



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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The Backslider Characterized; Or, The Evil And Danger Of Defection Described.

By Rev. Ebenezer Erskine¹

“If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.” —Heb. 10:38.

[The following Discourse was represented to the commission, May 1725, by Mr. Alexander Anderson, as if it had been of such a turbulent or erroneous tendency, that he himself, preaching after me, was obliged publicly to contradict me. The following notes are, to the best of my remembrance, the *ipsissima verba* which I delivered at that time. Whether the doctrines contained therein deserved the character he gave them before the Reverend Commission, or if he had ground publicly to contradict, I submit to the judgment of the impartial world.]

“From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.” —John 6:66.

In the beginning of this chapter, our blessed Lord works a notable miracle; he feeds five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes, twelve baskets of fragments remaining. The multitude is so taken with this miraculous feast, that they thought to make him a king. But our lowly King of Zion did not affect worldly grandeur, His kingdom not being of this world; therefore he withdraws himself, and passes over the sea to Capernaum. Many of the multitude, whom he had fed, followed him thither. And there our blessed Lord takes occasion to preach a very heavenly and spiritual sermon to them, holding out the necessity of

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living and feeding by faith upon him, in order to everlasting life. These carnal hearers are exceedingly stumbled at the spirituality of his doctrine, looking upon it as a piece of unaccountable stuff and nonsense. Upon which they begin to drop off from him, as the evangelist remarks here, in the words of my text, *From that time many of his disciples went back, &c.*

In which words we may notice, 1. A defection, or going back from Christ. 2. The season of it: namely, *From that time*, or, after he had preached the foregoing sermon. 3. The cause of it, implied in the time, namely, the spirituality of his doctrine. 4. The persons guilty of this defection, namely, professed disciples; and that not a few, but many of them. 5. The final and irrecoverable nature of their defection, they *walked no more with him*.

The words are plain and easy; and therefore there is no need of any critical explication. Wherefore, take this natural observation from them; namely,—

DOCT. “That there are some seasons in which many of Christ’s pretended disciples fall off from him, and that finally and irrecoverably. *From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.*”

In handling this doctrine, I shall observe the order of the words, and speak a little,

- I. To this defection, or falling off from Christ.
- II. Inquire a little into the causes of it.
- III. The seasons of it.
- IV. The persons guilty of the defection, namely, the disciples.
- V. Give a few characters of those who fall off finally, and walk no more with him.
- VI. Apply the whole.

I. I say, I will speak a little of *this defection or falling off from Christ*. And here I would, 1. Give you some of the scriptural names of it. 2. Speak of the kinds and degrees of it. 3. Notice some of its ingredients. 4. Mention some of its concomitants.

First, I would give you some scriptural names by which it is called. And sometimes it is called *a looking back*: Luke 9:62: “No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of heaven.” My friends, you have been professing to set your faces heavenward; O beware of casting a back-look

upon your old lovers: “Remember Lot’s wife;” take heed that God do not set you up as monuments of his vengeance. Again; it is sometimes called a *turning back*: Lam. 1:8: “Jerusalem sigheth, and turneth backward.” The way to heaven will not admit of a retreat; you must still be pressing forward, whatever opposition may be in your way. Again; sometimes it is called a *drawing back*: Heb. 10:38: *If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.* Moreover, it is called a *sliding back*; intimating, that the people who are not well established in religion stand upon slippery ground: Hos. 11:7: “My people are bent to backsliding from me.” Furthermore, it is called a *falling back*: Is. 28:13: “The word of the Lord was unto them, precept upon precept, and line upon line; that they might go and fall backward, and be broken, and snared and taken;” and you know a backward fall is exceedingly dangerous. *Lastly*, To mention no more, it is called a *turning aside*. It is said of Israel, that “they quickly turned aside like a deceitful bow;” which frustrates the design of the archer, by shooting away, or beside the mark. They who “turn aside into crooked ways,” whatever may be their pretences to religion, miss the mark of the same, even the “mark and prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus; and shall be led forth,” and have their part “with the workers of iniquity.”

Secondly, I come to treat of the kinds and degrees of defections from Christ. And, not to multiply distinctions, which are more ready to confound than edify hearers, I shall only mention these two or three

1. Defection from Christ is sometimes more universal and general, of the body of a church and nation together. Thus, Ephesus, (Rev. 2) is charged with falling from her first love. And the whole body of the Israelitish nation are engaged together in a defection, by going in to worship the idolatrous calves which Jeroboam erected at Dan and Bethel: and it was so universal, that the prophet Elijah thought he had been left alone; though, indeed, the Lord tells him, that he had “seven thousand in Israel, which had not bowed the knee to Baal.” And sometimes it is more special and particular, as when a single society, family, or particular person, enters upon a course of defection and backsliding from Christ and his ways; of which instances may be afterwards named.

2. Sometimes it is more open and avowed, in contradistinction from the former, by abandoning and relinquishing the very profession of religion to which they once pretended, and become openly wicked and shamefully criminal, giving themselves loose reins in a way of sin. Or, it is more hidden and secret, when, though there be still a profession of religion kept up; yet the power of godliness is quite forsaken, and the heart maintains a close correspondence with sin, and lives in a secret trade of wickedness, inconsistent with the rules of Christianity.

3. There is a total, as also a partial defection or falling off from Christ. A total or final, is that of the wicked and reprobate, who, when they fall, are like lead, or a stone falling into deep water, which never rises again; as it is said of Pharaoh and his host, “They sank like lead in the mighty waters:” they make an utter “shipwreck of faith and a good conscience.” A partial defection is incident even to the godly themselves. I may call it *temporary*; for they may be left for a considerable time, to make many woeful steps of defection from Christ and his ways; as is plain from the instances of David, Peter, Abraham, and many others. But when they fall, they are like wood or cork, falling into water, who, though they sink at first, yet they rise again by faith and repentance, which influence the reformation of their lives, and which, in pursuit of the divine purpose of grace for their salvation, are actuated in them by the Holy Spirit, according to Psal. 37:24: “Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.”

The defection here spoken of in the text, seems to have been of the first kinds of each division. It was general and public; for there was a great multitude of them, as we read in the beginning of the chapter: it was open and avowed; for they put a slight on Christ in the face of the sun: and it was total and final; they walked no more with him, nor looked after Christ any more.

Thirdly, I come to notice some ingredients of this defection here spoken of: And there appears to have been these things in it:—

1. A dissatisfaction with Christ, and a vilifying both him and his way; for they said, ver. 42, “Is not his father and his mother, and sisters with us? how then came he down from heaven?”

2. A murmuring and repining against the spirituality of his doctrine, out of a rooted enmity and prejudice against it: ver. 41: “They murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread of life which came down from heaven:” and again, “This is a hard saying, who can hear it?”

3. A formal disputing and arguing against his doctrine, as repugnant to reason. They set up their reason as the standard of revelation, and will receive nothing but what they were able to comprehend; for *they strove*, or disputed, “amongst themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ver. 52.

4. A formal casting off with Christ, and turning back to their old way and trade of living, by which their latter end was worse than their beginning; for *they went back and followed him no more*, as in the text.

Fourthly, I come to mention some concomitants of defection from Christ.

1. It is commonly accompanied with a halting and wavering between sin and duty, as Israel did between God and Baal: “How long,” says Elijah to them, “do ye halt between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.” When this wavering befalls people, they cannot stand long; for “a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways,” says James. “Their heart is divided; therefore shall they be found faulty.”

2. It is commonly attended with a mercenary kind of spirit. For, as secular and worldly interest is the spring of all their religion; so it is the spring of their apostacy and defection from it; as is plain from what our Lord tells his pretended disciples: “Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.” Where this mercenary spirit prevails, folk will stand by Christ and religion as long as it will stand with their selfish and secular designs, but no longer. Christ, conscience, religion, and every thing, must slavishly submit to this at length.

3. It is attended with a stretching of Christian liberty to the uttermost pitch, and a dallying with the appearances of evil. “O,” will the man say, “what needs all this needless scrupulosity and preciseness? I may adventure thus far, and yet keep in both with God and a good conscience.” Like Eve, who thought she might tamper with the temptation, without any hazard of compromising herself; or Samson, who thought he might dally with Delilah, and yet keep in with God. O sirs, it is dangerous going too near God’s marches; for, as one says, he that will go all the length he may, when occasion serves, will go farther than he ought.

4. It is attended with a snarling at reproofs. They cannot abide to have their sores ripped up, and the evil of their ways discovered. Let ministers preach ever such sound doctrine, yet if they but point towards the quarter where their defections lie, presently they are like wild bulls in a net, full of fury and resentment. We find too much of this, even in good men, when engaged in a partial defection. Asa was so irritated by the reproof of the prophet, that he cast him into prison, for telling him that he was fallen from his former confidence in God, when the hosts of the Ethiopians came up against him. And the Galatians reckoned Paul their “enemy, because he told them the truth.”

With a snatching at the reputation of those that stand their ground, or who give any testimony against their defections: and if they can perceive any such making but the least wrong step, they are sure to make it as open and public to the world as possible, and to represent it in the blackest character imaginable. It is a very true observation, that backsliders are commonly backbiters. They cannot abide to see any out-shine themselves in holiness and tenderness; and therefore

they lie at the catch, to wound the reputation of those that cannot run the same length with themselves. This made David pray, “Deliver me, O Lord, from all my transgressions, and make me not the reproach of the foolish: for when my foot slippeth, mine enemies do magnify themselves against me.”

6. Division is usually the concomitant and fruit of defection. If we should trace all divisions to their spring, by which the inmost parts of the church of God have been rent, since the first ages of Christianity, we should still find them taking their rise from the bitter fountain of defection. What was it but the defections of some in the church of Corinth, that gave birth to that division, of which the apostle complains, 1 Cor. 1? What was it but the defections of the church of Rome, that has made such a wide breach between Protestants and Papists? It is true, every party and set of men have preached up peace, and cried out against division; as the Papists to this very day, exclaim against us for making a rupture in the church of Christ: whereas it is not we, but they themselves, that make the rupture by their defections. We must not say, *A confederacy* with any in a way of sin, or purchase peace at the expense of truth and holiness. This was the sentiment of good old Jacob on his death-bed, Gen. 49:5: “Simeon and Levi are brethren in iniquity: instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret,” &c. Many other things might be added as concomitants of defection; but I must not stand on them. I go on, therefore, to—

II. The *second* thing in the text and method, which was, to *inquire a little into the causes of defection*. And,

1. The main cause, or rather occasion, of this defection here mentioned, was the unpleasantness of Christ’s doctrine to the sensual and carnal inclinations of these pretended disciples mentioned in our text. His doctrine did not suit their humours, and answer their expectations; therefore they *went back, and walked no more with him*. Just like many among ourselves, who, if ministers do not preach according to their fancies, if they be free and faithful, and preach against the defection of which they are guilty, they either turn their backs on them, or cry out upon them as men of turbulent spirits, incendiaries, fire-brands, and what not? But ministers need not be discouraged on this account, since the apostles of our Lord were characterized after the same manner: “These are they that have turned the world upside down.” I fear there are many among us, who, if they would speak the language of their hearts, would join issue with that people, Isa. 30:10: “Who said to their seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits. But, sirs, we need not wonder to

see folk stumbling at the plain truths of the word, seeing Christ himself is “set for the fall,” as well as for the “rising of many in Israel.”

2. The love of worldly riches is another great cause of defection, as is plain from what the apostle says, 1 Tim. 6:10: “The love of money is the root of all evil: which, while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” Where the love of the world has the ascendant in the heart, the love of God cannot be strong; for, “if *any man love* the world, the love of the Father is not in him:” and where the love of God is not, it is impossible for that man to stand his ground.

3. The love of worldly ease is another great cause of defection from Christ, especially in a time of persecution for the gospel’s sake; for then it will be said, as Peter to Christ, when dissuading him from going up to Jerusalem, *Master, spare thyself*; it is best to sleep in a whole skin. But let us remember what Christ says in this case, Matth. 16:25: “Whosoever shall save his life, shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it.”

4. The fear of man is another cause of defection: “The fear of man,” says Solomon, “bringeth a snare;” especially the fear of offending and displeasing great men, upon whom we have any kind of dependence. But, as an antidote against this, let us compare the wrath of man with the wrath of the eternal God. Shall we adventure to run upon “the thick bosses of the Almighty’s buckler,” to avoid the displeasure of a worm like ourselves? Is. 51:12: “Who art thou, that shouldst be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man, who shall be made as grass? and forgettest the Lord thy Maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth?” To the same purpose is that caveat given us by our blessed Lord; “Fear not man, that can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul,” &c.

5. Bad example has a fatal influence this way; and especially the bad example of men of influence and authority, such as ministers and magistrates. You have a word for this, Hos. 5:1: “Hear ye this, O priests, and give ye ear, O house of the king; for judgment is toward you; because ye have been a snare on Mizpeh, and a net spread upon Tabor.” When we have conceived a great veneration for any man, we are very ready to run after his example. Thus, Gal. 2:13: Barnabas, with many of the converted Jews at Antioch, were led away with Peter’s dissimulation, who seemed to them a pillar; for which Paul withstood him to the very face. Let us always remember, that we are to be followers of no man, but in so far as they are followers of Christ.

6. The treachery and deceit of the heart, with its natural bent and bias towards sin: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.”

That character given Israel is exceedingly applicable to it, Hos. 11:7: “They are bent to backsliding.” There is not only an easiness and drawability in the heart of man to sin, but a strong propensity and inclination. So that it was not without sufficient ground that Solomon tells us, Prov. 28:26: “He that trusteth in his own heart, is a fool.” Let us, therefore, advert to that caveat of the apostle’s, Heb. 3:12: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.” I might mention many other causes, if time would allow, such as absolute and downright hypocrisy in their dealings with God. If the heart be not “right with God,” people can never be “steadfast in his covenant.” Again; self-confidence, when men lean to their own understanding, trust to their own strength; like Peter, “Though all men should forsake thee, yet will not I.” These resolutions, that are founded upon our own strength, will prove like Jonah’s gourd, wither, and come to naught, as soon as ever the wind of temptation blows on them. We are not to trust any created grace that is in us, but only the grace that is in Christ Jesus: “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.” Again; when folk voluntarily let down their guard, and slack their watch, they yield themselves an easy prey to the devil: and therefore, “Be sober, be vigilant; for your adversary the devil goes about, as a roaring lion, seeing whom he may devour.” Again; when folk do not lay a sure foundation. He that builds must count the cost. They that have not a root of solid grace in themselves, will fall away in the time of temptation. And so much for the causes of defection, the second thing proposed.

III. The *third* thing was, to *inquire a little into the seasons of defection*. The words also give ground for this inquiry: *From that time many of his disciples went back*. You may take these few causes, among many others: —

1. Defections may happen after God has been making very signal and remarkable appearances in his providence for a people. Christ, in the beginning of this chapter, had made a signal, yea, a miraculous appearance, for those people, by feeding them in a desert place; and yet a day or two after, they *went back, and walked no more with him*. This was the sin of Israel: God delivers them out of their Egyptian bondage, in an awe-inspiring way, plaguing their enemies, and dividing the Red Sea before them; and yet they soon forgot his mighty works, and turned aside from the right way. And, alas! May not this aggravate the defections of which we in this land are guilty, that we have turned aside from God, after many surprising and almost miraculous deliverances that he has wrought for us?

2. Defections frequently happen in the midst of the clearest revelation of the gospel, and when the light of the gospel is shining with the greatest brightness among a people. This people here had heard Christ himself preach, who spake as never man spake; and yet, immediately upon the back of hearing him, they turned their back upon him. This also aggravates our defections, and abounding sins, that they are under the clearest sunshine of gospel-revelation: “If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin.”

3. After very solemn professions of love and friendship to Christ. This people here professed such a kindness to Christ, that they would needs make him a king; and they are so taken with him, that they follow him to the other side of the sea; and yet, alas! They *went back, and walked no more with him*. Thus, Israel also, they seemingly professed, that “whatever the Lord their God should command them,” that they would “observe and do;” but they quickly “turned aside like a deceitful bow.” My friends, you have been professing friendship to Christ, before men and angels, by partaking of the symbols of his body and blood: O take care that you be not found practically renouncing your sacramental engagements, by entering upon a course of defection. Alas! May not the defections of many professors be dated from a communion-table? They come away, after they have got the sop, with more of hell and the devil in them than before.

4. After some remarkable common illumination, and seeming experiences in religion, Heb. 6 &c. It was a high aggravation of Solomon’s sin, that he went astray after the Lord had several times appeared to him.

5. The time of worldly prosperity. Deut. 32:15: “Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked.” And Hos. 13:6: “According to their pasture, so were they filled: they were filled, and their heart was exalted; therefore have they forgotten me.”

6. A time of trial and persecution for righteousness’ sake, when enemies are invading the rights and privileges of the church of Christ, casting fire into his sanctuary, and polluting the dwelling-place of his name. This is a season in which the Lord calls for a special testimony for himself at the hand of professors; and yet even then many fall off; and sail with the stream. The stony-ground hearers, “when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they are offended.” Rotten fruit usually drops off in a storm; and the wind commonly drives away the chaff.

7. Defection may happen among a people, even when there is a remnant keeping their ground, and maintaining their integrity; as you see here. When the multitude are turning their back on Christ, he says to his disciples, “Will ye also go away?.” To which they answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go but unto thee?”

thou hast the words of eternal life.” Rev. 3:4: “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis, which have not defiled their garments,” &c.

IV. The *fourth* thing is, to *inquire who they are that make this defection from Christ*. We are told here, that they were disciples; that is, they were so professedly. They pretended to be disciples, and had gone considerable lengths with Christ, which had procured for them this character. For,

1. They had entered into Christ’s school, and got many a sweet lesson: but, *hearing many things, they did not observe them*. They were disciples; for they owned him as their Master and Lord: ver. 25. “When they had found him on the other side of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when camest thou hither?” and, ver. 34: “Lord, evermore give us this bread.” Of the same kind are these, (Matth. 7:22,) who cried, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?” &c.

2. They were a set of men that had a very fiery edge upon them for awhile: for they not only followed Christ through the sea, but they have seemingly very strong desires after Christ, and the bread of life; saying, “Lord, evermore give us this bread.” But though “with their mouth they pretended much love, yet their heart went after their covetousness.”

3. They are called disciples; for they joined themselves to the society of the true and real disciples of Christ, and go along with them, in following Christ for a considerable time; but yet turn their backs on them at length.

4. They had been eye and ear witnesses of the doctrine and miracles of Christ: and yet, for all this, they *went back, and walked no more with him*. Thus, you see upon what account they might be called disciples.

And now, seeing in the text we are told that they were many; hence, therefore, you may take the following observations or remarks:—

1. That, among the multitude of professors, Christ has commonly but a small body of supporters in a winnowing and sifting time: There was but a handful that staid with Christ; the greatest multitude dropped of. The heap of corn is but small, when the straw and chaff are separated from it. Christ’s flock is but a little flock: “Many are called, but few are chosen. Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”

2. As Christ has but a small number of supporters, so the greatest number of professors usually dance to the devil’s pipe, and comply with the side of the

times. Many of them went back, only the twelve staid behind: “Broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there he which go in thereat.”

3. Defection from Christ is of a very spreading and contagious nature; “a little of this leaven” is fair to “leaven the whole lump;” like a pestilential air, it flies over a whole country or kingdom in a very little time. Among the many thousands in Israel, only seven thousand had not bowed to Baal. There were but “a few names in Sardis, which had not defiled their garments.” Hence it follows, —

4. That the way of the multitude is always to be suspected. And people are never to think themselves safe enough, because they have many neighbours; for we are not to “follow a multitude to do evil,” in regard the way of the multitude is a way commonly loathed of God.

5. The followers of Christ need not be discouraged because of the paucity of their number; for it has been so in all ages. It was so at first, and will be so to the end of the world: “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith in the earth?” And therefore, I say, though you should sit like a pelican in the wilderness, and owl in the desert; though you should become the song of the drunkard, and be held for signs and wonders in Israel, because of the singularity of your way; yet be not discouraged at this, for it is far better to go to heaven alone than to hell in company.

Now, if it be asked, Why the Lord suffers defections among his professed disciples? I answer, briefly, 1. Because God will have a difference put “between the precious and the vile?” 1 Cor. 11:19: “There must needs be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest. God will have the chaff distinguished from the wheat, the dross from the true gold; he will have his Israel proved and tried, that they may be distinguished from others. 2. That real disciples may be challenged to cleave to the Lord with the more firmness and resolution: “Lord, to whom shall we go, but unto thee?” said the twelve, when they saw the multitude running away. We have a word to this purpose, Job 17:8,9: “The innocent shall stir up himself against the hypocrite;” and then it immediately follows, “The righteous shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall add strength,” as in the Hebrew, or “he stronger and stronger;” intimating that the defections of hypocrites from the way of the Lord sharpens the resolution of the truly godly in cleaving to him; for at such a time, God, as it were, is issuing his proclamation in the camp of Israel, “Who is on the Lord’s side?” To which we may add, that these defections of pretended disciples do, in a way of righteous judgment, prove stumbling-blocks to others, by which they are hardened in a way of sin. And thus a woe falls both upon the offender and the offended; according to

that of Christ's, Matth. 18:7: "Woe unto the world because of offences: for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh."

V. The *fifth* thing is, *to give a few characters of those who fall off finally, and walk no more with Christ.* Only, before I go on, I would premise, that I do not here offer to give positive marks of an irrecoverable condition; for who can set bounds to the infinite grace and mercy of him, to whom no case is desperate, and "who is able to save to the uttermost" of sin, and to the uttermost of misery? But all I do is, to offer some melancholy symptoms or presumptions of an irrecoverable defection.

1. It is a ominous evidence of a final defection, when people fall off from the profession and practice of religion, after some signal, though common, illuminations and warmings of the Spirit; for which you may read Heb. 6:4-6.

2. When people, through the influence of these common illuminations in the knowledge of Christ, have been led to make considerable advances in the way of religion, and yet afterward apostatize, and fall back into the same puddle of wickedness which they seemed to have escaped. A weighty scripture for this you have, 2 Pet. 2:20,21.

3. When people knowingly and wilfully venture upon a way of sin, after they have received the knowledge of the truth: for which see Heb. 10:26,27. When folk come that length, especially after a profession of religion, as to become mockers of true piety, attempting to ridicule things sacred, and to banter those out of their religion, whom they think to be aiming heavenward: this is a black mark of one that is entirely given up of God; this being an open proclamation of war against heaven. "Be not mockers, lest your bands be made strong."

4. Those whose hearts are filled with malice against the image of God in his people, who reject and detest the very picture of holiness in his people, and so become open persecutors of Christ in his members, and take all methods imaginable to extirpate the name of Christ and Christianity out of the world: as did the cursed apostate Julian.

5. When people get success and prosperity in a way of sin. They thirst after sin, and God grants them the desire of their hearts. This is a sign of total and final defection; for, says, the Lord, "Backsliders in heart shall be filled with their own ways." Perhaps, you think all is right, because God in his providence does not check you in your sinful ways. But assure yourselves, there cannot be a sadder

mark of his wrath and vengeance; for then he seems to be saying, “They are joined to their idols, let them alone. Let him that is filthy, be filthy still.”

6. When, after challenges of conscience, rebukes from the word and Spirit upon the account of sin, all comes to be hushed up in a profound silence, and the senses of the soul are locked up in a deep slumber, then it would appear, that God is saying, as he said to the old world, “My Spirit shall no more strive with them.” They “would not hearken to my voice, and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lusts; and they walked in their own counsels. I would have purged them, and they were not purged; therefore they shall not be purged from their filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon them.” We have a sad instance of this nature, Is. 6:10: There is a people on whom God had taken a great deal of pains, as we read, chap. 5. He had chosen them as his vineyard, planted them in a fruitful soil: but all his labour was lost; they still went on in a course of defection and apostacy; “instead of grapes, they brought forth wild grapes.” Well at length God seals them up under a stroke of judicial blindness and hardness; so that no reproof from word, providence, or conscience, should ever affect them. “Go,” says the Lord, “and make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and convert, and be healed.”

Before I proceed to the application, I shall do away with a question which some serious soul may be ready to ask, upon what has been said on the former head; namely, Wherein lies the difference between the partial and temporary defections of the godly, and these total, final, and irrecoverable apostacies of hypocrites and temporary believers?

To which I answer, 1. The believer, when he is left to backslide, or to fall into any sin, howls and groans under it; it lies heavy on him, like a burden too heavy for him to bear. “Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head, therefore my heart faileth me.” They can never enjoy themselves with satisfaction, till they be recovered again. An instance of this we have in the apostle Peter, after he had been left to make that foul step of defection, in denying Christ with curses and imprecations: after Christ gave him but a look, he went out, and wept bitterly. The same we see in David, Psal. 51. After he had been guilty of murder and adultery, in the matter of Uriah and Bathsheba, how does he lament and bewail his folly? And that which principally touches them, is not so much the penal, as the moral evil of their defection; they are not so much grieved that they themselves suffer, as that God is dishonoured, and religion wounded by their means; as we see in

David, Psal. 51:4: “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight.”

2. They are never at rest, or ease, till they have the guilt and filth of their sin expiated and washed away by the blood and Spirit of the Lord Jesus; and all the world will not quiet their consciences, till this be obtained. O, says David, after he had made this foul step, “wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin:” And again, ver. 7: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” Whereas the hypocrite, when he falls, satisfies the clamours of his conscience either by extenuating his sin, or by multiplying his duties. “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or ten thousands of rivers of oil?” But he never runs to Christ, to have his “conscience sprinkled from dead works.”

3. The believer, after he has fallen, does not satisfy himself with a turning from sin to God, but he must have some reviving intimations of God’s favour and reconciled countenance: as David, (ver. 8:) “Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.” Though all the world should fawn upon him, yet it will not please him, unless he get a smile from God himself.

4. When the believer falls, his fall leads him to bewail the corruption and deprivation of his nature. He traces the streams to the fountain, and sits down there, and weeps over it, as the cause of all his defections and backslidings from God as David did, (ver 5:) “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me:” and looks up to God for a cast of renewing grace, (ver. 10:) “Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me.” Whereas hypocrites bewail the loss of their reputation more than they do their sin or the deprivation of their nature.

5. When believers fall, they come under fresh engagements, through grace, to walk more closely with God than ever they have done before, and endeavour to be more serviceable to him in their generation than ever; as David, (ver. 12,13:) “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; then will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee.”

6. As burnt children dread the fire, believers are afraid of falling into the same sins again; and for this end indent with God, not in their own, but only in his strength to keep them; as David, “Uphold me with thy free Spirit;” and again, elsewhere, “Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps may not slide:” and Psal. 119:5: “O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!” Now, from these marks of the partial falls of the godly, you may easily gather the difference

between them, and the damnable apostacy and total defection of hypocrites and reprobates.

And now I go on to the application of this doctrine; and all the use I make of it shall be in a word of *exhortation*. Is it so, that many of Christ's pretended disciples do, some time or other, fall totally and finally away from him? Then let me exhort and persuade all hearing me, but especially you who have been lifting up your hands to him at a communion-table, and professing to be his disciples, by laying your hands on a slain Redeemer, to endeavour firmness and stability, in cleaving to Christ and his way. O let it not be said of you, as it is said of these disciples here, *From that time they went back, and walked no more with him.*

To enforce this exhortation, consider, *first*, the evil of apostacy either in part, or in whole.

1. It is a provocation of the highest nature. And there are especially two evils in it, which cannot but awaken divine resentment; namely, treachery and ingratitude. *1st*, There is treachery in it. What husband would take it well, if his wife should abandon him, and follow after other lovers. My friends, you have been taking God for your husband, in a solemn manner, before angels and men; and will it not be treachery in the highest degree, to go and prostitute your souls to sin, his greatest enemy? Will not this cast a calumny and reproach upon God, as if others were better than he? This will make him say, "What iniquity have your fathers found in me?" &c. "O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee?" *2dly*, There is ingratitude in it, also. It was a very cutting word that Christ had to his disciples, in the verse following our text, "Will ye also leave me?" The same is he saying to every one of you: 'Will ye also go away, after such proofs of my kindness, after such repeated vows and obligations?' From all which it is evident, that apostacy is a provocation of the highest nature.

2. Your backsliding will give a deep wound to religion, and bring up a reproach upon the good ways of God. You have been owning him as your Lord and Master, and declaring before the world, that you think his service the best service, his wages the best wages; that one day in his courts is better than a thousand. Now, if after all you backslide, will not the world conclude, that you have not found that in his service which you expected? And thus others will be scared from the good ways of the Lord.

3. You will grieve the hearts of the godly, whose hearts God would not grieve. And it is a dangerous thing to offend one of his little ones: “It were better for you that a mill-stone were hanged about your neck, and you cast into the midst of the sea, than that you should offend one of these little ones.”

4. If you shall apostatize in the whole, and slide back with a perpetual backsliding, it will be a prelude of your eternal banishment and separation from the presence of God. God’s soul takes no pleasure in backsliders, and therefore they can never have access into his gracious presence; consequently, “ shall be punished with everlasting destruction.”

5. If you be believers, and apostatize in part, you shall put a whip in God’s hand to chastise you. If you shall after this turn careless in your walk, more remiss in duty, less frequent, less fervent, less lively, than before, you may assure yourselves, that you shall not go unpunished: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. –If his children forsake my law, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes.”

Secondly, Consider some great advantages of stability in cleaving to Christ, and standing firm to his cause and interest.

1. It will furnish you much inward peace and tranquillity of mind: “Great peace have all they which love thy law.” God tells Israel, that if they had cleaved to him and his way,” their peace should have been as a river, and their righteousness as the waves of the sea.”

2. It will glorify God, and reflect a lustre upon religion; make the world conclude you serve a good Master. Hence is that of Christ; “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

3. As backsliding strikes a damp upon the spirit at the approaches of death; so stability of heart, in the Lord’s way, affords courage and confidence, through Christ, upon the approach of that grim messenger of the Lord of hosts. Hence is that of Paul, “I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness,” &c.

4. The reward of grace is ensured in Christ to the steadfast soul: 1 Cor. 15:58 “Be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, and your labour shall not be in vain in the Lord.” Remember, that your title to the reward comes in by virtue of your union with Christ; and O how glorious is that reward the steadfast soul is entitled to through him! It has a kingdom secured to it:

“Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations; and I appoint unto you a kingdom.” A throne: Rev. 3:21: “To him that overcometh, will I grant to sit with me in my throne.” A crown is secured; a crown of life: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” A crown of glory: “When the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory which fadeth not away.” A crown of righteousness, which is “laid up for all that keep the faith, and love his appearing.” A crown of joy, yea a crown of everlasting joy, shall be “upon their heads, and sorrow and sighing shall fly away.”

I conclude with two or three advices:—

1. Take care that the foundation be well laid, upon the everlasting Rock Jesus Christ; for this is *the foundation* that God hath *laid in Zion*, and *another foundation can no man lay*. You must be cemented to this foundation by the Spirit and faith, otherwise you can never stand in a day of trial; for your root being rottenness, your “blossom shall go up as the dust.” The house built upon the sand fell, when the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon it; but the house founded upon this rock shall stand out against the utmost efforts of the gates of hell.

2. Maintain an everlasting suspicion over your own hearts; for “he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool,” considering that it is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” Particularly take heed of the workings and sproutings of the bitter root of unbelief, which causes to depart from the living God, Heb. 3:12.

3. Keep your eyes upon the promises of persevering grace, particularly that, Jer. 32:40: “I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.” If you plead and improve this promise by faith, it is impossible you can draw back; for it is “impossible for God to lie.” God stands on both sides of the covenant, to fulfil both his and our part of the same; and therefore plead, that he may fulfil his in you, that he would keep you by his “power, through faith unto salvation.”

4. Keep a steady eye on Christ, the blessed Mediator of the covenant.” Eye him as the store-house and fountain of all your supplies of grace and strength; for it is “out of his fulness that we receive, and grace for grace.” Eye him as your Captain, to fight all your battles against sin and Satan; for he has “spoiled principalities and powers;” and if ever we overcome, it must be in the blood and strength of the Lamb. Eye him as your guide, to lead you through all the dark and difficult steps of your pilgrimage; for “he leads the blind in a way that they have

not known.” Eye him as your pattern; endeavour to imitate him in all his imitable perfections; run your Christian race, “looking unto Jesus.” Remember how steady and firm he was in carrying on the great work of redemption; *he set his face like a flint* against all the storms and obstacles that lay in his way; “he did not faint, nor was he discouraged,” but “travelled on in the greatness of his strength, enduring the cross, and despising the shame;” for he said on the cross, “It is finished.” So study ye, after his example, to run your Christian race, your course of obedience, and press oil against all temptations and difficulties, till ye “have finished your course with joy,” and arrive at “the mark and prize of the high calling of God in Christ.”

5. Beware of the first beginnings of defection and backsliding; for one trip makes way for another. Defections, are like the rolling of a stone upon the brow of a high mountain; if once it begin to roll, it is likely never to rest till it be at the bottom. You have been upon the mount of God, sirs; and if you begin once to roll down the hill of your high professions and resolutions, it is a hundred to one if you do not land in the depths of apostacy, and at last in the depths of hell.

6. *Lastly*, Study to be well skilled in unmasking the mystery of iniquity, and in detecting the wiles and stratagems of the tempter, and to provide yourselves with suitable antidotes against every attack of the enemy. For instance, if he tell thee sin is pleasant, ask him, if the complaints of the worm of conscience be pleasant too? and if “one day in God’s house” be not “better than a thousand in the tents of sin?” If he tell thee, that nobody sees, ask him if he can shut the eye of an omniscient God, whose “eyes are as a flame of fire,” and who “setteth our most secret sins in the light of his countenance?” If he tell thee, that it is but a little one, ask him, If there be a little God? Or if His displeasure be a little thing? If he tell thee, that sin is profitable, ask him, “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” By considerations of this nature, the mind comes to be fortified against the attacks and onsets of that grand enemy of salvation, and prove a notable ballast to keep the soul firm and steady against the most violent storms and tempests that may blow either from earth or hell.

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