

# 1

## **THE MARKS OF A BACKSLIDER**

Almost every day we learn from the news media about some upright and productive citizen who has gotten himself into trouble. How pitiful it is to see such a person lose his job, desert his family, and become a failure! We feel the same way whenever a man whose name was once held in great respect has fallen into disrepute.

It's even more pathetic, however, when someone begins slipping without even realizing what's happening to him. He's not doing his work quite as well. He is not as concerned about grooming and appearance as he used to be. He is becoming lax in paying his bills. Or maybe he's angry more often; he's growing more coarse in his language; he's showing less concern for his loved ones. His friends shake their heads in dismay as they see what's happening. They may even offer him advice and help, but he just refuses to listen.

Yes, a gradual decline like that is heartbreaking to watch, but it's more tragic when such a trend begins to happen in the spiritual realm. Sorry to say, it happens all too often. Believers in Christ

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gradually, bit-by-bit, begin to drift away from fellowship with the Lord. Little-by-little they give in to self and to Satan. The light of faith that once burned so brightly in their hearts has flickered and grown dim, and they've become indifferent to God and the church. Somehow as the months or years slip past, they wander far away from the Lord.

Friend, if what I've been talking about is happening to you or to one of your loved ones, this series of messages is meant for you. Its purpose is twofold: (1) to show you how to tell if you've wandered away from the Lord, and if you have, (2) to encourage you to come back to the Father and home. In this first lesson, we will think together about five marks of a backslider. They are:

1. He has no interest in Christian fellowship.
2. He has no desire to attend church.
3. He has no personal or family devotions.
4. He has no burden for others.
5. He has no spiritual sensitivity.

Let's discuss these characteristics one by one. The first mark of a believer who needs to "come home" is that he has:

### **NO INTEREST IN CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP**

Could this be a description of you? You once enjoyed spending time with other believers. You actually welcomed the opportunities to discuss spiritual matters, to talk about Christian experiences, and to pray with others about things of mutual concern. You chose your best friends from among fellow believers, and you had no problem identifying with them. But now things are different. You just don't like being with Christians anymore—

at least those who are committed believers. Any talk about God or the Bible makes you feel uncomfortable. You find fault with your former friends, and you accuse them of being pharisaical or hypocritical. You're spending more and more time with non-Christian companions, and you're doing things now that you would never have thought of doing before.

If that portrays you, you are in need of spiritual restoration. Something is wrong, and you know it. Way down inside you are miserable. As a backslidden Christian, you are unhappy and frustrated.

The reason you feel that way is that you are going against your new nature as a believer in Christ. The moment you received the Lord Jesus you were given new spiritual life. You were born into the family of God. But now your behavior is inconsistent with your identity as His child. You are spending time with people who have an entirely different view of life. You need to come back to the heavenly Father.

The inspired psalmist indicated in Psalm 1 that the "blessed" person is one who does not improperly associate with those who are evildoers. He wrote:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night (Ps. 1:1-2).*

I encourage you to renew your friendship with those who know and love the Lord. Seek their companionship. Identify yourself with the people of God who are committed to doing His will. When

you do, you will have taken that first giant step on the way home to joy and spiritual peace.

A second mark often detected in a backslidden Christian is that he has:

### **NO DESIRE TO ATTEND CHURCH**

Often when a Christian refuses to gather with other believers for worship, he has a need for spiritual restoration. (You understand, of course, that I'm talking about those who are able to attend a good, gospel-preaching, Bible-teaching fellowship of believers, but who deliberately avoid it.) The author of Hebrews wrote:

*Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:24-25).*

Every believer who is physically able should attend church. When other believers have gathered to honor the Lord, he should not be in a fishing boat, on a golf course, or even relaxing around the house. If he's neglectful of being in God's house, he needs to find his way back home.

We are told that the believers of the early church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). We also read this about them:

*So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added*

*to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).*

I realize that in our society it's easy to become negligent in the matter of church attendance. Weekend outings, mini-vacations, and recreational activities are strong competitors. Furthermore, some would argue, "We are not under the law. We're not obligated to observe sabbath regulations. Let's not be legalistic about it."

But the fact remains that failure to assemble with other believers for worship, for instruction, and for Christian fellowship is to miss out on one of God's gracious provisions for spiritual growth and blessing. Just to continue sending in your weekly check, remember, is no substitute for being there. I would encourage you, therefore, to get back into a regular routine of church attendance, and to do so as soon as possible. Join with fellow Christians in singing the songs of praise. Unite with them in prayer. Pay close attention as the Word of God is proclaimed in the sermon. As you sincerely do those things, you will soon be back in fellowship with the Lord.

The third mark of a wayward believer is that he has:

### **NO PERSONAL OR FAMILY DEVOTIONS**

Not only do we miss out on a special blessing when we fail to gather with fellow believers for worship, prayer, and the preaching of God's Word, but we are also losers when we do not allow time for personal communion with our Father in heaven. The Lord Jesus Himself demonstrated for us the importance of talking alone with God. During His earthly min-

istry He was engaged in prayer on different occasions with the Father in solitude. We should follow His example. Jesus told His disciples:

*When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly (Mt. 6:6).*

In addition to personal, private prayer, family devotions are vitally important. We are to bring up our children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). If you neglect reading the Bible to them, if you fail to give them instruction in holy living, and if you do not pray with them, you are not obeying God’s commandment to parents. Oh, I know that sometimes it is difficult to squeeze in time for personal devotions, much less to get the family together. Everyone’s so busy—all going off in different directions. But if you’re honest, you’ll admit that if you really try you can find the time. The spiritual benefits both for you and your loved ones will more than repay the efforts involved. You’ll draw closer as a family, and you’ll experience the joy of restoration to God’s favor.

This brings us to a fourth mark of the Christian who is backslidden. He has:

### **NO BURDEN FOR OTHERS**

A backslidden Christian will lack concern for the spiritual needs of his fellowman. Yes, one of the first signs of slippage is a failure to do what we can to carry the message of Christ to a lost and dying world. New Christians often start out by enthusiastically telling everyone they can about the Lord Jesus and salvation. They seize every opportunity

to give their testimony, and their eyes sparkle as they speak of their conversion. But something begins to happen. They become lukewarm. They lose their first love. They no longer have a burden for souls. They lose their zeal in witnessing. The flame of gratitude to God and compassion for the lost needs rekindling.

The fifth mark of a backslidden Christian is that he has:

### **NO SPIRITUAL SENSITIVITY**

The sharp edge of his commitment to Christ and his obedience to the Word has been blunted. He is no longer concerned about the will of God. Usually this shows up first in his attitude toward sin. The obedient Christian, you see, is disturbed by all forms of evil. Living in close fellowship with the Lord, he is grieved both by his own sin and that of others. He is well aware that it's the antithesis of all he knows and loves.

But how quickly one can slip back into his old sinful way of life! Almost imperceptibly, his attitudes change. He begins to do things that are contrary to the will of God. Finding lame excuses for his behavior, he condones practices he knows he should not tolerate. He is no longer grieved over the sins of others. He doesn't want to avail himself of the power of God to overcome evil and lead him to spiritual victory.

Friend, if that is a description of you, you're backsliding. You need a new conviction of sin and a revised abhorrence of evil. The agony of Christ in Gethsemane and on Calvary's cross was because of sin—yours and mine. It is sin that brought all the

suffering and grief into this world. A Christian must not be indifferent to it—in his own life or in that of others.

Let me conclude by asking you to examine your own personal relationship to the Lord. You might begin by reviewing the five marks of a backslidden Christian:

1. No interest in Christian fellowship.
2. No desire to attend church.
3. No personal or family devotions.
4. No burden for others.
5. No spiritual sensitivity.

Could it be that you must honestly say: “I’m backslidden! I have to get right with God. I need to come home.” If that’s the case with you, do it—and do it now!

Your first step is to confess your sin to the Lord. First John 1:9 assures us that:

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Then, accepting God’s forgiveness, renounce your wrongdoing. Find your companions from among God’s children. Return to church. Establish and maintain a continuing relationship with Christ through private and family devotions. Witness to others of His redeeming love. As you do these things, you’ll rediscover that the Christian life can be truly wonderful!

## 2

# WHY CHRISTIANS FALL

As the years pass by, many believers lose the enthusiasm, zeal, and love for Christ they once had. With that in mind, F. B. Meyer, in his book *Light On Life's Duties*, made this observation: "The story of the lost chord has been told in exquisite verse and in stately music. We have all heard of the lady who, in the autumn twilight which softly filled the room, laid her fingers on the open keys of a glorious organ.

She knew not what she was playing,  
Or what she was dreaming then;  
But she struck one chord of music,  
Like the sound of a great Amen.  
It flooded the crimson twilight,  
Like the close of an angel's psalm.  
And it lay on her fevered spirit  
With the touch of infinite calm;  
It quieted pain and sorrow,  
Like love overcoming strife;  
It seemed the harmonious echo  
From our discordant life.  
It linked all perplexed meanings  
Into one perfect peace,  
And trembled away into silence,  
As if it were loath to cease.

"Something called her away, and when she returned to the organ, she had lost that chord sub-

lime. Though she longed for it, and sought it, it was all in vain. It was a lost chord." Meyer observed: "Whenever I hear that story, it reminds me of the lost joy, the lost peace, the lost power of which so many Christians complain."

A friend of mine told me that in all his years of being a pastor, one of the most pathetic questions he ever heard was this: "Preacher, how in the world did I ever get where I am today?" The man who asked it was sobbing as he sat across the table in the visiting room of the county jail. Arrested the previous night, he had been charged with being drunk. A few short years before, he had commanded a good salary, was faithful in church attendance, and lived happily with his wife and children. But he had started to slip—not much at first, but as the months went by he lost his job, his wife filed for divorce, and his reputation was shattered. Now he had nothing!

What causes men and women to fall like this? Why are some once-godly church members now far from the Lord? What leads to the miserable, unhappy condition that calls for spiritual restoration?

I don't know all the factors involved, but perhaps I can put my finger on at least a few of the reasons Christians fall. I have observed four basic tendencies that are often causes for backsliding. They are:

1. Giving in to our weaknesses.
2. Placing the temporal above the eternal.
3. Taking our blessings for granted.
4. Letting sorrow or disappointment overcome us.

Self-evaluation can be profitable. I therefore encourage you, as we think about these causes for spiritual decline, to look closely at your own life.

Ask yourself this question: "Am I in need of spiritual restoration?" A correction now may save you years of heartache later on, and it will bring true joy back into your life.

The first reason many Christians stray from the Lord is this:

### **THEY GIVE IN TO THEIR WEAKNESSES**

There are "blind spots" in the temperament of Christians that are open to the attack of Satan. They find it difficult to exercise self-control in those areas. We all have areas of vulnerability, and somehow the devil seems to know every one of them. You can be sure that he will concentrate his attacks at those places.

One man in particular comes to mind. He was easygoing and tolerant. He related well to others. He had many friends. He found it difficult to say no to anyone. But those very things—his likable disposition and his love of people—became his weaknesses. When he was out with the crowd, he would go along with whatever they did. He often compromised his convictions because he just hated to offend anyone. And because he habitually gave in to his weaknesses, he became a poor husband, father, and provider. His testimony was seriously hindered.

As I indicated, everyone has his areas of weakness. Some people are withdrawn and moody. Others are perfectionists. Still others are headstrong and impulsive. We should therefore be honest with ourselves and recognize our vulnerabilities. As we acknowledge what they are, we should be on guard continually lest we fall. We should avoid every circumstance that might make a special appeal to our

sinful tendencies. As we ask the Lord for help we will overcome. The power of God is greater than any temptation of the evil one.

A second underlying cause for backsliding among many Christians is this:

### **THEY PLACE THE TEMPORAL ABOVE THE ETERNAL**

I'm not just talking about worldly practices, but a preoccupation with earthly things so that we lose sight of heavenly things. It's a matter of perspective. Paul wrote, "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). Therefore, we sing that old gospel song:

This world is not my home,  
I'm just a-passin' through;  
My treasures are laid up  
Somewhere beyond the blue.  
The angels beckon me  
From heaven's open door,  
And I can't feel at home  
In this world anymore.

As pilgrims on this earth, "we're just a-passin' through." But so often we place the values, attitudes, and things of this world above our commitment to Christ and to things heavenly and eternal. There's nothing wrong with a comfortable home, the enjoyment of good music and art, or the promotion of worthwhile humanitarian projects. But none of these should ever become more important to us than that of doing the will of God. No, we must never exalt the world above Christ. The Lord Jesus laid down this principle to His disciples:

*No servant can serve two masters; for either he*

*will hate the one and love the other; or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Lk. 16:13).*

Being a Christian calls for complete surrender to the Lord. There must never be divided loyalty between Him and the world.

A third reason some Christians backslide is this:

### **THEY TAKE THEIR BLESSINGS FOR GRANTED**

It is possible to be the special objects of God's love, and to be the recipients of His manifold blessings (a good job, a healthy family, and a successful business), and yet forget all about the One who gave us these things in the first place. We fail to remember that:

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning (Jas. 1:17).*

When we are richly blessed of the Lord and fail to recognize the true source of all the good things, we tend in our fallen human nature to become self-satisfied and to feel self-sufficient. We fail to rely on the Lord the way we should. We neglect Him, trusting only in ourselves.

I am reminded of these words of Moses:

*When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have*

*built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage (Dt. 8:10-14).*

These words of warning are needed just as much today as they were in ancient Israel's day. Human nature doesn't change. We are prone to take our blessings for granted, to give ourselves the credit for our successes, and to assume that we'll always have good health.

Missionaries working in depressed areas of the world report that the poverty-stricken often seem much more grateful for what they have than we who enjoy so much more. Oh, we may say a prayer of thanks, but too often there is no real appreciation. Yes, taking God's blessings for granted and failing to recognize and acknowledge His goodness can lead to spiritual decline. When we count our blessings, therefore, let us remember from whom they come, and be careful to express our gratitude to Him in both what we say and what we do.

A fourth reason why some believers backslide is this:

### **THEY LET SORROW OVERCOME THEM**

Some Christians go into a tailspin of self-pity or anger against God when tragedy strikes them. A certain man told his minister that when two of his children died in auto accidents within a year, he felt a spirit of rebellion well up within him. He quit reading the Bible, he refused to go to church, and he

prayed very little. But he finally realized that he was the loser. He saw that he was shutting himself off from the special grace and strength he needed from God. And in time he came back home to the Lord.

I wonder, could it be that you have allowed some disappointment or sorrow to overcome you? As a result, you are resentful toward the Lord. You're angry and bitter today. You're out of fellowship with Him. You're miserable and unhappy, and you know it. I would encourage you to read Romans 8:28—and believe it!

The Christian who really takes God at His word will be sustained and victorious even through the most difficult trials and deepest sorrows of life. The one who doubts God's Word, however, may be overcome by his disappointment and go down to spiritual defeat.

In the light of what we've been discussing, I remind you of this old saying: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Yes, preventive medicine is extremely important. The more quickly a disease is detected and treated, the less serious will be its consequences. The same is true in the spiritual realm.

If you have backslidden and are far from the Lord, the way home to joy and fellowship is open to you. It's the pathway of confession, commitment, and submission. The Lord stands ready to forgive you if you are willing to acknowledge and forsake your sins.

I received a letter from Pastor Raymond Biddle some time ago, and this is what he wrote: "Our church has a good, clear-ringing bell, but yesterday we were ashamed of it. The first dull sound sent

me looking for the bell-ringer, who soon found out what was wrong. Nearly an inch of snow and sleet had blown on it during a night storm, and consequently it was thoroughly encased in ice. What a poor call to worship it gave! The Lord then impressed the thought upon my heart that Christians can become sheathed in the sound-deadening things of the world. As a result, their witness becomes ice-encased."

With this thought in mind, I emphasize that it is both our duty and our privilege as believers in Christ to give forth a clear-ringing testimony. Yet how often our words and deeds are muted by the ice of this world. It covers up and deadens the sound of our testimony. And the devil rejoices when Christians are drawn away from the Lord and become so cold spiritually that they ice up. Some of the ices that encase believers are pride, jealousy, materialism, hatred, lying, gossip, and envy. The best way to prevent this from happening is to be diligent in prayer, in studying God's Word, and in maintaining our fellowship with other believers. The Bible assures us:

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9).*

Doing that, you will be taking your first and all-important step in finding your way back to the Father and home. May God help you, right now, to do so, and to pray in the words of that wonderful old hymn:

I've tired of sin and straying, Lord—  
Now I'm coming home;  
I'll trust Thy love, believe Thy word—  
Lord, I'm coming home.

# 3

## **FACTS ABOUT BACKSLIDERS**

Christians do backslide. That's a fact we cannot deny. Many people today who made a profession of faith in Christ have drifted far from the Lord spiritually. Some still attend church, while others never go at all. Some are living rather respectable, moral lives, while others are living in open sin. Some still have their jobs, attractive homes, and families, while others have lost everything. Some acknowledge they are wrong and admit their unhappiness, while others defend themselves and insist they're having a wonderful time. Some are plagued with serious doubts, while others have given themselves wholeheartedly to their sensual and selfish desires.

Yes, Christians do backslide—to different degrees and for different reasons. But they all have one thing in common: They are not living as close to the Lord as they once did. We can't help but wonder what's going to happen to them. Will they lose their salvation? Will God punish them? Can they get away with it? Is there a way back home? These are vital questions.

In this lesson, therefore, let's examine four facts about the Christian who is out of fellowship with the Lord; that is, the backslider. They are as follows:

1. He will not perish.
2. He can expect chastening.
3. He may die prematurely.
4. He can be fully restored.

The first truth about a born-again believer who has strayed away from the Lord is this:

### **HE WILL NOT PERISH**

A backslidden Christian cannot lose his salvation. Oh, I know that he may feel as though he's lost. When he first realizes how deeply he has fallen into sin, it may seem to him that God could never forgive him. He hates himself for what he's doing, and he thinks that God must hate him too. But feelings, we should remember, sometimes lie. And it's a fact that once you are born again you can never lose your salvation.

Now wait a minute! Don't turn me off. Give me a chance to explain. I know very well what some people would tell me if they could. They'd say, "Listen, preacher, don't give me any of that you-can't-lose-your-salvation business. I know a man who claims he was saved many years ago. He was active in church, testified to others of his faith in Christ, and lived a Christian life for years. But then he left his wife and became involved with another woman. He is now living in deep sin. Do you mean to tell me that if he died right now he'd go to heaven?"

Let me say first that we must not build our doctrine on personal experience but on the Word of God. Second, we don't know the true condition of that man's heart. Perhaps he was never saved in the first place. Maybe he was just going through the motions. Only God knows for sure. Stories like that,

therefore, do not discredit the fact that a person who has been truly converted to Christ cannot lose his salvation. In fact, the very nature of our salvation would indicate that it is an eternal transaction.

Just think for a moment about all the wonderful things that happen when we receive the Lord Jesus and experience salvation.

- We are united with Christ (Eph. 2:4-6).
- We are born again (2 Cor. 5:17).
- We are justified in God's sight (Rom. 3:24) .
- We are baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).
- We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).
- We are sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13).
- We are made citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20).

Think of the implications of these spiritual realities of salvation! Would God unite us with His Son, only to destroy that oneness? Would He through the new birth make us members of His family as "sons of God" and "joint-heirs with Christ," only to undo that relationship? Would He describe Christians as "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" and then break that seal? Absolutely not! The very nature of salvation as a life-giving, deep-seated transaction between God and us gives us every assurance that it is an eternal relationship. It's not an on-again, off-again sort of thing. The Lord Jesus Himself suggested this truth when He said:

*This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day (Jn. 6:39).*

And in verse 47 of that chapter He promised, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in

Me has everlasting life.” Read also these words of the Savior:

*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand (Jn. 10:27-29).*

Having received Christ as Savior, we have the assurance of eternal life. Oh, we may disobey the Lord and stray into sin. Many years may pass by. But if we have been genuinely born again, we can never be lost. We remain God’s children, members of His family. We do not lose our salvation because of backsliding.

A second truth about a wayward Christian must be emphasized. Although a believer will not perish:

### **HE CAN EXPECT CHASTENING**

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul mentioned that some of the Christians at Corinth were sick because of their misbehavior at the table of the Lord. He wrote:

*As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*

*For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:26-32).*

Yes, the apostle Paul said, "For this reason many are weak and sick among you." The Lord was apparently judging the sins of certain believers through illness. Every child of God who disobeys the Lord can expect His chastening hand. This is designed to bring him back home into fellowship with the heavenly Father. It is for the believer's own benefit. The author of Hebrews recorded God's words as follows:

*My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? (Heb. 12:5-7).*

After King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed in battle, he was afflicted by the Lord. David described his suffering in Psalm 32:3-4 as follows:

*When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer.*

David confessed his sin to the Lord and received forgiveness. He could therefore say:

*I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin (Ps. 32:5).*

And according to verses 1 and 2 of this same psalm:

*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

Before going on, let me give you a word of explanation. Sometimes disease or physical pain does come from the Lord as chastening. But that does not mean that every hurt or sickness is caused by unconfessed sin. If you are confined to a bed today or stricken with a crippling disease, you need not necessarily conclude that you are being chastened. The infirmity may have come for some other reason.

I am thinking about the man born blind. The disciples asked Jesus if the man's blindness was due to some wickedness in his life. Jesus gave this answer:

*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him (Jn. 9:3) .*

Keep in mind also that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" had no connection with any disobedience on his part. Not all sickness, therefore, is punishment for sin. But it certainly must be considered as a possibility.

Remember, then, that the backslider may be chastened by the Lord to show him his sin and his need for repentance. That chastening sometimes takes the form of illness. Search your heart carefully. And if there is sin in your life, confess it to the Lord, forsake it, and accept God's forgiveness.

Thus far we have seen that even though a disobedient believer "will never perish," he may ex-

perience chastening. This leads us to our third truth about a backsliding Christian who is being judged for his sin:

### **HE MAY DIE PREMATURELY**

In his warning to the Corinthians because of their abuses at the Lord's Table, the apostle Paul said, "For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" (1 Cor. 11:30). Yes, some of the believers in the church at Corinth had actually died because of sin. This is the same kind of judgment the apostle John referred to as the "sin leading to death" (1 Jn. 5:16).

We have a striking example of this judgment in the early church. Ananias and Sapphira had sold a piece of property. They claimed to have given the proceeds to the church, but they had kept a portion for themselves. Peter was given discernment about the matter, and after he rebuked Ananias, the man fell dead. Three hours later, his wife died in the same manner. This man and his wife (and we have no reason to doubt that they were genuine believers) were judged severely by the Lord—through death itself—because of the gravity of their sin.

Now, I realize that this is not God's usual way of working. But it may well take place even today with those who persist in their evil way and bring public reproach on the cause of Christ.

The fourth truth about the wayward Christian we want to discuss is encouraging:

### **HE CAN BE FULLY RESTORED**

It is possible for backsliders to return to the favor and fellowship of God. Yes, there is a way back

home. The heavenly Father wants to forgive and bless that disobedient child of His who is willing to confess and forsake his sin. The Lord takes no delight in chastening His children. He would much rather be blessing them.

The experience of the man in 1 Corinthians 5 who had sinned so grievously with his stepmother comes to mind. Paul actually instructed the church leaders to “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (v.5). This was not a vindictive command. Rather, it was for the man’s own benefit. It was, as the apostle went on to say, “that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (v.5).

That man repented, and his fellow believers were told by Paul to forgive him, to comfort him, and to reaffirm their love to him (2 Cor. 2:7-8). The apostle’s exhortation was evidence that God had forgiven him. Others were to do the same.

If you are truly born again, you can never lose your salvation. But if you are out of fellowship with the Lord and you continue in your sinful way, you can expect God to chasten you. He may send physical affliction or financial reverses. He may even take away your life. I therefore urge you to come home to God’s blessing and favor. Acknowledge that your indifference and wickedness are sinful and displeasing to the Lord. Confess your sin to Him. Then claim His forgiveness. Ask for His power and help. Go back to church. Start praying. Read your Bible. And renew your Christian friendships. Come home to the Lord right now.

## 4

# THE WAY BACK HOME

Have you heard the story about Barney, who had always been proud of his thick, black, wavy hair? It began dropping out, and finally only one lone strand remained. Awakening one morning, he looked at his pillow and was shocked to see lying there that single, precious hair. Jumping out of bed, he ran downstairs crying, "Martha, Martha, I'm bald!"

This is not to make fun of anyone whose hair is starting to thin. I tell this story because it reminds me of Christians who begin dabbling in the things of the world. They progressively wander farther and farther from the Lord and deeper and deeper into sin. And they do so without even realizing what's happening to them. It is not until they have had some startling experience, perhaps due to divine chastening, that they wake up and see their true condition before God. You see, the devil leads the believer downward so slowly and gradually that he doesn't even perceive what's going on. It is only when he is stripped of his spiritual power that he finally becomes aware of his true condition before God.

I'm sure that some of you who read these words trusted Christ for salvation many years ago, but today you are living in sin. You've turned your back on the Lord. You are plagued with guilt. You are miserable. If that describes you, then this conclud-

ing lesson on the wayward Christian is especially for you. I want to point out the way back home.

In our first lesson we considered the marks of a backslidden Christian—a lack of desire to spend time with fellow believers, no interest in church attendance, an absence of sensitivity to sin, and little concern for prayer or telling others about Christ.

We then sought to identify some of the causes for backsliding. We saw that usually it is a gradual process, starting with small things and becoming more and more serious. As George Sweeting, former President of Moody Bible Institute, expressed it, “Collapse in the Christian life is rarely a blowout—it’s usually a slow leak.” He’s right! It often begins by making a small concession to some weakness, or placing the earthly above the heavenly, or taking the blessings of the Christian life for granted. Before you know it, the bright flame of faith and love for God has died down and the spiritual life has grown cold.

In our preceding lesson we discussed what can happen to a believer who continues to live in sin. Although a person who has been born again can never lose his salvation, he may be chastened through pain, disappointment, or affliction. He might even die prematurely. The apostle Paul mentioned that some of the believers at Corinth were sick, and some died, because of their misbehavior at the table of the Lord. “For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep” (1 Cor. 11:30).

We can be thankful, however, that the way home is always open for the Christian who truly wants the Lord’s forgiveness. He still loves you as His child, and He longs for your restoration.

If you are wandering away from the Lord (whether you are just beginning to let your love for Christ grow cold, or if you have been living in sin for years), read very carefully as I outline three steps in coming back to the Lord. They are suggested in the book of Revelation, where the apostle John recorded these words of the living Christ to the church at Ephesus:

*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent (Rev. 2:5).*

Three words in that verse, “remember,” “repent,” and “do the first works,” suggest three steps to be taken by a wayward believer in coming back to the Lord. He should:

- **Remember** his former life with Christ.
- **Repent** of his sin.
- **Renew** his life of obedience and faith.

The first step in returning to the Lord is:

## **REMEMBER**

Think back for a moment on the pleasures and delights of the Christian life you enjoyed right after your conversion: the thrill of having your sins forgiven, the satisfaction you found in Bible reading, the blessings of attending church, and the fellowship and the special closeness you felt with the heavenly Father when you prayed. You loved Christ—even to the point of being willing to die for Him. You shared with others what He had done for you. You cherished the sense of complete forgiveness and acceptance by God. Your life was char-

acterized by prayer and faith in God's Word. Yes, your awareness of the Lord and your love for His people were wonderful. But that was long ago. Things have changed. Now you must say with William Cowper, the songwriter:

Where is the blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the soul-refreshing view  
Of Jesus and His Word?

If you are a backslidden believer, I would admonish you in the words of our text, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen."

In the crucial issues of life, memory is truly a blessed gift. Time and again the love between a husband and wife is rekindled through the recollection of their days of courtship and their first happy years of marriage. Think also how many a man, hardened by sin, has been touched by a song reminding him of his childhood and mother.

The American writer O. Henry, in one of his short stories, portrayed the force of memory. He told of a man who, as a lad in a country school, sat beside a sweet, innocent young girl. As he grew into manhood, he fell into bad company and became a thief. One day, while congratulating himself after successfully picking a man's pocket, he saw coming down the street that former classmate, still as beautiful and pure-looking as ever. Overwhelmed at how low he had fallen by comparison, he ducked into a side street, leaned his head against a lamppost, and cried out to God, "Oh, how I hate myself!" His memory had shown him how loathsome he had become.

Yes, friend, remember! Reflect upon those happy

days when the Lord Jesus was real and precious to you. As you do, you'll be taking that first step back to God and to a restoration of the sweet fellowship you once enjoyed with Him. You'll then be ready for that second step in coming back home:

## **REPENT**

You'll recall that in Revelation 2:5, Jesus not only said "remember," but He added the word "repent." He said, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent."

The word *repent* means "to change one's mind." It involves viewing something differently. This is what we are to do when we grow cold spiritually and find ourselves in a backslidden condition. We are no longer to excuse or condone our sin! We are to view it as God does. We should see it as being wrong and abhorrent in His sight. Then we are to confess our disobedience to the Lord, renounce our sin, and accept His pardon. When we truly repent, we may be sure that the Lord will forgive our sin and receive us back into fellowship with Him.

I realize that this can be a very painful process. It's never easy to admit we've been doing wrong. As we face squarely our disobedience to the Lord, we may have feelings of sorrow and remorse. We may grieve to think of the hours we have wasted or the people we have hurt. We may shed tears over the dishonor we have brought to the Lord's name. In fact, I wish we would see more weeping over sin.

Repentance is indeed an important step for the wayward Christian to take in coming home. You must change your attitude toward your behavior. Admit that your disobedience to His will is nothing

less than sin. Confess it to the Lord. Accept His forgiveness. Instead of trying to justify your actions or seeking to blame others for wandering away, take the responsibility yourself. Be willing to say, "I have sinned. It's my fault. I am sorry."

A third step in coming back home to fellowship with the Lord:

## **RENEW**

After encouraging the believers at Ephesus to remember and to repent, the risen Christ told them to "do the first works" (Rev. 2:5). It might be helpful to read that admonition in its context.

*To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 'I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent'" (Rev. 2:1-5).*

According to verse 4, the Christians in the church at Ephesus had left their "first love." They were therefore to remember, to repent, and to do their "first works." They were to return to a life of faith

and obedience. Their love for Christ was no longer as fervent as it used to be.

We have all seen something like that happen in marriages. A husband, for instance, becomes so engrossed in his own personal interests that he begins to take his wife for granted. Oh, he's faithful in his financial support and in coming home every night. But the way he speaks, looks, and listens soon betrays his departure from his first love. What must be done to recapture it? Well, that husband needs to pay more attention to his wife, just as he used to. He should notice little things, respond to her needs, do things to please her, and to tell her every day, "I love you."

So too, the backslidden believer must "do the first works." He has to rekindle that "first love." He has to begin serving the Lord again. It's not enough for him just to remember and repent. He must also do! There must be a changed life. He must return to church, read his Bible, pray, and live in obedience to the Word of God. Doing this, he will once again know the joy and satisfaction of walking with the Lord.

If you are in a backslidden condition and are far away from the Lord, I'd like to repeat for you those three steps in coming home:

**STEP 1: REMEMBER.** Think back on the joys of former days. Recall the happiness that was yours when you were first saved, when you were faithful in fellowshiping with other believers and diligent in serving the Lord. But don't stop there. Even though a sentimental recollection of the past (godly parents, a Christian home, and inspiring church services) can be a tremendous help in bringing you back to God, it will not in itself solve your spiritual

problem. Having remembered the blessings you once experienced, you must be willing to make another move.

**STEP 2: REPENT.** Change your mind about the way you are living. Agree with God that it's wrong. Accept the blame. Claim His forgiveness.

**STEP 3: RENEW.** If you have truly repented, it will show in what you do. After renouncing your sin, live again the life of obedience that once was yours.

*Remember, repent, and renew!* You have not really found the way back to God until you have taken all three of these steps.

I would like to close with a word of warning for those to whom these lessons have been especially directed—believers who have wandered away from God and are now living in sin. If you persist in your life of disobedience, God will certainly chasten you. He may even take your life. The blessing and joy of the walk of faith will not return until you come back to the Lord. So take the three steps we talked about in this lesson. Life is so brief. The opportunities for serving Christ are limited. And beyond lies eternity. So, humble yourself before God and *remember, repent, and renew.* Live the way you did before you left your "first love." You do your part, and God will do His! Come home to God. As you do, you'll want to say with the hymnwriter:

I've wasted many precious years—

Now I'm coming home;

I now repent with bitter tears—

Lord, I'm coming home.

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This booklet is taken from messages taught in 1984 by Richard W. De Haan on the *Day Of Discovery* television program. Richard was president and teacher of RBC Ministries for 20 years. He is now retired.

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