

# **BACKSLIDING AND RECOVERY**

## **BACKSLIDING**

In our study we will find that the word backsliding is only found in the old testament. Also its use is confined to the nation of Israel and found only in the prophets Jeremiah and Hosea. Within these two books there are 16 references and each is to the nation. Of course we would understand that the nation can only take on the characteristics of the people within it. For the nation to backslide individuals must also backslide. Both prophets use the word either as a statement to describe the condition of the people e.g. "Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer" Hos. 4 v 16 or as a call to them to return to God e.g "return thou backsliding Israel" Jer 3 v 12.

Having accepted that the term refers to the nation but must be a description of individuals within the nation it is also clear that other expressions in scripture equally describe this condition and as such go from the beginning of the book right through to New Testament times and on into our day. For example in Rev 2 v 4 it is said of the church at Ephesus "thou hast left (abandoned) thy first love". A description of the condition of the church but as with Israel surely also a description of the conditions of the members of the church.

The word itself has its root according to Strong's Hebrew Bible Dictionary in the Hebrew word "shuwb" meaning to turn back. The word most commonly used by Jeremiah and Hosea has the meaning apostate or turning away. When we consider this in new testament times Paul does warn "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers have itching ears and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned to fables" 2 Tim. 4 v 3 & 4.

Both Jeremiah (he is known as the weeping prophet and did also write Lamentations) and Hosea (he is known as the Jeremiah of the northern kingdom also the prophet of the broken heart) write prior to the children of Israel being carried away into captivity and seem therefore to be making a final call to the people prior to a time of divine judgement. Similarly Paul warns of last day conditions and writes about a time that will come.

So many examples are found in scripture. One might consider:

Noah – Gen 9 – lies drunk and is uncovered in his tent.

Abraham – Gen 12 – in a time of famine goes down into Egypt.

Lot – Gen 13 – for him the well watered plains of Jordan

Samson – Judges 14 – Samson went down to Timnath

Elimelech – Ruth 1 – went to sojourn in Moab

Saul – 1 Samuel 15 – because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord

David – 2 Samuel 11 – David tarried still at Jerusalem

Solomon – 1 Kings 11 - his wives turned away his heart after other gods

Prodigal Son – Luke 15 – In context of other things lost in the chapter undoubtedly a picture of the sinner but as one who left the father's house an indication of one who backslides.

Peter – Luke 22 – Satan hath desired to have you – "I know him not"

John Mark – Acts 13 – John departing from them returned to Jerusalem.

Demas – 2 Tim 4 – hath forsaken me having loved this present world.

As we study in particular the new testament and make application to our own day we must differentiate between the turning back of a true believer and that of someone who has made a profession but not truly saved. We judge that those in John 6 v 66 who "went back and walked no more with him" would be in this later category. In that day many were following the Lord Jesus only out of curiosity e.g John 6 v 2 "a great multitude followed him because they saw his miracles" v 26 "ye seek me not because ye saw the miracles but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled". The Lord Jesus also in his teaching of the sower in Matt 13 makes it clear that seed into stony places will initially look as if it has borne fruit v 20 "heareth the word and anon with joy receiveth it. Yet hath he no root in himself but dureth for a while". No real lasting work of salvation. In such circumstances it would be not up to us to judge but we do know "The Lord knoweth them that are his" 2 Tim 2 v 19.

Where does backsliding begin? The wise man Solomon whom we have previously mentioned is the only other to mention the backslider when he writes Proverbs 14 v 14 “the backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways”. We often only become aware of the condition when there is some physical or external evidence that we see but the condition may have been ongoing for some time. Backsliding does not begin with someone stopping coming to the meeting. That may be the last step.

Perhaps that time when I stopped praying (I may have kept saying prayers) or reading my bible was the time when the backsliding started. David did not start backsliding when he took Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11 but when he “tarried still at Jerusalem” others had gone to the battlefield he was missing. Have I stopped being present when the tract band is out visiting homes or when the open air group is witnessing in the street. These might be steps that will lead to me eventually leaving the fellowship of Christians to which I presently belong.

## **RECOVERY**

It is good to know that there is always a way back for the backslider. When we remember the example of the prodigal son in Luke 15 how lovely to read “when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him”.

When the Lord Jesus clearly indicated in Luke 22 that Peter would betray him he spoke of a time “when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren” v 32. There is no thought of Peter having to have a further salvation experience the word here means to revert or to come again or to turn about. On the day of resurrection Peter is restored to a right relationship with a personal meeting with the Lord Luke 24 v 34 “hath appeared unto Simon” and also a public declaration recorded in John 21 v15 v16 v17 “I love thee”. Three denials are followed by three affirmations.

In our earlier list we mentioned John Mark who in Acts went back. Good to note that later Paul will write of him “take Mark and bring him with thee; for he is profitable to me for the ministry” 2 Tim 4 v 11. A work of recovery had occurred in his Christian experience.

How is recovery effected? There may be a number of factors.

1. The prodigal “came to himself” Luke 15 v 17. There is of necessity a need for me to want recovery. When David’s sin was revealed to him he wrote Psa 51 where we read v1 “have mercy upon me” v 2 “wash me thoroughly” v 7 “purge me” v 10 “create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me” v 12 “restore unto me the joy of thy salvation”.
2. We observe that for Peter in Luke 22 that the Lord Jesus says “I have prayed for thee” v 32. There is for every true believer a Great High Priest who is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” Heb 4 v 15 and also “the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” Rom 8 v 26. We have such resources to help and strengthen us.
3. We have other believers who can help us. Scripture teaches us to “bear one another’s burdens” Gal 6 v 2. True spiritual friends will confront us when they observe any tendency to backslide although we may not always be appreciated for doing so Gal 6 v 1 “Brethren if a man be overtaken in a fault (trespass) ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness considering thyself lest thou also be tempted”. This gives us the a) who – spiritual b) what – restore c)how – in spirit of meekness. Also James 5 v 20 “he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death and hide a multitude of sins” this cannot refer to an unsaved person as in v 19 James has written “brethren if any of you do err from the truth and one convert him”. The restoration of one who has backslidden can be a ministry that brings the same joy as the evangelist sees in the salvation of the lost.

It is clear from the example of Israel in O/T that God wants recovery “turn O backsliding children (still part of his family) Jer 3 v 14 “return ye backsliding children and I will heal your backslidings” v 22. God grant that if I have wandered time and opportunity will be given for me to return.