

The Awful Consequences of Backsliding

I once heard a preacher say, "The Bible never says anything about backsliding." That man doesn't know his Bible! The Scriptures speak much about backsliding, because it is a very serious matter - with very severe consequences! In reading the history of Israel and Judah, we see one generation after another backsliding against the Lord. God told Hosea, "*My people are bent to backsliding from me...*" (HOS 11:7). In Hebrew, the meaning is, "My people are in the habit of turning their backs and withdrawing from me. They've always had this tendency!"

And Jeremiah's frequent heart-cry was: "*Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married to you...*" (JER 3:14). "*O LORD... our iniquities testify against us... for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee.*" (JER 14:7). "*(Jerusalem's) transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased.*" (JER 5:6).

The term backsliding means, simply, "turning one's back on God." Ironically, God's people backslid mostly after times of great blessing and prosperity. Often, when God poured out incredible mercies on Israel, the people soon turned away from Him.

"How shall I pardon thee for this? Thy children have forsaken me, and sworn by them that are no gods; when I had fed them to the full, they then committed adultery... The house of Israel and the house of Judah have dealt very treacherously against me, saith the Lord" (JER 5:7,11). The Lord is saying here, "I blessed them, I favored them. And now they've turned their backs on me!"

In this passage, Jeremiah describes exactly who a backslider is. First, a backslider is someone who once enjoyed the blessings and favor of God. He walked before the Lord with a devoted, humble, kind heart. He loved praying and digging into God's word. He vowed, "I will serve thy heart." And for a while he did seek the Lord faithfully. He forsook his wicked ways and delighted in the fellowship he found with other saints in God's house.

But then something began to draw this believer's heart away from the Lord. He no longer had genuine love. Instead, rebellion crept in. Soon he lost both the love and fear of God. He no longer trembled in the Lord's presence. His heart slowly grew cold.

Today this backslider has totally revolted against the narrow way and gone back to worldly ways. He has become completely blind, foolish, without understanding. He no longer seeks the Lord or turns to his word. All desire to pray is gone. And he doesn't go to God's house anymore. He has removed himself completely from the Lord's presence - and he's headed toward apostasy!

The Bible makes it very clear: Backsliding is an evil, bitter thing - and it has awful consequences! "*Thine own wickedness shall correct*

thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord GOD of hosts." (JER 2:19).

"I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?" (JER 2:21). The Lord is saying, "How could you have turned away from me, when I planted you and tried to establish you? Yet, you turned and walked away!"

Jonah Was a Backslider!

You probably know the story of Jonah. Be warned, beloved - because what happened to Jonah happens to all backsliders!

Here was a prophet of God, a man of genuine faith who loved and feared the Lord. Indeed, Jonah walked closely enough to God to be entrusted with a prophetic word to an entire city-state. The Lord told him, "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.*" (JONAH 1:2).

But instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah rebelled and ran. He fled to Joppa, a seaport town about thirty-five miles north of Jerusalem. There he bought a ticket on a

cargo ship headed for Tarshish, a city in Spain known for its mighty ships and smelting of precious metals. It was a wicked city that represented prosperity, success and power.

Now, the Mediterranean trade ships of Jonah's day sailed a route between Joppa and Tarshish, stopping at other seaport towns in Greece and Turkey. So, Jonah's trip was probably intended to be a three-to-four-week journey. And soon after the prophet boarded ship, he went down into the hold, wrapped himself in a blanket and fell asleep.

But God arranged a storm that broke in on the backslider's tranquil sea cruise. Suddenly, without warning, the winds became violent, the waves rose higher, the sails were ripped apart, the rudder was of no use. The crew was completely at the mercy of the storm. God had stirred up a whole sea to get to one man who was in disobedience!

The captain and crew probably had never seen anything like it. Frightened, they began unloading all the cargo and dumping it into the sea, to lighten the ship. Soon all the sailors began crying out to their gods. I picture them digging into their duffel bags, clutching and kissing their little brass images and carved ivory gods. You've probably seen many people do the same thing today - kissing their good-luck charms superstitiously, in times of trouble!

But Jonah somehow slept through it all, hidden down in the hold. Yet his sleep was not the sleep of an indifferent or lazy person. It was the sleep of sorrow - the deep slumber of a man who knew he was running from God!

Jonah's mind and body had to be worn out from the constant anxiety and inner turmoil of his backsliding. His conscience was troubled, and he couldn't get away from it: He had ruined his ministry. He'd made the wrong move, and now his reputation was destroyed. He'd blown it, lost it all - and now he had no future.

At this point, everything was wrong between Jonah and the Lord. He was in total disobedience, a fugi-

tive. And he feared the judgment and chastisement he knew would come. He probably spent his first week on the boat thinking, "How could I have done this? I've made the wrong decision. I've turned my back on the Lord!"

Even if a backslider is able to sleep at night, his sleep is that of a condemned person. He remembers God's touch, his loving arms around him. He remembers being in God's house with all the saints, being on fire for the Lord, feeling God's hand on his life. But now the backslider can only toss and turn - because he has turned his back on his loving Lord!

Backslider, if you are running from the call of God, living in disobedience, you will have only the deep sleep of sorrow. You'll feel like a condemned person, worn out by guilt and anxiety. And you can be sure your storm will come - because God loves you! You have embarked on the same trip Jonah took. And like that backslidden prophet, you will be tossed about by a life-and-death battle for your soul!

Let me ask you: Do you think God will stand idly by and let the devil take you from him? Do you think he'll let you simply walk away and damn your own soul? Never! You once told him you'd serve him for life - and he took you at your word. Jesus sprinkled his blood on you. And now he's saying, "That's my blood, shed for you. You're mine - and I won't let you go. I'll take any drastic action I have to, to keep you. I may put you in the belly of a whale. But I won't let you run head-first into hell!"

There are three awful consequences to backsliding. Let me share with you these three consequences:

1. Consequence Number One: Your Backsliding Makes You a Dangerous Person to Be Around!

When you are backslidden, you are one of the most dangerous people on earth - a walking time bomb! Backslidden Jonah was a marked man. He knew God would not let him get away with his rebellion. And when he stepped onto the boat at Joppa, he became the

most dangerous man on the Mediterranean. Why? It was because God was after him!

When God has a controversy with a backslider, it affects everyone around him. You see, when the backslider's storm finally comes, it hits everybody - family, children, co-workers, friends, even strangers. The storm aimed at Jonah put everyone on that ship in danger, along with the dozens of other ships on that part of the sea. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives were exposed to the great danger.

For years I've heard addicts and alcoholics say, "My addiction is my sin, my problem only. I'm not hurting anyone but myself." No! Scripture proves that it's not just your problem. It's the problem of everyone who lives with you, walks with you, knows you. God is pursuing you - and that makes you dangerous!

One woman wrote to me: "My preacher father backslid from the Lord. He resigned from his church and left the ministry altogether. Then he divorced my mother and married an ungodly woman. He dragged all my brothers and sisters down with him, causing them to turn from God. Now he's trying to get me to backslide. He calls me a phoney, saying I should stick with the family. But, praise God, he hasn't been able to touch me. God has been keeping me!"

I think of a certain husband and father who was delivered from a terrible drug addiction. He got wonderfully saved and was restored to his wife and children. God blessed this man with a decent job. And when he came home from work at night, his three kids crawled up in his lap, happy and excited, thanking Jesus that Daddy was home. Their house hold was full of God's favor.

But then the tempter showed up. Eventually, the man went back to snorting cocaine. Soon his wife saw something in his face she hadn't seen for over a year. His eyes were red again. She whispered a prayer: "Oh, God - don't let it be!"

But she knew he was hooked once more. He came home from work at noon, trying to drink cold water

and coffee to bring himself out of a daze. She knew then he was no longer going to his job, because he'd lost it. Now he was back on the streets.

This backslidden man became dangerous to his family. All of their money was cut off, and all of God's blessings disappeared. He tried to convince everyone, "It's my sin, my problem. I'm only destroying myself." No - he was destroying his entire family! His three children became bitter and angry - mad at God, Daddy, Mommy, the whole world. And now the grandchildren, the godly legacy, this man could have had might never exist.

Just a few weeks ago, one of the top Wall Street brokers of all time - a man who handled multi-millions of dollars - was exposed as being hooked on heroine. He snorted just before doing all his business deals. He even got his wife hooked, along with another Wall Street broker. This man lost his job, his home, everything. He and his wife are now living in one of New York City's homeless shelters.

Beloved, nobody lives and dies only to himself! When David sinned in numbering the Israelites, he too became a dangerous man. The judgment that God sent on him fell on Israel as well. Talk about a deadly storm: 70,000 men lost their lives! David had to cry out: *"...Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly, but these sheep, what have they done? Let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house."* (2.SAM 24:17).

Likewise, many backslidden Christians are sending their co-workers to hell. At one time these believers were a testimony on the job. They kept a Bible on their desk and were always eager to talk about Jesus. Their colleagues knew something was genuinely different about them.

But now these ungodly co-workers realize there has been a change. They know their Christian colleague is backslidden! They can't explain what has happened in spiritual terms, but they do know something is different now. Their once-zealous Christian co-worker has become like them - and he

was their last hope! They may have mocked him at one time, but secretly they thought, "At least he's somebody I can go to in trouble. He may even prove to me there's a God."

This backslidden Christian has robbed them of their hope, taking away what little spark of faith they might have had. Now these heathen are convinced it's impossible to serve God. The backslider has become a danger to their very souls!

2. Consequence Number Two: You Will Be Rebuked by the World!

When the ship's captain found Jonah asleep in the hold, he shook him awake and soundly rebuked him: *"... What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God..."* (JON 1:6). He shouted at Jonah, "What are you doing sleeping, preacher? Fall on your face and pray!"

Imagine - a prophet of God, rebuked by a heathen sailor! All the sailors were awake, calling on their gods - but the prophet of God was asleep. Jonah had lost his testimony!

I can imagine what the prophet thought when he woke. He felt the rocking of the ship, heard the men wailing in fear, saw the hold filling with water. He had to be thinking, "Uh-oh - this is it! God has caught up with me. I'm the cause of this awful storm!"

So he hurried up on deck to confess. He said, "Men, this is all about me. I'm a backslider, running from God!" *"...for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you."* (JON 1:12). All the sailors then cried, "Why are you bringing all of this trouble on us? Why were you so afraid of your God that you had to run from him? What kind of God do you serve, Jonah?" (see verse 10).

The apostle Paul also suffered through a storm at sea. But it wasn't because he was running from God. On the contrary, Paul was at peace with God. He could stand confidently as his ship began to break apart, and reassure the ungodly crew: "Don't worry, gentlemen - not one of you

will be lost. I heard from my God last night. He has told me we're all going to be saved!"

If you're a backslider, you probably remember a time when you could stand confidently in any storm or crisis. Like Paul, you could tell the world, "My God is able!" But now the only things people see in you are fear and exhaustion. Like Jonah, you are weak, no match for the enemy. You can't command a storm. You don't bring any real hope to a situation. You've lost the dignity that comes with walking closely with Jesus. Worldly lust has drained all your spiritual power!

Worst of all, your backsliding presents to the world an unattractive picture of salvation. You make it seem as if it's more profitable to be sinner than a Christian. Now your co-workers say to you, "Why are you so irritable these days? Where is the joy you once had? Why have you stopped trying to get me to go to church with you? Have you quit on God?"

There should not be a single area of our lives in which we make it seem more attractive to serve the devil than to serve the Lord. In every area we ought to have the gentleness, kindness, goodness and grace of God. Our lives should be a testimony that says, "Serve Jesus. He makes a way where there is no way. He'll see you through any storm!"

But the backslider has lost that testimony. He can tell you what it used to be like to serve Jesus. But that isn't a testimony, because it has no power. And that is the rebuke of the ungodly! When the storm hits you full force, and you show up at work with sorrowful tears, they'll say to you, "What kind of Christian are you? Why don't you get on your knees and call on your God? I can't help you. He can!" They will testify to you!

3. Consequence Number Three: God Is Going to Take You Down Into the Lowest Pit Known to Man!

If you're running from God, you'll be swallowed up like Jonah - in the belly of a great trial! Your trial could be your health, your finances, your family. Yet it will

happen not because God wants to destroy you, but because you are his. Accept it right now, backslider: No man or woman who runs from God escapes the storm. And no human power can deliver from it!

"(Jonah) said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you ... Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them." (JON 1:11-13).

These ungodly sailors tried to spare Jonah. They were experienced seamen and knew the terrain of the deep. As they imagined Jonah being eaten by sharks, they hesitated to throw him overboard. But, beloved, when God goes after a backslider, no-one can hinder his divine plan! If you're running from the Lord, mark it down: Your crisis coming, and it will be the storm of your life. Your loved ones and friends may try to shield you from it, but none of their best efforts will work. God has already made up his mind: He has a purpose in sending the storm. And he knows if you are rescued from it before he can discipline you, you'll never be saved!

"...Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (JON 1:14-17). After the storm follows the darkest, most critical moment of your life. It's called the pit of despondency. Jonah's trial took him down to the deepest recesses of the earth, where there was no light at all. He testified: *"I went down to the bottoms of the mountains..."* (JON 2:6).

What an awful condition Jonah found himself in: total darkness, seaweed wrapped around his body, water sloshing up against him constantly. And the physical pressure must have been incredible. Even submarines have to be pressurized to go into the deep. Jonah's eardrums had to be in constant pain.

Backslider, can you imagine being in that kind of dark, stinking mess? Take a good look - because it's a picture of where you're headed! There is coming upon you a night of terrible darkness, a time of absolute despair and despondency.

Jonah had two options in his dark pit of despair. And the same two options are available to every backslider who goes down into the belly of a dark crisis:

1. You can give in to the despondency and hopelessness, convinced God hates you for your disobedience. You can say, "I'm so far down, I can never get back to God. There's no hope for me!" Despair will rule your life, sinking you ever deeper into the pits of depression.

Jonah easily could have given in to this spirit of despondency. If he had, he would have died in the whale's belly, his name never to be spoken again. You may object, "But God had ordained a mission for Jonah. He never would have let him die down there." No! God could have found someone else for Jonah's mission. We all have free will to choose - and Jonah had to make a choice concerning his attitude.

Beloved backslider, you too can give up in your storm! When everything is against you - when you descend to the lowest pit of anguish, feeling swallowed up by despair - you'll think God has abandoned you. You'll be tempted to say, "It's no use. God doesn't care. He can't possibly love me, because he's allowed all this trouble to fall on me."

When you get to that point of despair, you have a choice to make. That brings up your second option:

2. You can call on God for mercy. You can come back to the Lord, no matter how far from him you've run!

Thank God, Jonah made the right decision: *"Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice."* (VERSES 1-2).

The whole purpose of your storm is to press you to do as Jonah did - to turn back to God! The Lord is pressing you to return to your first love - to come back to his house, call on him, and trust and pray

your way out of trouble. You only have to choose to do that!

This true story is meant both to warn and encourage you. Like you, Jonah thought God was finished with him. He cried: *"I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever..."* (VERSES 4-6).

But in the end, Jonah made the right choice, praying: *"When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple... I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."* (VERSES 7-9).

I have a minister friend whom I first met a number of years ago. I loved this man dearly. He was one of the sweetest, gentlest people I'd ever met - a simple, trusting man who had a burden for lost souls. Everyone knew he was called to do a great work for God.

Then he began to have trouble in his marriage. Each time I saw him, he seemed a little cooler than before, a little more despondent. Then one day I received a call from a mutual friend who said this pastor had resigned from the ministry. He'd left his family and run off with a female drug addict who had backslidden from the Lord.

Soon the storm hit this man's life full force. First there was financial ruin. Then he discovered his lover couldn't satisfy him after all. Moreover, she had gotten him hooked on pot. Now he was in a deep depression, miserable and despairing.

I'll never forget the look on this couple's faces when I met with them. Neither of them would lift their eyes to meet mine. He was now selling drugs. And she knew she had broken up a gospel preacher's family. Both were in the belly of the whale, utterly despondent.

I said to this man, "I still love you, friend. I want you to know I'll walk beside you. More importantly, the Lord loves you. Please - let me take you by the hand and bring you back to the Savior. The Lord will restore everything the canker worm has eaten."

But my friend was so low, so discouraged, he answered, "No, Brother David, I'm too far gone. I've sinned too deeply, too intentionally, against Jesus. There's no way he could forgive me for what I've done. I've sunk too low!"

I sat with them for two hours with my Bible open, trying to persuade them to come back. But nothing I said could console this former minister. I couldn't pull him out of his despair.

Like Jonah, this man had two options. Even though he felt God had given up on him, he only needed to cry out from the belly of his hell, "Oh, God, I've sinned against you. Deliver me!" And the Lord immediately would have reached down to deliver him.

But each time I reached out to this man after that, I realized he'd gone deeper into the pit. Eventually I

lost all contact with him. The last I heard, he was far gone, still mired in the depths of despair.

What about you who are reading this message? Have you backslidden and refused to return to Jesus? You may say, "Brother Dave, you don't know what I've done and how far down I've gone." Let me tell you, friend: If you allow yourself to wallow in your fear, guilt and condemnation, you'll be crushed in it - and end up hard-hearted!

Or, you have another choice. You can say, "No! I've read a message of hope - a message of strength and power in Jesus. I can go home to my Lord. I can turn back to him!"

I believe that as soon as Jonah started praying in the whale's belly, God began drying up a nice spot somewhere inside the cavernous fish and said, "Now, Jonah, come sit over here and worship me." Jonah must have had some revival meeting with God inside that dark place. Meanwhile, God was guiding that whale across the Mediterranean, beaching him on the shore and making him vomit up Jonah. Out came a man of God - set free,

anointed and back on schedule with the Holy Ghost's plan!

God restored everything for Jonah. And he wants to restore everything the devil has taken from you. He wants to give back everything to you in good measure. That's why he has left this glorious promise to all his backslidden children:

"Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, saith the LORD... they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the Lord their God. Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God."

JER 3:20-22

All you have to do is simply return. It is God's work to heal your tendency to backslide: "... **I will heal your backslidings...**" (VERSE 22). Turn back to your gracious, loving Savior. He promises to bring you all the way back to Himself!

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