

THE BACKSLIDER'S WAY HEDGED UP

NO. 590

A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“She said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink. Therefore, behold, I will hedge up your way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths. And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now.”
Hosea 2:5-7.

GREAT and grievous was the apostasy of the seed of Abraham from the Lord their God. They had been chosen by special grace from among all people, and had the high honor to receive the oracles of God, yet they were bent on backsliding from God, and were unfaithful to the Most High. The gods of the surrounding heathen were constantly a snare to them, and they forsook the only living and true God to prostrate themselves before blocks of wood and stone. Though chastened a thousand times they learned nothing by the rod, and though as frequently forgiven and visited with mercy, the holy bonds of gratitude did not bind them to their God. As an abandoned woman leaves a kind and tender husband for the base love of the vilest of the vile, even so both Israel and Judah played the harlot towards the Lord who had espoused them in infinite love.

Yet God has not even now written a bill of divorcement, or cast away the people whom He did foreknow. Through eighteen hundred years the sons of Israel have had to wander to and fro without a settled dwelling place, yet God has not utterly given them up or broken His covenant with them, for the day shall come when Israel shall return, when again she shall be called Hephzibah, and her land Beulah. Come, long expected day! Appear, You glorious King of the Jews! and you, O Judah, return from your captivity, shake yourself from the dust, put on your beautiful garments, and salute the Lord, your Ishi, your tender, loving Husband.

Beloved brethren and sisters, the apostasy of the children of Israel has been recorded for our learning, for, as they were prone to wander, so are we, and the methods by which God brought them back of old are precisely those which He uses with His erring children at the present day. Instead of wondering at Israel's wickedness, let us examine ourselves, and repent for our own sins, and while we see the hand of God upon *them*, let us learn to admire those methods of unerring wisdom by which divine love preserves the ransomed ones from going down into the pit.

In considering our text, my aim will be to be used as the Holy Spirit's instrument to arouse, instruct, and restore backsliders. Such wanderers may be present now. Their first love they have lost, and their zeal is quenched. There may be some here who have gone further still, and have forsaken the church of God altogether, having given up their profession and all attendance upon divine worship. O that the voice of Israel's God may be heard in their hearts this morning, crying, "If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted? but you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, says the LORD."

I. We commence the consideration of the passage before us with the remark that **WHILE SINFUL MEN ARE IN PROSPERITY THEY PERVERT THE MERCIES OF GOD TO THEIR OWN INJURY**, making them instruments of sin and weapons of warfare against God.

While the children of Israel enjoyed an abundance of temporal comforts they ascribed all these blessings to their false gods. Hear the wicked and treacherous words—"I will go after my lovers that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink." Oh! base ingratitude to their bounteous JEHOVAH! Infamous ascription of His glory to graven images! Prosperous sinners make three great mistakes. At the outset *they give their temporal mercies the first place in their hearts*. Because their business prospers, they do not consider that their soul is perishing, because there is enough on the table for themselves and for their children, they forget that their soul is famished for lack of heaven's bread. They put the shadows of time before the realities of eternity. They say, "*We must live,*" but they forget that *they must die*. So long as the current glides smoothly and the gentle flow of the river of their joy is undisturbed, they forget the cataract red with the blood of souls down whose tremendous steeps those treacherous waters will soon hurry them.

Is it not a gross mistake to attach so much importance to this poor body of clay, and forget the priceless jewel of the immortal soul? Why do you think so much of a world in which we only tarry for a few evil years, and neglect the world where we must dwell forever? Such folly is most shameful in one who was once a professed Christian, because he knew, or professed to know, somewhat of the superiority of the eternal over the temporal, of the vanity of things earthly and the glory of things heavenly. Yet because things go well with him—because his wife is in health, his children blooming, his house well furnished, his property increasing, he says, "Soul, take your ease," and disturbs not himself, though heaven is black with lowering tempest, and the light of God's countenance is hidden from him. The loss of God's presence the man thinks to be a trifle, because he is succeeding in the world, as though a man should count it nothing to lose his life if he may but keep his raiment whole to be buried in. O fools, thus to put the last things first, and the first things last.

One error leads to another, and hence such people *hold their temporal things upon a wrong tenure*. Do observe how many times the word "my" is found in the text. "Give me *my* bread and *my* water, and *my* wool and *my* flax, *my* oil and *my* drink." Why, they were not hers but God's, for the Lord expressly claims them all in the ninth verse, and threatens to take them all away.

Backslider, there was a time when you did confess yourself to be God's steward, when you said, "I am not my own, but bought with a price," yet now you have so set your heart upon worldly things, that all your talk runs in this fashion, *my* horses, *my* houses, *my* lands, *my* profits, *my* children, and an endless list of things which you think to be altogether yours. Why, man, they are not yours, they are only lent you for a season, you are but God's under-bailiff, you have possession only as tenant-at-will, or as a borrower holding a loan. The Lord claims even now the prior right to all you have, and the day shall come when He shall show you this, for if He has mercy upon you—and I pray He may—He may take these from you one by one, and make you cry out in abject wretchedness of soul, "O God, forgive me that I made these my gods, and claimed them as my own."

Then further, backsliders *are apt to ascribe their prosperity and their mercies to their sins*. I have even heard one say, "Ever since I gave up a profession of religion, I have made more headway in business than I did before." Some apostates have boasted, "Since I broke through puritanical restraint, and went out into worldly company, I have been better in spirits, and better in purse than ever I was before," thus they ascribe the mercies which God has given them to their sins, and wickedly bow down before their lusts, as Israel did before the golden calf, and cry, "These be your gods, O Israel, which brought us up out of the land of Egypt!"

Sinner, if you did but know it, a long-suffering God has given you these things. Even to you who will perish, He has given many mercies as your portion in this life, seeing that you have no heritage hereafter. O take heed, lest you be fattened upon them as beasts for the slaughter. Unto you, backsliders, He has given these things to try you, to see how far you will go, to what extravagances of ingratitude you will descend, and how far you will despise His tender means.

O backslider, is it not marvelous that God has not long ago stretched you upon a bed of sickness, when you consider how much you have brought dishonor upon Christ's name, how you have vexed

God's people, how you have made the wicked open their mouths against God? Is it not a wonder that He did not take you away with a stroke, when you first forsook Him? And yet, see—instead of this, He multiplies your mercies. Does He not as good as say, "Return unto your rest, for I have dealt bountifully with you. I am married to you, and therefore I treat you as a husband treats his spouse. Although I might well proclaim a divorce against you, yet since I have betrothed you unto Me forever, My goodness and mercy shall not leave you even in your sins." Herein lies the gross mistake of the backslider—that he will attribute his present happiness and comfort to his sins rather than to the forbearance of God.

Here are three great errors, and oh, I fear they are so deadly, that unless God interpose in providence and in grace, they will be as fatal as the three darts which Joab thrust through the heart of Absalom as he was dangling by his proud hair in the wood of Ephraim. I fear that the goodly Babylonian garment, and the talents of silver, and the wedge of gold, will ruin you as they did Achan of old. These three falsehoods, like the three daughters of the horseleech, will never be satisfied until they have utterly destroyed your soul.

You will be wrapped in fine linen and fare sumptuously, and all this shall but ensure you the torments of the damned. Go to, now, weep and howl for the miseries which shall come upon you, your riches are corrupted, your garments are moth-eaten, your gold and silver are cankered, and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. You have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. Hear you the word of the Lord by the mouth of His servant Peter, tremble at it, and be afraid, "If after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

II. Let us turn from this gloomy side of our subject, and observe with gratitude that THE LORD INTERPOSES ADVERSITY IN ORDER TO BRING BACK HIS WANDERING CHILDREN.

Let us consider for a moment the hindrances which a God of love frequently puts in the way of His elect when they backslide from Him. Here we have the matter opened up to our attention. "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up your way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths." Here you see that it is *an unexpected hindrance*, for it is placed right in the man's way—"I will hedge up your way"—it was his *way*, his *habit*, he had fallen into it, and he meant to keep on, but suddenly he met with an unlooked-for obstacle. Just as farmers, when a public path runs through their field and persons begin to wander too much into the grass or corn, will put up bushes to keep the public to the path, or just as husbandmen to keep their cattle in their fields, make thick thorn hedges which the beasts cannot break through, so God puts a thorn hedge of troubles right in the way of His chosen to stop them in their sins.

This hedge may be placed in your way in different shapes, perhaps you will meet with it this day. I see the hand of God as it touches the elect but erring man, suddenly business grows slack, customers fall off one by one, bad debts multiply, bankruptcy stares him in the face, where he had enough to lavish on his pleasures he has not enough to supply his needs. A mighty famine has arisen in the land of sin and he begins to be in want. He little expected this. If anybody had told him when he was so proudly driving that fast-trotting horse along the streets that he would come to hard work, he would have laughed him to scorn. He thought he should live like a millionaire, but now he seems far more likely to die a pauper.

Or it may be that sudden sickness has fallen upon his once strong and healthy body. He could drink with the most drunken and no voice could ring so loud as his in the midnight revelry, but now he is paralyzed, he has lost the use of half his limbs, or perhaps some internal complaint has weakened him and made him totter along the road in constant jeopardy of sudden death. Now the smooth road is rough indeed and the world has lost its many charms.

Ah! sinner, the sound of music is hushed for you, and the joys of the flowing bowl are yours no more. Your foaming tankards, your wantonness and chambering are gone, mercy has rent them from you in love to your soul. Possibly the hedge is made of other thorns, perhaps the man's children sickened, there are many funerals in the house in quick succession. That firstborn son, the expected heir, the joy of his father's heart, falls like a withered flower, his wife is cut off as a lily snapped from its stalk, and he stands weeping, a widowed husband, a childless man.

Any of these ways, and thousands more which I need not here recount, are God's methods of building walls across the way of those whom He ordains to bless. When the man breaks through one hedge, the Lord of mercy will build another, and maintains His hedges at such a degree of strength that the bullock which is most accustomed to the yoke shall not be able to push through.

O backslider, the divine finger can touch you in the tenderest part, and though up to this moment you have boasted, "Nobody can make me wretched, nothing shall ever make me fret," yet He can shut you up in such despair that none can remove the heavy bar. Think of what your brain may yet become—it is cool and calculating now, and you can clearly see that your fellows are left behind in the race of competition—but remember how soon an unseen cause may soften that brain into imbecility, or excite it into incipient insanity! How soon may that boasted brain become like a burning sea throbbing with waves of fire! Beware lest such a visitation become the prelude of the wrath eternal, my prayer for you is, that more gentle means may bring you to repentance, but to that you will never come unless the Lord hedges up your way with thorns.

Observe that it was a very *disappointing* impediment. While the prosperous sinner was securely pursuing his way he was stopped. "Why," says the man, "if it had not been for that, I would have made a fortune." "Why did death come just when my fair girl looked so lovely in the bloom of opening womanhood, and when my dear boy had grown so engaging that his company was my delight?—ah! this is trouble indeed. To meet with misfortune just when I had built that new house, and held my head so high, and expected to see my daughters so respectably married—why, this is very disappointing," and the man kicks, and though once he professed to be a child of God, yet it is painfully possible that he is ready to curse God and die. But if he knew—oh! if he knew the divine motive, he would thank God for his troubles on bended knees.

You will remember that story of the painter in St. Paul's. When on high he painted his picture upon the ceiling, he went backward upon the stage to look at it, and was so engrossed with his occupation, that he was just on the edge of the stage and in great danger of being dashed to pieces by a fall from that dizzy height. A friend saw him, and knowing that if he called out to him he would be startled, and thus his fall might be hastened, he took up a brush full of paint and threw it at the picture, the desired effect was produced, for the painter in great anger rushed forward to upbraid him, and thus his life was spared. God seeing you painting a fair scene of life and happiness on earth, suddenly spoils it all, you rush forward, crying out against Him, but oh! what reason have you to thank Him for that disappointment which has robbed Satan of his prey and saved your soul!

Moreover, what *painful* hindrances our heavenly Father often uses. He hedges the sinner's path not with rhododendrons and azaleas, not with roses and laurels, but with thorns. Prickly thorns which curse the soil and tear the flesh are God's instrument of restraint. Nothing but a thorn hedge would have stopped the man, he was so madly set upon his present course that he would dash through anything else, but God, whose eternal mercy has marked that man out as a special object of love, uses the most effectual remedies, and plants a fence of thorns. Are you smarting this morning—so smarting that you wish you had never been born? Do you feel the cuts and lashes of evil fortune so much that you would sooner end your existence than continue any longer as you are? I bless God for this, if you are one of His children, for it is thus, and thus only, that will change your ways.

Furthermore, the fence is *effectual* if the thorn hedge will not suffice, it is written, "I will make a wall." There are some so desperate in sin that they will break through ordinary restraints, then a wall shall be tried through which there is no breaking, over which there is no climbing. Ah, backslider!

backslider! perhaps you have already broken through the thorn hedge, your trials have not been sanctified. I have known some who have had enough trials, one would think to have melted a heart of adamant, and yet they have set their faces like a flint against God, and gone on worse than ever.

“Who is JEHOVAH, that I should obey him?” said Pharaoh, when he was vexed with many plagues, and so have you said. God, I trust, will not destroy you as He did Pharaoh, but He will break one way or another, the iron sinew of your proud neck, for when it comes to a wrestle between God and you, you may be sure of a fall. The Lord never was defeated yet even by the stoutest adversary, and He will not in your case be frustrated in His design.

If you be really one of His chosen, you shall meet with an affliction such as perhaps you never heard of in any other man, and if nought but this will stop you, He will invent some new form of disease, some fresh method of pain in order to get at your soul. If you cannot be saved by the gentle wind, He will send the storm, if this suffice not, He will try the hurricane, and if you will not run into port even then, tornado shall follow tornado till you are broken to pieces like a wreck, and compelled to swim to the Rock of Ages for rescue.

These are but parts of His ways, and even His hard things are full of mercy. The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel, but the cruel things of God are full of tender mercy. He only uses these methods because nothing else will do, and He would sooner that you should enter into heaven with every bone broken, than that you should descend into hell with the full use of your powers.

III. In the third place—you would think that the sinner would now stop, but instead of it, according to the text, **EVEN THOUGH GOD WALLS UP THE WAY OF SIN, MEN WILL TRY TO FOLLOW IT, BUT IN THE CHOSEN THIS RESOLVE WILL BE IN VAIN.**

“She shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them.” Do you see the man, he has suffered such loss that he cannot find the means to sin as he used to do, where he had money to spend to indulge himself, he now finds an empty purse, but yet he tries to do his worst, he goes up and down that wall to see if there is not a hole in it somewhere, he tries to scramble over it where there is a projecting stone—he climbs half-way up, and falling, cuts his hands, but he will try again and again. He runs all along that thorn hedge and looks and looks again for a gap, and oh! if he could but find one, if he could but escape from God's boundaries, if he could but scrape enough money together to have another debauch, if he could find just enough to play the gentleman again, but he cannot, he has no means whatever to indulge his sin.

Perhaps the case runs another way, God has taken away from the man all the pleasure of sin. He cannot be as satisfied as he used to be with his money. As he puts it into the till he despises it, and when he sees it accumulating at his bankers it only brings him care and no contentment as once it did. His children turn out one by one a curse to him. In business everything seems determined to plague him. Whereas at the theater he could gaze and listen with ecstasy, the whole affair is now tame and dull. Those wines so full of flavor, have now through his satiety lost their usual charm.

Let him do what he will, the world is all a blank and wretchedness for him. Like Tiberius he would give a mint of gold to anyone who would invent him a new pleasure or restore the vigor of the old, but no, the thorn hedge is too well made, the Great Husbandman has planted it too well, the sinner would become a spiritual suicide but he cannot, let him desire it as he may. He is desperately set on destruction as though it were to be desired. O sinner, how is this—how has the fall spoilt us that we should be so enamored of our own destruction? O my God, what a creature is man! Though he knows that sin will be his ruin, yet he hugs it as though it were his chief mercy, heaps to himself destruction as though it were gold, and digs for his own ruin as for hid treasure.

Oh! if the righteous were half as intent in seeking after goodness as the wicked are in hunting after sin, how much more active would they be! If we were half as strongly set upon the things of God as sinners are set upon their own ways and their own pleasures, we should have no waverers, no timid, cowardly spirits. Truly this love of sin is so strange, that if we did not see it in ourselves we should

wonder at it, but Christian, this is in *you* as much as in the worst of men, you, too, if it had not been for divine mercy, would have plunged on from bad to worse.

If Omnipotence itself had not seized the reins and turned us into the way of truth, we would at this moment have been dashing on in the road of sin—I say if Omnipotence itself had not interposed. It was not the minister, it was not conscience, it was not merely providence—it was more than this—JEHOVAH'S own right arm threw back the horse on its haunches and cast the rider to the ground, as He did Saul at Damascus, or else we should have hastened on to our destruction and perished through the hardness of our hearts. Let us sing unto Him whose mighty mercy has rescued us, and let us pity those whom the restraints of providence cannot bind, who will if they can leap through stone walls to have their way and their sin.

Thus then, dear friends, we have presented to you the deplorable picture of the sinner infatuated, perfectly infatuated and drunken with the love of sin and enmity to God, and mercy itself, so far as we have gone, foiled of its purpose. The thorn hedge not enough—the stone wall not enough—what shall come now?

IV. Our next business is to consider THAT THE BACKSLIDER'S FAILURE IS FOLLOWED BY A BLESSED RESULT.

The hunt was very arduous, but the greedy hunter has missed his prey, and there he sits weary with the chase and ashamed of himself. What comes of it? Do observe it, for the result is one which I hope you and I know already. "Then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then it was better with me than now." O Lord! teach some who are here this morning to pray this prayer.

Observe here is repentance *attended with sorrow*. The poor creature in this case feels, deeply feels to the very soul, the wretchedness of her condition. She is in so bad a plight, that though she had despised her former state, she now confesses it to be better.

Observe that it is *an active repentance*. It is not merely "I will return," but "I will go and return." When the grace of God sets a backslider upon returning, He will stir up all the powers of his soul to seek after God. He cries, "My soul waits for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning." There is much earnestness in a sinner seeking Christ, but, if possible, there is more in a backslider returning from the error of his ways, for he has not only the guilt of sin to mourn over, but the double guilt of having despised the Savior, of having known the way of righteousness and having turned from it. Here are two spurs to make him speed on in his course.

Observe, dear friends, that the *confession* which this poor soul makes of folly is *one which is sustained by the best of reasons*. She says, "Then was it better with me than now." Let us see whether this is not true with you. Well, backslider, what have you gained by it after all? Have you gained anything more comfortable than *the light of your Father's face*? You once could say, "Abba, Father!" you rejoiced to know that God was at peace with you, you were reconciled to Him by the death of His Son.

Now God is angry with you, your fears tell you that He has forgotten to be gracious. What can make up for this loss? When God lights a candle, what brightness is in the room, but when God's candle is gone, where is the sun, and where the moon? They give no light to you. Before, when you were in your right senses, you had the privilege of going to the throne of grace, *you could tell your wants before God, and spread your sorrows there*, but you have no throne of grace to go to now. Why, you scarcely dare pray. As for your friends, you would not like to tell them your troubles. Poor prodigal, what sorry friends are those who waited on you in your days of wealth, they sat with their legs under your mahogany, and drank your wine while you had any—but you know that you would be a fool to expect any help from them, now that you need it. Your lovers have forsaken you, and those who once were so kind—where is their love now?

Do I see one among you who has been cast off by her companion in sin and shame? Ah, woman! Poor wretched woman! have you been made to feel that smart so common to those who sin as you have done, cast into the street by him who first decoyed you by his fair promises of love? Your case is but one

of many, and there are thousands who find that the world knows not what faithfulness means, first sin deludes, deceives, and pretends to love, and then afterwards it casts off its victims. Ah! you had a father's house to go to, and a father's mercy to plead, but you have not it now, it was better with you then than now.

And then, *you had God's promises to fall back upon*. If you had any trouble, you opened your Bible, and there was a passage to cheer you, when you had losses, the cheering words exactly met your case, but now that Book is full of fire, it flashes lightning upon you as you read it, there is not a promise there which smiles on you, your fears whisper that the treasury of God is shut against you. Once you had *communion with Christ Jesus*—ah! now I touch a tender string—you did sit at the banqueting table of Christ, unless you were awfully deceived and a gross hypocrite, you could say, "He has kissed me with the kisses of His mouth." After this, how could you go to the door of that deceiver Madame Wanton! How is this? O soul, if you have ever known the love of Christ, I am sure you will say, "It was better with me then than now."

What can the world afford you comparable to fellowship with Jesus? One hour upon His bosom is worth ten thousand years in the palaces and courts of the world's wealth and royalty, and you know that it is so. There is no room to entertain a comparison for a moment—

*"What peaceful hours you once enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still.
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill."*

O that your repentance, fixed upon such reasons as these, may be deep! May you make a confession of your extreme folly, and now fall down before God and find mercy!

To close this point, this repentance was *acceptable*. It is not often that a husband is willing to take back his wife when she has so grossly sinned, as the metaphor here implies, and yet observe that God is willing to receive the sinner, though his sin is even more aggravated. By the mouth of Jeremiah He speaks these words—"Return unto me, for I am married unto you." I do not know anything which should make the backslider's heart break like the doctrine of God's immutable love to His people. Some say that if we preach that "whom once He loves He never leaves, but loves them to the end," it will be an inducement to man to sin. Well I know man is very vile, and he can turn even love itself into a reason for sinning, but where there is as much as even one spark of grace, a man cannot do that.

A child does not say, "I will offend my father because he loves me," it is not even in fallen human nature generally, unless inspired by the devil to find motives for sin in God's love, and certainly no backsliding child of God can say, "I will continue in sin that grace may abound." They who do so show that they are reprobates, and their damnation is just. But the backslider who is a child of God at the bottom, will, I think, feel no cord so strong to hold him back from sin as this.

Backslider, I hope it will also be a golden chain to draw you to Christ. Jesus meets you, meets you this morning. You were excommunicated. You were driven out from among God's people with shame, but Jesus meets you, and pointing to the wounds which He received in the house of His friends at your hands, He nevertheless says, "Return unto me, for I am married unto you." It is a relationship which you have broken, and it might legally be broken forever if *He* willed it, but He does not will it, for He hates to put away.

You are married to Jesus. Come back to your first husband, for He is your husband still! The fountain which washed you once can wash you again. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." The robe of righteousness which covered you once can cover you again, though you have cast it from you with scorn, yet still it is yours, and the Father bids His servants bring forth the best robe and put it on you. Come to Me! You have forgotten the Lord, but He has not forgotten you, you love sin, but He will change your will, and set

your heart upon Himself, for He is determined that you shall be His forever. Is not this a soul-melting doctrine? If there be so much as a spark of spiritual life in you, I think you will say, "Against such love as this I cannot sin, against such tender mercy I will not rebel, I will return unto my first husband, for then it was better with me than now."

I do not know, but I may be speaking very pointedly and personally to some here—I hope I am. I know that the most of you are not in this condition, and for this I thank my God. I pray you, however, lift up your hearts in prayer for those who are, and ask my Master that as this bow is drawn at a venture He may direct the arrow.

There are some such here—I know there are. There are some here who have come this very morning with no idea that God would meet with them. You have put the reins upon your neck and you have given yourselves up. The restraints of morality can scarcely bind you, and yet once you prayed at the prayer meeting and sat at the sacramental table, and you put on the Lord Jesus Christ by profession in baptism, but oh! what are you now? Your life would not bear to be talked of, your conduct has become so gross and vile, you might have expected to have heard this morning some word that should have cut you off forever from hope, but, instead of it, the silver trumpet sounds today with notes of love and pity. Return! Return!—your husband woos you over again—return! for then it was better with you than now.

V. Not to be longer on the point, let us observe in the fifth place, that THERE IS AN AWFUL CONTRAST TO ALL THIS.

There are some who prosper in this world until, like a wide-spread tree, they are cut down and cast into the fire. There are backsliders, who, never having had the root of the matter in them, go back unto their own ways, to the land from which they came out, and continue there forever. I beseech you never trifle with backsliding. I have put God's free grace in the boldest manner that I could just now, but oh! let me warn any man who would pervert that free grace into an excuse for sin, let me warn him against playing with backsliding.

One man may roll down a precipice and may scarcely be injured, but *I* would not try it, for I might break my neck. One man took poison and he was hurried off to the hospital, and by the use of proper antidotes was spared, but I would not advise you to try it, nay I would beg you to put it away from you. Chosen vessels of mercy, notwithstanding their backslidings, are brought back, but ah! remember that nine out of ten of those who backslide never were God's people.

They go out from us because they were not of us, and this is the history of their lives, and may be the history of your life, ah! and may be the history of mine yet—they joined the church, they had been greatly impressed under a sermon, they were young, they knew little as yet of the trials of life, being in the church they walked consistently for years, they kept the faith, but the church was cold and they grew cold too, they neglected weekday services, the closet was forsaken, family prayer was hardly attended to, then they forsook the sanctuary altogether, but they were still moral and upright, they began anon to associate with those whom once they avoided, their business went on well, they had risen from the lowest grade of society to occupy a middle position, they still prospered, gold accumulated, they were the successful people, there was a worm at the root of it all it is true, but nevertheless, it looked so fair and seemed so well, the man did not like to remember that he ever had gone to that little meeting house, he felt ashamed that ever he had associated with those whom once he knew to be the people of God, he went on still accumulating wealth, but one day *he was found dead!*

Shall I pursue his history? In hell he lifts up his eyes in torments forever, with this as the special worm that never could die to gnaw his conscience that he *did* know in his head the way of righteousness, but had turned away from it in his heart. In letters of fire he sees written athwart that burning sky, "YOU KNEW YOUR DUTY BUT YOU DID IT NOT, you have come from the cup of the Lord to the cup of devils, you turned aside from the people of God to the children of Satan, you deliberately chose the evil and you forsook the good, you perished not as the ignorant perish, not as they perished who were careless from their birth, not as those who were unvisited by pangs of conscience, or who knew not the Word, but you perished in the light of the Gospel, with the sun of mercy shining upon your eyeballs, you

perished, though you stood as it were on the very doorstep of heaven, you drifted back to hell in the teeth of a tide of mercy.”

This, I say, may be your case and mine, if we be not really rooted and grounded in Christ, we may fall by little and little. We may even continue till we die, to be church members, and yet backslide in heart by slow degrees, until we become rotten through and through, and God casts us on the dunghill. I say by the special and miraculous mercy of God, His elect will be ingathered, but take you heed, sirs, that you build not on your profession, for profession is no proof of election. You must be born again, and only the man who continues to the end shall be saved. May we have such perseverance given us, for His name's sake.

VI. With this last we conclude—IS NOT THIS SUBJECT A VERY SOLEMN WARNING TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

What some do others may do. If one man falls, another may. If one professor turned out to be a hypocrite, so may another. If one minister reels from the pinnacle of honor and is dashed upon the rocks beneath, so may another. I want to make a personal application of this to myself, and I pray my brethren in office behind me, venerable though some of them are in years, to remember that this may be their case. And you, my associates and fellow members, many of you united to the church before I was born, remember, that age and habit are no security against apostasy. There must be the continual keeping and anointing of the Holy Spirit. I beseech you, and here I do beseech myself also, let us watch against the beginnings of backsliding. Let us take care of the little sins, O let us watch against the little coolnesses of heart.

Brethren, no one backslides all at once. Few men who profess to be saints become outward sinners in one step, it is usually by little and by little. I pray you do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together. Wake up from your coldness in private prayer if this has come over you. If your love to Christ has grown cold stay not in this state of danger, but pray to the Master to inflame your heart again. If any of you have in any respect whatever fallen from your first love, if that old enthusiasm which was in us as a church has departed from any of you, pray God to give it you back. If any of you are not bringing forth such fruit unto God as you used to do, O be suspicious of yourselves. Carnal security may be the heaven of fools, but it is the ruin of believers—

*“Be watchful, be vigilant, dangers may be,
In an hour when all seems secure to thee.”*

Especially at this time when the eyes of the world are fixed upon you as a church, and upon me as a witness for God, let us walk carefully. If ever I might ask your prayers, nay, claim them as my right, it is now, I beseech you who love God, ask for me my Lord's upholding grace that His servant may not flinch nor turn his back in the day of battle. Ask for yourselves the same, that when the fight shall grow less hot and there shall come an hour of calm and quiet thought, I, your pastor, and yourselves, my fellow soldiers in Christ, may look down the ranks and say, “Not one comrade has fallen, the arrows flew thick about them, but their armor was complete, the enemy was fierce, but the Master gave them strength equal to their day. He has kept those whom He gave to us, and not one of them is lost.”

May it be yours and mine on heaven's starry steeps to look back upon the superlatively glorious grace which shall have kept us to the end, and brought us to the land where there shall be no more sin. Let us trust the Savior. There is the sinner's hope, there is the saint's strength. Let us cling to the cross again, and may Almighty grace keep us there, and so glorify itself forever. Amen.

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