

THE WAY TO GOD

by

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CHAPTER NINE

BACKSLIDING

**“I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely:
for mine anger is turned away” (Hosea 14:4).**

THERE are two kinds of backsliders. Some have never been converted—they have gone through the form of joining a Christian community and claim to be backsliders; but they never have, if I may use the expression, “slid forward.” They may talk of backsliding, but they have never really been born again. They need to be treated differently from real backsliders—those who have been born of the incorruptible seed, but who have turned aside. We want to bring the latter back the same road by which they left their first love.

Turn to Psalm 85:5. There you read: **“Wilt Thou be angry with us for ever? wilt Thou draw out Thine anger to all generations? wilt Thou not revive us again: that Thy people may rejoice in Thee? Show us Thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us Thy salvation.”** Now look again: **“I will hear what God the Lord will speak: for He will speak peace unto His people, and to His saints: but let them not turn again to folly” (v. 8).**

Backsliders and the Word of God

There is nothing that will do backsliders so much good as to come in contact with the Word of God; and for them the Old Testament is as full of help as the New. The book of Jeremiah has some wonderful passages for wanderers. What we want to do is to get backsliders to hear what God the Lord will say.

Look for a moment at Jeremiah 6:10:

“To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of the Lord is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it.”

That is the condition of backsliders. They have no delight whatever in the word of God. But we want to bring them back, and let God get their ear.

Read from the fourteenth verse:

“They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the Lord. Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein. Also I set watchmen over you, saying, Hearken to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not hearken.”

That was the condition of the Jews when they had backslidden. They had turned away from the old paths. And that is the condition of backsliders. They have got away from the good old Book. Adam and Eve fell by not hearkening to the word of God. They did not believe God’s word; but they believed the tempter. That is the way backsliders fall—by turning away from the word of God.

“I Will Plead With You”

In Jeremiah 2 we find God pleading with them as a father would plead with a son.

“Thus said the Lord, What iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they are gone from Me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? . . . Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith the Lord, and with your children’s children will I plead . . . For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the Fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Now there is one thing to which we wish to call the attention of backsliders; and that is, that the Lord never forsook them; but that they forsook Him! The Lord never left them, but they left Him! And this, too, without any cause!

He says, **“What iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they are gone far from Me?”**

Is not God the same today as when you came to Him first? Has God changed? Men are apt to think that God has changed; but the fault is with them.

Backslider, I would ask you: “What iniquity is there in God, that you have left Him and gone far from Him?”

You have, He says, hewed out to yourselves broken cisterns that hold no water. The world cannot satisfy the new nature. No earthly well can satisfy the soul that has become a partaker of the heavenly nature. Honor, wealth and the pleasures of this world will not satisfy those who, having tasted the water of life, have gone astray, seeking refreshment at the world’s fountains. Earthly wells will get dry. They cannot quench spiritual thirst.

Again in the thirty-second verse:

“Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet My people have forgotten Me days without number.”

That is the charge which God brings against the backslider. They **“have forgotten Me, days without number.”**

I have often startled young ladies when I have said to them, “My friend, you think more of your ear-rings than of the Lord.”

The reply has been, “No, I do not.”

But when I have asked, “Would you not be troubled if you lost one: and would you not set about seeking for it?” the answer has been. “Well, yes, I think I should.”

But though they had turned from the Lord, it did not give them any trouble; nor did they seek after Him that they might find Him.

How many once in fellowship and in daily communion with the Lord now think more of their dresses and ornaments than of their precious souls! Love does not like to be forgotten. Mothers would have broken hearts if their children left them and never wrote a word or sent any memento of their affection; and God pleads over backsliders as a parent over loved ones who have gone astray. He tries to woo them back. He asks: **“What have I done that they should have forsaken Me?”**

The most tender and loving words to be found in the whole of the Bible are from Jehovah to those who have left Him without a cause (Jeremiah 2:19).

Hear how He argues with such (Jeremiah 2:19):

“Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that My fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts.”

I do not exaggerate when I say that I have seen hundreds of backsliders come back, and I have asked them if they have not found it an evil and a bitter thing to leave the Lord. You cannot find a real backslider, who has known the Lord, but will admit that it is an evil and

A Bitter Thing to Turn Away

from Him.

I do not know of any one verse more used to bring back wanderers than that very one. May it bring you back if you have wandered into the far country.

Look at Lot. Did not he find it an evil and a bitter thing? He was twenty years in Sodom, and never made a convert. He got on well in the sight of the world. Men would have told you that he was one of the most influential and worthy men in all Sodom. But alas! he ruined his family. And it is a pitiful sight to see that old backslider going through the streets of Sodom at midnight, after he has warned his children, and they have turned a deaf ear.

I have never known a man and his wife to backslide, without its proving utter ruin to their children. They will make a mockery of religion and will deride their parents:

“Thine own wickedness shall correct thee; and thy backsliding shall reprove thee!”

Did not David find it so? Mark him, crying, **“O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee; O Absalom, my son, my son!”**

I think it was the ruin, rather than the death of his son that caused this anguish.

I remember being engaged in conversation some years ago, till past midnight, with an old man. He had been for years

Wandering on the Barren Mountains of Sin

That night he wanted to get back. We prayed, and prayed, and prayed, till light broke in upon him; and he went away rejoicing.

The next night he sat in front of me when I was preaching, and I think that I never saw any one look so sad and wretched in all my life. He followed me into the inquiry-room. “What is the trouble?” I asked. “Is your eye off the Saviour? Have your doubts come back?”

“No; it is not that,” he said. “I did not go to business, but spent all this day in visiting my children. They are all married and in this city. I went from house to house, but there was not one but mocked me. It is the darkest day of my life. I have awoke up to what I have done. I have taken my children into the world; and now I cannot get them out.”

The Lord had restored unto him the joy of his salvation; yet there was the bitter consequence of his transgression.

You can run through your experience; and you can find just such instances repeated again and again. Many who came to your city years ago serving God, in their prosperity have forgotten Him: and where are their sons and daughters? Show me the father and mother who have deserted the Lord and gone back to the beggarly elements of the world; and I am mistaken if their children are not on the high road to ruin.

As we desire to be faithful we warn these backsliders. It is a sign of love to warn of danger. We may be looked upon as enemies for a while; but the truest friends are those who lift up the voice of warning. Israel had no truer friend than Moses.

In Jeremiah God gave His people a weeping prophet to bring them back to Him; but they cast off God. They forgot the God who brought them out of Egypt, and who led them through the desert into the Promised Land. In their prosperity they forget Him and turned away. The Lord had told them what would happen (Deuteronomy 28). And see what did happen.

The king who made light of the word of God was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, and his children brought up in front of him and every one slain: his eyes were put out of his head; and he was bound in fetters of brass and cast into a dungeon in Babylon (II Kings 25:7). That is the way he reaped what he had sown. Surely it is an evil and a bitter thing to backslide, but the Lord would win you back with the message of His word.

In Jeremiah 8:5, we read: **“Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden by a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast deceit, they refuse to return.”** That is what the Lord brings against them.

“They Refuse to Return”

“I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright: no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? Every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle. Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but My people know not the judgment of the Lord.”

Now look: **“I hearkened and heard; but they spake not aright.”** No family altar! No reading the Bible! No closet devotion! God stoops to hear; but His people have turned away!

If there be a penitent backslider, one who is anxious for pardon and restoration, you will find no words more tender than are to be found in Jeremiah 3:12:

“Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; and I will not cause Mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger forever.”

Now notice: **“Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the stranger under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed My voice, saith the Lord. Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you”**—think of God coming and saying, “I am married unto you!—and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion.”

“Only acknowledge thine iniquity.”

How many times have I held that passage up to a backslider! **“Acknowledge”** it; and God says: **“I will forgive you.”** I remember a man asking, “Who said that? Is that there?” And I held up to him the passage, **“Only acknowledge thine iniquity”**; and the man went down on his knees, and cried, “My God, I have sinned”; and the Lord restored him there and then. If you have wandered, He wants you to come back.

He says in another place, **“O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away”** (Hosea 6:4).

His compassion and His love is wonderful!

In Jeremiah 3:22: **“Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto Thee; Thou art the Lord our God.”**

He just puts words into the mouth of the backslider. Only come; and, if you will come, He will receive you graciously and love you freely.

In Hosea 14:1, 2, 4: **“O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord (He puts words into your mouth): say unto Him, take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips . . . I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for Mine anger is turned away from him.”**

Just observe that; Turn! Turn!! TURN!!! rings all through these passages.

Now, if you have wandered, remember that you left Him, and not He you. You have to get out of the backslider’s pit just in the same way you got in. And if you take the same road as when you left the Master you will find Him now, just where you are.

How Backsliders Treat Christ

If we were to treat Christ as any earthly friend we should never leave Him; and there would never be a backslider.

If I were in a town for a single week I should not think of going away without shaking hands with the friends I had made, and saying “Good-by” to them. I should be justly blamed if I took the train and left without saying a word to any one. The cry would be, “What’s the matter?”

But did you ever hear of a backslider bidding the Lord Jesus Christ “Good-by”; going into his closet and saying: “Lord Jesus, I have known Thee ten, twenty, or thirty years: but I am tired of Thy service; Thy yoke is not easy, nor Thy burden light; so I am going back to the world, to the flesh-pots of Egypt. Good-by, Lord Jesus! Farewell”? Did you ever hear that? No; you never did, and you never will.

I tell you, if you get into the closet and shut out the world and hold communion with the Master you cannot leave Him. The language of your heart will be, **“To whom shall we go,”** but unto Thee? **“Thou hast the words of eternal life”** (John 6:68).

You could not go back to the world if you treated Him in that way. But you left Him and ran away. You have forgotten Him days without number. Come back today; just as you are! Make up your mind that you will not rest until God has restored unto you the joy of His salvation.

A gentleman in Cornwall once met a Christian in the street whom he knew to be a backslider.

He went up to him, and said: “Tell me, is there not some estrangement between you and the Lord Jesus?”

The man hung his head, and said, “Yes.” “Well,” said the gentleman, “what has He done to you?” The answer to which was a flood of tears.

In Revelation 2 -4, 5, we read: **“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”**

I want to guard you against a mistake which some people make with regard to “**doing the first works.**”

Many think that they are to have the same experience over again. That has kept thousands for months without peace; because they have been waiting for a renewal of their first experience. You will never have the same experience as when you first came to the Lord. God never repeats himself.

No two people of all earth’s millions look alike or think alike. You may say that you cannot tell two people apart; but when you get well acquainted with them you can very quickly distinguish differences. So, no one person will have the same experience the second time.

If God will restore His joy to your soul let Him do it in His way. Do not mark out a way for God to bless you. Do not expect the same experience that you had two or twenty years ago. You will have a fresh experience, and God will deal with you in His own way. If you confess your sins and tell Him that you have wandered from the path of His commandments, He will restore unto you the joy of His salvation.

Peter’s Fall

I want to call your attention to the manner in which Peter fell; and I think that nearly all fall pretty much in the same way. I want to lift up a warning note to those who have not fallen. “**Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall**” (I Corinthians 10:12).

Twenty-five years ago—and for the first five years after I was converted—I used to think that if I were able to stand for twenty years I need fear no fall. But the nearer you get to the cross the fiercer the battle. Satan aims high. He went amongst the twelve; and singled out the treasurer—Judas Iscariot, and the chief apostle—Peter. Most men who have fallen have done so on the strongest side of their character.

I am told that the only side upon which Edinburgh Castle was successfully assailed was where the rocks were steepest, and where the garrison thought themselves secure.

If any man thinks that he is strong enough to resist the devil at any one point he needs special watch there, for the tempter comes then.

Abraham stands, as it were, at the head of the family of faith; and the children of faith may be said to trace their descent to Abraham: and yet down in Egypt he denied his wife (Genesis 12).

Moses was noted for his meekness; and yet he was kept out of the Promised Land because of one hasty act and speech, when he was told by the Lord to speak to the rock so that the congregation and their beasts should have water to drink. “**Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?**” (Numbers 20:10)

Elijah’s Cowardice

Elijah was remarkable for his boldness: and yet he went off a day’s journey into the wilderness like a coward and hid himself under a juniper tree, requesting for himself that he might die, because of a message he received from a woman (I Kings 19).

Let us be careful.

No matter who the man is—he may be in the pulpit—but if he gets self-conceited he will be sure to fall. We who are followers of Christ need constantly to pray to be made humble, and kept humble. God made Moses' face so to shine that other men could see it; but Moses himself wist not that his face shone, and the more holy in heart a man is the more manifest to the outer world will be his daily life and conversation.

Some people talk of how humble they are; but if they have true humility there will be no necessity for them to publish it. It is not needful.

A lighthouse does not have a drum beaten or a trumpet blown in order to proclaim the proximity of a lighthouse: it is its own witness. And so if we have the true light in us it will show itself. It is not those who make the most noise who have the most piety.

There is a brook, or a little "burn," as the Scotch call it, not far from where I live. After a heavy rain you can hear the rush of its waters a long way off; but let there come a few days of pleasant weather, and the brook becomes almost silent. But there is a river near my house, the flow of which I never heard in my life, as it pours on in its deep and majestic course the year round.

We should have so much of the love of God within us that its presence shall be evident without our loud proclamation of the fact.

Peter's Self-Confidence

The first step in Peter's downfall was his self-confidence.

The Lord warned him. The Lord said:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:31, 32).

But Peter said: **"I am ready to go with Thee, both into prison and to death."** **"Though all shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended"** (Matthew 26:23).

"James and John, and the others, may leave you; but you can count on me!" But the Lord warned him: **"I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest Me"** (Luke 22:34).

Though the Lord rebuked him, Peter said he was ready to follow Him to death. That boasting is too often a forerunner of downfall. Let us walk humbly and softly. We have a great tempter; and, in an unguarded hour, we may stumble and fall and bring a scandal on Christ.

The next step in Peter's downfall was that he went to sleep.

If Satan can rock the church to sleep he does his work through God's own people. Instead of Peter watching one short hour in Gethsemane, he fell asleep, and the Lord asked him, **"What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?"** (Matthew 26:40).

The next thing was that he fought in the energy of the flesh.

The Lord rebuked him again and said, “**They that take the sword shall perish with the sword**” (Matthew 26:52).

Jesus had to undo what Peter had done.

*The next thing, he “**followed afar off.**”*

Step by step he gets away. It is a sad thing when a child of God follows afar off. When you see him associating with worldly friends, and throwing his influence on the wrong side, he is following afar off; and it will not be long before disgrace will be brought upon the old family name, and Jesus Christ will be wounded in the house of his friends. The man, by his example, will cause others to stumble and fall.

Another Wrong Step

The next thing—Peter is familiar and friendly with the enemies of Christ.

A damsel says to this bold Peter: “**Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee.**” But he denied before them all, saying, “**I know not what thou sayest.**”

And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him and said unto them that were there: “**This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth.**” And again he denied with an oath. “**I do not know the Man.**”

Another hour passed; and yet he did not realize his position; when another confidently affirmed that he was a Galilean, for his speech betrayed him. And he was angry and began to curse and to swear. And again denied his Master, and the cock crew (Matthew 26:69-74).

He commences away up on the pinnacle of self-conceit, and goes down step by step until he breaks out into cursing, and swears that he never knew his Lord.

The Master might have turned and said to him, “Is it true, Peter, that you have forgotten Me so soon? Do you not remember when your wife’s mother lay sick of a fever that I rebuked the disease and it left her? Do you not call to mind your astonishment at the draught of fishes so that you exclaimed, ‘**Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord?**’ Do you remember when in answer to your cry, ‘Lord, save me, or I perish,’ I stretched out My hand and kept you from drowning? Have you forgotten when, on the Mount of Transfiguration, with James and John, you said to Me, ‘**Lord, it is good to be here: let us make three tabernacles**’? Have you forgotten being with Me at the supper-table, and in Gethsemane? Is it true that you have forgotten Me so soon? The Lord might have upbraided him with questions such as these: but He did nothing of the kind. He cast one look on Peter.

There was so much love in it that it broke that bold disciple’s heart, and he went out and wept bitterly.

And after Christ rose from the dead see how tenderly He dealt with the erring disciple.

“And Peter”

The angel at the sepulchre says, **“Tell His disciples and Peter”** (Mark 16:7).

The Lord did not forget Peter, though Peter had denied Him thrice; so He caused this kindly special message to be conveyed to the repentant disciple. What a tender and loving Saviour to have!

Friend, if you are one of the wanderers, let the loving look of the Master win you back; and let Him restore you to the joy of His salvation.

Before closing, let me say that I trust God will restore some backslider reading these pages, who may in the future become a useful member of society and a bright ornament of the church. We should never have had the thirty-second Psalm if David had not been restored: **“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered”**; or that beautiful fifty-first Psalm which was written by the restored backslider. Nor should we have had that wonderful sermon on the day of Pentecost when three thousand were converted—preached by another restored backslider.

May God restore other backsliders and make them a thousand times more used for His glory than they ever were before!

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