lord, heal *my* backslidings!”

From *Backsliding Healed* reprinted by Pilgrim Publications.

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892): Influential Baptist minister in England. History’s most widely read preacher (apart from those found in Scripture). Today, there is available more material written by Spurgeon than by any other Christian author, living or dead. Born at Kelvedon, Essex, England.

THE BACKSLIDER’S RETURN

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

“Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins”—James 5:20.

PARTICULAR ATTENTION OUGHT TO BE PAID to backsliders; for in bringing backsliders into the church there is as much honor to God as in bringing in sinners. “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him” (Jam 5:19).

Alas! The poor backslider is often the most forgotten. A member of the church has disgraced his profession, the church excommunicated him, and he was accounted “a heathen man and a publican” (Mat 18:17). I know of men of good standing in the Gospel ministry, who, ten years ago, fell into sin; and that is thrown in our teeth to this very day. Do you speak of them? You are at once informed, “Why, ten years ago they did so-and-so.” Brethren, Christian men ought to be ashamed of themselves for taking notice of such things so long afterwards. True, we may use more caution in our dealings. But to reproach a fallen brother for what he did so long ago is contrary to the spirit of John, who went after Peter, three days after he had denied his Master with oaths and curses.

Nowadays it is the fashion, if a man falls, to have nothing to do with him. Men say, “He is a bad fellow; we will not go after him.” Beloved, suppose he is the worst, is not that the reason why you should go most after him? Suppose he never was a child of God—suppose he never knew the truth—is not that the greater reason why you *should* go after him? I do not understand your mawkish⁵⁵ modesty, your excessive pride that won’t let you after the chief of sinners. The worse the case, the more is the reason why we should go. But suppose the man is a child of God, and you have cast him off—remember, he is your brother. He is one with Christ as much as you are. He is justified; he has the same righteousness that you have. And if, when he has sinned you despise him, in that you despise him, you despise his Master. Take heed! Thou thyself mayest be tempted and mayest one day fall. Like David, thou mayest walk on the top of thine house rather too high, and thou mayest see something which shall bring thee to sin. Then what wilt thou say, if then the brethren pass thee by with a sneer and take no notice of thee?

Oh! If we have one backslider connected with our church, let us take special care of him. Don’t deal hardly with him. Recollect you would have been a backslider too, if it were not for the grace of God. I advise you, whenever you see professors living in sin to be very shy of them. But if after a time, you see any sign of repentance, or if you do not, go and seek out the lost sheep of the house of Israel. For remember, that if one of you do err from the truth, and one convert him, let him remember that “he who converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

Poor backslider, thou wast once a Christian. Dost thou hope thou wast? “No,” sayest thou, “I believe I deceived myself and others. I was no child of God.” Well, if thou didst, let me tell thee that if thou wilt acknowledge that, God will forgive thee. Suppose you did deceive the church, though art not the first that did it. There are some members of this church, I fear, who have done so, and we have not found them out. I tell you your case is not hopeless. That is not the unpardonable sin. Some who have tried to deceive the very elect have yet been delivered; and my Master says He is able to save to the uttermost (and ye have not gone beyond the uttermost) all who come unto Him. Come thou, then, to His feet; cast thyself on His mercy; and though thou didst once enter his camp as a spy, He will not hang thee up for it, but will be glad to get thee anyhow as a trophy of mercy. But if thou was a child of God and canst say honestly, “I know I did love Him, and He loved me,” I tell thee He loves thee still. If thou hast gone ever so far astray, thou art as much His child as ever. Though thou hast run away from thy Father, come back, come back, He is thy Father still. Think not He has unsheathed the sword to slay thee. Say not, “He has cast me out of the family.” He has not. His bowels yearn over thee now. My Father loves thee; come then to His feet, and He will not even remind thee of what thou hast done....Come back and thy Father will receive thee gladly. He will put His arms around thee and kiss thee with the kisses of His love, and He will say, “I have found this My son that was lost; I have recovered this sheep that had gone astray.” My Father loved thee without works, He justified thee irrespective of them; thou hast no less merit now than thou hadst then. Come, trust, and believe in Him.

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⁵⁵ mawkish – lacking in robustness.