

THE BACKSLIDER IN HEART

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Text: The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways.—Proverbs xiv:124.

BACKSLIDER—I don't like the looks of this word, nor do I like its sound or its meaning. It suggests defeat and failure, and we had rather think of victory and success.

Slacker is another ill-sounding word. It may describe one who, in the late war, when the country was needing and calling for men, managed to evade active service at the front, though physically qualified for such service.

But deserter is the worst word in this category. It describes one who responded to the need of his country, enlisted in the war, went to the front, but instead of enduring to the end, deserted, thus bringing an awful stigma on his name. Many a mother or father, while mourning over the loss of one or more sons on the field of battle, can say with a feeling of pardonable pride, "thank God, they were faithful to the end!" In the American Civil War, one mother saw her seven sons go to the front; they all either died in battle or in the hospital. President Lincoln, with his characteristic sympathy, addressed a most beautiful letter to that mother. He lamented the inadequacy of words to convey consolation to her stricken heart. But he also told her that she must feel something of pride in being able to place such an offering upon the altar of her country, making the greatest sacrifice that any mother was called upon to make to bring liberty to the oppressed.

But think what would have been that mother's feelings had one or two of her sons deserted from the ranks! That would have been something worse than death.

This word backslider has in it the meaning of deserter. It implies that one has enlisted in the army of the Lord, had a genuine work of grace wrought in his heart, may have witnessed a good profession for some time, but has finally turned back, perhaps to rebuild the things he once destroyed, becoming entangled again with the yoke of bondage. He goes back to his old associates, his old sins, and openly and brazenly lines up with the forces of the enemy; his last state worse than the first.

Here we are describing an out-and-out backslider. But our text does not refer to such an one. It speaks of the backslider in heart, a condition that may exist without any apparent decline in religious devotion or loyalty to the cause of Christ.

Let me here insist that only one who has had real experience in grace can backslide, either in heart or in life. Those who submit the matter of their soul's salvation, to the pretense and boasted authority of ritualistic and ceremonial churches, never backslide, simply because they never slid forward. They know nothing of an internal change. If they were to profess or confess such a thing, they would be regarded as victims of a satanic hallucination. They would be treated as enemies of the truth, as were Mr. Wesley and the early Methodists. They were treated as apostates, when they broke away from the gross formality and ecclesiastical tyranny to find a present conscious salvation, that was attested by the spirit of adoption, which cried Abba Father. And in evangelical churches today too often membership only implies being

taken in—and badly taken in—no real heart-experience being taught or required. Such members do not backslide; only those who have passed from death unto life feel the danger and know the danger of backsliding—receding from a position and experience they once held in the kingdom of grace.

And as salvation is a heart experience known only to the one receiving it, so also backsliding is a heart experience at the beginning and unless rectified may ultimate in final apostasy. God looketh at the heart, while man looks on the outward appearance. Medical science has an x-ray that can look deep into the body and see those conditions of which even the individual himself may be unconscious. The Holy Ghost is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. God is more concerned with the inner condition than with the outward life. Jesus told the Pharisees they fixed up the outside beautifully, but within were full of conception and pollution. Hence the Bible admonishes, "Keep thy heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life." As a man thinketh in his heart so is he."

This being the case, how can a Christian maintain a holy heart life when carnal affections have not been crucified and the body of sin destroyed? How can a Christian keep the fortress of his heart when the enemy outside attacks and the enemies of carnal affections on the inside are tugging at the will to open the door to the devil!

The other night I listened in to an able popular young preacher in a great church. His sermon was a warning to his parishioners against the danger of backsliding during summer-time. He recounted the imminent danger. The first he particularized were the sins of the body, then those of the mind, then those of the will. He urged his people to attend the means of grace, etc.—all good advice. But I thought how cruel it is to tell young people, and older ones too, to go out amid all the slush and slime of a godless world, they must see everyday on the street, and not urge them to seek that sanctification of the soul, that indwelling presence of the Holy Ghost, that can alone give them real heart victory.

And the preacher needs to be warned as well as the layman. For if he is trusting in himself to keep himself, there are enemies nearby to lay him low. Think of the low state of heart life that preacher must possess who never magnifies the power of Jesus to save from outward and inward sin! He may have known it when he began his ministry, but now has become wise—worldly wise. He sees things differently, for the god of worldly success and carnal approbation has blinded his eyes, and now he smiles at the crude emotionalism that finds expression in praises to God and glad hallelujahs to Christ our King. Can you imagine a crowd full to the brim with base-ball, going to a big league game and watching a game full of spectacular plays, that include home runs and all the rest, remaining in stoical silence during it all? I was never to such a game. I have listened in enough to know the crowd goes wild. Pandemonium reigns when great plays are made, as when the bases are loaded, two are out, there are two strikes on the batter; but in the next pitch he lifts the ball way up in the bleachers for a home-run; you know the rest.

I am not pleading for any such noisy, wild demonstrations as that in a religious meeting.

But if you will read your Bible you will see how much is said about shouting, praising and rejoicing in God. "Cry out and shout thou inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel who is in the midst of thee." Brother, sister, if you have ever known what it is not merely to be blessed, but to be baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire, you have known what it is to have joy unspeakable and full of glory. If you keep that blessing you will have recurring spells of the same kind. You may have had an emotional fulness you called sanctification. But did the blessed Holy Ghost come in? Or are you now so cold, so dull in your soul, so indifferent in your prayer-life that people who are really alive in God are an offence to you, and you say "I believe in living it and not making so much noise?" Yes, this indwelling presence is the only thing that can enable one to live it—to praise God for this blessing when the old cow acts bad or things go wrong and you hit the wrong nail, or serious afflictions beset your body, or loved ones forsake you. You can tell how much grace you have most any day by the things that arise to test and annoy.

Alas! Backsliding in heart fills the mind full of our own carnal notions, and inclines us to try to feel happy when we are really miserable. We may be so blind as to make a false appraisal of values as did the Laodiceans. They said they were rich and increased in goods and had need of nothing, not knowing they were poor and wretched and miserable and blind and naked.

Brother, sister, if you have known better days than these; if you have had greater love for a real hot Holy Ghost meeting; if you have had larger appreciation for real heart-searching preaching than you have today, you have suffered a heart decline. Like the man who lost his axe head and couldn't chop with the handle, so if you are a preacher, a layman, you need an uplift of soul, a reanointing of the Holy Ghost that will make your soul like a watered garden.

Terribly sad is it to see the professor of religion, lulled to sleep in the cradle of "carnal security," saying "peace, peace, when there is no peace." Sad to see them given over to hardness of heart when no truth seems to stir them or make them conscious of their danger and their need. Such people when visited by the most tragic experiences, are often unable to shed a tear. The stony heart makes it impossible to weep. God gives them over to their delusion. They have played fast and loose with God for so long that the light within them has become darkness, while at the same time many look upon them as most exemplary Christians. Some of these have heard holiness for years; have professed it. They may be in holiness churches, paying for the support of holiness preaching, or they may have gone into a church where the pastor intensifies their spiritual deadness with his pious soporifics. They will never become aware of their true state until the Judgment Day. Their pious profession will be torn from them and they will stand confused and confounded, not having on the wedding garment. Their naturally good disposition and pious manner are not enough. Only as we have fully yielded and continue to yield ourselves a living sacrifice upon the altar of the Lord, and the fire of heavenly love keeps falling on souls, can we expect to hear Jesus say, "Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."