

Doctrine of the Backslider

1. To “*backslide*” is to revert to sin or wrongdoing. It is to lapse morally or in the practice of religion.
2. Most often backsliding has reference to the lapse of the nation of Israel into paganism and idolatry.
3. The term “*backslider*” is found in only three Old Testament books: Proverbs, Jeremiah, and Hosea.
4. The word “*backsliding*” in all of its forms is used only 17 times in *Scripture*. In each instance a spiritual truth is taught.
 - **The essence of backsliding is selfishness.** *Prov. 14:14 The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways: and a good man shall be satisfied from himself.*
 - **One reason why God allows backsliding is to produce conviction of sin and personal accountability.** *Jer 2:19 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.*
 - **So holy is God that backsliding is expressed in terms of astonishment.** *Jer 3:6 The LORD said also unto me in the days of Josiah the king, Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? She is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot.*
 - **Because of her backsliding God decided to divorce Israel.** *Jer 3:8 And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also.*
 - **Despite the severe dealing of God with the northern kingdom of Israel the southern kingdom of Judah continued to act treacherously before God.** So great became the sin of Judah that Israel was made to look righteous by comparison. *Jer 3:11 And the LORD said unto me, The backsliding Israel hath justified herself more than treacherous Judah.*
 - **God call unto those who are backsliding to repent and receive His mercy and grace.** *Jer 3:12 Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the LORD, and I will not keep anger forever. Jer 3:14 Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion: Jer 3:22 Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God.*

- **Part of the judgment of God upon those who backslide is an increase in natural evil.** *Jer 5:6 Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased.*
- **Two distinct characteristic of a backslider are persistency in evil and deceit.** *Jer 8:5 Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast deceit, they refuse to return.*
- **It is a precious moment when God grants repentance of this sin and open confession is made.** *Jer 14:7 O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backsliding are many; we have sinned against thee.*
- **God asks specifically how long the heart intends to persist in rebellion for such is the essence of backsliding?** *Jer 31:22 How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? For the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man.*
- **The heart of a backslider finds a perverse glory in the activities engaged.** *Jer 49:4 Wherefore gloriest thou in the valleys, thy flowing valley, O backsliding daughter? That trusted in her treasures, saying, Who shall come unto me?*
- **Those who will not cease to sin discover that cannot cease from sinning. The strength of sin is such that it is compared to a heifer sliding back from a forward pull.** *Hosea 4:16 For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer: now the LORD will feed them as a lamb in a large place. Hosea 11:7 And my people are bent to backsliding from me: though they called them to the most High, none at all would exalt him.*
- *Hosea 14:4 I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him.*

5. The Hebrew words for backslider is:

- In Jeremiah 3:6 there is the word *meshuwbah* (mesh-oo-baw), which refers to apostasy.
- There is the word *suwg* (soog) in Proverbs 14:14 which is from a primitive root meaning properly to flinch, i.e. and so by implication to go back, literally (to retreat) or figuratively (to apostatize).
- There is the word *showab* (sho-bawh) which is used in Jeremiah 3:14. The word means to be an apostate, i.e. idolatrous.

- In Jeremiah 31:22 there is the word *showbeb* (sho-babe') which has reference to an apostate, i.e., heathenish or (actually heathen). *Jeremiah 31:22 How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? for the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man.*
 - There is the word *sarar* (saw-rar') in Hosea 4:16 which refers to a primitive root; to be torn away, i.e. (morally) be refractory. *Hosea 4:16 For Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer: now the LORD will feed them as a lamb in a large place.*
5. The backslider is considered by God to be an apostate and an apostate does not have eternal life. An apostate has never had eternal life even though there has been a measure of gospel light. Like a dog returning to his vomit, like a pig returning to his wallowing in the mud, the backslider, the apostate, the wolf in sheep clothing will show his true nature with the passing of time.
 6. By the grace of God a backslider can enjoy a genuine conversion experience by turning to God according to gospel terms.
 7. It is a false assurance of salvation for a person to believe that he can live as a backslider and still go to heaven.

A Simple Gospel Sermon on Repentance

There was once a term frequently used in the church. In the old days it was used often. You rarely ever hear it today. Indeed, in my 12 years in the ministry I have never preached a sermon on the topic until now. Despite the infrequency with which it is mentioned, the concept, I think, is still valid. It is backsliding.

The term backsliding, I discovered in my research, was popularized in the 1600's by John Bunyan in his very famous allegory Pilgrim's Progress. In the story, you may recall, the character of Christian and Hopeful are on their religious pilgrimage. While on the journey they begin to discuss an individual by the name of Temporary. He had started the pilgrimage, but along the way he fell by the wayside, or, as Bunyan worded it, backslid. That term was picked up, particularly, but not exclusively by the Methodists in early America and became a stock phrase. It referred to those once faithful individuals who had lost interest in their Christian pilgrimage.

There are some denominations who do not affirm the concept. They say once saved always saved. Methodists have never affirmed that, because it implies that if a person becomes a Christian then he loses his free will to turn away. The individual who was free to choose the way of Christ, we insist, is still free to turn his back on it. Man can experience no level of grace that is beyond the possibility of falling.

Jesus had just finished one of his more obscure teachings. He said several things, which confused some and upset others. "I am the bread of life," he said. Some objected to this language because he was comparing himself to Moses who gave the children Manna, or bread, in the wilderness. Jesus then took it a step further and declared, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." This appeared odd to some because they knew he was the son of Mary and Joseph and not some modern day Elijah sent from heaven back down to earth. And then he just flat confused many because he suggested that everyone must eat his flesh and drink his blood otherwise they would die. It sounded too cannibalistic.

You can then understand why in verse 66 of chapter 6 (please don't read anything into that) we read that many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Notice what is said, they turned back! They quit following. They became Temporary. I don't think a single reason can be identified as to why so many stopped following, a combination of issues probably, as we have already noted: His teaching confused some. His images offended others. But primarily, I think it was his claim to be the new source of life, his claim to be greater than Moses, a new Manna. Either way, they weren't buying it and they left. Just like that. One day they were disciples and the next they were not. They became backsliders.

First, I would suggest that backsliding is a reality. It has often been said that backsliding is something that is preached by Methodists (insert your own tradition), but is practiced by all denominations. We believe that backsliding is a proven reality in scripture. The Bible is filled with people who started out well but who ended up tragically. For the sake of brevity I will offer just two examples: one from the Old Testament, the other from the New Testament.

Who in the Old Testament began a more promising career than Saul? There was not a man among the people of Israel who offered more potential in leadership. He represented more than a King. He represented hope. Yet, Saul was eaten with jealousy when the young David appeared on the scene and stole the spotlight, and twice he attempted to have him killed. So a life that seemed set for success and honor, ended instead in failure and tragedy.

In the New Testament I hold up for your consideration the person of Demas. He is mentioned only three times. The first instance is in Philemon. Paul introduces him by saying: Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. At that moment we can see what great esteem he was held in. He is equal with Luke, a fellow worker, and is even mentioned before him. It is evident that at this point he is a faithful follower of the Lord. The second time he is mentioned is in the Book of Colossians. Paul now writes: "Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas." Now something seems to have changed. Luke is mentioned first, rather than Demas. Not only that, there are words of praise for Luke, but Demas is mentioned only by name. Apparently he is beginning to slow down.

Later, in Paul's letter to Timothy, he writes: "Demas deserted me, having loved this present age." There in a few words you have the story of a man's life. What started out with so much promise ended in disappointment.

Backsliding is not merely a problem for Biblical characters; it is an issue for the modern church. When I first came to this church I was visiting with someone, and we were thumbing together, through the church's pictorial directory. Time and time again as we went through each individual picture my host used such phrases as: "You know, I haven't seen them for a long time." Or, "Yes, they used to be active but.."

Listen, there is not a protestant or Catholic Church in the city of Memphis that could possibly hold all of its members if they decided to show up on Sunday. But we don't gear our building facilities for such an event because we know it will never happen. Why? Because we all know that backsliding is a reality. Yes, there can be no argument about the reality of it, either in the Bible or in the local congregation.

Secondly, I would pose the question: why do people backslide? There are many reasons for backsliding. Some of it is due to incomplete conversions. I have often wondered if we make it too easy for people to join the Methodist church, thereby setting up a situation whereby people may not take their vows seriously enough. When Jesus fed the 5,000 by the Sea of Galilee he told the crowd: You seek me not because you saw a miracle, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. In other words, they followed him for what they could get out of it. We live in a day of cheap grace, and far too often crowd approval and peer pressure result in conversions that are not genuine. But while incomplete conversions may explain some backsliding, it does not get to the heart of the problem. Most backsliders do so, I am convinced, simply because their spiritual buckets develop a leak and much of their commitment seeps out.

We need to understand that there are certain periods in our lives when we are more susceptible to doing what these disciples did, turning back and no longer following him. The college years, for example: Out of earshot and eye range of mom and dad, the college student is often tempted to drop church. When a couple first gets married. So often love is blind concerning the spiritual relationship of marriage and faith is ignored. The promotions years, when we are climbing the corporate ladder: God so often gets crowded out of the picture.

Perhaps most of all, however, people turn back because our priorities get flipped. Increasingly people resort to excuses as to why they cannot come to church. It's an indication of a dwindling spiritual life, hobbies, jobs, even family crowding God out of the picture. The road to backsliding is paved with excuses. It will cripple the Christian life. I sometimes wish that people would listen to themselves as they parade forth their excuses.

All living things can die through neglect. A plant in a garden, a friendship, a marriage--all can wither if not nourished. I have never met a person who crashed out of the Christian life. By that, I mean that I have never personally known an individual who woke up one morning and announced: From now on I will not be a Christian. I will turn my back on God, on the Bible, on the church. I have known many persons who oozed out of a once vital faith with the Master. It was done simply through neglect and inattention. The flame of faith was extinguished through neglect.

Commitment, discipleship, long suffering, faithfulness. These were not found in the life of those who turned back that day in Galilee. But there were twelve who were committed. Peter spoke for them: To whom shall we go? We will stay here with you Lord.

At the Olympic games in Paris in 1924 the sport of canoe racing was added to the list of international competitions. The favorite team in the four-man canoe race was the United States team. One member of that team was a young man by the name of Bill Havens. As the time for the Olympics neared, it became clear that Bill's wife would give birth to her first child about the time that Bill would be competing in the Paris Games. In 1924 there were no jet airliners from Paris to the United States, only slow-moving ocean-going ships. And so Bill found himself in a dilemma. Should he go to Paris and risk not being at his wife's side when their first child was born? Or should he withdraw from the team and remain behind. Bill's wife insisted that he go to Paris. After all, he had been working towards this for all these years. It was the culmination of a life-long dream. Clearly the decision was not easy for Bill to make. Finally, after much soul searching, Bill decided to withdraw from the competition and remain behind with his wife so that he could be with her when their first child arrived. Bill considered being at her side a higher priority than going to Paris to fulfill a life-long dream.

To make a long story short, the United States four-man canoe team won the gold medal at the Paris Olympics. And Bill's wife was late in giving birth to her first child. So late, that Bill could have competed in the event and returned home in time for the birth. People said, "What a shame." But Bill said he had no regrets. After all, his commitment to his wife was more important. A high price, yes, but not too high a price for someone he loved. I can hear that higher priority in Peter's words: It is you we love Lord, to whom shall we go?

Third, I would warn that there is a consequence to backsliding. Perhaps no other story in scripture explains it better than the story of Samson. He once had such a rich vital relationship with the living God, but ever so slowly he went the way of backsliding. One day Samson got up to do battle with the Philistines and in Judges 16:20 we read the most salient verse in his life's story. It reads: He did not know that the Lord had departed from him. Suddenly Samson found himself in the midst of battle and he called upon his reservoir of faith, only to discover, much to his surprise, that it was empty. Only then was he awakened to the reality that his relationship with God was not a burning fire, but a cold ember.

Oh friends, too many repeat the story of Samson. We don't even realize that God is no longer a vital part of our life--that is until a crisis arises. How many people have I known, couples whose marriages were on the verge of complete disaster, and out of complete desperation they come back to the church that they haven't been to in years. It's the last fling before the divorce. Then, when it doesn't work, as invariably it does not, they wonder why religion had no effect. I feel like saying: What do you expect?

How many times have I known someone who lost a loved one who was dearer than life itself, they come back to the church for the funeral after being away for years, and they can't understand why they did not have the spiritual resources to handle it. I feel like saying: What did you expect? Samson waited till he was in the middle of the battle and then he called upon the name of the Lord God of hosts, but God didn't answer. Why? Because, says the scripture God was no longer with Samson and he didn't even know it. It had all happened so gradually that it took a crisis before he understood it.

We can come back to a closer walk with God. Remember the distance that you have put between yourself and God means nothing. The tragedy is not the distance; it is that your love is no longer vital. We can return when we evaluate our closeness to God and the church and repent our sinful excuses. Then start witnessing to the love of Christ.

Why is it so vital? Obviously for the state of your soul but for another reason as well. Others need to see you faithful. You have a witness in this world. Your friends, your family, your children especially need to see you faithful. It will have a life long effect upon them.