Return, O Backslider (Part 1)

By Richard Owen Roberts

When the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah confirming his ordination as a prophet to the nations, he modestly hesitated, saying, *"Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child."* But the Lord who calls and equips told him in no uncertain terms, *"Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord"* (Jer. 1:6-8).

Just as the time approached for Jeremiah to begin his public ministry, the Lord said: *"Gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defensed city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee"* (Jer. 1:17-19*).*

He was one man against an entire nation! He was one man with an unwanted message! He was one man with the God-given courage to use a much-despised term! Jeremiah plastered Israel with a label they did not like and could not peel off! Jeremiah laid his axe to the root of Israel's tree and in specific, direct and plain-spoken fashion fixed attention on Israel's great problem! Fearing not princes, priests, prophets nor people, he denounced them all alike! He called their problem *backsliding*. For his faithful declaration of the truth of God, he received as much thanks and acclaim as he would if he were to declare the same message in the church today. Ponder this searching passage:

"Thus saith the Lord, Shall they fall, and not arise? Shall he turn away, and not return? Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast deceit, 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 [dove] and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but My people know not the judgment of the Lord" (Jer. 8:4-7).

How is it that the so-called *brute beasts* and *dumb birds* are wiser than men? The salmon know when and where to return to their place of beginnings, but the backslider has forgotten the God who made him. Isaiah the prophet cried: *"The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward"* (Isa. 1:3-4).

What Is Backsliding?

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What exactly is backsliding? Nowhere in all Scripture is it better described than in Proverbs 14:14: *"The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways."* There you have it – a backslider is a person who was once emptied of his own ways and filled with the ways of God, but who gradually allows his own ways to creep back in until he is all but empty of God and full of himself again.

This is the very problem Jeremiah addressed. The people of his day had allowed more and more of self to slip into their hearts until the God who brought them out of Egypt and blessed them above all human beings was almost entirely crowded out of their lives and forgotten. Chapters two and three of Jeremiah clearly outline this crowding-out process. The word from God to backslidden Israel commences with a lament concerning the former days:

"I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the Lord, and the first fruits of His increase…" (Jer. 2:2-3). What was had ceased to be. Their early love for God was gone. Holiness was forgotten. Israel no longer delighted the heart of God. A people who had once borne fruit were barren. Those once filled with God were now filled with themselves. Consider carefully the unfolding evidence:

1. *"Thus saith the Lord, what iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they are gone far from Me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain?"* (Jer. 2:5). In the vanity of their own minds and hearts, they determined God was no longer important to them.

2. They conveniently forgot the great things God had done for them in former days: bringing them out of the land of Egypt, leading them through the wilderness, and bringing them into a plentiful country (Jer. 2:6-7). Whenever great mercies are forgotten, praise and thanksgiving are lost.

3. The religious leaders had joined the backsliding hosts. The priests failed to ask, "Where is the Lord?" Those responsible for handling the law did not know God. The pastors also transgressed against the Lord, and the prophets joined the forces of Baal (Jer. 2:8). Thus, all the religious leaders engaged in activities totally devoid of spiritual benefit.

4. With God crowded out of their lives, they cast about for something else to take His place. Not being altogether godless in their thinking, they happily adopted as gods mere figments of their imaginations – gods that were no gods – a truly astonishing and horrible departure from the glory the people had once known and enjoyed. Jeremiah wonders if any other nation ever exchanged its gods, especially the *living God*, for no gods (Jer. 2:10-11).

5. Israel had once drunk at the fountain of living waters, but in their backslidden state they hewed out for themselves broken cisterns that could hold no water (Jer. 2:12-13). Imagine – the living waters of a fountain exchanged for the stagnant water of a leaking cistern!

6. Those who had known the guiding and correcting power of a holy fear of God, so absolutely essential to life and happiness, crowded it right out of their lives and began drifting on the vast sea of the backslidden (Jer. 2:19).

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7. Despite continual disclaimers of any pollution and repeated washings with nitre and soap, the filth of their backslidden condition was upon them. It could not be scrubbed off. Having played the harlot under every green tree, they could not hide their iniquity (Jer. 2:22-23).

8. What could be more natural than for those who had crowded God out of their lives to worship and serve the things they made with their own hands rather than the Creator who made them? (Jer. 2:27-28). In a time of trouble they might call to a stick and say, *"Thou art my father,"* or to a stone and say, *"Thou hast brought me forth."*

9. As with backsliders of all times and places, they could not be content until they had drawn others into their circle of corruption. A great delight of the fallen is the fall of others, but the blood of their victims is upon their skirts (Jer. 2:33-34).

10. Despite these overwhelming evidences of backsliding in Israel, Judah did not return to the Lord with all her heart but only deceptively, so that faithless Israel was less treacherous than Judah (Jer. 3:10-11).

Message Opposed

When God sent Jeremiah to proclaim this message, He did not lead him to believe Israel was expectantly waiting for a prophet to come and reclaim them. Jeremiah was clearly told, *"They shall fight against thee"* (1:19). And they did. Backsliders are notorious fighters. Returning from backsliding requires tremendous grace. Note this demand: *"Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord… and I will not keep anger forever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed My voice, saith the Lord. Turn, O backsliding children…"* (Jer. 3:12-14).

When God sent Jeremiah, it was with a message not merely for the common people, but for the kings, princes and priests as well. Imagine the anger kindled among religious leaders when God used Jeremiah's tongue to declare, *"I will give you pastors according to Mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding"* (Jer. 3:15). If it takes grace for lay people to repent of their backsliding, how much more grace is required for backslidden pastors to repent not only of their own sins but also of the evil of misleading God's people? Imagine the struggle Jeremiah faced with those backslidden leaders God promised to replace!

When God sent Jeremiah, however, it was not only with the promise of a coming fight, but also of certain victory: *"They shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee saith the Lord, to deliver thee"* (Jer. 1:19). Every backslider must face the fact that he is engaged in a fight he is certain to lose. Backsliders never prevail against the God they have crowded out of their lives.

While the term *backsliding* is not used constantly in the Bible, the problem of backsliding is frequently present. Beginning with Genesis 6:5-6 where we are told, *"God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart,"* and continuing to the Revelation of John where Jesus lamented, *"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love"*

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(2:4), man's capacity to grieve his Creator by being filled with himself is abundantly evident.

Backsliding is not a phenomenon peculiar to one age or people. The temptation to backslide is constant with the people of God. However, the sin of backsliding is not always prevalent to the same degree. It was definitely a great evil in the days of Moses. Hosea felt deeply the burden of the evil as did Isaiah and other prophets. In New Testament days the Jews manifested tragic backsliding. Now, in our own day, the great evil is prevalent once more. Literally millions of professing Christians show serious signs of severe backsliding.

God is infinitely patient and understanding of the weaknesses of His people, but backsliding is not merely a problem of human weakness; it is the sin of crowding God out by filling one's life with self. Many who are astonished and disgusted that a dog will return to his vomit have failed to consider carefully Peter's warning:

"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 true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (2 Pet. 2:21-22). Here is an accurate description of backsliding: the washed pig wallowing once more in the mire and the dog eagerly lapping up his own vomit!

What more powerfully proclaims the need of revival in our day than the backslidden condition of hosts of professing Christians? The people of Jeremiah's day had no edge on us in departure from the living God. If there was ever a people wallowing in mud like pigs and consuming their own vomit like dogs, it is the present generation. We delight in our vast progress and entertain ourselves with stories of the wonderful increase of knowledge in our lifetime, but the love of filth and corruption has scarcely ever been greater in the history of the world. We pride ourselves in our understanding and in our love of the downtrodden and oppressed, we do not hesitate to advise the rest of the world how to conduct its affairs, but we are so deeply embedded in the quagmire of self that all our mouthings are like dirty bubbles.

Evidences of a Backslidden Condition

Backslidden Christians are everywhere. They are in the churches and out of the churches. They are in the pews and in the pulpits. They are on boards and are bored. They serve on committees and teach Sunday school. The backslidden seem to be more numerous than the upright and their influence throughout the world vastly more powerful. While backsliders do not all manifest the same traits, evidences of their condition are not difficult to pinpoint. Backsliding is present when:

1. Prayer ceases to be a vital part of a professing Christian's life. It is grievous to realize that many churches have no public prayer meetings of any kind. More upsetting is the fact that many individual Christians have no regular stated seasons of private prayer during which they commune alone with God. How can a person be both Christian and prayerless? But prayer does not need to be entirely lacking from a life for backsliding to prevail. When it becomes perfunctory and without moral earnestness, there is more than ample evidence of backsliding. Some who *say* their prayers every day never pray. The formulation of thoughts and ideas along religious

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lines, the mouthing of words, the bowing of the head and body, and the repetition of pious phrases, do not in and of themselves constitute real prayer. If the heart does not earnestly commune with God, no genuine prayer is present. The mere repetition of religious expressions, no matter how beautifully constructed or sincerely spoken, does not constitute genuine prayer. When the heart of man and the heart of God meet in communion, there is prayer. Prayerlessness and mere formality in saying prayers are unmistakable marks of a backslidden condition.

2. The quest for biblical truth ceases and one grows content with the knowledge of eternal things already acquired. Almost all backsliders demonstrate a sense of satisfaction with the truth already in their possession. Backsliders are rarely diligent in their study of the Bible. They do not find themselves in the grip of a passion to mine treasures from the Word of God. They are content with the little pearls of wisdom their mothers hung about their necks in the days of their spiritual infancy or with the Scripture gems the pastor mines on their behalf. They do not find themselves daily in the garden of the Lord plucking flowers rare and fragrant. They are content with the wilted bouquet they carried to their baptism. If any new biblical truth comes to them, it must come by the effort of another, not their own. This is not to say backsliders never read the Bible. Many backsliders have long established habits of dutiful devotion they have never broken, but while they go on reading Bible words, backsliders are content with the truth of God already in their possession.

3. The biblical knowledge possessed or being acquired is treated as external fact and not applied inwardly. Not every backslider has totally abandoned the acquisition of biblical truth. Some badly backslidden pastors acquire new Bible knowledge on a weekly basis. It is possible to go on learning new things from the Holy Scriptures without benefit to the soul. If biblical truth does not enter the heart and transform the life, its acquisition is without eternal merit. The Bible was designed by God not merely to inform us, but to transform us. If biblical truth already possessed is not acted upon, the accumulation of additional truth will have little or no effect. Some backsliders teach Sunday school every week. They carefully prepare their lessons and diligently consider the facts they are to present. However, if their contemplation and their teaching of the Word of God do not move from the area of the head to the realm of the heart, no amount of additional study and teaching will alter their backslidden ways. Likewise, the backslider may sit in a Bible-preaching church every time the doors are open. He may listen attentively to the words spoken and congratulate the preacher on his unfolding of biblical truth, but if the Word preached does not drive out self, his backslidden condition only worsens every time he hears the Bible proclaimed.

4. Earnest thoughts about eternal things cease to be regular and gripping. In the early days of a person's new walk with Christ, the mind continually turns toward spiritual matters. When backsliding commences, the mind turns less and less toward heaven, God, eternity, and holiness. In the earliest stages of the decline, spiritual thoughts may come frequently, but they are less gripping. As a person becomes more and more filled with his own ways, there will simply be less room for thoughts of eternity. At first, there may be a conscious awareness that the thought patterns are changing, but as backsliding progresses, it becomes less and less obvious to the backslider that this transformation is taking place. Eventually, a gentle rebuke will be treated with scorn and the backslider will rise to justify his own departure from the living God.

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5. The services of the church lose their delights. The recently converted in the services of the church a thrill and a joy. They never think they will grow weary of these newly discovered blessings. The singing of every hymn is an experience to be remembered. The hearing of the Scriptures read publicly is sheer delight. They sit on the edges of their seats to hear the sermon and can scarcely find sufficient words to thank the preacher for his immense contribution to their lives. Not content to come only on Sunday mornings, they may even shock the elders by their presence at every stated meeting of the church. Then backsliding sets in. "What happened to the preacher?" they wonder. "How did he lose his fire? Why do the once stirring hymns now seem to drag?" Even the Scriptures lose their cutting edge. The backslider now finds it difficult to attend even the Sunday morning service. The warmhearted approach of the pastor and the people now seem meddlesome. Rather than risk an uncomfortable conversation with an overzealous deacon, the backslider slips out quickly from the service and makes his way home, spiritually hungry and unsatisfied. Finding no help in such a church, he either abandons attendance altogether or seeks a church home where backsliders are more comfortable.

6. Pointed spiritual discussions are a source of embarrassment. The person on fire for Jesus Christ delights in every opportunity to talk about Him. No place seems inappropriate for vital spiritual conversation. When backsliding begins, the church seems like the best place to discuss religious matters. Soon it seems altogether inappropriate to speak seriously of spiritual matters in mixed company. It isn't long before free discussion of eternal matters becomes a source of acute embarrassment. If anyone takes the liberty of addressing the backslider concerning the welfare of his soul on a street corner, in an airplane or on a commuter train, his temper may flare. For fear of public confrontation, the backslider is apt to make fun of a serious-minded co-worker who persists in speaking freely of spiritual issues on the job. The backslider is apt to go so far as to proclaim vehemently, "There are two things I never discuss – religion and politics!" Mark this, if the public discussion of deeply important spiritual matters is an embarrassment to you, there can be no question concerning your backslidden condition. The person whose love for Christ is current will delight in every opportunity, public or private, to hear Him lifted up with reverence.

7. Sports, recreation, and entertainment are a large and necessary part of your lifestyle. Paul acknowledged there was profit in physical exercise. Jesus demonstrated the worth of drawing aside from daily tasks for rest and revitalization. However, the current focus on fun and games has nothing in common with a biblical lifestyle. So serious has become man's love of entertainment that some churches even compete with one another for a star-studded cast to lead their public services. Few churches even consider holding special meetings in competition with sporting events. Many a preacher is more certain to have the Sunday morning service over by noon sharp than he is to say anything worthwhile. He would no sooner incur the wrath of his recreation-minded congregation by detaining them from Sunday afternoon picnics and games than he would deprive himself of his own Saturday evening entertainment.

Christians are not saved to play but to serve. If sporting events are as important to you as spiritual progress, you are backslidden. If you must choose between church and recreation and recreation wins, you are backslidden. If you devote more time to play and exercise than to prayer and the Word of God, there can be no doubt of your true spiritual condition, in your case, backsliding has not only begun, but progressed to a deplorable level.

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8. Sins of the body and of the mind can be indulged in without an uproar in your conscience. Prior to conversion it is not to be expected that sins will play havoc with the conscience. The unregenerate is known to have a seared conscience and can hardly be required to shed tears over sins. But how can a Christian, who has been made a new creature in Christ Jesus, for whom *"all things have become new"* (2 Cor. 5:17), manifest this same callousness? By one method only: *backsliding.*

When a Christian is walking in fellowship with Christ, his sensitivity to right and wrong is similar to that which characterized Jesus in His life on earth. If that walk deteriorates, sensitivity vanishes and the backslider manifests a lack of concern over personal sin. What once seemed almost inconceivably awful becomes too insignificant to worry about. Sins that were carefully shunned are now embraced by the backslider with relish. As he grows more and more full of himself, he looks with increasing warmth upon those sins of body and mind which will make his position comfortable and pleasant, demonstrate his freedom from unnecessary restraints and prove that he is as able to discern good from evil as the Almighty. Once sick at the mere thought of sin, the backslider can engage in gross iniquity with scarcely a stir of conscience or a tear of grief.

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(To be continued)

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