

Backsliding, a Question of Grave Concern

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (Isa. 1:2-4).

What is a backslider? Briefly, he is one who has gone backward instead of forward. Religiously, he is one who once knew the Lord, but who has now forsaken Him; he is one who has gone back into the ways of the world; he is one who has lost the zeal and interest that characterized his life immediately following his conversion.

The Hebrews were guilty of backsliding, and Paul asked them to "call to remembrance the former days" and the zeal for God and spiritual things that they possessed in those days (Heb. 10:32).

Not enough attention is given to this matter of backsliding today. Converts should be instructed concerning the sin of backsliding. Sermons should be preached that show that backsliding is incompatible with the Bible doctrines of baptism, sanctification, faith, spiritual growth, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, love for God, and obedience to His will. Pulpits should ring out with warnings about backsliding. Fervent prayers should ascend, and intense effort should be put forth to restore backsliders to the Lord. To all spiritually minded people, to gospel preachers and Bible elders, and to God Himself, backsliding is a question of grave concern.

I. The Possibility of Backsliding Makes it a Question of Grave Concern.

Some people say that a genuine Christian can never backslide. If someone appears to be a backslider, they say that he was never actually converted. Their contention is based upon a misinterpretation of certain verses in I John.

But, the Bible shows that a Christian can backslide. The devil is still on the loose. Peter writes to Christians and admonishes them to be on guard against the devil, for he is seeking their destruction (I Pet. 5:8,9). If they cannot backslide, what is the point of the warning? During their forty years in the wilderness, the children of Israel fell into the sins of idolatry, fornication, and murmuring against God. When Paul wrote to Christians and told them of the way that God punished Israel for those sins, he said, "Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition (warning)" (I Cor. 10:11). "Wherefore," Paul concluded, "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). In the Hebrew letter, Paul plainly warned the brethren, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God" (Heb. 3:12). Why would anybody say that it is impossible for Christians to backslide when the Bible speaks so clearly to the contrary?

Many examples of truly converted, born-again people who have backslidden into sin could be cited to show that backsliding is possible. I am thinking of a man in a city in Missouri where I preached during the first years of my ministry. He had been a terrible drunkard and gambler primarily because, as a traveling salesman, he was away from home so often and with the wrong crowd. But, he was converted to Christ and became a truly new creature. How he would weep as he would tell me of those days when he broke the heart of God! He was always present, prayer-meeting night and all, with his Bible and friendly handshake. But, his wife who was supposed to be a Christian, objected to his giving a tithe and an offering to the Lord's work. After a couple of years of such nagging, this man finally gave up, and the last that I heard, he was back in the

world just like he once was. Yes, people who have been converted CAN backslide. Countless existing cases prove it!

As long as it is possible to develop the deadly disease of cancer, cancer will always be the question of grave concern in the medical world that it is today. And as long as it is possible for Christians to backslide, backsliding will always be a question of grave concern in Christianity.

II. The Tendency to Backslide Makes it a Question of Grave Concern.

It is not only possible for one to backslide, but there is actually a strong tendency among people to backslide. Simon of Samaria had believed and been baptized, but almost immediately, the old "Big I" idea returned, and Peter had to command him to repent (Acts 8:13-24).

A garden that is neglected becomes weed-infested and is not productive. Lives that are neglected and are not given careful attention have the tendency to backslide. Congregations that are neglected become sin-infested and bear little fruit for God. Ever so many accept Christ in all sincerity, but if they are not given spiritual attention, most of them will turn out to be backsliders.

Do you realize that those who are praying today may be negligent in the days ahead? Do you realize that those who today are out in soul winning work, laboring to win others to Christ, may need someone to restore them to Christ in the future? Do you realize that those who today are strong in the Lord may be weak in another year? Do you realize that those who now are on fire for Christ may be smouldered down to a bare flame in another year? Well, that is altogether likely in many cases. How many times I have marveled at how fast the devil can get his job done! Let us realize that the Bible backs us up in this fact of the backsliding tendency. In Gal. 6:1, Paul said, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." Yes, those who today are spiritual and who restore others to Christ may likewise be tempted themselves

and need someone to restore them to Christ in the future.

Though the Old and New Covenants may differ in nature and in requirements, yet human nature and tendencies are the same under both. Look at Israel's backsliding tendency. They had hardly been delivered from Egyptian bondage until they reverted to idolatry in worshipping the golden calf. They hadn't even reached the promised land until they committed fornication with the Moabitish women, murmured against God, and became guilty of disbelieving God. When the new generation entered Canaan, they soon forgot Jehovah because of material prosperity and idolatry.

Any evangelist who is constantly in revival and evangelistic meetings will tell you how his heart has been broken time after time upon returning to places where he has conducted good meetings to find that the elders and members have let new converts drift back into the world and have let the congregations get into terrible messes once more. I am thinking of a rural congregation where I have conducted two such meetings. It is in the north country where the winters are severe, and the entire community had nothing but dirt roads in those days. Most of the families lived considerable distances from the church building. During the severe winter months, the roads would get blocked with snow, and no services would be conducted for several Sundays. Then, the weather would break up, but the attendance would be small. It was there that I conducted my very first revival meeting. It was in the summer time, and we had a good meeting. The people took hold of the work in an encouraging way. It looked like great days were ahead. But, winter came, and things closed down for a short while. The brethren contacted me the next spring to see if I could come and get them back on their feet. The meeting that summer started small, but the crowds came, and something like twenty-five were baptized. I taught those folks the best that I could. I told them that they couldn't allow a single Sunday during the winter to go by without having services. They determined and promised to keep the work going in a fine way. I felt confident that it would be different than it had been before. But, right there in the very beginning of my ministry, I learned the lesson that every servant of the Lord needs to learn; this is, that there is a strong

tendency in people to backslide. It was not possible for me to stay on with the work there following the meeting, which I would like to have done. But, I am sorry to say that little by little, bad things began to happen there, and within three years from that time, the entire congregation disbanded, and at this writing, there is not a religious service of any kind in that community where once they gathered a hundred strong.

Yes, brethren, the tendency is to backslide. We must watch our own lives. We must watch the lives of new converts. We must not neglect congregations.

III. The Prevalency of Backsliding Makes it a Question of Deep Concern.

Go into the average community and ask for the “membership list” of the congregations, and you will find that more have backslidden and are now inactive than have stayed true to God as they all started out to do. Check the church records where you attend and get the names of those who have been added to the congregation during the last five years. Then, see how many of them are now unfaithful. If your investigation reveals what such an investigation would reveal in the average congregation, I say that you cannot help but see that backsliding is a very prevalent sin today.

Because of backsliding, congregations are not ready in the early part of a special meeting to launch out to win souls to Christ. In every meeting, it seems that there must be considerable time spent trying to get the congregation back into line with God and to get the members warmed up for God before there can be many lost sinners brought to Christ. Oh, I say, and I say it truthfully, backsliding is a present-day menace to Christianity!

When church people move into another community, many of them do not look up the church. They will change their mailing address, get a job, look up the grocery store, and send their children to school, but they will neglect their church life. They try to excuse themselves by saying that everybody is strange, or they don't know where to go, or it wouldn't seem like “church” because it wouldn't

be the old home church. So, they just drift downstream spiritually and soon forget God altogether.

I well remember the first teacher that I had at church when I was just a little fellow. (My parents always took the whole family to the church services; I started my church attendance when I was three weeks old and have never been absent since, except for the few Sundays of sickness scattered throughout the years.) I suppose that I was about four years old when I can remember this teacher teaching us stories about Jesus, David, Daniel, and others. But, when I had grown to high school age, this woman chaperoned the Friday night young people's dance in town. The preacher who preached to the congregation when I was in high school got mixed up with one of the women in the very next congregation where he preached and had to leave town in a hurry. The day that I was baptized, there were eleven others baptized also. But, the only two persons of the eleven who today even as much as attend church services have fallen for the feminine fad of smoking.

Oh, I know that backsliding is prevalent today! It is affecting preachers, elders, deacons, newly converted people, and longtime members of the church. This makes it a matter of grave concern.

God has always been gravely concerned over backsliding. When Israel backslid, He sent the prophets to plead with them to return to God. Simon of Samaria had no sooner sinned than Peter dealt with the backslidden condition of his heart. When Peter himself sinned down at Antioch, Paul dealt with him immediately. Brethren, God is vitally concerned about this matter of backsliding, and if Christ dwells in our hearts, and if we think as God thinks, we too will be gravely concerned about this great question.

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words tell what a backslider is.
2. Give two Biblical reasons for believing a Christian can backslide.
3. How do some people reason who deny the possibility of a

Christian's backsliding?

4. What convert in New Testament times soon backslid?
5. Tell of Israel's backsliding experiences even before they entered Canaan.

The Backslider is the Loser

"Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe unto the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:38,39).

The backslider is a heavy loser. He may try to "put on" as if everything were rosy with him. But, the truth of the matter is, he is a loser from every standpoint. We are going to consider exactly what a backslider loses. If you know that you are a backslider, won't you consider each point that is made? You will see what you are missing each day, and you will see what eternity holds for you.

I. A Backslider Loses the Favor of God, the Fellowship of God, and the Special Blessings of God.

God has never been pleased with a disobedient person. God says, "If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him," or "my soul shall not be pleased with him." God will not fellowship a sinning person. "The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is AGAINST them that do evil" (I Pet. 3:12). As light has no fellowship with darkness, so God has no fellowship with men who sin. A holy God cannot fellowship an unholy person. Therefore, a backslider loses that close, warm fellowship with the heavenly Father. Though

he may kneel to pray, God's face is against him, and He will not hear. He no longer knows the joy of walking with the Lord and doing His will. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing, following his baptism (Acts 8:39), but if he ever backslid, he lost that joy. All of the special providential blessings that God promises to His people have completely vanished from the backslider, for God will not grant special blessings to the wicked. God promises to add all good and necessary things to those who seek the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness first (Matt. 6:33).

Notice the backslider, and you will see that his countenance shows him to be a backslider. I remember a Christian young lady, who let the devil slip up upon her and get her entangled in a courtship with a man who didn't even believe in God. I wrote her prior to their marriage, showing her that God forbid her to be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever and warning her of the dismal life that she was walking into. But, she married the man anyway, although not taking any personal offence toward me for my letter. Two years later, while in the city where she lived, I called on her. After learning from her that she did not attend church services and after seeing spiritual neglect written all over her life, as she rocked on her knee a little son who looked exactly like his atheist father, I said, "Tell me, have you ever regretted at any time that you married against the teaching of God's Word?" Then, with tears welling up in her eyes, she said, "Donald, I have regretted it many a time." As I looked at her in her grief, I could see that she realized that she had lost the favor of God, the fellowship of God, and the special blessings of God. What a loss for a heart to suffer.

II. A Backslider Loses the Fellowship of His Brethren in Christ.

While some who are backsliders in heart still keep on attending church services, yet the usual thing for a backslider to do is just quit the church altogether. He turns his back upon the worshipful gathering of the saints. He is not there to sing the praises of God with his brothers and sisters in Christ. He is absent when the

brethren bow together in prayer before the heavenly Father. He is not there to study God's Word with other children of God. He is not invited home with a good Christian family for Sunday dinner, for he is keeping company with an altogether different crowd. How heavy his heart must feel at times when he hears the church bell ringing and recalls the sweet times of the past when he was in the fellowship of the church! In the place of the Christian fellowship that he once enjoyed, if he has any fellowship at all now, it is with the world and the worldly crowd. What a terrible and unsatisfying fellowship sin offers him in place of the wholesome fellowship that he has lost through backsliding!

III. A Backslider Loses His Name, His Respect, and His Influence for Christ.

Just let a Christian become entangled in sin, and he will become the talk of the town. People call him a hypocrite, and people have little respect for him. The influence that he once had for Christ is now completely shattered. If he tries to correct anybody's sin, he is always told to go home and clean his own house before he tries to clean anybody else's. His very life is a disgrace to Christ, for it holds Christ up to open shame and ridicule.

I am thinking of a woman who had a bad case of pride. She thought that she was just a little bit better than anybody else, although she was always putting on "affected" humility. For the most part, people had little confidence in her Christianity. Although she talked to people about their souls, people laughed to her back at her invitations. They said that she ought to go home and patch up the hard feelings with her relatives and with her neighbors with whom she was not on speaking terms. Oh, how despicable a backslider is in the eyes of men!

IV. A Backslider Loses His Salvation if He Dies in that Condition.

Those who advocate the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" teach that though backsliding is a sin, yet it is not soul-damning. Their reasoning is that if he was once saved, he can never be lost, no matter what he does. But, that is not the teaching of the Bible. The Bible teaches that if a man dies as a backslider, he is as lost as a sinner who has never accepted Christ.

Heb. 10:39 says that those who draw back, draw back unto perdition. That word "perdition" means "perishing". Thus, those who draw back perish. "Perish" is the word used in John 3:16 to distinguish the lost from those who have eternal life. Though Simon of Samaria had believed and been baptized, when pride overtook him and caused him to sin by offering Peter money for the power to bestow the Holy Spirit upon others, Peter said to him, "Thy money PERISH WITH THEE. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter" (Acts 8:20,21). Notice that Simon was in a perishing condition. Jesus pictured Himself as the vine and His disciples as the branches. Jesus said, "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6). A disciple either abides in Christ, or he does not abide in Christ. If he abides in Christ, he will bear fruit, but if he does not abide in Christ, he will be cut off and burned. Read the whole passage, John 15:1-6, and you will surely see that a disciple who is not faithful to Christ does not have salvation. According to Peter, if one has come to know Christ and has been delivered from his sins, but returns to them, his latter end is worse than his original state (II Pet. 2:20). Isn't a man lost before he accepts Christ? Well, the backslider is in a worse condition than an alien sinner—Peter says so. Both are lost, but the backslider is in an even worse condition, for an alien sinner is more likely to accept Christ than a backslider is to return to Christ. God sees a backslider as repulsive as a sow that was washed that goes back to her wallowing in the mire and as a dog that returns to eat his vomit (II Pet. 2:20-22).

Brother, listen! If you go back into sin and die out of

fellowship with God, it matters not if you have been baptized; it matters not how faithful a Christian you were at one time; it matters not how many souls you have won to Christ or how many sermons you have preached. If you die in your sins as a backslider, then, my brother, according to the Word of God, you are headed as straight for hell as any Christ-rejecting sinner now living. What a loss a backslider receives when he loses his eternal soul!

As we consider the backslider's losses, we see that he actually loses everything good in this life, he loses Christ in the hour of death, and he will lost heaven in eternity. What tremendous losses to suffer and how foolish to suffer them when we know that "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (I Tim. 4:8).

QUESTIONS

1. Prove that a backslider loses his salvation.
2. Comment upon what else he loses from God.
3. What are some of the blessings of Christian fellowship that he loses?
4. What about a backslider's reputation and influence in the community?
5. What else does a backslider lose?
6. What do you think about the wisdom of backsliding?

Indications of a Backslidden Heart

“Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God” (Acts 8:21).

The trouble with backsliders, like all other sinners, is their hearts. Jesus said that “out of the heart” come forth all kinds of evil (Matt. 15:19), and James tells us that a man is “drawn away of his own lust and enticed” (Jas. 1:14). In other words, as a man thinketh “in his heart”, so does his life follow (Prov. 23:7). Therefore, men backslide in their lives because they are backsliders in their hearts. Prov. 14:14 shows that men backslide in their hearts first, then follow with their lives: “The backslider IN HEART shall be filled with his own ways.” When Simon of Samaria sinned after his conversion, our text points out where the difficulty was—Peter said, “Thy HEART is not right in the sight of God.” As v. 22 shows, it was the “thought of his heart” that was wrong and that needed God’s forgiveness.

As long as men can be hypocritical (purposely concealing their hearts by pious outward conduct), there will always be more actual backsliders than we count. Of course, looking upon the outward appearances, we can observe backslidden lives, but God, who is able to look upon the heart, is able to detect the backslidden hearts of many others who have fooled us with their pious, religious fronts. This was evident in the case of the Pharisees. Of them, Jesus said, “Even so ye also OUTWARDLY appear righteous UNTO MEN, but WITHIN ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity” (Matt. 23:28). Therefore, let us realize that there are far more backsliders in the eyes of God than we realize. It is altogether possible that some of you now reading these lines are righteous outwardly as far as men are concerned, but you may be backsliders in your hearts before the ALL-SEEING and NEVER-DECEIVED eye of God!

I am convinced that many people who are backslidden in their hearts try to hang onto Christ and Christianity outwardly. I mean that

they are not right with God, but they continue to attend church services, to give, to study, and to pray. They attend, but there is little heart-hunger. They give, but merely because they are supposed to. They study the lesson for next Sunday, but they do not feast upon the Word of God. They pray, but their prayers are from their lips and not their hearts.

I am thinking of a lady in an Iowa congregation who bore some of these very indications of a backslidden heart. She was always present; she had her Bible with her; she prayed at the prayer service as usual—her life outwardly did not reveal the fact of backsliding to the average person in the church. But, I came to fear that something was wrong on the inside, on which God alone could look. Something was at work unbeknown to the average person. Her heart was becoming backslidden. In time, her backslidden condition was apparent to all. Hanging on outwardly while the inside is cold and dead is just a slow way to a backslidden life. God saw what was happening all the time.

Since the devil is on our trail, and since we have seen that the tendency is to backslide, it behooves all of us to know what some of the indications of a backslidden heart are, else backsliding will overtake us, and all that is written in the Bible against backsliding will apply to us. We are listing certain signs that should alarm us if we detect them in our hearts, for they are indications of a backslidden heart. Search your own heart carefully with EACH one to see if you may be guilty of a backslidden heart.

1. When we become content with our spiritual growth as it is.
2. When we lose our hunger and thirst for the things of God.
3. When we think that the Bible is dry.
4. When we get our eyes fixed upon money and the things that money will buy.
5. When it takes much preaching and urging to get us to do something for Jesus.
6. When we are ashamed of Jesus in the presence of sinners.
7. When we pray without being greatly burdened about our petitions.
8. When we worry instead of committing our way unto the Lord in

prayerful trust.

9. When we grow weary in well doing.
10. When we preach or teach without seeking God's help.
11. When we are not desperately concerned over the unsaved condition of our neighbors and friends and are not trying to win them to Jesus.
12. When we do not have a vision of what we can do for Jesus.
13. When we do not show the spiritual concern over our own soul's condition that others are showing in it.
14. When we do not care to be with spiritual people and talk about spiritual things.
15. When we are tempted to short-change God in our giving, our prayer time, and our service
16. When we are afraid that gospel preaching is going to "drive people away".
17. When we do not like preaching that unsettles us by convicting our consciences.
18. When the most pleasing part of the church service is the closing song and dismissal.
19. When we can sing gospel songs without thinking about the message of the songs.
20. When we can partake of the Lord's supper without thinking of the sufferings of Jesus.
21. When we want the church to be more social and less spiritual in its program.
22. When we have a hard time keeping our minds on what we are reading in the Bible or on what we are hearing in the sermon.
23. When somebody becomes distasteful in our eyes because of his or her spirituality.
24. When we do not fear our temptations.
25. When we see "little" sins cropping out without being alarmed.
26. When we hate to see the revival meeting begin just at the time that we had planned to do something else.
27. When we do not yearn for heaven nor hope for the second coming of Christ.
28. When we can find an excuse for not doing what we should do.

29. When it is easier to see the shortcomings in others than in ourselves.

30. Maybe that very thought that is in your heart right NOW.

If you are a backslider in heart, face the fact and do something about it. By all means, do not try to cover up your backslidden heart except in the blood of Jesus that is able to wash away all sins. Won't you "keep your heart with all diligence", realizing that "out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23)?

QUESTIONS

1. Men recognize backsliders by their lives; God recognized them first by their _____.
2. List as many of the 30 indications of a backslidden heart as you can.
3. Which ones have you noticed in people the most?
4. What are some other indications that you might personally add?
5. What Bible character was told that his backslidden heart was not right before God?