

# Spiritual Growth 10. Its Decline

by A.W. Pink

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## Transcript

Spiritual Growth

10. Its Decline

I

First, its nature. That which we are here to be concerned with is what some writers term "backsliding"—a lucid and expressive word that is not employed so often as it should be or once was. Like most other theological terms this one has been made the occasion of not a little controversy. Some insist that it ought not to be applied to a Christian since the expression occurs nowhere in the New Testament. But that is childish: it is not the mere word but the thing itself which matters. When Peter followed His Master "afar off," warmed himself at the enemy's fire, and denied Him with oaths, surely he was in a backslidden state—yet if the reader prefers to substitute some other adjective we have no objection. Others have argued that it is impossible for a Christian to backslide, saying that the "flesh" in him is never reconciled to God and that the "spirit" never departs from him. But that is mere trifling: it is not a nature but the person who backslides, as it is the person who acts—believes or sins. It is not because the word backslide is a controversial one that we have preferred "decline," but because the former is applied in Scripture to the unregenerate as well as the regenerate—to professors as such, and here we are confining our attention to the case of a child of God whose spirituality diminishes, whose progress is retarded. There are, of course, degrees in backsliding, for we read of "the backslider in heart" (Prov. 14:14) as well as those who are such openly in their ways and walk. Yet to the great majority of the Lord's people a "backslider" probably connotes one who has wandered a long way from God, and whom his brethren are obliged to sorrowfully "stand in doubt of." As we do not propose to restrict ourselves to such extreme cases, but rather cover a much wider field, we deemed it best to select a different term and one which seems better suited to the subject of spiritual growth. By spiritual decline we mean the waning of vital godliness, the soul's communion with its Beloved becoming less intimate and regular. If the Christian's affections cool, he will delight himself less in the Lord and there will be a languishing of his graces. Hence spiritual decline consists of a weakening of faith, a cooling of love, a lessening of zeal, an abatement of that whole-hearted devotedness to Christ which marks the healthy saint. The perfections of the Redeemer are meditated upon with less frequency, the quest of personal holiness is pursued with less ardor, sin is less feared, loathed and resisted. "Thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4) describes the case of one who is in a spiritual decline. When that be the case the soul has lost its keen relish for the things of God, there is much less pleasure in the performance of duty, the conscience is no longer tender, and the grace of repentance is

sluggish. Consequently there is a diminishing of peace and joy in the soul, disquietude and discontent more and more displacing them. When the soul loses its relish for the things of God there will be less diligence in the quest of them. The means of grace though not totally neglected, are used with more formality and with less delight and profit. The Scriptures are then read more from a sense of duty than with a real hunger to feed on them. The throne of grace is approached more to satisfy conscience than from a deep longing to have fellowship with its occupant. As the heart is less occupied with Christ the mind will become increasingly engaged with the things of this world. As the conscience becomes less tender a spirit of compromise is yielded to and instead of watchfulness and strictness there will be carelessness and laxity. As love for Christ cools, obedience to Him becomes difficult and there is more backwardness to good works. As we fail to use the grace already received, corruptions gain the ascendancy. Instead of being strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, we find ourselves weak and unable to withstand the assaults of Satan. A born-again Christian will never sink into a state of unregeneracy, though his case may become such that neither himself nor spiritual onlookers are warranted in regarding him as a regenerate person. Grace in the Christian's heart will never become extinct, yet he may greatly decline with respect to the health, strength, and exercise of that grace, and that from various causes. The Christian may suffer a suspension of the Divine influences to him. Not totally so, for there is ever such a working of God as maintains the being of the spiritual principle of grace (or new nature) in the saint, yet he does not at all times enjoy the enlivening operations of the blessed Spirit on that principle, and its activities are then interrupted for a season, and in consequence, he becomes less conversant with spiritual objects, his graces languish, his fruitfulness declines, and his inward comforts abate. The flesh takes full advantage of this and acts with great violence, and in consequence the Christian is made most miserable and wretched in himself. If it be asked, Why does God withdraw the gracious operations of His Spirit from His people or suspend His comforting influences, which are so necessary for their walking in Him? Answer may be made both from the Divine side of things and the human. God may do this in a sovereign way, without any cause in the manner of their behavior toward Himself. As He gives five talents to one and only two to another according as seems good in His sight, so He varies the measure of grace bestowed on one and another of His people as best pleases Himself. Should any one be inclined to murmur against this, then let him pay attention to His silencer: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own" (Matthew 20:15). God is supreme, independent, free, and distributes His bounties as He chooses, in nature, in providence, and in grace. God takes counsel with none, is influenced by none, but "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11). As such He is to be meekly and cheerfully submitted to. But it is not only from acting according to His own imperial right that God withdraws from His people the vitalizing and comforting influences of His Spirit. He does so also that He may give them a better knowledge of themselves and teach them more fully their entire dependency upon Himself. By so acting God gives His children to discover for themselves the strength of their corruptions and the weakness of their grace. Though saved from the love, guilt, and dominion of sin, they have not yet been delivered from its power or presence. Though a holy and spiritual nature has been communicated to them, yet that nature is but a creature—weak and dependent—and can only be sustained by its Author. That new nature has no inherent strength or power of its own: it only acts as it is acted upon by the Holy Spirit. "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength" (Isa. 45:21): every believer is convinced of the former, but usually it is only after many a humiliating experience that he learns his strength is not in himself but in the Lord. It is rather in a way of chastisement that, in the great majority of instances, God withholds from His people the gracious operations of the Spirit; and that brings us to the human side of things, wherein our responsibility is involved. If the saint becomes lax in his use of the appointed means of grace—which are so many channels through which the influences of the Spirit customarily flow—then he will necessarily be the loser

and the fault is entirely his own. Or if the Christian trifles with temptations and experiences a sad fall, then the Spirit is grieved and His comforting operations are withheld as a solemn rebuke. Though God still loves his person; He will let him know that He hates his sins, and though He will not deal with him as an incensed Judge, yet He will discipline him as an offended Father; and it may be long before he is again restored to the freedom and familiarity that he formerly enjoyed with Him. (See Isa. 59:2; Jer. 5:25; Hag. 1:9, 10.) Though God draws not His sword against His erring saints, yet He uses the rod upon them. "If his children forsake my law and walk not in my judgments, if they break my statutes and keep not my commandments, then will I visit transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes; nevertheless my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break nor alter the thing that has gone out of my lips" (Ps. 89:30-34). Then it is our wisdom to "hear the rod" (Micah 6:9), to humble ourselves beneath His mighty hand (1 Peter 5:6) and forsake our folly (Ps. 85:8). If we do not duly repent and amend our ways, still heavier chastisements will be our portion; but "if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). When the Spirit's influences are withheld from the Christian, it is always the safest course for him to conclude he has displeased the Lord and to cry "Show me wherefore thou contendest with me" (Job 10:2). Second, its causes. The root cause is failure to mortify indwelling sin, called "the flesh" in Galatians 5:17, which makes constant opposition against "the spirit" or the principle of grace in the soul of believers. A carnal nature is ever present within them, and at no time is it inactive, whether they perceive it or no, Yea, they are often unconscious of many of its stirrings, for it works silently, secretly, subtly, deceptively, prompting not only to outward acts of disobedience, but producing unbelief, pride and self-righteousness, which are most offensive to the holy One. This enemy in the soul possesses great advantages because its power to rule was unopposed by us all through our unregeneracy, because of its cursed cunning, because of the numerous temptations by which it is excited and the variety of objects upon which it acts. Yet it is our responsibility to keep our hearts with all diligence, to jealously watch over its workings, for the principal part of the "fight" to which the Christian is called consists of continually resisting the uprisings and solicitations of his evil principle: in other words, to mortify them. The more carefully the believer observes the many ways in which indwelling sin assails the soul, the more will he realize his need of crying to God for help that he may be watchful and faithful in opposing its lustings. But alas we become slack and inattentive to its serpentine windings and are tripped up before we are aware of it. This is stupid folly, and it costs us dearly. By our slothfulness we get a sore wound in the soul, our graces droop, our conscience is defiled, our relish for the Word is dulled, and we lag in the performance of duty. Grace cannot thrive while lust is nourished, for the interests of the flesh and of the spirit cannot be promoted at the same time. And if our corruptions be not resisted and denied, they will, they must, flourish. If the daily work of mortifying the flesh be not diligently attended to, sin will most certainly become predominant in its actings in our hearts. If we fail there, we fail everywhere. True, the lustings of the flesh cannot be rendered inactive, but we must refuse to provide them with fuel: "make not provision for the flesh unto the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13:14). Those lusts cannot be eradicated, but they can (by the Spirit's enablement) be refused. There is where the responsibility of the Christian comes in. It is his bounden duty to prevent those lusts occupying his thoughts, engaging his affections, and prevailing with the will to choose objects which are agreeable to them. Take covetousness as an example—a lusting after the empty things of this world. If the mind permits itself to have anxious thoughts for material riches, and the affections to be drawn unto them and pleasing images are formed in the imagination, the lust has prevailed and our conduct will be ordered accordingly. An earnest pursuit after corrupt things preys upon the vitals of true spirituality. The preventative for that is to set our affection upon things above, to make Christ our satisfying portion, and having "food and raiment . . . therewith be content" (1 Tim. 6:8). It is very

evident then that the Christian should spare no pains in seeking to ascertain and be sensibly affected by the real causes of his spiritual decline, for unless he knows from what causes his spiritual decays proceed, he cannot "remember therefore from whence he is fallen" nor truly "repent" of his failures or again "do the first works" (Rev. 2:5); and unless and until he does these very things he will deteriorate more and more. It is equally clear that if there be certain appointed means the use of which promotes spiritual growth and prosperity, then the slighting of those means will inevitably hinder that growth. As the first of those means is the mortifying of the flesh it will be found that slackness at that point is the place where all failure begins. It is sin unmortified and unresisted, yielded to and allowed, and—what is still worse—unrepented of and unconfessed, which brings a blight upon the garden of the soul, Sin unmourned and unforsaken in our affections is more heinous and dangerous than the actual commission of sin. Closely connected with the mortifying of sins is the Christian's devoting of himself entirely to God. Christian progress is largely determined by continuing as we began—by the measure in which we steadfastly adhere to the surrender we made of ourselves to Christ at our conversion and to the vows we took upon us at baptism. If our conversion was a genuine one we then renounced the world, the flesh and the devil, and received Christ as our only Lord and Saviour. If our baptism was a Scriptural one and the believer entered intelligently into the spiritual import and emblematic purport of that ordinance, he then professed to have put off the old man, and as he emerged from the water — as one symbolically risen with Christ—he stood pledged to walk in newness of life. As the adult Israelites were "baptized unto Moses" (1 Cor. 10:1, 2)—accepting him as their lawgiver and leader, so those who have been "baptized" unto Christ, have "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27) having enlisted under His banner, they now wear His uniform. The more consistently the believer acts in harmony with the public profession he made in his baptism, the more real progress will he make. Since Christ be "the Captain" of his salvation, lie is under bonds to fight against everything opposed to Him, for "they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again (2 Cor. 5:15). Each day the saint should renew his consecration unto God and live in the realization that "he is not his own, for he is bought with a price"—no longer free to gratify his lusts. The more Christ's purchase of him be kept fresh in his mind, the more resolutely will lie conduct the work of mortification, It is forgetfulness that we belong to God in Christ which makes us slack in resisting what He hates. It is such forgetfulness and slackness that explains the call "remember therefore from whence thou art fallen" (Rev. 2:5)—i.e., your dedication to God and your baptismal avowal of identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. While there be a healthy desire after God and a delighting of ourselves in Him, an earnest seeking to please Him and the enjoyment of communion with Him, there is necessarily an averseness for sin and a zeal against it. While we have a due sense of our obligations to God and high valuation of His grace to us in Christ, we continue to find duty pleasant and direct our actions to His glory. But when we become less occupied with His perfections, precepts, and promises, other things steal in and little by little our hearts are drawn from Him. The light of His countenance is no longer enjoyed and darkness begins to creep over the soul. Love cools and gratitude to Him wanes and then the work of mortification becomes irksome, and we shelve it. Our lusts grow more unruly and dominant and the garden of the soul is overrun with weeds. In such a case we must "repent" and return to "the first works" (Rev. 2:5)—contritely confess our sinful failures and re-dedicate ourselves unto God. Again; if the Christian accords not to the Word of God that honor to which it is so justly entitled, he is certain to be the loser. If the Word holds not that place in his affections, thoughts and daily life which its Author requires, then sad will be the consequences. If the soul be not nourished by this heavenly bread, if the mind be not regulated by its instructions, if the walk be not directed by its precepts, disastrous must be the outcome. We must expect God to hide His face from us if we seek Him not in those ways wherein He has promised to meet with and bless us, for such a neglect is both a violation of His ordinance and a disregard of our

own good. I may spend as much time in reading the Bible today as ever before, but am I doing so with a definite and solemn treating with God therein? If not, if my approach be less spiritual, if my motive be less worthy, then a decline has already begun, and I need to beg God to revive me, quicken my appetite, and make me more responsive to His injunctions. Finally; it requires few words here to convince a believer that if there be a decreasing occupation of his heart with Christ, his fine gold will soon become dim. If he ceases to grow in a spiritual knowledge of his Lord and Saviour, if he become lax in desiring and seeking real communion with Him, if he fails to draw from the fulness of grace which is available for His people, then a blight will fall upon all his graces. Faith in Him will weaken, love for Him will abate, obedience to Him slacken, and He will be "followed" at a greater distance. His own words on this point are too clear to admit of mistake: "He that abideth in me and I in him [note the order: we are always the first to make the breach], the same bringeth forth much fruit [his graces are healthy and his life abounds in good works], for severed from Inc [cut off from fellowship] ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). The same things which opposed our first coming to Christ will seek to hinder our cleaving to Him, and against those enemies we must watch and pray. "Faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6). Since it is "with the heart man believeth" (Rom. 10:10), saving faith and spiritual love cannot be separated—though they may be distinguished. Faith engages the heart with Christ, and therefore its affections are drawn out unto Him. Thus faith is a powerful dynamic in the soul, and acts (to borrow the words of Thomas Chalmers) as "the impulsive power of a new affection." A little child may be amusing itself with some filthy or dangerous object, but present to him a luscious pear or peach and he will speedily relinquish it. The world absorbs the heart and mind of the unregenerate because he is of the world and so knows nothing better, for the Christ of God is a Stranger to him. But the regenerate has a new nature and by faith becomes occupied with Him who is the Center of Heaven's glory, and the more the mind be stayed upon Him, the less appeal will the perishing things of time and sense make upon him. It is faith in exercise upon its glorious Object which overcometh the world.

II

We have pointed out the deep importance of ascertaining the causes from which spiritual decays proceed, in order to bring us to a due compliance With the injunctions of Revelation 2:5. We cannot turn from that which is injurious and avail ourselves of the remedy until we are conscious of and sensibly affected by those things which have robbed of spiritual health. But let not the young Christian assume a defeatist attitude and conclude that ere long he too will suffer a decline. Prevention is better than cure. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. This aspect of the theme should serve a dual purpose: a warning against such a calamity and as furnishing instruction for those whose graces have already begun to languish. Thus far we have dwelt only on what will be the inevitable consequences if the believer fails to make a diligent and full use of the chief aids to spiritual growth; now we proceed to point out other things which are among the causes of decline. A slackening in the prayer life will soon lower the level of one's spiritual health. This is so generally recognized among Christians that there is the less need for us to say much thereon. Prayer is an ordinance of Divine appointment, being instituted both for God's glory and our good. It is an owning of His supremacy and an acknowledgment of our dependency. On the one hand the Lord requires to be waited on, to be asked for those things which will minister unto our wellbeing; and on the other hand, it is by means of prayer that our hearts are prepared to receive or be denied those things which we desire—for it is essentially a holy exercise in which our wills are brought into harmony with the Divine. A considerable part of our religious life consists in praying, either in public or in private, either orally or mentally; and our spiritual prosperity ever bears a close proportion to the degree of fervor and constancy with which this important duty is attended to. Prayer has been rightly termed "the breath of the new creature," and if our breathing be impeded then the whole system suffers—true alike spiritually and naturally. But prayer is more than a duty: it is also one of the two principal means of grace, and without it

the other (the Word) profits us little or nothing. Since prayer be the breath of the new creature, we need to live in its own element—the atmosphere of Heaven. In order thereto a new and living way has been opened to the throne of grace, whither we may come with boldness and confidence, and there find help. Help for what? For everything needed in the Christian life, more particularly, for enablement to comply with the Divine precepts. That which God requires from us may be summed up in one word, obedience, and it is only through prayer we obtain strength for the performance thereof. That is partly the meaning of "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The law reveals man's duty, but it conveys no power for the discharge of it. But grace (as well as truth) comes to us by Jesus Christ as the previous verse tells us, yet there is no other way of receiving out of His fullness except by the prayer of faith, Prayer is even more than a means of grace: it is a holy privilege, an unspeakable boon, an inestimable favor, and it should be the most delightful of all spiritual exercises. It is by prayer we have access to God and converse with Him, whereby He becomes more and more a living Reality unto the soul. It is then that we draw near to Him and He draws near to us, and there is a sacred converse the one with the other. Thereby we commune with and delight ourselves in Him, It is while we are thus engaged that the Spirit graciously fulfills His office work as the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry "Father! Father!" We then find He is more ready to hear than we are to speak. Pleading the merits of Christ we enjoy most blessed fellowship with Him and obtain fresh foretastes of the everlasting bliss awaiting us on high. It is to a reconciled Father we come, and as "his dear children." If we approach in the spirit of the prodigal son, the same welcome awaits us and the same tokens of love are received by us. It is then we are made to exclaim "Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over" and that we pour out our hearts before Him in praise and adoration, Now contemplate a slackening of the prayer life in the light of the three things pointed out above, and what must be the inevitable consequences! How can I prosper if I shirk my duty? How can the blessing of God rest upon me if I largely refuse that which He requires from me? If prayer also be one of the chief means of grace and I neglect it, am I not "forsaking my own mercies?" If it be the only channel through which I obtain fresh supplies of grace from Christ shall I not necessarily be feeble and sickly? If my strength be not renewed, how can I successfully resist my spiritual foes? If no power from on high be received, how shall I be able to tread the path of obedience? And if prayer be the principal channel of communion and converse with God, and that holy privilege be lightly esteemed, will not God soon become less real, my heart grow cold, my faith languish, and my joy vanish? Yes, a slackening in the prayer life most certainly entails spiritual decline, with all that accompanies the same. Sitting under an unedifying ministry. God has appointed and equipped certain men to act as His shepherds to feed His sheep. He speaks of them as "pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer. 13:15). In the ordinary course of events it is His method to employ human instrumentality, and therefore He has provided gifted servants "for the perfecting of the saints" (Eph. 4:11, 12). Satan knows that, and hence he raises up false prophets to deceive and destroy. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 warns us that "such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves in to the apostles of Christ." Nor should we be surprised at this, "for Satan himself is transformed as an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness." Those ministers of his have long held most of the professors' chairs in the seminaries, thousands have occupied the pulpits of almost every denomination, and the great majority of those who sat under them were corrupted and fatally deluded by a specious mixture of truth and lies; and real Christian is who attended; injuriously affected. It is because of the presence of these disguised ministers of Satan that God bids His people "Beloved, I believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they be of God, for many false prophets are gone out into the [professing] world" (John 4:1). "Try" them by the unerring standard of Holy Writ: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it

is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20). God holds you responsible to "prove all things" (1 Thess. 5:21) and commends those who have "tried those who say they are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). His urgent command to each of His children is, "Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth thee to err from the words of knowledge" (Prov. 21:27). That is not optional but obligatory, and we disregard it at our peril. Listening to false doctrine is highly injurious, for it causes to err from right beliefs and right practices. The ministry we sit under affects us for good or evil, and therefore our Master enjoins us "Take heed what ye hear" (Mark 4:24). It is of far greater moment than young Christians realize that they heed that which has just been pointed out. The reading matter we peruse and the religious instruction we imbibe has as real an influence and effect upon the mind and the soul as that which ye eat and drink does on the body: if it be corrupt and poisonous its effects will be identical in each case, Proof of that is found in the history of the Galatians. To them the apostle said, "Ye did run well: who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (5:7), and the answer was, heretics, Judaisers, who perverted the gospel. And the saint to-day is hindered ("driven back," margin) if he attends the preaching of error. Therefore "shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase unto more ungodliness and their word will eat as doth a canker" (2 Tim. 2:16, 17). The teaching of heretics diffuses a noisome influence, till it eats away the life and power of piety, as a gangrene spreads through a limb. But one may sit under what is termed a "sound" ministry and, through no fault of his own, derive no benefit from the same. There is a "dead orthodoxy," now widely prevalent, where the truth is preached, yet in an ununctionless manner, and if there be no life in the pulpit there is not likely to be much in the pew. Unless the message comes fresh from God, issues warmly and earnestly from the preacher's heart, and be delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit, it will neither reach the heart of the hearer nor minister that which will cause him to grow in grace. There is many a place in Christendom where a living, refreshing, soul-edifying ministry once obtained, but the Spirit of God was grieved and quenched, and a visit there is like entering a morgue: everything is cold, cheerless, lifeless. The officers and members seem petrified, and to attend such services is to be chilled and become partaker of that deadening influence. A ministry which does not lift the soul Godwards, produce joy in the Lord, and stimulate to grateful obedience, casts the soul down and soon brings it into the slough of despond. Only the Day to come will reveal how many a babe in Christ had his growth arrested through sitting under a ministry which supplied him not with the sincere milk of the Word. Only that Day will show how many a young believer, in the warmth and glow of his first love, was discouraged and dismayed by the coldness and deadness of the place where he went to worship. No wonder that God so rarely regenerates any under such a ministry: those places would not prove at all suitable as nurseries for His little ones. Many a spiritual decline is to be attributed to this very cause. Then take heed, young Christian, where you attend. If you cannot find a place where Christ is magnified, where His presence is felt, where the Word is ministered in the power of the Spirit, where your soul is actually fed, where you come away as empty as when you went,—then far better to remain at home and spend the time on your knees, feeding directly from God's Word, and reading that which you do find helpful unto your spiritual life. **Companionship with unbelievers.** "Enter not into the path of the wicked and go not in the way of wicked men" (Prov. 4:14). "I have written unto you not to keep company—with the world" (1 Cor 5: 10, 11). The word for "company" there means to mingle: we cannot avoid contact with the unregenerate but we must see to it that our hearts do not become attracted to them. Indeed the Christian is to have good will toward all he encounters, seeking their best interests (Gal. 6:10); but he is to have no pleasure in or complacency toward those who despise his Master. It is forbidden to walk with the profane in a way of friendship. "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14), for familiarity with them will speedily dull the edge of your spirituality. "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Cor. 15:33). We cannot disregard these Divine precepts with impunity. "Know ye not that the friendship of

the world is enmity with God?" (James 4:4). "A companion of fools shall be destroyed" (Prov. 13:20). But it is not only the openly profane and lawless who are to be shunned by the saint: he needs especially to avoid empty professors. By which we mean, those who claim to be Christians but who do not live the Christian life; those who are "church members" or "in fellowship" with some assembly, but whose conduct is careless and carnal; those who attend service on Sunday, but who may be found at the movies or the dance-hall during the week. The empty professor is far more dangerous as a close acquaintance than one who makes no profession: the Christian is less on his guard with the former, and having some confidence in him is more easily influenced by him. Beware of those who say one thing but do another, whose talk is pious but whose walk is worldly. The Word of God is plain and positive on this point: "Having a form of godliness, but [in action] denying the power [reality] thereof: from such turn away" (2 Tim. 3:5). If you do not, they will soon drag you down with themselves into the mire. O young Christian, your "companions," those with whom you most closely associate, exert a powerful influence upon you for either good or evil. Far better that you should tread a lonely path with Christ, than that you offend Him by cultivating friendship with religious worldlings. "He that liveth in a mill, the flour will stick upon his clothes. Man receiveth an insensible taint from the company he keepeth. He that liveth in a shop of perfumes and is often handling them carrieth away some of their fragrancly: so by converse with the godly we are made like them" (A Puritan). "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise" (Prov. 13:20). In selecting your closest friend, let not a pleasing personality allure: there are many wolves in sheep's clothing. Be most careful in seeing to it that what draws you to and makes you desire the Christian companionship of another is his or her love and likeness to Christ, and not his love and likeness to yourself. "I am a companion of all that fear thee and of them that keep thy precepts" (Ps. 119:63) should be the aim and endeavor of the child of God, though such characters indeed are very scarce these evil days. They are the only companions worth having, for they alone will encourage you to press forward along the "narrow way." It is not those who profess to "believe in the Lord," but those who give evidence they revere Him; not those who merely profess to "stand for" His precepts, but who actually perform them, that you need to seek out. So far from sneering at your "strictness" they will strengthen you therein, give salutary counsel, be fellow helpers in prayer and piety: the godly will quicken you to more godliness. Their conversation is on sacred topics, and that will draw out your affection to things above. If you are unable to locate any of these characters, then make it your earnest prayer "Let those that fear thee turn unto me and those that know thy testimonies" (Ps. 119:79). An undue absorption with worldly things. "Worldly" is a term that means very different things in the minds and mouths of different people. Some Christians complain that their minds are "worldly" when they simply mean that, for the time being (and often rightly so), their thoughts are entirely occupied with temporal matters. We do not propose to enter into a close defining of the term, but would point out that the performing of those duties which God has assigned us in the world, or the availing ourselves of its conveniences (such as trains, the telegraph, the printing press), or even enjoying the comforts which it provides (food, clothing, housing), are certainly not "worldly" in any evil sense. That which is injurious to the spiritual life is, time wasted in worldly pleasures, the heart absorbed in worldly pursuits, the mind oppressed by worldly cares. It is the love of the world and its things which is forbidden, and very close watch needs to be kept on the heart, otherwise it will glide insensibly into this snare. The case of Lot supplies a most solemn warning against this evil. He yielded to a spirit of covetousness and so consulted temporal advantages that the spiritual welfare of his family was disregarded. When Abraham invited him to make choice of a portion of Canaan for himself and his herds, instead of remaining in the vicinity of his uncle, upon whom the blessing of the Most High rested, he "lifted up his eyes (acting by sight rather than by faith) and beheld all the plain of Jordan that it was "veil watered everywhere . . . then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan and Lot journeyed east." Thus, he even went outside the land itself, for we are told

"Abraham dwelt in the land of Canaan and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent toward Sodom" (Gen. 13:8-10). Nor did that content him: he became an alderman in Sodom (Gen. 18:1) and discarded the pilgrim's "tent" for a "house" (v. 3). How disastrous the sequel was both to himself and his family is well known. One form of worldliness which has spoiled the life and testimony of many a Christian is politics. We will not now discuss the question whether or not the saint ought to take any interest in politics, but simply point out what should be evident to all with spiritual discernment, namely, that to take an eager and deep concern in politics must remove the edge from any spiritual appetite. Clearly, politics are concerned only with the affairs of this world, and therefore to become deeply absorbed in them and have the heart engaged in the pursuit thereof, will inevitably turn attention away from eternal things. Any worldly matter, no matter how lawful in itself, which engages our attention inordinately, becomes a snare and saps our spiritual vitality. We greatly fear that those saints who spent several hours a day in listening to the speeches of candidates, reading the newspapers on them, and discussing party politics with their fellows during the recent election, lost to a considerable extent their relish for the Bread of Life. III

Having dwelt at some length on the nature of spiritual decline and pointed out some of the principal causes thereof, a few words should be said on its insidiousness. Sin is a spiritual disease (Ps. 103:3) and, like so many others, it works silently and unsuspected by us, and before we are aware of it our health is gone. We are not sufficiently on our guard against "the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13): unless we resist its first workings, it soon obtains an advantage over us. Hence we are exhorted "Take good heed therefore unto yourselves that ye love the Lord your God" (Josh. 23:11), for all spiritual decline may be traced back to a diminution of our love for Him. The love of God is of heavenly extraction, but being planted in an unfriendly soil, it requires guarding and watering. We are not only surrounded with objects which attract our affections and operate as rivals to the blessed God, but have an inward propensity to depart from Him. In the early stages of the Christian life love is usually fresh and fervent. The first believing views of the gospel fill the heart with amazement and praise to the Lord, and a flow of grateful affection is the spontaneous outcome. The soul is profoundly moved, wholly absorbed with God's unspeakable gift, and weaned from all other objects. This is what God terms "the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals" (Jer. 2:2). It is then that the one who has found such peace and joy exclaims, "I love the Lord because he hath heard my voice, my supplications [for mercy], because he hath inclined his ear unto me: therefore will I call upon him as long as I live" (Ps. 116:1, 2). At that season the renewed soul can scarcely conceive it possible to forget Him who has done such great things for it or to lapse back in any measure to his former loves and lords. But if after twenty years of cares and temptations have passed over him without producing this effect, it will indeed be happy. There are some who experience no decline, but that is far from being the case with all. There are those who speak of the Christian's departing from his first love as a matter of course, who regard it as something inevitable. Not a few elderly religious professors who have themselves become cold and carnal (if they ever had life in them), will seek to bring young and happy Christians to this doleful and God's dishonoring state of mind. With a sarcastic smile they will tell the babe in Christ, though you are on the mount of enjoyment today, rest assured it will not be long until you come down. But this is erroneous and utterly misleading. Not so did the apostles act towards young converts. When Barnabas visited the young Christians at Antioch, he "saw the grace of God and was glad," and so far from leading them to expect a state of decline from their initial fervor, assurance, and joy, he "exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord" (Acts 11:23). While the great Head of the church, informed the Ephesian saints that He had it against them "because thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). There is no reason or necessity in the nature of things why there should be any abatement in the Christian's love, zeal, or comfort. Those objects and considerations which first gave rise to them have not lost their force. There has been no change in the grace of God, the efficacy of Christ's

blood, the readiness of the Spirit to guide us into the truth. Christ is still the "Friend of sinners," able to save them unto the uttermost that come to God by Him. So far from there being good or just reason why we should decline in our love, the very opposite is the ease. Our first views of Christ and His gospel were most inadequate and defective: if we follow on to know the Lord, we shall obtain a better acquaintance with Him, a clearer perception of His perfections, His suitability to our ease, His sufficiency. He should, therefore, be more highly esteemed by us. Said the apostle "this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment" (Phil. 1:9). So far from himself relapsing, as he neared the end of his course, forgetting the things that were behind, he reached forth to those that were before. To decline in our love is quite unnecessary and to be lamented, but to attempt a vindication of it is highly reprehensible. It would be tantamount to arguing that we were once too spiritually minded, too tender in conscience, too devoted to God. That we were unduly occupied with Christ and made too much of Him: that we overdid our efforts to please Him. It is also practically to say, we did not find that satisfaction in Christ which we expected, that we obtained not the peace and pleasure in treading Wisdom's ways that we looked for, and, therefore, that we were obliged to seek happiness in returning to our former pursuits, and thereby we confirmed the sneer of our old companions at the outset, that our zeal would soon abate and that we would return again to them. To such renegades God says "O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me" (Micah 6:3). The fact remains, however, that many do decline from their first love, though they are seldom aware of it until some of its effects appear. They are like foolish Samson, who had trifled with temptations and displeased the Lord, and who "awoke out of his sleep and said, I will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him" (Judges 16:20). Yielding to sin blinds the judgment, and we are unconscious that the Spirit is grieved and that the blessing of God is no longer upon us, Our friends may perceive it and feel concerned because of the same, but we ourselves are not aware of it. Then it is those solemn words accurately describe our case: "strangers have devoured his strength, and he knows it not; yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not" (Hos. 7:9)! "Gray hairs" are a sign of the decay of our constitution and of approaching decrepitude: so there are some signs which tell of the spiritual decline of a Christian, but usually he is oblivious to their presence. We will turn now and point out some of the symptoms of spiritual decline. Since sin works so deceitfully and Christians are unconscious of the beginnings of retrogression, it is important that the signs thereof should be described. Once again we find that the natural adumbrates the spiritual, and if due attention is paid thereto, much that is profitable for the soul may be learned therefrom. Constipation is either due to self-neglect or a faulty diet, and when sin clogs the soul it is because we have neglected the work of mortification and failed to eat "the bitter herbs" (Ex. 12:8). Loss of appetite, paleness of countenance, dullness of eye, absence of energy, are so many evidences that all is not well with the body and that we are on the way to a serious illness unless things soon are righted: and each of those has its spiritual counterpart. Irritability, inability to relax, and loss of sleep, are the precursors of a nervous breakdown, and the spiritual equivalents are a call "return unto thy rest O my soul" (Ps. 116:7). In cases of leprosy, real or supposed, the Lord gave orders that the individual should be carefully examined, his true state ascertained, and judgment given accordingly. And just so far as a spiritual disease is more odious and dangerous than a physical one, by so much is it necessary for us to form a true judgment concerning it. Every spot is not a leprosy! and every imperfection in a Christian does not indicate he is in a spiritual decline. Even the apostle Paul groaned over his inward corruptions, and confessed He had not yet attained nor was he already perfect, but pressed forward to the mark for the prize of the high calling. Yet those honest admissions were very far from being acknowledgments that he was a backslider or that he had given way to an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. Great care has to be taken on either side, lest on the one hand we call

darkness light and excuse ourselves, or on the other call light darkness and needlessly write bitter things against ourselves. Undoubtedly more are in danger of doing the former than the latter. Yet there are Christians, and probably not a few, who wrongly depreciate themselves, draw erroneous conclusions and suppose their case is worse than it is. For instance, there are those who grieve because they are no longer conscious of that energetic zeal, of those fervent and tender affections, which they were sensible of in the day of their espousals. But a change in their natural constitution, from an increase of years, will account for that. Their animal spirits have waned, their natural energy has diminished, their mental faculties are duller. But though there be less tender and warm feelings, there may be more stability and depth in them, Many things relating to the present world, which in our youth would produce tears, will not have that effect as we mature, though they may lay with greater weight on our spirits. To confuse the absence of the brightness and excitement of youth with spiritual decline and coldness is a serious mistake. On the other hand every departure from God must not be reckoned a mere imperfection, which is common to all the regenerate. Alas, the tendency with writer and reader alike is to flatter himself that his "spot" is only "the spot of God's children" (Deut. 32:5), or such as the best of Christians are subject to; and therefore to conclude there is nothing very evil or dangerous about it. Though we may not pretend or deny that we have any faults, yet are we not ready to regard them lightly and say of some sin, as Lot said of Zoar "is it not a little one?" Or to exclaim unto one we have wronged, "What have we done so much against thee?" But such a self-justifying spirit evidences a most unhealthy state of heart and is to be steadfastly resisted. The apostle Paul spoke of a certain condition of soul which he feared he should find in the Corinthians: that of having sinned and yet not repented for their deeds, and where that is the case spiritual decay has reached an alarming stage. Here are some of the symptoms of spiritual decline. 1. Waning of our love for Christ. If the Lord Jesus is less precious to our souls than He was formerly, in His person, office, work, grace, and benefits, whatever we may think of ourselves, we have assuredly gone back. If we have a lower esteem of the Lover of our souls, if our delight in Him was decreased, if our meditation upon His perfections are more infrequent, if we commune less with Him, then grace in us has certainly suffered a relapse. It is the nature of certain plants to turn their faces towards the light: so it is of indwelling grace to strongly incline the heart unto heavenly objects and to take pleasure therein. But if we neglect the means of grace, are not careful to avoid sinful pleasures, or suffer ourselves to be weighted down by the concerns and cares of this life, then will our affections indeed be dampened and our minds rendered vain and carnal. As it is only by acts of faith on the glory of Christ that we are changed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18), so a diminishing of such views of Him will cause our hearts to become chilled and lifeless. 2. Abatement of our zeal for the glory of God. As the principle of grace in the believer causes him to have assurance of Divine mercy to him through the Mediator, so it inspires concern for the Divine honor. As that principle is healthy and vigorous it will cause us to refuse whatever displeases and dishonors God and His cause, and inspire us to practice those duties with a peculiar pleasure which are most conducive to the glory of God, and which give the clearest evidence of our subjection to the royal scepter of Christ. If the new nature be duly nourished and kept lively, it will influence us to bring forth fruit unto the praise of God; but if that new nature be starved or become sickly, our concern for God's glory will greatly decrease. If we have become less conscientious than formerly of whether our conduct become or bring reproach upon the holy Name we bear, then that is a sure mark of our spiritual decline. 3. Loss of our spiritual appetite. Was there not a time, dear reader, when you could truly say "Thy words were found and I did eat them, and thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jer. 15:16)? If you cannot honestly affirm that today, then you have retrograded. You may indeed be a keener "Bible student" than ever before and spend more time than previously in searching the Scriptures, but that proves nothing to the point. It is not an intellectual interest but a spiritual relish for the Bread of life that we are now treating of.

Do we really savor the things that be of God: the precepts as well as the promises, the portions that search and wound as well as comfort? Do we not merely wish to understand its prophecies and mysteries, but really "hunger and thirst after righteousness"? If we prefer ashes to the heavenly manna, the "husks" which the swine feed on to the fatted calf—secular literature than sacred—then that is an evident sign of spiritual decline.

4. Sluggishness or drowsiness of mind. One is in a sad frame when exercise before God and communion with Him are supplanted by carnal ease. In spiritual torpor it is much the same as in the natural: our senses are no longer exercised to discern good and evil, we neither see nor hear as we ought, nor can we be impressed and affected by spiritual objects as we should be. While in such a condition spiritual duties are neglected, or at most performed perfunctorily and mechanically, so that we are none the better for them. If spiritual duties be attended to from custom or conscience rather than from love, they neither honor God nor profit ourselves. Though the outward exercise be gone through, the spirit of it is lacking, the heart is no longer in them. Those who read the Bible or say their prayers as a matter of form or habit perceive no change in themselves: but those who are accustomed to treat with God in them, and then discover a disinclination thereto, may know that grace in them has languished. If we have no delight in them we are in a sad case.

5. Relaxing in our watchfulness against sin. The want of alertness in guarding against all that is evil, under a quick and tender sense of its loathsome nature, is a sure sign of spiritual decline. Refusing to keep our hearts with all diligence, indifference to the working of our corruptions, trifling with temptations without, are certain evidences of the decay of personal holiness. When the new nature is healthy and vigorous, sin is exceedingly sinful to the saint, because he then has a clear and forcible apprehension of its malignity and contrariety to God, and that maintains in him a holy indignation against it. While the mind is engaged in considering the awful price which was paid for the remission of our sins, a detestation of evil is stirred up in the heart, and that is attended with strict watchings, for the renewed soul cannot countenance that which was the procuring cause of his Savior's death. Such an exercise of grace has been obstructed if sin now appears less heinous and there is less care in maintaining a watch against it.

6. Attempting to defend our sins. There are some sins which all know are indefensible, but there are others which even professing Christians seek to justify. It is almost surprising to see what ingenuity people will exercise when seeking to find excuses where sin is concerned. The cunning of the old serpent which appeared in the excuses of our first parents seems here to supply the place of wisdom. Those possessing little perspicuity in general matters are singularly quick-sighted in discovering every circumstance that appears to make in their favor or serves to extenuate their fault. Sin, when we have committed it, loses its sinfulness, and appears a very different thing from what it did in others. When a sin is committed by us, it is common to give it another name—covetousness becomes thrift, malignant contentions fidelity for the truth, fanaticism zeal for God—and thereby we become reconciled to it and are ready to enter on a vindication, instead of penitently confessing and forsaking it.

7. Things of the world obtaining control of us. In proportion as the objects of this scene have power to attract our hearts, to that extent is faith inoperative and ineffectual. It is the very nature of faith to occupy us with spiritual, heavenly, and eternal objects, and as they become real and precious our affections are drawn out to them, and the baubles of time and sense lose all value to us. When the soul is communing with God, delighting itself in His ineffable perfections, such trifles as our dress, the furnishing of our homes, the glittering show made by the rich of this world, make no appeal to us. When the Christian is ravished by the excellency of Christ and the inestimable portion or heritage he has in Him, the pleasures and vanities which charm the ungodly will not only have no allurements but will pall upon him. It therefore follows that when a Christian begins to thirst after the things of time and sense and evinces a fondness for them, his grace has sadly declined. Those who find satisfaction in anything pertaining to this life have already forsaken the Fountain of living waters and hewed them out broken cisterns that hold no water (Jer. 2:13).

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