

Beauty for Ashes: Part 1: Causes of Heart Wanderings

by G.D. Watson

The sermon explores the various subtle causes of heart wanderings from God, urging believers to remain vigilant against spiritual decline.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:18, Proverbs 28:26, 1 Corinthians 10:12, Galatians 6:7, Ephesians 4:27, 1 Thessalonians 5:6, Hebrews 3:12, James 4:7, 1 Peter 5:8, 1 John 2:15

Topics: "Spiritual Decline", "Backsliding"

Description

G.D. Watson preaches about the various causes of backsliding, emphasizing the importance of recognizing human frailty, imperceptible inroads of Satan, the dangers of looking upon forbidden things, self-management, taking undue liberties, self-confidence, being spoiled by earthly kindness, luxurious living, presumption, focusing on difficulties, harshness of spirit, and lightness of spirit as factors that can lead to a decline in grace and spiritual bondage.

Transcript

I. HUMAN FRAILTY -- Throughout the Scriptures we are taught the infinite frailty and weakness of men; and even the best of men are set forth as having no strength of their own. Abraham said he was "but dust and ashes." Isaiah said, "We all do fade as a leaf." Job said, "I abhor myself." Paul said, "I am less than the least of all saints." And Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing." All strength must be imparted to the soul from God. There are some few characters in the Bible against whom no blemish is mentioned; but in those characters it is recorded that all their goodness was imparted. They claim nothing of and from themselves. It is possible that in six thousand years there have lived a few persons whose hearts never consciously wandered from God. Doubtless there are many who have had many wanderings, without the humility or the fullness of light to perceive or confess it. And the millions of God's children have been painfully conscious of shortcomings -- backslidings of greater or less extent. Living as we are, in the state of probation, there is no degree of grace which may not be lost; and this is consistent with the doctrine so clearly taught in many Scriptures, that a saint may feel assured of his ultimate salvation. In the passage of Corinthians which says, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," the original tells us, "Let him that assuredly standeth take heed"; that is, let the most advanced believer, who has the fullest assurance of faith, take heed lest he fail.

II. IMPERCEPTIBLE INROADS OF SATAN -- Heart wanderings from God are almost imperceptible at first. There are slow degrees of the leakage of grace, almost imperceptible inroads of temptation. The Devil insinuates himself in soft, silent ways and through unguarded avenues, and in such an assumed celestial raiment, that before the soul is aware, he has well-nigh captured the magazines of the heart. A little spiritual laziness and little tonings down of self-sacrifice are like the coming of gray hairs. The Bible speaks of a certain one who had "gray hairs... here and there upon him, yet he knoweth [it] not." The loss of property and of health have the same imperceptible beginning as backsliding from God.

III. LOOKING UPON THE FORBIDDEN -- Wanderings from God often begin by looking on forbidden objects. The eye is allowed to rest too long upon an object of temptation. Through the eye the thoughts take hold upon the object. This kindles exaggerated and unlawful desires. This undermines the will, and the outcome is sin in greater or less degree. Such was the case of Eve, who stood looking on the forbidden fruit, when God told her not even to look upon it. This was the case of David, who was gazing from the top of the palace. This is the art that Satan tried on Jesus, when he spread before His mental vision all the kingdoms of the earth and all their glory in one dazzling panorama of world-wide sovereignty and splendor. But Jesus instantly turned His mental eye from the beautiful vision and fixed it on His coming cross. This is the best cure for all fascinating and tempting visions -- to get in the mind the precious blood of Jesus. The sight of Christ crucified is the panacea for unholy mental pictures.

IV. SELF-MANAGEMENT -- Another cause of heart wanderings is self-management and attempting to take our affairs in our own hands -- trying to help the Lord in His providences of our case in times of trouble and distress. We must be led through many a soul crisis. These crises will come to us in social life, in business, in church relations, in health, in lines of duty. Many of them cannot be avoided. They are in the very nature of things in this world, and when they come, our human spirits are so eager for the speedy and premature result that they accept of an unlawful deliverance; and we are so tempted to think that God had forgotten us, or that He is too slow, that we take affairs into our own hands. This was the case of Rebekah and Jacob, who thought that they surely must manufacture a lie and deceive Isaac with the goatskin, in order to secure the fulfillment of an infallible promise from God; but their self-management brought sad separation and years of sorrow. This was the case with King Saul, who thought that Samuel was so long reaching his appointment that he must play the part of the priest and offer sacrifice; and from that hour he began wandering from God. This was the case with Uzza, who thought, when the oxen stumbled, he must surely put forth his hand and assist the Lord in caring for the ark. Officiousness has led many a soul into spiritual bondage. It is so easy even for spiritual men to get the impression that they must manage the work of God; that they are responsible in great revivals for keeping their little fingers on the safety-valves, and curbing divine fire within the limit of their prudence. Spiritual power is lost in the attempt to manage the kingdom. Self-management, in some form or other, is the starting point of many a decline in grace.

V. TAKING UNDUE LIBERTIES -- Another cause of the loss of grace is taking undue liberties with innocent things. There are many things which in themselves are natural and innocent, and inseparable from our earthly life; but if undue liberties are indulged in with them, they become stepping-stones to inward, and oftentimes outward, sin. Especially is this true in the social life. We must mingle in society, and there are social affinities and personal friendships and mutual attractions of mind and personal manners which are a part of the constitution of our nature; but along these lines of personal magnetism and social attractions there needs to be the firmest caution, the most rigid determination, against all undue familiarity and against all excess of friendly feeling. In tens of thousands of cases, an improper caress, a

fondling in hand-shaking, an imprudent kiss, has formed the velvet slide to sin and to many a heartbreaking sorrow. In like manner undue liberties are often taken in wit and sarcasm, a punning and joking which has degenerated from innocence into wounding, or cutting, or snubbing, and sore breeding of ill-will. Many a lawsuit, many a family quarrel, many a separation of friends, many a living hell, has been the outcome of what commenced in seeming pleasantry. This same truth applies to lines of business and in various directions. In order to maintain the highest liberty in innocence and pure love and courtesy and friendship, there must be a guard against letting liberty degenerate into license. One inch of license will destroy a mile of liberty.

VI. SELF-CONFIDENCE -- Another cause of backsliding is self-confidence, or leaning on native or acquired strength. The soul which has been highly favored of God, or is possessed with strong natural traits, will instinctively lean upon itself, until it has been thoroughly mortified. This was the case with Peter, who was so confident of the inherent magnanimity of his character that he vowed, though all the others should forsake Christ, he would never forsake Him. Young converts in their first love make extravagant assurances of heroism; and oftentimes, in the first glow of the sanctified state, the human mind will fancy itself quite strong. It takes many a lesson to burn into us the reality of our utter nothingness. Self-confidence has so many forms to it. Like the atmosphere, it adapts itself to all zones and seasons of human life. Christians often unconsciously confide in their experience, instead of leaning only on the Holy Spirit, who makes the experience. The Lord warned the Jews that when they should enter the land of Canaan, and should eat and become full, that they were to beware, lest thou forget the Lord." A full stomach has a poor memory; it waxes fat and kicks. This teaches us that even in the Canaan life we are not to depend upon our experience. If we do, we shall lose it. Soul whiteness is like a snowflake -- if you lean on it, it dissolves. Because we have been endowed with grace, or strength, or wisdom, or some success, it is no guarantee that these endowments will continue unless we depend alone on the source from which they flow.

VII. SPOILED BY EARTHLY KINDNESS -- Another cause of spiritual weakness is that of being spoiled by earthly kindness. Just as millions of children go to wreck through false kindness and lack of correction, so thousands of Christians are ruined in their spiritual life by an excess of popularity and earthly kindness. This is more particularly true of ministers than any other class. If they have some talent and success, and good evidence of grace, they will inevitably have many friends. These friends will manifest their love, some wisely, and some unwisely. In many cases, preachers are flattered and praised and receive presents and are toasted and feasted until their grace is gone and their common sense as well. They are tempted to regard themselves as public ecclesiastical pets; to accept gifts on birthdays and Christmas days and wedding days; to have every want anticipated; to be complimented on every sermon, or every prayer; to be invited to parties and state occasions, until they dwindle into soft sentimental poetical dudes of the Church, not only unfit to lead souls to God, but, like the mincing Agag did to Saul, lead souls down to hell. Many a minister, who was a poor farmer boy or a factory hand when first converted, and who began his Christian life with a heavenly fibre in his soul, has imperceptibly taken the velvet and cologned road into a spiritual desert. Paul and Wesley both declare against softness of life as a cause of soul-ruin.

VIII. LUXURIOUS LIVING -- Akin to the foregoing, another cause of backsliding is what is termed good living. There never was an age in which luxurious living was more common than in America today. The common people have furnishings in their houses, and clothing, and richness of food, and conveniences for ease and comfort, which the kings of other ages never had; and this luxurious mode of living is a great hindrance to grace. In many cases it ruins, because the human heart so easily becomes attached to those

things which are luxurious and easy. There is a passion for big dinners, soft furniture, elegant clothing, labor-saving arrangements, palace cars, and everything that conduces to sensuous ease and pleasure, which is the ruin of tens of thousands. It is so rare in these days to find a heroic Christian, who can endure hardness and great simplicity, and who cares nothing for the velvet accommodations of modern life. In the twenty-first chapter of Luke, Jesus warns us against these very things -- surfeiting, and drunkenness, and animal pleasures -- and intimates that at His second coming the professed Church will be drowned in luxurious living, which prophecy is being fulfilled.

IX. PRESUMPTION -- Another cause of backsliding is presumption -- the taking it for granted that the soul stands so well with God that He will make great allowance for it, and that the guardian angel will take extra trouble to extricate the disobedient heart. Satan tells you that you are the Lord's pet; that He thinks more of you than He does of most of His children; that He will make excuses for you that He does not make for others. This was the temptation that came to Solomon. He had been assured of his high standing with God, and of his unparalleled wisdom and knowledge; and Satan played his tune of temptation on the strings of presumption, until the wisest of men mourned in the dust and cried, "vanity of vanities!" This was the temptation which the Devil presented to Jesus, when he urged Him to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple -- that He was so highly favored of God that the angels would catch Him ere He struck the pavement. This principle can have innumerable applications. God is as impartial in His chastisements as in His love. If He will show His love to the vilest wretch on earth who repents, so He will chastise the highest saint on earth -- even a Moses, who talks face to face with Him. Presumption is the sin that made the Devil, and one that Satan presents in a thousand varied forms to decoy the child of God.

X. LOOKING AT OUR DIFFICULTIES -- Another cause of the loss of grace is looking at our difficulties. It is to be expected that life is full of difficulties, and living in a fallen world implies this. There are difficulties in the spiritual life in the way of seeking pardon or holiness -difficulties in growth in grace -- difficulties that spring from our own minds or from heredity, our social surroundings, our temporal affairs, our temperament or our poor and false teaching difficulties innumerable, that spring like weeds in every field of life; and to get the eye on these difficulties will weaken faith, sap perseverance, distract the mind, cloud the vision and draw the soul from God. The divine life is pre-eminently the way and life of faith. When Peter looked at the waves of the sea, his mind lost the bright conception of the omnipotence of Jesus, and so he began to sink. When Abraham looked at the difficulties of how he was going to retain his beautiful wife in the presence of the greedy heathen king, he did not know how to manage it; and so he was induced to tell a falsehood, just because the difficulties of the situation, for the time being, shut out the omnipotent care of God. Our heavenly Father permits His children to be hemmed in many times by the network of difficulties, and the Devil uses such circumstances to plead the necessity of committing sin in order to get through. The very things that God permits as a test of our faith, the Devil uses as an argument for some disobedience.

XI. HARSHNESS OF SPIRIT -- Not a few souls have lost grace and fallen into spiritual bondage through harshness of spirit. Severe judgment of others is what Faber terms an "under-graduate sin" that is liable to be committed by young zealots or narrow-hearted souls. The denunciation of others has in it a large element of self-righteousness. Denunciation of others has in it a back-handed way of praising ourselves; in the same proportion that we think we knock others down, we fancy we raise ourselves up. It is impossible to speak evil of another without an implied compliment to self. Many times souls claiming great spirituality have denounced sin in such a sinful way as to commit more sin than the very sin they denounced. There is nothing in the whole Christian life more delicately dangerous than the condemnation

of others. An old spiritual writer has said that "to rebuke another for sin requires more humility than any other duty." We sometimes hear people speak of "hitting sin," and "hitting it hard"; but such kind of work, unless it is saturated with tears and tenderness, will only bruise the soul that does the hitting. It is possible to preach on the damnable nature of sin with such severity of spirit and such an implied tone of self-gratulation that it only makes Satan laugh and grieves the divine Dove. How many thousands have lost the sweetness of pure love, the calm, close walk with God, by a sharp sword-thrust and unkind criticism, a harsh judgment, an unloving condemnation! Self-righteousness is as subtle as the ether. It runs up into the high altitudes, and tries to insinuate itself into the highest state of grace. The Devil will tempt you to be severe toward others, under the pretense of being brave and heroic and not being afraid to denounce sin. He has practiced his game so long that he does not care how much you denounce him and all his works. If he can only get one drop of his satanic vinegar into your heart, that will repay him for all the blows that you can give him.

XII. LIGHTNESS OF SPIRIT -- I mention, as last among the causes of backsliding, lightness of spirit. This is apparently the opposite of harshness. There are some whose natures are not biased toward severity. These will likely break away from God by a trifling, joking, laughing disposition, which serves Satan's purpose just the same. This Spirit of lightness is very apt to prevail at camp meetings and large religious gatherings, where Christians of talent and wit meet together. The habit of making puns of people's names and things, be they ever so seemingly innocent, is always injurious to deep piety. It grieves the Holy Ghost, diverts the mind from divine things, jostles the soul from its internal calmness in God, and weakens it for prayer and for being the channel of the Holy Ghost. Hundreds of souls have snapped the cord of communion with God by a joke, or a pun, or a loud laugh, or a coarse and boisterous gesture. The worst calamity is that so few Christians get close enough to God to discern these things. Anything that breaks up the recollectedness of the mind in God, or interferes with an elevated, quiet refinement of soul, is a starting-point for wandering.

WORK FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

Tender, gentle Holy Spirit,
Here is work for Thee to do;
Burn away the life of nature,
Melt my hardness through and through.
I'm so needy, blessed Spirit,
Speed Thy work in me, I pray;
All the precious blood has purchased,
All my Father's will today.
Pure, illuminating Spirit,
Here is darkness to remove,
Coldness for Thy hot consuming,

Craving for Thy fiery love.
Here are burdens to be lifted,
Sorrows to be borne away,
Dark clouds to be dissipated
By the splendor of Thy day.
Secret woes that need Thy healing,
Thunder-scars that need the balm
Of Thy Christ-revealing virtue;
Fears that need Thy heavenly calm.
Here's a heart so torn and lonely
It can only sob for Thee;
Turn its storm-lashed waters quickly
To a tranquil, glassy sea.
More than save me -- fill and use me;
Crowd me with Thy heavenly store,
Till I'm loaded with Thy graces,
Breaking out at every pore.
Set my heart on fire for Jesus,
With a sweet, increasing flame,
A divine, eternal passion
For the glory of His name.
Hotter and still hotter burning,
Glow with sevenfold furnace heat;
Clothe me with seraphic lightning,
For my Saviour's service meet.

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