

"BENT TO BACKSLIDING"

"And my people are bent to backsliding from me." Hosea 11:7.

A backslider is a child of God who has indulged in sin and gotten out of fellowship with Him. His sin may have been a mere coldness of heart or a grievous iniquity that is known to many. In either event, it is a sin in God's sight. When any Christian falls into sin he is a backslider. His backsliding does not affect his sonship, but it does affect his peace, joy, and fellowship, as well as the approval of the heavenly Father. His standing is that of a disobedient and wayward child.

Backsliding consists of the Christian's withdrawing himself from the state of devotion to God and striving to please himself or Satan. It is the cessation of a life of dedication, the repudiation of the vows that he made to the Lord Who saved him, and a departure from the path of righteousness.

God's Word contains the record of numerous backsliders. It tells of the failures, sins, and backslidings of God's children through the ages. God wanted us to know that His children were frail people, and subject to temptation, like we are. Many of them yielded to the same temptations that we do.

Noah was a saved man, but he was a backslider when he got drunk.

Abraham was a backslider. When Abraham and his beautiful wife, Sarah, arrived at the border of Egypt, he anticipated that the Egyptians might kill him and take Sarah, so he proposed that she tell them that she was his sister; when he lied about his wife he became a backslider.

Lot became a backslider, but there isn't any doubt as to his salvation for the Word of God refers to him as "just Lot," meaning that he was a justified man. The Bible refers to him as a righteous man. Lot sought the fellowship of the wicked Sodomites. Of course, he didn't move into Sodom in one day's time. The Word of God says that he pitched his tent toward Sodom. After a few moves we find him living in Sodom. There he became a big man politically. He was one of the civic leaders. But, he also became a backslider; then, he lost his influence, got drunk, and ruined his own daughters.

The backsliding of the Israelites was an indisputable fact. They mourned bitterly because of their bondage in Egypt. God delivered them out of the hand of Pharaoh. They were scarcely free from the whips of the Egyptian taskmasters when they began lusting after the fleshpots of Egypt, and complaining that they had not been permitted to remain there instead of being brought out to die in the wilderness.

Even meek Moses lost his temper and became a backslider. God told him to strike a rock and water would come from it. He obeyed and God sent the water from the rock. Later God told Moses to speak to the rock and water would flow from it, but Moses was angry at those rebels whom he was leading through the wilderness. Chiding them for their rebellion, and quarreling at them because of the rebellious spirit, Moses took the rod and beat the rock in disobedience to the command of God. Water came from the rock, but Moses had sinned by losing his temper. Because of this backsliding Moses lost his opportunity to enter the Promised Land and died and went to heaven instead.

David, a man after God's own heart, and the one whom God used to write many of the wonderful psalms, committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then had her husband, Uriah, slain in order that he might hide his sin.

One day Simon Peter told Christ that, even though all men should deny Him, he would die before he would ever deny Him. Then, three times individuals accused Peter of being a disciple of Christ, and three times he lied by denying it. Finally, when it got so hot for him that he felt he had to prove that he was not a Christian, he started cursing. When he denied his Lord and cursed, he certainly was a backslider.

Joseph of Arimathea was a backslider, even though he provided the tomb and assisted with the burial of the Lord Jesus. Concerning him the Word of God says, "After this Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple, but secretly for fear of the Jews" (John 19:38). Any person who is a secret disciple is a backslider. If you are a child of God, you ought to acknowledge it publicly, follow your Lord in baptism, unite with the church, and take your stand for Christ.

These scriptural examples should prove to us that even the greatest saints frequently fell into sin, and thereby lost the wonderful joy that every child of God should have. But scripture, observation, and experience unite in declaring the fact that many do backslide. In your own sphere you know those who are the reverse of what they once were. Perhaps some of you are not as good Christians as you were in other days.

I. The Condition of Backsliding.

The condition of backsliding is so common among Christians today as to be almost universal. We are not obedient to the commands of our Lord. For example, He said: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (I John 2:15), and yet worldliness is the characteristic of many of our lives. Worldly people are our closest friends, worldly pleasure is our greatest pursuit, and delight, and worldly position, prestige, power, and possessions are the prizes which we covet and strive to obtain.

Was there ever a time when you were nearer to God than now? Was there ever a time when you read and enjoyed the Bible more than you do now? Was there ever a time when you prayed more, and had your prayers answered more frequently than now? Was there ever a time when you were occupied more fully with the Lord's work than you are today? If so, you are a backslider. You have backslidden from that close intimacy with God, and from that high place of blessing which you once enjoyed.

In His Word God says, "My people are bent to backsliding from me" (Hosea 11:7). In all of God's children there is a tendency or proneness to disobey God and commit sin. That old song, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," has in it the revealing heart-cry of every Christian who finds himself a backslider. It says,

"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above."

One of the most dangerous features of backsliding is the backslider's unconsciousness of it. How can one slip from earnestness in the Christian life into a condition of spiritual decrepitude without know it? It is due to the inclination to look more favorably on ourselves than we do on others. We mark the changes in the external appearance of others, such as the pallor

of disease, or the wrinkles of care, or the stoop of old age, far more readily than we do those which manifest themselves in our personal appearance. It is the same in the spiritual realm. We are far more likely to discern the defections of others than we are our own.

In the initial stages of backsliding the backslider is largely unaware of the change that is taking place in him. He gradually withdraws his affections from God and his devotion to Him, lives under the control of a self-pleasing spirit, becomes careless about discharging his religious duties, neglects to commune with God through Bible study and prayer.

There are those who are backslidden in heart. They may still be regular in their church attendance and activities, but they are not happy. Those who are backslidden in heart easily turn aside from their duties and obligations to Christ and His church. Ere long they become less active in service for Christ and frequently cease attending church services. At least, they become very irregular in their attendance and very unreliable in the performance of Christian duties. Furthermore, many who are backslidden in heart and from duty, frequently become wicked in their conduct. By so doing they become a stumbling-block to others and stand in the way of sinners who might be saved if it were not for them.

II. The Causes of Backsliding.

1. The old Adamic nature.

Every saved person has this old nature, and he will never get rid of it as long as he is here in this world. That old nature causes one to have a proneness to wander away from the Lord. God said: "Any my people are bent to backsliding from me" (Hosea 11:7). Thank God, one can win the victory over the old nature through Christ.

2. Incomplete surrender.

If one does not surrender himself to the Lord, he will be ruled by the flesh instead of being led by the Holy Spirit, and backsliding is inevitable. Backsliding starts in the heart. God has said, "They do alway err in their heart" (Hebrews 3:10). Insensibility to the spiritual deterioration, or unconsciousness of backsliding, may be accounted for largely by the fact that the individuals are absorbed in other matters to such an extent that they forget the condition of their own hearts. Due to their incomplete surrender backsliding gradually steals upon them.

3. Neglect of prayer.

Any failure in the life of a Christian can be traced to the lack of prayer. If any Christian would save himself from backsliding, he must pray regularly, consistently, and earnestly. He who is in the habit of reviewing the transactions of the day in his closet in the presence of God is not likely to fall under the deteriorating influence of backsliding.

4. Disregard for God's Word.

A backslider always neglects the study of God's Word. A child of God cannot neglect the study of God's Word without becoming a backslider.

When the heart is full of love for God, the Bible will be the most precious book to the believer. But when love for God grows cold the Bible is no longer interesting reading. Through the study of God's Word one receives the revelation of His will. If you will feed upon God's Word daily, as He teaches you to do, it will give you the strength which you need to stand openly and publicly for God. Sin in the life keeps one from studying the Bible, but diligent study of it will prevent sinful living.

5. Irregular church attendance.

We should both admire and imitate the Israelites who said: "We will not forsake the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:39). David said: "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1). Of our Lord Jesus Christ we read, "And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught" (Mark 1:21). "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read" (Luke 4:16). The fact that the Bible enjoined and Christ practiced public worship should be sufficient grounds for all Christians to be regular in church attendance.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews observed that it had become the habit of some to forsake their former practice of assembling regularly in their public services for the purpose of worshipping God and of being instructed in His Word. Both he and the Lord were grieved that some were cultivating the unbecoming and sinful habit of staying away from the church services. God has ordained that His children should assemble in His house and worship Him publicly, and He always blesses those who do.

Absenteeism from church services is the big blot on the membership of the churches today. Even though multitudes of church members do not consider it important or worthwhile for them to go to church, their empty pews testify to the backslidden and distressing condition of their souls. In view of the fact that they have ignored God's Word which says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Hebrews 10:25), and have thereby demonstrated their lack of spirituality, we need not be surprised at the deterioration of character which is so obvious in their lives. It is a certainty that any Christian who voluntarily absents himself from the worship services in the Lord's house is a backslider. Church attendance cannot be neglected except at the price of spiritual impotence and joylessness. I challenge you to find a saved church member who voluntarily absents himself from the worship services in the Lord's house who is genuinely happy. Backsliding and happiness are never found in the same life.

We are prone to place the blame for our spiritual declension or backsliding upon somebody else. If we are not the kind of Christian we ought to be, we are not active in the Lord's service as we ought to be, we are inclined to blame somebody else rather than acknowledge that we ourselves are responsible for our shortcomings. But God very frankly put the responsibility where it belongs when He said, "Thou has fallen by iniquity" (Hosea 14:1). If you have fallen into sin, or come short of God's standard, then you have fallen by your own iniquity, and it is useless to blame anybody else for it. If you are not what God planned for you to be as a Christian, there is only one person to blame for it, and that is yourself.