

## **Warnings against spiritual decline and backsliding**

"Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone should fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up should cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." (Hebrews 12:14-15)

There are clear commands in the Bible to pursue holiness and make progress in our spiritual lives; but, at the same time, serious warnings are issued against those who fall short of the grace of God and again start living according to their old (carnal) nature. Such people easily become embittered due to disappointments and difficult circumstances, and then defile others with their doubts and negative thoughts. We either move forward spiritually and make progress towards holiness, or we fall backward. Those who draw nearer to the Lord, experience His peace and joy in their hearts and also live peacefully with other people, while those who backslide inevitably grow cold in their love towards God and their fellow human beings.

We are warned that we live in an apostatising world, which rapidly deteriorates while heading for the judgements of God. It is obvious that spiritual decline and deception are increasing in the end-time with a view to promoting a climate of receptivity to the Antichrist. However, Christians should look beyond these problems, expect the Rapture and Second Coming of Christ and keep on preparing to appear before Him in holiness. We should resist the deception and apostasy to ensure that we are not contaminated, discouraged or drawn away by it.

Peter says: "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and Godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God. ... Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace. ... You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away by the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:11-12, 14, 17-18) Peter closes his epistle with a word of warning and a word of encouragement. Professors Walvoord & Zuck (The Bible Knowledge Commentary) say: "The words since you know these things beforehand translate one Greek word, "proginoskontes", from which comes the English word "prognosis". When a medical prognosis is made, a patient is better able to prepare himself / herself for what is ahead and, if possible, to correct himself / herself. When a doctor says, "If you continue to eat as much as you do now, you will have serious heart problems in a few years", the patient knows beforehand and can therefore change his / her life in accordance with the information he / she has. Peter then warned, "Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away by the error of the wicked." The verb "led away" emphasises a group movement. False teachers are not satisfied with ambushing one or two, now and then, here and there; they want to sweep large groups of people away from the correct doctrine of Christ. Those who keep company with such people are in danger of being "led astray" (translated as "stumble" in 2 Peter 1:10 and "fallen" in Galatians 5:4)."

If you do not grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, then even the knowledge that you do have will become eroded over time and expose you to deception. The Bible warns us against spiritual stagnation and regression, as that is the opposite of growing in grace and holiness. The Bible offers us a clear prognosis of the spiritually sick world in which we live, so we can take fitting steps to avoid being drawn away by it. We should not become part of the spiritual

problems in the world, but instead remain immovably strong in our life of faith, thereby remaining part of the only solution which the unsaved and the backslidden believers so desperately need.

The New Testament is full of instruction on how "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." (Jude v. 3) Anton Bosch makes the following very relevant remark in this regard: "The fact is that all of the epistles, from Romans to Jude, are written with one primary goal, and that is to warn against the dangers of discouragement, unrepented sin, disobedience and false doctrine. If these did not have the potential of resulting in apostatising (falling away), then there would be no need for the endless warnings and then we may as well continue in sin that grace may abound. Certainly not! (Romans 6:1-2) If falling away was not a problem then why should we strive for pure doctrine, holy living and endurance?"

There are two different stages of backsliding, i.e. relapsing *in* grace and falling *from* grace. In the first phase, the person in question remains a child of the Lord as he / she has only grown cold in his / her love. Christ said: "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." (Matthew 24:11-12) Spiritual and moral decline initially only give rise to a 'cooling down' in people's spiritual lives. The Galatians were in a similar situation as they had backslidden from spiritual to fleshly Christians. Paul asked: "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to obtain your goal by human effort?" (Galatians 3:3) That was a common problem in the early Church, and that is why Paul said to the Corinthians: "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:1) They either stagnated spiritually because of not surrendering themselves completely to be filled by the Holy Spirit, or they backslid from a spiritual into a carnal state. Many Christians proceed along the path of deception and sin until they eventually fall from grace. The apostatising mainly occurs in two areas, i.e. a spiritual (doctrinal) falling away and moral (fleshly) sins in which backsliders indulge.

There are various examples in the Bible of people who completely fell from grace spiritually due to moral sins as well as the embracing of false teachings:

**Reverting to apostasy.** Already in the Old Testament, the consequences of spiritual backsliding were clearly indicated: "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die." (Ezekiel 18:24) This is the consequence of a complete falling away. Such people are again under the judgement of sinners, despite the fact that they earlier were believers who served the Lord. They lost their way and allowed their faith to be overturned.

**A threatening total apostatising.** After David had committed the severe sins of murder and adultery which were expressly forbidden by God's law, he realised that he was on the brink of a complete spiritual falling away as had happened to Saul before him. (1 Samuel 16:14) David earnestly prayed to the Lord for mercy, confessed his sins and pleaded that the Holy Spirit would not depart from him: "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight. ... Purge me ... and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ... Blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, o God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of

Your salvation." (Psalm 51:4, 7, 9-12) He did not continue to live as a backslider, but was forgiven, cleansed and fully restored to the service of the Lord.

**Falling from grace.** Paul warns the Galatians that should they continue to mix law and grace, they would subvert the New Testament doctrine of salvation to their own peril. By doing that they would forfeit their assurance of faith, as they no longer regarded the sacrifice of Christ as being sufficient without the law: "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Galatians 5:4) He was talking to people who have already received the Lord Jesus as Saviour and were established in His grace. However, should they revert to aspects of the law, they would deny Christ and inevitably lapse into an unsaved state. They would become "estranged" from Christ as the only Saviour, and again put themselves under the yoke of the law.

**Rejection of the doctrine of Christ.** The foundational principles of the gospel are non-negotiable. If anyone defects from these tenets he / she does not abide in Christ and inevitably loses his / her claim to salvation: "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son." (2 John:9) Professors Walvoord & Zuck (The Bible Knowledge Commentary, pp. 907-908) say the following on this Scripture: "These words suggest strongly that the apostle was thinking here of defection from the truth by those who had once held to it. The word "continue" (Greek "meno") has been used 23 times in 1 John in reference to the "abiding" life. A person who does not continue in a thing has evidently once been in it. The New Testament writers were realists about the possibility of true Christians falling prey to heresy and warned about it, particularly in the book Hebrews. John had just cautioned his readers about possible loss of reward (v.8). They were thus now cautioned not to overstep the boundaries of sound doctrine, but to remain where they were, and to abide (continue) in the teaching on Christ. To deviate from the truth is to leave God behind. God is not with a person who does so. What such a person does, he / she does without God."

**The severance of one's relationship with Christ.** The Lord Jesus emphasised the responsibility of believers to continuously abide in Him and avoid becoming estranged from Him: "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ... If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned." (John 15:4, 6) The Lord cannot become unfaithful, but we can neglect our relationship with Him, and ultimately depart from Him. The end of the backslider's path is the fire of God's judgements, because he has again joined the sinners and agnostics and condoned their actions. We will bear the consequences of whatever we do.

**An attack on faith by the god of money.** False teachings are proliferating during these last days. There is a very common predilection for the prosperity gospel among people who are strongly inclined to pursuing worldly joy and wealth. They do not love Christ for the spiritual needs of their immortal souls, but mainly for the acquisition of temporary blessings. Because of this materialistic attitude, Jesus describes them as spiritually blind and spews them out of His mouth. (Revelation 3:16-17) He severs His relationship with them because of their humanistic self-justification. The god of money, Mammon, is the driving force behind a false gospel which is intent on destroying people's faith. That is the reason why Jesus Christ stands outside the door of the end-time church of Laodicea to impress it on the hearts of the apostate members that

they are engaged in an empty and deceptive form of religion where He is excluded. They only boast in their own achievements and declare church members to be saved without spiritual regeneration. They only confess Christ with their lips but their hearts are far from Him. (cf. Matthew 15:8-9)

**The great falling away of the last days.** The Bible clearly warns against doctrinal decline. People who depart from the truth which they previously confessed, are playing into Satan's hands as they open themselves up to false teachings which emanate from the Great Deceiver: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons." (1 Timothy 4:1) Such people abandon the true faith and embrace false teachings, thereby deviating from their journey as followers of Christ. There is a marked increase in this phenomenon during the End Time, but it was prevalent right through the church dispensation. Paul exhorted Timothy to keep a fast hold on faith throughout his life in order to have "faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck." (1 Timothy 1:19) If we turn away from the truth, spiritual stumbling and ultimate shipwreck awaits us. Paul cites an example of such derailed disciples who departed from the faith, and says that they strayed from the truth, "and they overthrow the faith of some." (2 Timothy 2:16-18) Today, there are many of these people in the world who are spiritually shipwrecked, and they are now being used by Satan to destroy the faith of others.

**Relapsing into open heresy.** A major part of the spiritual decline of the last days is aimed at the denying of the Biblical Jesus, thereby preparing the way for the embracing of the false, universal Christ of all faiths - the Antichrist. (Revelation 13:3-4) The existence of Jesus is not denied, but He is wrongly portrayed as the historical Jesus who has no divine attributes and can therefore not save anybody's soul. Many of the preachers who themselves previously believed in the Biblical Jesus, but subsequently became apostate postmodern teachers, deceive many other people who are ignorant on God's Word, and guide them along the way to perdition: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed." (2 Peter 2:1-2) False teachers deceive people by proclaiming distorted dogmas that are at variance with God's Word. (2 Timothy 4:3-4) They despise and reject the truths of the Bible as old-fashioned and obsolete.

**A self-destructive denial of Biblical truths.** The very last warning in the Bible is addressed to people who deny aspects of God's Word, thereby effectively discarding them: "And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away His part from the Book Of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." (Revelation 22:19) This warning does not only apply to the book of Revelation, but refers to the entire Bible. (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Luke 21:33) Believers who submit to the power of deception and then start denying and spiritualising basic biblical doctrines, thereby removing them from the Bible, face the terrible prospect that their names could be blotted out from the Book Of Life. That means that their names were indeed entered into the book earlier, but were subsequently erased because of the heresies which they accepted. The overcomers who remained true to the Lord Jesus and His Word, are assured that they will never be counted among the defectors whose names will be removed: "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book Of Life." (Revelation 3:5) Why would such an assurance be given if no names can be erased from this book? Jesus will say to the overcomers: "... you

have kept My Word and have not denied My Name." (Revelation 3:8) They have persevered on the path of the Lord to the end.

The removing of important doctrines, precepts and promises from the Bible has already advanced so far that it has given rise to a comprehensive "theology of denial". The list of denials keeps on growing and already includes the following basic doctrines: faith in the Bible as the literally inspired and inerrant Word of God, the Creation account, the miracles in the Bible, the virgin birth, deity and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the saving power of His atoning death, the End Time restoration of Israel to their land, the Rapture, which is when the Heavenly Bridegroom will take away His bride, the End Time appearance of a personal Antichrist who will rule over the Earth for seven years, Christ's Millennium Reign of peace after His Second Coming, the restoration of the throne of David in Jerusalem, etc. What remains of the Bible when deceived theologians subject it to a humanly-conceived scientific worldview, and explain it in terms of critical-historical principles of exegesis, thereby robbing it of essential aspects of its basic meaning? An equally important question is: what will happen to the people who are guilty of these transgressions? Because of denying the Ultimate Truth, their names shall no longer appear on the list of the saved.

**The judgement upon false prophets.** These are self-appointed prophets who proclaim unverifiable extra-Biblical prophecies. With the book of Revelation having been written in conclusion of the Bible, we have the whole counsel of God that He wished to reveal to us (Acts 20:27), and for that reason we are not to add or take away anything from it: "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book." (Revelation 22:18) We should preach the Word only (2 Timothy 4:2), which means that alleged revelations through dreams, visions, audible voices, conversations with angels or deceased saints, are out of order. These messages are deceptive, and those who convey them must know that God's judgements are awaiting them. They will remain behind when the Lord comes for His own, despite the fact that they may have been popular preachers. (Matthew 7:22-23)

**Renewed slavery to sin.** Paul warns believers in Israel earnestly against reverting to a life under the domination of sin: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:12-13) It is obvious that these "brethren" should guard against yielding to sinful temptations, as that could lead to a life of indulgence in sin. If they do that, they will depart from the living God and eventually have evil and unbelieving hearts. If they die in that state, they will certainly be lost. They must repent anew if they wish to restore their relationship with Christ, but then they will have to realise that perseverance is needed to remain on the way of the Lord to the end: "For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end." (Hebrews 3:14; cf. Colossians 1:23)

**The lost son and his restoration.** In the parable of the lost son, we read about a young man who was overcome by sinful desires. In reaction to that, he wilfully broke his relationship with his father to go and enjoy whatever the sinful world could offer him. He lived a prodigal life and spent his money on prostitutes. (Luke 15:13, 30) Fortunately, this young man came to his senses and longed to return to his father and to restore his broken relationship with him. He firmly resolved: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, father, I have sinned against

Heaven and before you." (Luke 15:18) His father heartily forgave him and fully restored him. From this parable we learn that there definitely is grace to backsliders - even after they have fallen from grace and become slaves of sin again.

We should not make the mistake of justifying the prodigal son in his backslidden state by assuming that he could never have become lost because he would always, under all circumstances, be the son of his father. The father himself said to the older son: "Your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." (Luke 15:32) In his backslidden state the son was not physically dead, but spiritually. He was described as "lost" and "dead", but was revived from his spiritual deadness. The Greek word for "revive" is "anazao", which literally means "to live again". The Strong's concordance and dictionary renders its meaning "to recover life; live again; revive". This word can only apply to a person who was alive, then died, and was afterwards restored to life. The son was alive while in his father's house, then died spiritually after indulging in a life of sin and thus became lost, but was again made spiritually alive when he returned to his father. There is hope for backsliders, even if they have completely fallen from grace, and for that reason we should have a ministry to find the lost sheep and return them to the Lord's flock.

**A wrong concept of eternal security.** Many Christians derive unjustified conclusions from the following statement by the Lord Jesus: "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." (John 10:27-28) The Lord's promises are often attached to conditions, and in this case He expects faithfulness from His disciples. The verbs in question, "hear" (heed, obey) and "follow", are written in the continuous tense, which indicates that His committed disciples *continue* to hear and obey His voice and *keep on* following Him. They alone receive the assurance that nobody (no external power) will snatch them from the Lord's hand. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, but will give us the strength to overcome it. (1 Corinthians 10:13) Satan cannot snatch us from the Lord's hand unless we wilfully collaborate with him. Because we retain our free will we can, when subject to temptations, go out of the Lord's hand of our own volition. If we no longer heed His Word and start wandering away from His presence, we can definitely expect major problems. This principle is also confirmed in John 15:4-6, which says that the branch that does not abide in Christ, will wither away and ultimately end up in the fire. If we abide in Him, like He in us, then we will never be lost. In the book of Revelation, the faithful disciples of Jesus are described as overcomers and they are encouraged to hold fast what they have (keep on following Him) until He comes again. (Revelation 2:25-26; 3:10-11) Those who have left their first love (Jesus Christ) will soon find themselves in spiritual darkness unless they repent from this fallen state. (Revelation 2:4-5) The lampstand with its light symbolises the Holy Spirit, and the Lord will withdraw His Spirit from those who are unfaithful and failed to abide in their first love.

**Irreversible apostatising.** There is an extreme form of irreversible apostatising from which the guilty person cannot be saved, but there are few people who backslide to this point (Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29) In these verses Paul describes a form of spiritual treason. The person in question rejects the King of the Kingdom to which he belonged by trampling the blood of Christ under his feet and insulting the Spirit of grace. The Spirit finally withdraws from him, which means he can never again be under the conviction of sin and be spiritually restored. This person becomes reckless and utterly insensitive to Biblical truth, and would easily mock Christians.

We should always remember that God does not pre-destine people to Heaven or Hell, but that they have a free will and decide for themselves whether they will be saved or lost. A believer can, through his / her own actions, resist, grieve or quench the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). The angels in Heaven also have a free will, and we read that in spite of all the glory of God which they saw and experienced in Heaven, many of them rebelled against God under the provocation of Lucifer, and were cast out of Heaven: "For God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell ("tartarus", a place of confinement for Hell) and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgement." (2 Peter 2:4) However, backsliders have mostly merely been defeated by temptations, deception and doubts. They did not despise Christ or blaspheme the Holy Spirit - neither did the lost son slander and reject his father. There is still grace for them to be revived spiritually, therefore we should reach out to them and help them to return to the Lord and restore their broken relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

**The message of Pentecost.** The promise of the filling of the Holy Spirit should often be appropriated by faith. Search yourself anew to see if there is any sin in you, or a gradual process of growing cold in your love for the Lord. Ask Him to once again endue you with power from on high. If you do that you will never stumble. When the Holy Spirit has full control over our lives we will overcome the temptations to sin: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) We will also be delivered from spiritual deception as the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth and remind us of everything that Jesus said. (John 14:26) He will also give us enlightened eyes of the mind to be able to correctly discern God's Word and specifically also Biblical prophecies. (John 16:13) It is only through His power that we can put on the whole armour of God to remain standing against the wiles of Satan. (Ephesians 6:10-11)

The Lord calls us to a life of fruitfulness and victory. That is a practical life of growing in the Lord "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine." (Ephesians 4:13-14) When there is spiritual growth and progress, there will not be stagnation, and least of all backsliding to the point where we are no longer convinced whether we are truly saved or not. The possibility of falling away still exists, but that spurs us on to watch and pray more and to have a strong resolve not to succumb to temptations. When there is stability and divine fruit in our spiritual life, there is no place for fear over backsliding, since perfect love casts out all fear. (1 John 4:18)

When we have peace in our own hearts we will only be troubled and concerned when it is clear that some of our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord are being deceived or getting entangled in moral sins. When it is obvious that there is backsliding, everything possible should be done, through prayer and counselling, to have the person restored to a path of spiritual growth: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted." (Galatians 6:1; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:12) With eyes fixed upon Jesus we must proceed on our spiritual journey with dedication, always laying aside every weight and also the sin which so easily ensnares us (Hebrews 12:1-2) The Lord enables us to finish this race as victors who always abided in Christ and never strayed from Him: "And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming." (1 John 2:28)

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