

(New Wine in New Wineskins) 12. Why Christians Fall

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen explores the reasons Christians fall into sin and emphasizes the importance of faith, fear of God, and community in overcoming temptation.

Scripture: James 1:14

Topics: "Overcoming Sin", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Zac Poonen addresses the reasons why Christians fall into sin, emphasizing the distinction between being tempted and actually sinning. He explains that while our old self has been crucified with Christ, the flesh still tempts us, leading to moments of falling rather than deliberate sin. Poonen identifies key factors contributing to these falls, including a lack of the fear of God, faith, awareness of the flesh's weakness, and the importance of fellowship within the body of Christ. He encourages believers to press forward in their spiritual journey and to dethrone their soul-life to avoid falling into sin, ultimately reminding them of God's promise to keep them from falling.

Transcript

Why do Christians fall into sin?

Before we consider the reasons for this, we must distinguish clearly between being tempted and sinning. James 1:14, 15 clearly states that everyone is tempted when he is lured by his own fleshly desires. Then when his mind consents to the temptation, a conception takes place and sin is born in his heart.

When we 'see' the glorious truth that our old man (this mind of ours that wanted to sin) has been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6), then we can put off the old man by faith. Then we will stop committing sin deliberately. We are born again (1 John 3:9). We will still be tempted, but our mind (the new man) no longer agrees with our flesh.

But though we may stop committing sin, we may nevertheless fall into sin (or be 'caught in a trespass' - Galatians 6:1). There is a difference between committing sin and falling.

Even though our old man has been crucified (Romans 6:6), our flesh is still alive to entice us. We however are determined to be faithful to Christ our Bridegroom; and we have no intention of giving ourselves to the

desires of the flesh. We do not commit adultery with the flesh, or else we would be adulteresses (James 4:4) and thus become a part of the harlot (Revelation 17:5) and not a part of Christ's bride. But a woman may conceive through being forced, even when she does not voluntarily give herself to a man. In such a case, however, the woman herself is nobler than if she had given herself voluntarily. This symbolises the difference between falling into sin (where we are overcome by the desires in our flesh) and committing sin (where we knowingly choose what we know to be wrong, and give ourselves to the flesh).

But though falling into sin is not as bad as committing sin, it nevertheless produces the same result - a conception giving birth to sin. The New Testament promise is that Jesus can keep us even from falling (Jude 24). This is the life of victory - where we are kept from falling into sin as well.

If you have stopped committing sin, but still find yourself falling into sin, then these may be the reasons why you fall.

1. A Lack of the Fear of God

The fear of God is the beginning (alphabet) of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). This is the first lesson in the school of wisdom. If we do not learn the alphabet, we cannot proceed further. "To fear the Lord is to hate evil", because God Himself hates evil (Proverbs 8:13). When we have heard the call of God to be holy because He is holy, and are gripped by that call, we shall hate sin.

Many believers find it quite easy to overcome some sins (anger, sexual sins, etc.) when in the presence of other believers, for they are afraid of losing their reputation. But they sin in the same areas quite easily, when alone. Therefore it is not because they are not able to overcome these sins that they fall, but because they love their reputation more than they fear God. They value man's opinion more than God's. Such Christians need to mourn and repent for "worshipping the creature (man) more than the Creator" (Romans 1:25), and need to cry out to God with all their hearts that God will teach them His fear. The promise is that if you cry out and lift up your voice and seek the fear of the Lord as you would hidden treasures, then God will teach you His fear (Proverbs 2:3-5; Matthew 5:6). He will be found only by those who seek Him with all their hearts (Jeremiah 29:13). Only those who mourn over their failures will be comforted (strengthened and helped - Matthew 5:4) by the Comforter.

We need to develop the habit of living before the face of God alone.

The reason why God has given each of us a private area - our thought life - is so that He can test us to see whether we fear Him or not. If we are concerned only about our external reputation before other men, then we shall be careless about sin in our thought life. Thus God makes a separation between those who are desirous of total victory and those who desire only an external victory over sin. If we mourn over sin in our thought life as over external sin, we shall enter into victory very quickly.

2. A Lack of Faith

All progress in the Christian life is by faith. The righteous live by faith (Romans 1:17) and then their path becomes like the light that shines brighter and brighter (Proverbs 4:18).

We can have faith for the forgiveness of sins and even for putting off the old man, and thus stop committing sin; and yet we may not have faith that Jesus can also keep us from falling into sin. Like the Israelites at Kadesh Barnea, we can be so full of unbelief, looking at the giants in the land (our flesh), that we do not enter the promised land of victory.

One of the most important laws in the kingdom of God is that we receive according to our faith (Matthew 9:29) - no more and no less. There is no partiality with God; but He rewards those who diligently seek Him in faith (Hebrews 11:6). Thus, some enter into a life of victory (like Joshua and Caleb who entered the land of Canaan), while many others remain defeated. The way to life is narrow and few find it because few really fear God and few have faith. Jesus could not do many 'works of power' in His own hometown because of their unbelief. He Himself was eagerly desirous to heal them. But their unbelief limited Him (Matthew 13:58). Thus it is even today. He desires to do great things for us, but is limited by our lack of faith.

Faith is more than intellectual belief. It is one thing to believe that Jesus has the power to keep people from falling and quite another thing to have faith that Jesus will keep you from falling. The former is a mental quality that even Satan has. The latter is a spiritual quality of the heart, that brings victory.

God's promise is, "Sin shall not be master over you" (Romans 6:14). Believe that, and when you fall, remember that the word of promise does not change. That remains steadfast. Get up and confess your hope in God's word and press on again, until hope becomes faith one day and victory is yours.

3. Not Knowing the Weakness of the Flesh

The flesh we have is totally impotent to do the will of God. Jesus taught this very clearly (Matthew 26:41). Paul realised this and said that nothing good dwells in his flesh (Romans 7:18). The one who realises this thoroughly will do at least two things: He will flee from temptation and he will pray earnestly for help from God. When a man does not do both of these, it is obvious that he is not yet convinced about the weakness of his flesh.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:73). We pray that prayer wholeheartedly, because we are convinced that our flesh is weak. Even an outstanding man of God like Timothy was exhorted to flee from youthful lusts and from the love of money (2 Timothy 2:22; 1 Timothy 6:10, 11). One would have thought that having advanced so far in the Christian life, Timothy could not possibly be tempted in these areas. But Paul knew he could. And so he exhorted Timothy to run away from temptation. The one who realises that his flesh is weak will obey this exhortation readily.

Further, the one who realises his weakness will also cry out to God for grace to help him overcome his weakness. All of us are weak, but not all are equally conscious of their weakness. The weak man will flee from danger when he sees it, but the strong man does not, because he has high thoughts about himself. He does not call out for help. Therefore he falls.

True humility is to recognise the weakness of our flesh and therefore flee from the temptation and to cry for help. Such alone receive God's grace, for God gives His grace only to the humble (1 Peter 5:5).

4. Not Having a Mind to Suffer

There is pleasure in sin - but it is deceptive and short-lived (Hebrews 3:13; 11:25). The opposite of pleasure is suffering. To suffer is to deny our flesh the pleasure of sin. We are told that if we arm ourselves with this attitude, we can cease from sin and do the will of God all our life (1 Peter 4:1, 2). To suffer in the flesh does not mean physical, bodily suffering, for no one ever stopped sinning that way. It refers to the pain caused to the flesh by the denial of its desires. We refuse to please ourselves, even as Jesus never pleased Himself (Romans 15:13). Thus we share the fellowship of His sufferings.

A determined attitude to suffer in the flesh, Peter says, is our armour in the day of battle. But we must have the armour before the battle begins. To look for the armour after the onslaught of temptation has begun, is useless, for one will not usually find it then. No. One must be armed before the conflict begins. When one does not have this armour ('the determined mind to suffer in self denial rather than get the least pleasure out of even a sinful thought'), then one draws back in the moment of temptation and gives in (Hebrews 10:38).

But if we are determined to die, rather than sin - that is, to be 'obedient even unto death' as Jesus was (Philippians 2:8), then this armour will be our strength and our protection in the day of battle.

If we love material things, for example, then we shall easily lose our peace and fall into sin when we face material loss or when someone else damages or loses some valuable possession of ours. But if we have chosen the way of 'suffering in the flesh', believing that God orders all things for our good (Romans 8:28), then we shall take even the loss of our goods joyfully (Hebrews 10:34).

5. Not Pressing Forward

Peter says that if we keep pressing on in our Christian life ('addingaddingadding') we will never fall (2 Peter 1:5-10). Many Christians fall into sin because they become content with their spiritual progress, instead of pressing on further towards perfection. Paul spent his life doing one thing - pressing on towards the goal of becoming like Jesus (Philippians 3:13, 14). This kept him from stagnation and also from sin. He exhorted Timothy not only to flee from temptation, but also to pursue after godliness, love, gentleness, etc., (1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22).

Many have stopped committing sin and are satisfied, even though they keep falling. Thus they never stop falling.

We are to judge ourselves in the light of God continually, in every situation, if we are to make any headway in discovering the latent evil that resides in our flesh. As we walk in the light, we can partake increasingly of the divine nature.

Thus we can keep adding to our faith virtue, brotherly kindness, love, etc. If we thus fill our mind with good thoughts at all times (Philippians 4:8), sin will not be able to enter our mind easily. It is the empty mind that falls an easy prey to temptation.

6. Not Dethroning the Soul-Life

In all children of Adam, the human soul-life is lord. They live according to their reason and their emotions. When we are converted, and put away the sinful works of the flesh, we do not usually realise that our soul-life (our human way of thinking, reasoning and feeling) needs to be dethroned too. We consider these things quite innocent and harmless. Yet it is the enthroned soul-life that causes many a Christian to fall into sin.

The frenzied whipping up of the emotions in a Christian gathering, for example, leads to many abnormal excesses and also to sin. Living in the emotions is not the same as living in the Spirit. These two are as different as earth and heaven. An emotionally tense meeting is not necessarily a spiritual meeting, for many people have gone away thrilled from such an atmosphere only to commit sin immediately thereafter. Our emotions are deceptive.

Likewise, our intellect is deceptive too. Most Christians have enthroned their intellect and therefore seek to understand the things of God with their human reasoning and logic. The result is that they are soon puffed up with dead Bible knowledge and fall (1 Corinthians 8:1). Their fall may not be apparent, for pride does not look as ugly as adultery, but it is, in reality, a greater fall. And it leads to many other falls too.

Humble yourself then, and dethrone your intellect and feelings, and become as a little child living in simple, unquestioning obedience to God's Word. Hate your soul-life and all that originates from it, and live in the Spirit, in helpless dependence on God's wisdom and strength. Thus you will preserve your soul and you will be kept from falling.

7. Not Valuing Fellowship

There is just no such thing as individualistic Christianity in the New Testament. The Old Testament prophets (like Elijah and John the Baptist) may have lived alone, but that was in the days when there was only a shadow and no body (Colossians 2:17). But now we have the body of Christ, and it is as we find our place in it, that the Head (Christ) keeps us from falling. Paul clearly states that protection from error and Christian growth can come only as we hold fast the Head and also keep the lines of supply open to the other members of the body (Colossians 2:19).

It is against the church that Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail (Matthew 16:18). Satan will certainly prevail against a lone Christian who tries to live on his own. It is not enough, however, to go to meetings twice a week. We must value fellowship with the other members and be integrated into the Body. It is only as we find our place as functioning members of the body of Christ that we can share in the triumph of the Head. Then our fellow members in the Body become a strength for us in the hour when the pressure becomes too great for us by ourselves (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Mutual exhortation in the body is God's means of keeping us from being deceived and from falling into sin (Hebrews 3:13). Value such fellowship, and you will be spared many heartaches and failures.

We see therefore that there is no once-for-all experience that guarantees that we will never again fall. But if we obey these laws of the Spirit, they will set us free from sin's power and we will be kept from falling (Romans 8:2). Then we shall be able to echo the cry of the apostle, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14).

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