

Beware Of Backsliding! (Song 5:1-8)

by BS Poh

In this book of allegory, we are learning about the love of Christ for His church. This is portrayed by the relationship between King Solomon and the Shulamite woman. We arrived at Chapter 4, in which we learned of Christ's love for the *passive* characteristics of the church as well as for her *active* characteristics. The church responds to Christ's love in two basic ways, viz. by resolving to keep close to her Lord, and also to serve Him well. The church, or the believer, is saying, in Chapter 4:6, "Until this world is over, and Christ comes to take me to be with Him, I will live a holy life and keep a close walk with Him in the Spirit." In Chapter 4:16, the church, or the believer, is saying: "Until Christ comes again, I will proclaim the truth far and wide. I will proclaim the fragrance of His name to all nations."

The believer, or the church, that is spiritually healthy will want to maintain the health of these two areas - viz. our devotion to God and our service to Him. If we are not careful in these two aspects of our spiritual life, backsliding will occur. Chapter 5 is about backsliding and its cure. In the present passage, which is Chapter 5:1-8, we consider the "why", "how" and "what" of backsliding. We want to find out why backsliding occurs, how it occurs, and what the consequences are.

I. Why backsliding occurs (v. 1).

We consider, first, why backsliding occurs. Verse 1 says, "I have come to my garden, my sister, *my* spouse; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk." This is the groom speaking, in response to the invitation of the bride who had earlier said, "Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits."

True believers only

Before we proceed any farther, it must be understood that we are here dealing with regenerate people, i.e. with true believers in Jesus Christ. Those who are not true believers cannot possibly backslide since they do not have spiritual life in the first place. They may be enthusiastic about Christian things, and come to church with some regularity but, with time, they lose interest. We are not surprised when they lose interest in spiritual things because we were never too convinced of their profession of faith. If you are one of these, you might be wondering how we know that you are not true believers. This is something hard to explain, but it may be compared to some form of spiritual sense which is related to the teaching of Scripture. The Bible teaches about those who have been convicted of their sins, who have despaired of saving themselves, and who now trust in Christ alone for salvation. It teaches about those who have repented of sins and are now full of gratitude for Christ's death on the cross for them. It speaks of a hunger for God's word, a thirsting for God's righteousness, and living to God's glory. We have experienced these things ourselves, and know of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. When we meet those who have the Spirit of Christ in them, we can sense that they are children of God, like us. We may not always be sure and, therefore, are careful to pass judgement. Nevertheless, we are wary of those who put on a veneer of Christianity - those who have "a form of godliness" but "deny its power" in their lives.

Only true believers would live to please their Lord. Only true believers would regard their lives and their service as belonging to the Lord. Only they would say, "Let my beloved come to *his* garden and eat its pleasant fruit." It is to your own good that you ensure you have true faith in Jesus Christ. The assurance of salvation cannot come from what others think of you. It is also useless to have a false sense assurance. You can tell a lie enough times and come to believe it in time. You can act like a Christian long enough and begin to think that you are one. God, however, knows who are His. On the last day, there will be *many* who call out, "Lord, Lord" but are rejected because the Lord has never regarded them as His. Let us, then, understand that only true Christians would want to guard their devotional life and their service to God.

Blessing from God

The believer would read the Bible regularly. He would meditate on God's word. He would attend church regularly to hear God's word preached, and to worship God with other believers. He would have a desire to see the gospel propagated to others, and he would gather with other believers to pray for souls to be converted. What would God do for such a believer? What would the Lord do for a church that guards her devotional life and serves Him well? Verse 1 tells us that the Lord will draw near to them as they draw near to Him. He comes to share the meal with them, appreciating everything they have done for Him. He makes everything done in His name fragrant and sweet - like myrrh and honey. He makes everything joyful and nourishing - like drinking wine and milk.

Eating a meal together speaks of warmth, acceptance and joy. Missionaries working in pagan cultures know too well the importance of eating anything served to them by their pagan hosts. Refusal to eat or drink with the hosts would be taken as a lack of acceptance of them. There is warmth, acceptance, and joy at a wedding feast. There is warmth, acceptance and joy when we welcome guests for a meal. This is reflected in the Lord's supper in church, when believers gather together in the presence of their Lord. The book of Revelation tells us that when all God's people are finally gathered together, there will be eternal celebration described as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9).

The next verse shows that there is plenty of food for everyone. The groom says, "Eat, O friends! Drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones!" The Lord desires His people to enjoy deeply the blessing He gives to them. More importantly, He desires us to enjoy His presence richly. For that to happen, we must be aware of His presence and appreciate it well. When the three apostles were on the Mount of Transfiguration, they were overwhelmed by the brightness of Christ's glory. The apostle Peter speaks of the possibility of loving Christ and rejoicing "with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). It is possible for the individual believer, and the gathered church, to experience this "inexpressible joy" of Christ's presence. Did not our Lord promised that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20)? May we experience this, and experience it more and more!

Complacency

We must understand that the rich enjoyment of the Lord Jesus Christ is experienced not only individually, but also when God's people are gathered together in worship. It is experienced not only when we are in quiet contemplation, but also during active service of some kind, such as when evangelizing from village to village, or when distributing tracts. Christ's presence is to be sought as we serve Him. Has He not promised to be with His people "to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20)? As we worship and serve Him, we must beware of becoming complacent, i.e. taking for granted the blessing of God, being careless, dropping our guard, and not being watchful of dangers. This is when backsliding can come to us.

One way that happens is to treat God's work as our own work. We forget who we are serving, and why we are doing certain things. Those who love the Lord would be emotionally involved in His

work, in His church, and in the progress of the gospel. That is understandable, and to be expected. We, therefore, feel strongly when things go wrong. The danger lies in forgetting that we are serving **Him** so that we get unduly agitated when other people appear to get in the way. When we forget that it is **God's** work we are doing, we become unduly upset, angry, or disappointed at any lack of progress, any disruption to our plans, or any disagreement from fellow believers. A root of bitterness in the heart may grow and cripple your service to God. When that happens, you might decline spiritually without even realizing it.

There are others who take for granted the privileges they have, such as the opportunity of hearing systematic teaching every week, the pastoral care received in church, and the fellowship with like-minded Christians. You begin to take the Lord's day lightly, and do not come with a heart of joy and anticipation. You sleep late on Saturday, and have difficulty waking up on Sunday. You are sleepy on the Lord's day, and no longer listen attentively to God's word. Spiritual decline comes to you so imperceptibly. Soon, you are excusing yourself from meetings, and going away quickly whenever a meeting finishes. You have lost the joy of meeting with other believers, and desire to avoid any probing from discerning friends.

God desires to bless the consecrated church and the devoted believer. The blessing of God will be experienced when we draw near to God, and serve the Lord faithfully. There is no necessity for backsliding to occur in the midst of blessing. But backsliding will come when God's people become complacent.

II. How backsliding occurs (vv. 2-5).

We consider, next, how backsliding occurs. We are not dealing with the manifestations of spiritual declension. We are not describing the ways by which backsliding shows itself. We have already described some of these ways. What we want to do now is to examine the hidden causes of decline in the individual. When individuals decline spiritually, it will affect the church in one way or another. What are the causes of spiritual decline, as revealed in the present portion of Scripture?

Indolence

Firstly, backsliding occurs when the believer becomes indolent, i.e. lazy and careless. We become sluggish, slow in doing what is right. We have already come across this in Chapter 3:1, which says, "By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him." We have noted that the original Hebrew indicates a searching "night by night" in a half-hearted manner. Here, in Chapter 5:2, we have, 'I sleep, but my heart is awake; *It is* the voice of my beloved! He knocks, *saying*, "Open for me, my sister, my love, My dove, my perfect one; for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.'" Just as the groom expresses his love for the bride, the Lord is constantly expressing His love to His people. He knocks on the door of our life, desiring to come in to commune with us. The right thing to do is to get up quickly and open the door for Him to come in. Instead, we have been slow in responding to Him. We waste time coming to serve the Lord. Wasting time means that opportunities to serve Him are lost as well. When we lose one opportunity, we also lose all the opportunities attached to it. It is a scary thought. When God blesses you with one opportunity to serve Him, you will discover that it leads to a string of other opportunities. Those who are faithful in little will be faithful in much. As you stretch yourself to serve God, your talents are sharpened and your abilities are exercised. Since you prove yourself faithful and willing to serve, God will use you even more. In fact, you will be amazed that you are able to do all that God gives you to do. What happens is that God fills you with His Spirit as you serve Him. His Spirit empowers you to do more than you thought you were able to do. However, the reverse is also true. When you are unwilling to serve, when you are lazy and slow to obey, you miss many opportunities to be useful. Your gifts are not developed, and you do not experience the joy of the Lord's presence.

Indolence is a chief cause of backsliding. You must be careful when sluggishness begins to be seen in your life. You are slow and lazy to respond to the Lord. You might not be lying in bed literally, but you take your time to do what needs to be done. We know, however, that there are those who literally lie in bed although they are not sleeping. They are not tired and lying down to rest. Instead, they have had too much sleep and are still lying down! Whether literally or not, we know what it means. This is the beginning of spiritual decline. Is the Lord speaking to anyone through this message? The Lord speaks to His people by His word. Often, we do not allow the word of God to speak to us as we read it. Then, when you come to hear the word preached, the Lord begins to address you personally. If you still refuse to respond, He may speak to you through a discerning Christian friend. If you still refuse to respond, the Lord may send trials into your life. We know that not all trials are brought about by sin. As with Job, a righteous man can be plagued with trials. However, it is always a healthy thing to do to examine yourself. It is to your own good that you examine yourself to see if God is chastising you through the trials.

Self-centredness

Apart from indolence, there is the problem of self-centredness. Indolence causes you to be sluggish, while self-centredness causes you to be self-pampering, such that you are always seeking personal convenience and personal comfort. In verse 3, the bride says, “I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on *again*? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them?” In those days, and in that part of the world, people walked about on dusty roads in sandals. They had to wash their feet at night before sleeping, and they would wash the feet of guests who arrived at their home. Here, the bride did not want the inconvenience and discomfort of putting on her robe to open the door for the visitor, and of washing her feet again later when the visitor had left. She failed to notice what it meant when the groom said, “my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night”. The groom had travelled a distance to come to her. He had been in the dark and in the cold. His hair is wet with the dew. How could she not notice that? Would not her heart be moved with compassion, and love, for the groom who had taken the trouble to come to see her? We would expect her to be so moved, but she wasn’t, simply because she was too absorbed with herself and her own situation.

This can easily happen to us when we are too absorbed with ourselves. We are too concerned with our own comfort and convenience to the point of overlooking the needs of others. Do you grumble about the neighbour ringing your door bell in the middle of the night, without a thought that his son might be critically ill and needing help? Are you unhappy that the pastor should visit so late at night, without a thought that he was held up by a bad traffic jam and had lost his way while looking for your house in the dark? Amazingly, self-centred people do not think much of the inconvenience and discomfort they cause to others whenever they want something done for themselves. The Lord taught His disciples not to lord it over others like the Gentiles did. Such self-centred people think nothing of the Lord’s teaching because it is lost upon them. They just do not seem to think it applies to themselves. They are too quick to ask others to do things for them, without any thought of the inconvenience caused, or even the inappropriateness of asking. Of course, good friends would not hesitate to seek help from one another, but that is different from abusing the friendship. You can be sure that such self-centred people have few friends. They are absorbed with their own comfort and convenience, and do not think much of the discomfort and inconvenience caused to others. When we really need help, we would hesitate to approach such people. They may be our friends, but they are not our close friends.

The spiritual lesson must not be missed. The Lord is constantly drawing near to His people to reassure them of His presence, and of His love for them. He does not seek our pity, for He needs none. But, surely, we ought to give some thought to what it meant for the Son of God to leave the glory of heaven to come to earth to save His people. Surely, we ought to give some thought to what it meant for the Son of God to bear the sins of His people on the cross, to feel forsaken by the

Father, and to be “made sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). Do we still begrudge having to come to church to worship Him? Do we still complain about the times of meeting, and the distance we need to travel, and the expectation to serve Him? Oh, sinful selves that we are! We need to weep for our sins. Just as Peter wept for denying the Lord, have we not denied the Lord ourselves?

Procrastination

Closely related to indolence and self-centredness is procrastination. You would have heard that “procrastination is the thief of time”. To procrastinate is to put off doing something out of habitual laziness. You are too slow to respond to the Lord’s call, and to His commands. You would finally do what is required, but you take so long to do it. The Lord will wait patiently, for He is long-suffering towards His people. In verse 4, we read, “My beloved put his hand by the latch *of the door*, and my heart yearned for him.” Why have we to wait until the Lord “puts His hand to the latch”? Yes, we yearned for Him, but why didn’t we come to Him immediately? The bride finally stirred, for we read in verse 5, “I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped *with myrrh*, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock.” Her hands and fingers drip with myrrh, to make it appear that she is so welcoming and has been waiting for the groom, but it has taken her so long to stir and finally to get up and open the door. She had waited until the groom attempted to unlatch the door himself but found it locked.

A similar situation is found in Revelation 3:20, where the Lord stands at the door and knocks. We are told, “If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” The Lord wants to bless us with His presence and in many other ways, but are we responding? This passage has been used in gospel preaching to call sinners to repentance. It is legitimate to apply it in that way, but what happens today is that it is used to convey the wrong message that salvation is dependent upon our response when, in fact, our response is only the means of receiving the gift of salvation. Modern teaching is largely Arminian, in which Christ is portrayed as having done His part, and it is now up to the sinner to do his part, to gain salvation. The passage actually speaks of Christ calling upon wayward churches to repent of their sins. It is addressed to backslidden Christians. As we have said, it is legitimate to apply it in the direction of calling upon sinners to come to faith in Christ, but it should be made clear that the call is for repentance from sin, to faith in Christ. It is not a call to the sinner to contribute his share of work to secure his own salvation. Christ must not be portrayed as pathetically standing at the door of the sinner’s life, waiting for the sinner to show pity on Him. No, the true teaching is rather that Christ has done all that is necessary to save sinners, by His death on the cross, and the sinner must come humbly to Him to receive salvation.

Coming back to the passage, let us remember that the Lord knows all that is in our heart. No amount of pretence, however subtle, can cover up the true state of our heart. If we do not serve the Lord willingly and sincerely, He already knows. That is why, as the years go by - as we grow in understanding of the Bible’s teaching, as we grow to some degree of spiritual maturity - we come to realize the futility of putting on a show before man. Let us be more forthright, let us be more open, with one another. Let us practise “simple faith”, leaving out all the charade and subtle hypocrisy of the carnal self. Let us seek to please the Lord rather than to please man.

We see now the three causes of backsliding, viz. indolence, self-centredness, and procrastination. A combination of the condition of our heart, our attitude, and our response to the Lord conspire to erode away our love for Him. We are sluggish, lazy, self-pampering, and slow to act on what we know to be right. We may even say sincerely that we want the Lord, that we want His blessing, that we want to know His presence in our lives - but why have we been so slow to act? One may conceivably argue whether these are *causes* of backsliding or are they *signs* of backsliding? But our purpose is already achieved, which is to show that there is a very real danger believers may backslide in their spiritual life. Of course, there are those who tend to act too rashly, especially

when they are upset and get into fits of passion. Those people must learn to control themselves, or they will regret their rashness in words or actions. That is a different matter, however. Here, we are concerned only with the danger of backsliding. If nothing is done to put the situation right, adverse consequences will come to us.

III. What the consequences of backsliding are (vv. 6-8).

What are the possible adverse consequences? The passage continues to show that there are some definite things that will happen. Three definite consequences are described.

Spiritual barrenness

First, there will be spiritual barrenness. We may carry out the right actions, but there is no noticeable profit from what we do. The ground has become dry. We dig for water, but none is to be found. We sow the seeds, but nothing seems to grow. This is shown by verse 6, which says, “I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away *and* was gone. My heart leaped up when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.” The Lord is generous. He continues to call out to you. He desires to fill your cup to overflowing. When He came to you, you were not ready. He has now moved on to the next one in line, to fill *his* cup. And there are others who are waiting to have *their* cups filled. It wasn’t that the Lord did not want to fill your cup. You were not ready when He came to you. You now have to wait for your turn. In the Lord’s mercy, He will come back to you. But you must wait for Him, and be ready.

Do we not read of the Ten Virgins, waiting for the groom to arrive (Matt. 25)? The five foolish virgins do not have oil ready, and are left out when the groom arrives. The five wise ones have oil ready, and so are allowed in with the groom. We do not want to be slow and lazy, to think only of our own comfort and convenience before we bestir ourselves to serve the Lord. How many opportunities are lost, and how much blessing we have missed! And how the years have flown by! As these words are heard, I will not be surprised if there are those whose hearts ache with pangs of remorse. But, O friends, do not linger longer in your remorse. Bestir yourselves to do what is right. Come, search for the Lord, and He will be found by you!

Conscience seared

The second consequences of backsliding is that your conscience will be seared. The apostle Paul speaks of those who have “their own conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:2), which is a graphic way of describing what might happen to us when we backslide. In the present passage, we have verse 7, which says, “The watchmen who went about the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil away from me.” We have come across the watchmen in Chapter 3:3, who are the pastors or some mature Christians in church. They guide those who have lost the assurance of salvation by directing them to God’s word. It is to God’s word that you must go so that your assurance may be restored. You must return to church to hear the word of God preached. You must renew your commitment to the Lord, and maintain peace in the church instead of creating trouble. In these ways, your assurance will be restored.

In the present passage, the watchmen do a very unusual thing. Instead of directing the troubled person in the right direction, they beat her up and humiliate her. However, this is only the perception of the troubled person. She thinks the watchmen are being rough and unhelpful. She even exaggerates the discomfort she experiences, when all the while the problem lies in herself. This is the description of the backslidden Christian. His conscience is sore, and he perceives that the preacher in church is harsh and unhelpful. He complains and exaggerates his negative perception of the preacher and his preaching. He is like a person in depression who sees the day as dull and gloomy. But is that the case? The sun is shining, and people are cheerful, but he perceives the situation as the complete opposite. The word of God is meant to comfort and strengthen those who are faithful to the Lord. But you have not been faithful. You are backslidden. Your conscience is

burned. That is why the word of God causes you to smart. Healthy skin feels the pleasure of running water during a nice shower, but broken skin feels the sting of the same water.

Cutting-edge blunted

There is a third consequence of backsliding. This is expressed in verse 8, which says, “I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I *am* lovesick!” The daughters of Jerusalem are the new believers, the seekers, and the adherents in the church. They are not hostile to the church and are, in fact, friends who seem happy to be part of us and try to be involved in the life of the church. Of course, our desire is that, with time, the seekers will come to faith in Christ, and the new Christians would become committed members of the church. Our hope is that those who claim to be Christians will be convinced of the need to be integrated into the life of the church, instead of merely “holding to the skirts” as adherents. But let us come to what is taught in this verse.

What it is saying is that the spiritually healthy believer is constantly guiding the new believers and the seekers - the daughters of Jerusalem. He is looked up to, his advice is sought, and his guidance is appreciated. However, when the believer is backslidden, his usefulness is reduced - his cutting edge is blunted. You know what it is like for the cutting edge of a knife to be blunted - it cuts with difficulty, and it does not cut cleanly. So also with the service of the backslidden believer - he is no longer spiritually sharp. Instead of being of help to the “daughters of Jerusalem”, he is seeking their help. This can happen to the church as a whole as well. Our cutting edge can become blunt such that we are no more as effective or useful as we used to be. Are we in such a state? On the personal level, is anyone in such a state? Are you needing the encouragement and support of those who have looked up to you? Of course you are still respected by them, for you have been their teacher and mentor. You might even be their spiritual father or mother, who have led them to faith in Christ. But in your backslidden state, you are not as helpful as you could be.

Conclusion

Here, then, are the three consequences of backsliding - you become spiritually barren, your conscience is seared, and you lose your spiritual sharpness. These consequences are never pleasant. Any right-thinking believer would not want to experience them. Such consequences come from indolence, self-centredness, and procrastination in our walk with God. They come to us when we are complacent with regard to the blessing of God upon us. How good it will be to have sustained blessing from the Lord, to know His presence, to be filled continually with His Spirit. The children of God need not have to backslide. The tendency to backslide is always there. We must take stock of ourselves, and not allow that to happen. God willing, we will consider next how to be restored from the backslidden state. It will be appropriate to end with these words by Joseph Hart (1712-68):

*How good is the God we adore,
Our faithful and unchangeable Friend!
His love is as great as His pow'r
And knows neither measure nor end!*

*'Tis Jesus the First and the Last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us home;
We'll praise Him for all that is past,
We'll trust Him for all that's to come.*

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