

5 Signs of a Backslidden Heart

I will never forget the words spoken one night by the pastor of the church in which I was saved. He said, “A person may take 20 years to backslide” (referring to a complete apostasy from the Lord). This is a sobering thought.

You grow old gradually. Your hair turns gray gradually. You can backslide just as gradually. Before you know it, you have wasted your whole life.

Where is the present course of your life taking you? Are you moving toward the Lord or away from Him? If you continued forever on this path, would you wind up in heaven or in hell?

MY SECRET BACKSLIDING At one time in my walk—in the late 1970s and early 1980s—I began to backslide, though all the while I claimed to be growing and maturing. My prayer time and devotional reading of the Word decreased. My fasting all but stopped; my witnessing dropped off. I virtually never took authority over the devil. (I really couldn’t have done much anyway!)

I had less and less control over the flesh. I fell in areas I had never fallen in before. Don’t get me wrong: I never touched another woman or misused ministry funds or stole anything. But I slipped up a few times in ways I never had before. I even became addicted to video games!

I felt the presence and joy of the Lord less frequently and less abundantly, yet I preached with fervor and remained an absolutely committed believer in Jesus. I was engaged in many good and even sacrificial works—still, I was backsliding!

I will be eternally grateful to my sister-in-law who, without my knowledge, helped to pray me back on fire. How I praise God

for miraculously intervening—for planting the first seeds on New Year's Day morning 1982, lovingly rebuking me in March of that year, awakening me with a vision of a spiritual outpouring in May, showing me how far away I was drifting in September, calling me to lay everything on the altar in October, and then sending a visitation November 21, 1982. I have not been the same since.

OUTWARD VITALITY, INWARD DECLINE Tragically, we can have all the outward trappings of Christian zeal and service without having a vibrant relationship with the Lord. According to New Testament scholar Robert Mounce, "At Ephesus, hatred of heresy and extensive involvement in the works appropriate to faith had allowed the fresh glow of love for God and one another to fade."

In other words, wrote Mounce in the New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans), "Every virtue carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction." So, it could be that our very zeal for truth and purity coupled with our penchant for hard work and sacrifice could rob us of our love both for God and man.

In *Revivals of Religion*, Charles Finney asserted that it is possible for a person to be active in Christian service and maintain forms of religion and obedience to God—even with a backslidden heart. "But," a troubled believer asks, "if I can seem to be on fire for God, keeping busy for the Lord and staying true to His Word, and yet be backsliding at the same time, how can I really know the state of my heart?"

A SELF-EXAMINATION Let me describe for you some tangible tests by which you can examine yourself. There's no reason to be in the dark when it comes to your own spiritual life. Ask yourself:

Has my personal devotion to Jesus decreased? Perhaps your

desire for intimate times with the Lord has waned, especially for prayer and worship, and your once-ravenous hunger for the Word is now lacking. (John G. Lake says backsliding begins with lessening hunger for the Word, while Leonard Ravenhill claims backsliding begins with decreasing prayer.)

Do you love Jesus today as you once loved Him before? You may enjoy the forms of worship—good music, singing, dancing, being part of an exciting corporate experience—but what about the object of worship? What about the Lord Himself?

You may have a message or a burden. Theology may intrigue you. The ministry may consume you. But all these things are mere idols and distractions in comparison with coming into God's presence and fellowshiping with Him. You grow and bear fruit only to the extent that you abide in the Vine (see John 15:1-8).

Has my personal satisfaction in God decreased? Do you feel the need for things other than God to gain fulfillment? Are you increasingly seeking social orientation in place of private devotions? Do you desire recognition and acceptance by persons of flesh and blood?

The Word says, "The desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19, NIV), and "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

At one time promotion on the job was not your primary source of satisfaction, nor was a big paycheck, a nice home, a new car, a special boyfriend or girlfriend, an exciting sports event, or even a happy family. (Yes! Spouses and children can take away from your delighting in the Lord above all.) Walking with God used to satisfy you.

Does it still satisfy you? Fully and completely? If not, you have left your first love.

Has my passion for spiritual work decreased? This will be reflected by a decreased burden for the lost (both at home and abroad), a decreased burden for revival (often replaced by good works, and more subtly by good spiritual programs), and a penchant for respectability in place of radicality. Holy zeal makes you uncomfortable, and you are becoming ashamed of Jesus and His reproach.

Witnessing used to come naturally, but now you almost avoid the subject. You simply don't care about the ones Jesus died for. Or maybe you don't fully believe that they are lost. Unbelief is always a result of backsliding somewhere, somehow. Do you find yourself spiritually numb?

And what about revival and visitation? How would you feel if the Spirit fell in power? (Not necessarily in some cultured—and “containable”—way, but with intensity and suddenness and upheaval.) Are you willing to let Him be in control—of the service, of the leadership, of you? Or have you become satisfied with a comfortable seat in the theater while the show itself never goes on? Beware of a powerless spiritual sophistication. The world admires it, but it has no teeth.

Have my standards of holiness become lower? Perhaps you have permitted things into your life, family or congregation that would have been unthinkable when you were on fire. You now find you are able to engage in certain activities, watch certain movies, enjoy certain sports and forms of entertainment, and attend certain functions which the Lord at one time convicted you of—but now there is no conviction!

Beware! This type of backsliding is often done in the name of spiritual maturity. I warn you as one who once fell into this very error: It is a trap and a lie!

The fact that something doesn't “bother you” may be the loudest warning you will ever hear. You are not experiencing the freedom that comes as a result of trust; you are

experiencing the insensitivity that comes from hardness. Absence of divine conviction does not mean absence of divine displeasure. It may actually point to a withdrawing of His presence. In fact, if the Holy Spirit is dealing with you even now, cry out to Him right where you are for restoring grace.

Am I backsliding in spiritual authority and personal victory? Perhaps you are experiencing a lack of victory over the flesh, falling back into old habits and lusts, finding yourself unable to resist and drive out the devil from strongholds in your life or the lives of those to whom you minister.

Remember: You can fool others, but you can't fool the flesh—and you can't fool the devil. As Leonard Ravenhill often asked, "Are you known in hell?" Are you moving from victory to victory, or do you find yourself more and more entangled every day (or month, or year)?

Peter taught that "a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him" (2 Pet. 2:19). You must ask yourself if Jesus is your Master or if you are mastered by sin.

CHOOSING TO RESTORE FIRST LOVE The Lord speaks of our first love as a height—a glorious, wonderful height. We forsake—not lose—our first love, meaning that we leave that place of spiritual passion by the choices we make and the lifestyle we adopt. Our first love is not something we accidentally misplace.

The Lord calls us to repent of the sin of forsaking our first love, meaning that we can be restored to that place of spiritual passion by the choices we make and the lifestyle we adopt.

What then are those choices and what is that lifestyle? Jesus gives us the answer: "Repent"—meaning make an about-face—"and do the things you did at first" (Rev. 2:5).

Have you ever read a Christian book on rekindling love in a

failing marriage? Such a book would diagnose the nature of marital problems and give practical steps to correct them. It might give as an example the husband who, in the early days of his relationship with his fiancée or wife, called her several times a day, sent her flowers once a week, took her on a special date every Saturday and so on. He knew how to keep the home fires burning.

But five children, three apartments, one house, four moves, six jobs and about 20 pounds later, he's forgotten what it takes. This husband needs to do the things he did at first. He needs to set aside time for his wife and love her again as his bride!

That's exactly what we need to do when our love for Jesus turns cold. We must renew our relationship with Him!

How? We set aside blocks of quality time to pour out our hearts to Him in prayer, sharing our innermost thoughts. We lift our voices to Him in worship, singing the songs that have been so precious to us, expressing our love for Him with thanksgiving and praise.

We saturate our minds and hearts with His Word, meditating on His truths, learning of Him, growing in knowledge and grace. We think back to the wonder of those early days, and we seek to recapture that sense of divine nearness. And, whenever we feel prompted, we share our faith.

According to Matthew Henry in his Commentary on the Bible, believers who have left their first love must return and do their first works. They must go back step by step until they come to the place where they took the first false step. They must endeavor to revive and recover their first zeal, tenderness, and seriousness and must pray as earnestly and watch as diligently as they did when they first set out in the ways of God.

Then, over a period of time, as we do these things—not with a “time clock” mentality, not as a spiritual performance or out of religious habit, not to earn brownie points or somehow merit His favor, but rather because we love Him and long for Him and want to deepen our fellowship with Him—His Spirit will flood our hearts, and before we know it, He will once again become the most precious One in our lives. Then all our good works—serving Him, sharing our faith, giving sacrificially—will become expressions of love, the overflow of hearts enamored with the Master.

That’s what it means to “do the things we did at first.” That’s what it means to return to the height we abandoned, to repent and return to our first love.

Yes, God will abundantly pardon. The Lord will receive you again, no questions asked. He has promised to draw near to those who draw near to Him (see James 4:8). As John Bunyan quaintly put it, when we take a step toward God, He takes a step toward us—but His steps are larger than ours! Now is the time to pursue the Lord with all our hearts.

Read a companion devotional.

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