

The Pilgrim's Regress

Guarding against Backsliding and
Apostasy in the Christian Life

Mark Jones



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2023 by Mark Jones

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are from the Holy Bible, King James Version (Authorized Version). First published in 1611.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62995-966-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-967-2 (ePub)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

With appreciation to two faithful pastors in my early Christian
life who helped this pilgrim to progress:

Leigh Robinson

Jack C. Whytock

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present
you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the
only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty,
dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

Jude 24-25

Contents

Foreword by Tim Challies	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	xvii
1. The Testimony of Scripture	1
2. The Pilgrim's Progress	13
3. The Varieties of Christians	25
4. The Insidiousness of Sin	37
5. The Coldness of Love	51
6. The Resurgence of Pride	65
7. The Abandonment of Godly Fear	77
8. The Death of Mortification	91
9. The Neglect of Prayer	105
10. The Disregard for Scripture	119
11. The Abandonment of Church	129
12. The Folly of Backsliding	139
13. The Recovery of Backsliders	149

14. The Slide to Apostasy	159
15. The Victory of Weak Grace	169
Conclusion	181
For Further Reading	185
Bibliography	187
Index of Scripture	193
Index of Subjects and Names	201

Foreword

Every Christian has witnessed a brother or sister in the Lord drifting from the faith that he or she once possessed. We have all witnessed some who were once committed and zealous growing cold, growing distant, growing dissatisfied. Alarmed, we wonder: Are they backsliding or are they in the process of rejecting the Christian faith altogether? Though we have all seen this, few of us have read good books about it. Though the experience is so common, resources are few. And for that reason I'm thankful for *The Pilgrim's Regress*. This book meets a need and fills a void.

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Mark Jones has written about a topic that is both alarming and comforting. It is alarming in its diagnosis of a spiritual condition that can afflict any of us if we fail to keep watch, if we fail to stay true, if we fail to remain faithful. Until our race is complete and we are safely in heaven, not one of us can stay still, not one of us can coast, not one of us can rest on our laurels. This book alarms and sobers us with the fear of what may befall us if we do not remain obedient to God and committed to his means of grace.

But this book is also comforting because it assures us that our God loves those who are truly his and that he will not let even one be lost. It assures us that none of us has sinned beyond the reach

of his grace or beyond his capacity to forgive. It assures us that God is always eager and willing to receive us back, even when we have drifted so much and slid so far.

Whether you are attempting to understand and guide someone who seems to be walking away, whether you are a pastor wondering whether one of your parishioners is backslidden or fallen away, or whether you have concerns for the state of your own soul, *The Pilgrim's Regress* will bless and help you. Drawing from the deep wells of Christians from ages long past, and fully dependent on the Bible, Jones writes with a theologian's precision and a pastor's love. He writes to encourage and to comfort, to reprove and to exhort. He writes ultimately to glorify our God and serve his people.

Tim Challies
www.challies.com

Preface

In 2013 I wrote *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (P&R Publishing). It addressed several problems occurring in broadly Reformed circles. At the time, an idea emerged that sanctification was the art of *simply* getting used to one's justification. Usually associated with this belief were other worrying views that became entrenched in much popular thinking. Several shibboleths emerged that were not quite in line with historic Reformed orthodoxy, but to query them was to put oneself at risk of being "anti-gospel." To warn believers of potential spiritual harm because of spiritual lukewarmness seemed to be contrary to the frequent calls to believers to "rest in God's amazing grace."

We can be thankful for Christian books that faithfully speak of the glories of God's salvation through Christ. But what about books that address issues that are a little uncomfortable for us to consider? Are we so naive as to think that all is well in the church today? And if we agree that some serious problems plague the church, are we prepared to accept that sometimes we need to be exhorted and warned, not just encouraged?

This book looks at Christian backsliding and, to a lesser extent, apostasy. To teach and preach on backsliding, one must have clear ideas of what is required to walk faithfully with God. Since many

wish to make the Christian life merely a matter of resting in God's grace, they don't feel too comfortable talking about the reality that one can backslide, even while in a state of grace, and suffer some spiritual harm (e.g., infrequent communion with God). But difficult topics are not to be avoided. They require care, precision, and a pastoral aim to help God's people. So in this book on backsliding and apostasy, I have enlisted the help of pastors and theologians from various eras in church history who found it necessary to write on these issues. A topic that seems to be avoided today certainly was not in past eras.

Some of these guides include the so-called Puritans, though I prefer to think of most of these British theologians as Reformed Catholics. After all, their sermons and writings are littered with references to many pastors and theologians from previous eras of church history (hence, Catholicity), but they also were part of a robust Reformed and ecumenical confessional tradition in one way or another (hence, Reformed). The Puritans are not always well liked, even in certain Reformed circles. This is odd for a few reasons, not least of which is the possibly bothersome fact that the Puritans wrote the confessional documents that many Presbyterian churches embrace to this day. Be that as it may, many will speak of how the Puritans rob one of assurance, and they may point to John Owen's work on mortification or even John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as examples. Yet it is Thomas Goodwin's work *The Heart of Christ in Heaven towards Sinners on Earth* that provided the backbone to Dane Ortlund's well-received book *Gentle and Lowly*.

One must wonder whether these critics of the Puritans have read widely and carefully in other eras of church history. If such people have reservations about Puritan pastoral theology, I cannot imagine how they would feel after reading many of the early church fathers or the medieval theologians. Even first-generation Reformers wrote some startling things that would make us squirm

a little. And whatever you do, do not read the chapter “Remember Lot’s Wife” in J. C. Ryle’s book *Holiness*.

In this book, while I made use of the Puritans, I also enjoyed very much the work of theologians from diverse traditions such as Thomas Boston (1676–1732), Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), and Octavius Winslow (1808–78). None of these men were Puritans. But they wrote clearly and perceptively on backsliding and apostasy. They understood the dangers of backsliding, its symptoms, and the cures required to bring saints back into close fellowship with God and his people.

This is not an academic work, but a book on pastoral theology. Ordinarily, pastors should be best suited to write and preach on this topic, given that they have had direct dealings with backsliders and apostates. This is a sad reality that pastors face, regardless of the health of their churches. I am deeply thankful for the faithfulness of God’s servants in my own church, where I have been privileged to minister for over fifteen years. During this time, some have drifted and returned; some have drifted and, sadly, not (yet?) returned; some are apparently drifting; others may yet drift; and many are gloriously growing in grace as they walk toward glory. In truth, the backsliding of church members is only part of the story. In keeping with one of the messages of this book, I also don’t know how often God has used my fellowship with these faithful saints to preserve me (and them) from backsliding. But I do know enough by now to thank God for them with this in mind.

Of all the books that I have been able to write, this one has been particularly difficult, not only because it hits close to home concerning many people in my own life whom I love, but also because I know my own heart, and some of the writing on these pages came naturally based on personal (and painful) experience. For that reason, I pray that if there is hurt on these pages for you, there will also be hope, healing, and happiness.

Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been made possible by the help of many people. In particular, I would like to thank John Hughes at P&R Publishing for all the work he has done in making this book a reality. Also, good editors are hard to find, but Karen Magnuson is one such editor. My friend Bob McKelvey read through the entire manuscript and made many helpful comments. He has been a great blessing to me over the years since he first supervised my MA thesis on John Owen. In Vancouver, I am blessed to have a supportive congregation with elders who encourage me to write for the wider church. And in this instance, a deacon at Faith Church, Mike O'Donaghue, read through the manuscript and offered some specific encouragements. Finally, I could not ask for a better family. My wife and children are, to quote Tina Turner, simply the best. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Introduction

There is no such thing in the New Testament as a believer whose perseverance is so guaranteed that he can afford to ignore the warning notes which are sounded so frequently. (Sinclair Ferguson)¹

The great nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian William Plumer tells of someone accusing a minister of opposing the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The minister affirmed that he was in fact against the perseverance of (unrepentant) sinners, while fully supportive of the perseverance of the saints. Not satisfied with that, the accuser replied, “Do you think that a child of God cannot fall very low, and yet be restored?”² Without denying the possibility, the minister calmly remarked that it would be “very dangerous to make the experiment.”³ Plumer agrees and adds, “He who is determined to see how far he may

1. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981), 174.

2. William S. Plumer, *Vital Godliness: A Treatise on Experimental and Practical Piety* (New York: American Tract Society, 1864), 148.

3. Plumer, 148.

decline in religion and yet be restored, will lose his soul.”⁴ While I might prefer to say “will likely lose his soul,” Plumer’s instinct appears correct: it is a dangerous thing to willfully drift away from God, otherwise known as Christian backsliding.

Christians generally accept the plain teaching of the Scriptures that, once in Christ, they are to become like him in holiness (Rom. 8:29), as they die unto sin and live unto righteousness. The life of faith (Gal. 2:20)—the sanctified life—is a journey “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). But Christians also realize that remaining, indwelling sin keeps us from pursuing Christ as we should and, worse yet, sometimes leads us to pull away from him. Such a drift, left unchecked, we call *backsliding*.

A pull away from living well for God, and by God’s grace, seems a constant thorn in our flesh. Speaking on backsliding, Charles Spurgeon said to his congregation on March 13, 1870, “I fear the disease is so rife among the people of God that there is scarcely one of us who has not at some time or other suffered from it.”⁵

If there is one consideration more humbling than another to a spiritually-minded believer, it is, that, after all God has done for him,—after all the rich displays of his grace, the patience and tenderness of his instructions, . . . the tokens of love received, and the lessons of experience learned, there should still exist in

4. Plumer, 148.

5. Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1871), 145. The remainder of Spurgeon’s sentence adds: “and I fear that the most of us might confess if we judged our own hearts rightly, that in some measure we are backsliding even now.” I think I understand the sense of what Spurgeon says here, especially considering his phrasing “in some measure.” Yet my definition of backsliding as something more obvious and sustained rather than our general failures as Christians leads me to say that I likely wouldn’t try to cast such doubt on my own flock that they are all basically backsliders. If everyone is a backslider, then nobody is a backslider.

the heart a principle, the tendency of which is to secret, perpetual, and alarming departure from God.

So wrote Octavius Winslow, a nineteenth-century pastor and contemporary of Charles Spurgeon and of J. C. Ryle, in his outstanding work *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*.⁶ Truly, few children of God are exempt from the humbling acknowledgment that we quickly and easily depart from living for God as we turn away from our Savior and thus grieve the Spirit.

Do you sense a general decline in faithful biblical zeal toward God in the church today? I do not think we can argue that things are worse now than they have ever been. This seems hard to prove and reveals a naive understanding about church history and people. Naturally, we tend to think that we are now living in a time of real spiritual distress. And in a sense, we are! If statistics are to be believed, as well as common observations, since roughly 2015 we have been facing a “de-churching crisis,” so to speak.

We are living in precarious times. Yet the Puritan John Owen felt the same way in his day. In his work *On the Nature of Apostasy*, he opens “To the Reader” by arguing:

That the state of religion is at this day deplorable in most parts of the Christian world is acknowledged by all who concern themselves in any thing that is so called. . . . The whole world is so evidently filled with the dreadful effects of the lusts of men, and sad tokens of divine displeasure, that all things from above and here below proclaim the degeneracy of our religion, in its profession, from its pristine beauty and glory.⁷

6. Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 9.

7. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850–53), 7:3.

One wonders what Owen might have to say today (probably a lot!).

We should not think that we are the worst of all, but we also need to be careful not to think that we are experiencing an age of unprecedented blessing. Speaking as a pastor, I see the reality of the recent worldwide global pandemic (COVID-19) as exacerbating certain issues that were likely present in the church but are now openly manifest in unique ways (e.g., lack of or indifference to hospitality).

Many Christians are lamenting their own personal declension during the past few years. Some seem genuinely concerned about their continued personal apathy and lukewarmness toward the things of the Lord, but they are not quite sure how to “rebound” and rediscover their first love. Others appear to be aware that their Christian living does not look or feel as it used to, but they seem indifferent about their malaise. Many willfully miss corporate worship, and their consciences don’t appear to prick them as they may have in the past because these people are living off various excuses that no longer seem entirely justifiable. Some still claim to watch online services, but even those who do so will admit that they tend to watch when convenient and often with little attention.

We can have some sympathy for how difficult many aspects of Christian living have become because of the pandemic. Christian fellowship and hospitality, for instance, were relegated to Zoom meetings in many countries, which simply catalyzed a struggle with being inhospitable toward others and so toward the Lord (Matt. 25:40). Even so, that does not change the reality for many that they are backsliding. Indeed, many parents are realizing how their children have not made great progress in the past few years, and so their concern is heightened by the stress they feel about the spiritual condition of their beloved offspring—and many of these parents will humbly acknowledge that they share some blame for the spiritual lethargy, indifference, and ignorance in their children.

Such manifestations of spiritual lethargy and unfaithfulness

reveal a spirit of backsliding that must be repented of. Indeed, backsliding of any sort is extremely serious in God's eyes. In the words of Thomas Adams, "backsliding has ever been a sin most odious to God; yes, it is a pack or bundle of sins trussed up together, all derogatory to his honor, and contrary to his nature."⁸ We reveal our hypocrisy to a God of truth; we reveal our inconstancy to a God who does not change; we reveal our infidelity to a faithful God; and we reveal our ingratitude to a gracious God.⁹

There must (and can) be a return to God and Christ by the Spirit. Hosea, concerned with Baal-worship in the northern kingdom that primarily manifested itself in sexual idolatry, pleads, "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity" (Hos. 14:1). Repentance leads to life and promises:

I will heal their apostasy;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them. (Hos. 14:4)

God's love is a drawing, wooing love to himself for the repentant backslider; it is a free love: "I will love them freely." But repentance is not a guarantee, as the Scriptures plainly testify. There are some who either slowly or quickly depart from the Lord and apparently never return. Peter and Judas jumped into a cauldron of sin, but only Peter emerged from it. As Andrew Fuller notes in his perceptive work *The Backslider*, "But whatever difference there be between a partial and a total departure from God, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the party himself at the time to perceive it."¹⁰ Similarly, Richard Bax-

8. Thomas Adams, *An Exposition upon the Second Epistle General of St. Peter* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 570.

9. Adams, 570.

10. Andrew Fuller, *The Backslider* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1840),

19. Sinclair Ferguson likewise notes: "The solemn fact is that none of us can tell

ter wisely remarked that “partial backsliding has a natural tendency to total apostasy, and would effect it, if special grace did not prevent it.”¹¹ The slippery slope does exist, and some who slide continue on it till they fall off into eternal darkness and despair.

We must reckon with the fact that the Scriptures offer plenty of salient examples of total abandonment from the faith. This is called *apostasy*. “After having made a profession of the true religion,” says Fuller, “they apostatize from it.” He adds: “I am aware it is common to consider a backslider as being a good man, though in a bad state of mind: but the scriptures do not confine the term to this application. . . . Backsliding, it is true, always supposes a profession of the true religion; but it does not necessarily suppose the existence of the thing professed. There is a perpetual backsliding, a drawing back unto perdition.”¹² We cannot merely consider backsliding without therefore also considering the consequence of unrepentant backsliding: apostasy.

The goal of this book is not merely to establish the fact of backsliding and apostasy, but to diagnose it in such a way that we are aware of the dangers and symptoms of drifting from the Lord and so apply the various remedies offered by God in his Word for healing the backslidden soul. I am incapable of preventing the total apostasy whereby it is impossible to be restored again to repentance (see Heb. 6:4–6). I can only hope to assist in alarming and awakening the backslider to the real threats and dangers of personal declension that lead to apostasy. So while the diagnosis is crucial, the remedy is even more so—and it must be one that wins backsliders back to God from their turning away.

the difference between the beginning of backsliding and the beginning of apostasy. Both look the same.” “Apostasy and How It Happens,” March 14, 2023, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/apostasy-and-how-it-happens>.

11. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* [. . .] (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1860), 125.

12. Fuller, *The Backslider*, 16–17.

If you are reading this book, you may be concerned about your own spiritual condition or the spiritual condition of others you love, and so you are seeking help. Or you are someone, perhaps even a pastor, who senses that something is not quite right with some of your people, and you are looking for help on how to recognize and deal with the dangers you are witnessing. May God be pleased to help all pastors develop such a caring sensitivity toward their wayward congregants. Or you may be a concerned family member who fears for the soul of a loved one. Many of us find ourselves in that position at some point in our lives. Take comfort; the Lord's arm is not too short to save (Isa. 59:1), and his arm is his Son, Jesus Christ, who finds his sheep and brings them back into the fold. But those who wander must be identified so that they may be found.

"I once was lost, but now am found," from the hymn "Amazing Grace!"¹³ could in fact have some application to the returning backslider, who, we pray, can again sing those words with a new-found fervor for God's patient, unchanging, amazing grace.

13. John Newton, "Amazing Grace!" (1779).

1

The Testimony of Scripture

O Backsliders, your case is a fearful one. (Thomas Boston)¹

Backsliding and Apostasy

In the beginning, Adam and Eve fell away from God, which led to their departure from the temple of the Lord (Eden). While their case is unique compared to the rest of those in the church, given that they lived in both the prefall and postfall periods, they were first to turn away from God and, in a certain sense, play the role of backsliders and apostates. Excommunicated from the Edenic temple, they were gloriously recovered by God's promise (Gen. 3:15) and brought back into fellowship with him, albeit as those who would live with indwelling sin for the remainder of their lives on earth.

Since the time of the fall, the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, reveals a disturbing catalogue of examples of backsliders and apostates from among the people of God. But the Bible also

1. Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston*, 12 vols. (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1852), 11:390.

reveals a patient, forgiving, gracious God so that backsliders do not need to remain on that path.

Backsliding is, as we would expect, a heart issue. So too is total apostasy, but in a different way. The latter reveals a heart of stone that has resisted the Holy Spirit in distinct ways. Apostates were at one time a type of backslider, but not all backsliders—praise God!—are necessarily apostates. A true Christian may backslide, but a saint who has been given the gift of supernatural faith from above cannot ultimately apostatize from the faith. Weak grace for those in Christ always proves victorious. An apostate who never returns to the Lord may have professed faith in Christ, but such a person was never truly engrafted into Christ to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, though he or she may have experienced many spiritual realities.

Archibald Alexander, in his excellent work *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, has a section on backsliding in which he not only distinguishes between perpetual and temporary backsliding, but also notes that those who live consistently godly lives can experience “short seasons of comparative coldness and insensibility” so that they “have not always equal light, and life, and comfort, in the divine life.”² These are common occurrences in the lives of faithful Christians and should not necessarily be termed *backsliding*. Rather, backsliding is something whereby a Christian is “gradually led off from close walking with God, loses the lively sense of divine things, becomes too much attached to the world and too much occupied with secular concerns; until at length the keeping of the heart is neglected, closet duties are omitted or slightly performed, zeal for the advancement of religion is quenched, and many things once rejected by a sensitive conscience, are now indulged and defended.”³ In other words, much of Christian obedience gets thrown off course.

2. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 206.

3. Alexander, 207.

In this book, we are concerned not so much with “short seasons” (e.g., a bad day or week) when we feel a little cold in our spiritual experience, but with formal backsliding and its relation to apostasy. Theologians who have addressed this matter have wisely stayed away from assigning definite periods of time to when spiritual sloth becomes formal backsliding. If we were to argue that three weeks of indifference to spiritual things constitutes backsliding, some might allow themselves two and a half weeks of “casual Christianity.” I confess to not wishing to assign a definite period for that reason, but I think one should certainly be careful when days of ignoring God and Christ quickly turn to weeks and months. There can be no room for allowing ourselves a holiday from serving Christ. He calls us to daily denial (Luke 9:23). Total apostasy, however, can be more easily defined in terms of a definite period insofar as the true apostate does not ultimately return to the faith.

The Scottish theologian Ebenezer Erskine makes the distinction between “a total, as also a partial defection or falling off from Christ.”⁴ The wicked (reprobate) constitute the former (i.e., total), whereas the godly can fall into the latter (i.e., partial). Erskine adds that the godly may temporarily turn away from the Lord, “for they may be left for a considerable time, to make many woeful steps of defection from Christ and his ways.” “But,” he says, “when they fall, they are like wood or cork falling into water, who though they sink at first, yet they rise again by faith and repentance.”⁵ True believers may even fall in such a way as to be labeled apostate, but they will return to the fold because grace will prove victorious. As John Flavel remarks in his work *The Fountain of Life*: “though believers are not privileged from

4. Ebenezer Erskine, *The Whole Works of the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine: Consisting of Sermons and Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects* [. . .], 3 vols. (London: William Baynes and Son, 1826), 1:24.

5. Erskine, 1:24.

backslidings, yet they are secured from final apostasy and ruin. The new creature may be sick, it cannot die. Saints may fall, but they shall rise again (Mic. 7:8).⁶

Chapter 17 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, “Of the Perseverance of the Saints,” acknowledges the fact of backsliding. While affirming the final perseverance of all true believers (17.1–2), the divines also recognized that some true believers may “through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalence of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their perseverance, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God’s displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalise others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves” (WCF 17.3).

In the following chapter in the confession (18.4), we are told that true Christians in their backsliding can experience an attack on their assurance of faith. As they are negligent in spiritual duties (e.g., prayer, public worship) and as they sometimes fall into a pattern of willful sinning for a period (e.g., habitual drunkenness, consistent use of pornography), their consciences are wounded, and they grieve the Holy Spirit. God can withdraw “the light of his countenance” and allow such people to, for a time, “walk in darkness and to have no light.” As the divines made clear, however, “yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair” (WCF 18.4). This is an apt

6. John Flavel, *The Works of the Rev. Mr. John Flavel*, 6 vols. (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 1:352.

description of a backslider who has returned to communion with God.

The divines say things about the backslider that today we sometimes deny or feel embarrassed to affirm. The idea that believers can bring temporal judgments on themselves, receive God's displeasure, and walk in darkness without the light of God's countenance is practically denied by many preachers who, in some cases, would witness some strange and perhaps even angry looks if they ever spoke of these things from the pulpit with even an ounce of conviction.

Now, we need to be reminded that this is a book primarily for and about professing Christians or those who once made a profession of faith but seem to be walking in darkness away from the presence of the light of the Lord. *Backslider* refers to a person who is still part of the visible church and has not abandoned the faith altogether. *Apostate* does not describe every unbeliever in the world. Rather, an apostate once belonged to the visible church by way of profession. Apostates make "shipwreck of their faith" and are thus handed over to Satan (1 Tim. 1:19–20). They go out from the church, but they were not of the people of God, "for if they had been of us," says John, "they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). Apostates incur greater guilt on themselves than pagans living in a land where the gospel has not reached them.

Exposed and disgraced false teachers in the church are guiltiest of the worst forms of apostasy, as Peter explains: "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first" (2 Peter 2:20). Since teachers will be judged more strictly (James 3:1), apostate false teachers have a weighty judgment awaiting them.

Backsliding and apostasy are church-related issues, in one way or another. A group of unreached people may not believe in the

Son of God for forgiveness of their sins, but they are not those who are described in this book.

Old Testament Examples

Backsliding and apostasy frequently happened in the Old Testament. It happened to individuals (e.g., Esau, Lot's wife). King Asa is one example among many. While the Chronicler has a generally favorable view of his reign, in the last five years of his life Asa backslides and fails to trust in God as he should, preferring instead to trust in alliances with foreigners (2 Chron. 16:1–14). Asa appears to even receive punishment for his sin (v. 12). Not just individuals, but corporately we see backsliding and apostasy among God's people (see Numbers; Judges).

Deuteronomy describes "certain worthless fellows," who left the people of God to serve other gods (Deut. 13:13). In Jeremiah's time, Judah forsook the Lord and instead trusted in pagan allies such as Egypt and Assyria, whose gods could not protect them (Jer. 1:16). Thus, Jeremiah declares:

Your evil will chastise you,
and your apostasy will reprove you.
Know and see that it is evil and bitter
for you to forsake the LORD your God;
the fear of me is not in you,
declares the Lord GOD of hosts. (Jer. 2:19)

What is called "apostasy" is later called "perpetual backsliding" in Jeremiah 8:5:

Why then has this people turned away
in perpetual backsliding?
They hold fast to deceit;
they refuse to return.

Both amount to a turning away from the Lord, a forsaking of faithful covenant relations. And while for the purposes of this book we are distinguishing the two, the Scriptures tend to see them in very close relation, and so must we.

The book of Judges is another clear example of Israel's backsliding and apostasy. In Judges 2:11–15, God's people served the Baals and thus abandoned the Lord—they abandoned their God who had rescued them from Egypt. Going after other gods, they provoked the Lord, who handed them over to their enemies. Despite their terrible distress, they did not listen. We know this because a constant refrain emerges in the book of Judges, “And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2:11; 3:7; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Various kings, as well, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (e.g., 1 Kings 15:26, 34; 2 Kings 21:20).

Many more examples could be offered. Whether recorded in the Major Prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah) or the Minor Prophets (e.g., Hosea, Amos), God's people in the Old Testament were constantly turning away from the Lord, and in many cases the judgments they received were testimonies to the seriousness of their offenses. For to whom much is given, much is expected (Luke 12:48).

New Testament Examples

In the New Testament, the reality of backsliding and apostasy does not simply disappear because of the stability and glories of the new covenant. Sadly, the dangers are littered all over the pages of the New Testament, with even whole books (e.g., Hebrews, Revelation) given to warning Christians about the dangers of falling away and the need to remain faithful to Christ as the only hope for salvation in a world that will one day be judged.

The author of Hebrews seems to make both backsliding and apostasy a central focus of the letter—not just in the obvious

places (Heb. 6:4–6; 10:25–29), but throughout the letter from beginning to end. In fact, in the letter, Old Testament examples (e.g., Ps. 95) serve as a warning for Christians living in the new covenant (Heb. 3–4). For one thing, the author seems to be concerned that all his hearers take seriously the dangers of “an evil, unbelieving heart,” which can lead people “to fall away from the living God” (3:12). The deceitfulness of sin can harden us and lead to rebellion against God (vv. 13–15).

Our Lord confronts the seven churches, sometimes with startling warnings. To the church in Ephesus he says: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). And in the letter to the church in Laodicea, the backsliding Laodiceans are warned that their pride and complacency may lead to a judgment of apostasy. Jesus declares: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:15–17). The Lord, who stands rejected outside the church, in his grace yet knocks and offers restoration if they repent. But Jesus warns them because he loves them (“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent,” v. 19). This type of pastoral care from Christ cannot be questioned, though one might quietly think that Jesus may be speaking a little too harshly for our modern sensibilities. The reality of his words shows us that sometimes entire congregations can spiritually drift.

None of the examples offered should surprise us if we have given even a passing reading to the Gospels. In the parable of the sower, Jesus highlights various types of people. There is a certain type of hearer (“sown on rocky ground,” Matt. 13:20) who hears the Word and even receives it with joy. Such a person “has no

root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (v. 21). This is a falling away, an apostasy.

Turning from the Lord is serious. Lot’s wife “looked back” and was destroyed (Gen. 19:26; see also Luke 9:62, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”). Jesus dealt with disciples who “turned back and no longer walked with him” (John 6:66). God does not delight in “those who shrink back and are destroyed” (Heb. 10:38–39). Christian living is a going forward, but backsliding is just that: a going backward. And sometimes that “backward” eventually manifests itself, if there is no repentance, in apostasy. It is a running from God to another god and becoming like that god (Pss. 115:4–8; 135:15–18).

Many people in the church are fond of the saying, “Major on the majors, minor on the minors.” Naturally, there is some truth in this, if only we can all agree on what the “majors” and “minors” are! But if we are going to adopt such an approach to pastoral ministry, it may mean a great many more warnings about the dangers of backsliding and apostasy than we are comfortable with. Our Lord did not hesitate to warn his hearers, and neither did the author of Hebrews.

Besides the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dort explain how the warnings have a positive use in the perseverance of the saints. In an English translation from the authorized Latin version in the Fifth Head of Doctrine (“Of the Perseverance of the Saints”), article 14, we read: “As it has pleased God to begin his work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so he preserves, continues and perfects it through the hearing, reading, meditation, exhortations, threatenings, [and] promises of that same gospel, and also through the use of the sacraments.”⁷ God

7. John Owen writes in connection with a gospel threat: “A fond conceit has befallen some, that all denunciations of future wrath, even unto believers, is legal, which therefore it does not become the preachers of the gospel to insist upon: so

preserves his people through many means, including promises and threats.

Indeed, the apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, has a rather long and important section on just this point. After reminding his hearers of the wickedness of certain Old Testament saints, with whom God was not pleased, and the subsequent judgments from God, Paul tells the Corinthians that these past historical events among God's people "took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor. 10:6). We should avoid the various temptations to turn away from the Lord to idolatry. These past acts of infidelity by those who claimed to be God's people should instruct us (v. 11) and cause us not to be overconfident. After all, warns Paul, "let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (v. 12).

The facts of biblical history tell us that all too often God's people did not find the infinite God satisfactory, lovely, and sufficient. God's goodness was deemed unacceptable, unenticing, and uninteresting. And when this happened, it was a type of practical atheism. The apostate is denying the God that he or she once claimed to know through Christ, and this, according to Stephen Charnock, "is a greater affront to deny him, after an experience of his sweetness and assistance, than to deny him before any dealing with him, or trial of him."⁸ He adds that "though all apostasy begins in a neglect, yet it quickly ripens into a hatred."⁹ The apostate hates

*would men make themselves wiser than Jesus Christ and all his apostles, yes, they would disarm the Lord Christ, and expose him to the contempt of his vilest enemies. There is also, we see, a great use in these evangelical threatenings to believers themselves. And they have been observed to have had an effectual ministry, both unto conversion and edification, who have been made wise and dexterous in managing gospel [threats] toward the consciences of their hearers. And those that hear the word may hence learn their duty, when such threatenings are handled and opened to them." *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850–53), 3:287.*

8. Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864–66; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 5:492.

9. Charnock, 5:492.

God. The backslider needs to be warned that drifting from God is a secret type of hatred that, sadly, left unchecked can become open hatred.

Application

What lessons can we glean from this brief look at examples from God's Word?

First, God warns his people of their turning away from him in order that they may turn back to him through faith and repentance. This is a note that will sound often in this book because it is a note that is often sounded in God's Word. Pastoral care requires warnings when there is a need to be warned! One should not go around frightening the godly, who, while conscious of their sin, are living in fellowship with God and his people. But we do have a duty to those who have become lukewarm. Christ makes promises to backsliders in Ephesus and Laodicea (see Rev. 2:7; 3:20–21). True, his threats are real, but so too are his offers of mercy and grace. If a doctor told a sick patient that all was well, we would accuse such a physician of malpractice. Sadly, many pastors today are too afraid to confront backsliders, and this may reveal a backslidden pastor. But the pastor also needs to hold out the same promises and comforts to backsliders (who repent) that we see in God's Word. If we are so sure that there is a remedy for a disease, we should not shy away from exposing a spiritual illness.

Second, the discussion above has shown that turning away from the Lord is a predominant theme in the biblical story. We can, however, distinguish between a total falling away (apostasy) and a temporary turning away (backsliding). It is hard to distinguish the two when the person is in the process of turning away from the Lord. But John Owen makes an important point that "it may be given as a safe rule in general, that he who is spiritually sensible of the evil of his backsliding is unquestionably in a recoverable

condition; and some may be so who are not yet sensible thereof, so long as they are capable of being made so by convictions. No man is past hopes of salvation until he is past all possibility of repentance; and no man is past all possibility of repentance until he be absolutely hardened against all gospel convictions.”¹⁰ There is always hope unless a person is “absolutely hardened” against the gospel. And when one is sensible of his or her own lukewarmness, then we have hope that gospel light will begin to shine on the darkness that has—we pray—only temporarily entered the soul.

For Further Reflection

1. Can you think of some other examples of backsliding and apostasy in the Scriptures that were not mentioned in this chapter?
2. What is the difference between backsliding and apostasy?
3. Do you see this danger in the church today? If so, how?
4. Read and meditate on Hosea 14; 1 Corinthians 10:1–12; Hebrews 3–4.

10. Owen, *Works*, 7:236.