

About Face

Pam's husband just disappeared one day. He'd been a good husband and father to his two small children and had been a sincere church attendee for several years. But in a seemingly radical change of heart, he just split.

Ted's wife had expressed some dissatisfaction with the women's group at church, but soon, it turned into a constant criticism. Then she got more and more into wanting stylish expensive clothes. Then came the sudden need for a new car, a new image (teeth, hair, and other things) and then an announcement – she had found some new friends that were more interesting. A few months later, she left Ted and her three children. She'd been a Christian since her teens, but now she was just 'way out there'. What happened?

The term 'backslider' rightly or wrongly conjures up thoughts of Cain, King Saul, and even Judas Iscariot. Many of us don't understand the term or the dynamics associated with it. Nevertheless, the spiritual issues surrounding it are so important to us as believers that we cannot afford to ignore, to misunderstand or to deal wrongly with it.

That's because each of us faces it every day.

'What?!' you may think. 'That's crazy. I love the Lord. I would never do that – why, even if everyone else deserts Him, I never will! I'll never deny Him!'

Uh-huh. It's good that you are confident of your love, but Peter felt

the same way, and if you asked them at the right time, so did many of those we consider backslidden. We face decisions, generally, every day that propel us in one direction or another.

"Direction?"

Yes, you see, it's no accident that faith in Christ produces what the Bible terms a "walk" or a "race" (Col 2:6, 1Ths 4:1, Hebrews 12:1, Jer 10:23). That is, at any given time, there's movement in a specific direction.

Randy Alcorn, in his book "Edge of Eternity", depicts his main character, Nick, as finding himself unexpectedly in a different world walking on the Red Road toward the heavenly city of Charis (a la Pilgrim's Progress). Now, Nick is not yet saved. He's discovering much about the Lord along the way, but he doesn't yet have a handle on why people in this place do the things they do. At one point during their trek, he, his friend Quon and their little group of pilgrims encounter many people all headed in the opposite direction toward the city of Babel (hell). Nick recalls...

Just for the fun of it, I turned around and walked about fifty feet with the crowd. It felt great.

"Nick! What are you doing? Get back here." It was Quon. I turned around, weaving my way back. What a pain.

"Don't do that," Quon said. "The GuideBook says once you retreat on the road you may not manage ever to turn around again."

Now, even though he has not yet gotten saved in the story, his experience is consistent with the Bible's description of backsliding.

You see, the words used for backsliding in the Bible simply mean to turn from or to turn away. Its fundamentally means that the child of God begins to face a different direction than the Person and place to Whom and to which he/she is called – to Jesus Christ and His home, heaven.

Simply put, **you will proceed in the direction you 'face'**. It's no accident that on two occasions Jesus told Satan to "Get behind Me." (See Mk 8:33 and Luke 4:8). If you're spiritually facing anyone or anything other than Christ, you will begin to backslide. Now we don't refer to someone who's stumbled in a sin a backslider, but the direction and dynamic are the same. It's a spiritual reality more sure than the meager law of gravity – you will gravitate to your 'potentate'; you will embrace the one you choose to face. And you will become like him/it. (See 1Jn 3:2; 2Cor 3:18 and Psa 115:8).

Now, God desires that you draw close to Him (James 4:8) which is to 'walk with Him' as did Enoch, Noah, Abraham and others (Gen 5:22; 6:9; 17:1; 24:40; 48:15). But if you hang around with the wrong crowd physically and/or the wrong influences mentally you'll find that your Christian walk loses momentum. As Psalm One describes it, walking slows to standing which, in turn, becomes sitting (Psa 1:1).

A bad choice, prompted not by God but by your own sin nature can take you way off course as with Alcorn's character or it may be only one degree to the right or left.

However, even one degree, when it repeats over and over can take you to the place where you're walking contrary to the Lord. One degree, if not corrected can lead to a big problem. Imagine leaving San Francisco airport headed for Honolulu with a one degree error in navigation – hope you brought your shark repellent!

So what runs through the mind of the backslider? What takes him/her off course?

Temptation... We are all tempted, all of us. What you're tempted by is quite common no matter how 'unique' you may think you are or it is. What you do with the temptation is key. Do you continue to face it, to entertain it, or do you turn from it back to the Lord? The backslider first 'toys' with temptation which inevitably leads to sin.

Denial... Generally, temptation works incrementally. Contrary to popular opinion, we don't 'fall' into sin, we walk into it step by step. Perhaps because of this, the sin nature is often successful in convincing us that we're still in control of the situation and thus we can play around the 'edge' of sin.

Now, thanks to belief in the atoning blood of Christ and the power of His Holy Spirit, we are no longer slaves to sin. Once saved, we are free not to sin. However, the wages of sin is death – sin still has its consequences even for the believer. As long as you deny your failure, you only allow it to increase its influence.

Guilt and Condemnation... At some point, the backslider in

heart hits the threshold, and denial gives way to guilt. Sooner or later, the devil's tempting 'bait' turns to a terrible 'beating'. He will lure you to the snare and then will be the first to accuse you for stepping into it. This is a critical time though, for the goal of the enemy is then to condemn you in order to keep you from repenting. His lies are laced with reruns of your sins. He wants you to 'look' at him, to continually face your sin rather than looking to the Lord. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear [me]." (Psa 66:18, also see Phil 3:13,14) Satan knows it hinders your fellowship with the Lord.

But LISTEN, Christ does NOT condemn you. He loves you – yes, even in your failure, even in your pit. The devil works very hard though to persuade you other wise. Condemnation and the false perception of God's anger with you is a powerful weapon in Satan's arsenal.

Now, you may think, 'But what about all those stories in the Old Testament where God got so upset with sin? Isn't God still the same?'

Yes, He is. He never changes. But you see ALL of His righteous justified anger with your sin, He poured out on Himself – that is, on His only begotten Son, Jesus. When you are saved and are trying to follow the Lord, you need not ever again feel condemned (See Romans 8:1)

However, you may face a sense of condemnation if/when you walk after the flesh. In that circumstance, Satan often uses it as his 'hammer'. That's when you must turn and hold to the promises of God. "If we

confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1John1:9) That's when you come back into the light – you honestly confess your sin to Him. "O house of Jacob, come, and let us walk in the light of the LORD." (Isa 2:5) "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." (1John1:7)

You see, at this point, God actually forgets about it – literally, truly, no jive. He's already forgiven it at Calvary and as you confess it before Him, it's GONE. In His mind, He's chosen to cause it to have never happened. Now, you may still remember, but He doesn't! "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." (Hebrews 8:12, 10:17) "He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities; and You wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:19) "As far as the east is from the west, [so] far has He removed our transgressions from us." (Psa 103:12) Wow! That's unburdening, isn't it?

Isolation and Rejection... As precious as God's children are, we can sometimes treat the repentant or struggling backslider with recoil and this can lead him/her to a sense of isolation and rejection – not just by us but by God. Now, the word instructs us not to fellowship with the unrepentant for that only encourages their sin and can corrupt us as well (See 1 Cor 5 as an example).

However, the backslider who's repented or wants to but is struggling must be treated as Galatians 6:1 says, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering yourself, lest you also be tempted."

About 30 years ago, shortly after coming to the Lord, I raced to the mission field of Europe. I was saved and loved the Lord genuinely and had a passion to serve Him. But though I memorized tons of scriptures, I had no real grounding in the Word nor any relationship with a godly pastor. While living in Greece, our second child was born and about a month and a half later went to be with the Lord. As you know or can imagine, it was very difficult.

Our shallow understanding and misguided counselors left us wandering. Deep inside, was a sense of failure and futility – like bitter seeds, they infested our hearts. Thus, the next couple of years were filled with my own backsliding.

Hitting bottom, so to speak, spiritually and morally, I finally came to repentance and began again, under some excellent Bible teaching, to really follow after the Lord. However, just as this healing and restoration was coming about, I confessed my past situation to a leadership couple in our church (James 5:16) – I was hoping they might be willing to help us 'along the way'. Unfortunately, they abruptly recoiled and it made me feel really 'leprous' and untouchable despite my repentance. Thankfully, my

pastor and his kind assistant 'caught' me, in a sense, and helped me get going again.

Futility... The backslider loses his grip on the concept of grace. After trying to measure up to some standard and failing perhaps many times, he hears the devilish siren cry that his life is futile, that God doesn't any longer accept him – he's just too bad, too much of a basket case, so why even try? Many, many backsliders simply believe God doesn't love them anymore and maybe never did. Sometimes, our behavior as believers reinforces that.

Self doubt... Now, you may have already observed that much if not all of this thinking is self-absorbed – very 'me-oriented'. And it is. The backslider is consumed with himself. "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways:" (Prov 14:14) (As we are ALL tempted to be.) Because of this, he can come to think of his salvation as related to some sort of a personal accomplishment rather than God's accomplishment and free gift. Thus, he can doubt his salvation.

Of course, all of this is a downward trek away from God's outstretched arms. But doom is NOT inevitable. It is NOT irreversible. It is NOT over. Too many are too quick to assert the scripture, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would [no doubt] have continued with us:.." (1John 2:9) and forget the scriptures that say, "Turn, O backsliding children, says the LORD; for I am married unto you:" (Jer 3:14) and, "Return, you

backsliding children, [and] I will heal your backslidings.” (Jer 3:22) and, “I will never leave you, nor forsake you.” (Heb 13:5) or the story of the prodigal son and many others that speak of God’s unfailing love and tender mercies.

You see, some of the most godly saints have been down this road. Consider King David as an example (See the Bathsheba affair in 2 Sam 11 &12) or the Apostle Peter (See his great denial in Matthew 26). But love, agape love, never fails. It never, ever fails.

Friends, perhaps you know someone who’s turned to the ‘left or to the right’ or perhaps has turned away altogether. Jude writes, “... beloved, remember the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; how that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, **having not the Spirit**. But you, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. **And of some have compassion, making a difference; And others save with fear, pulling [them] out of the fire;** hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. (Jude 1:18-23).

We are called upon to keep ourselves in the love of God, looking for mercy because we are aware of our own failures, acting with discernment and compassion toward those who are saved but turned out of the way. God help us

to reach out patiently and in love rather than write them off.

Or perhaps, you’re slipping yourself. You’re going through the motions outwardly but you know what’s going on inside. You’re no longer facing your Father in heaven. You’re not at all sure what He’d say if you turned back to Him. Listen to this paraphrased story originally told by Clement of Alexandria (153 - 217 AD) concerning John the Apostle:

One day toward the end of his life, John came to a city in western Turkey (some think it was Smyrna). There he met a young man zealous for the Lord whom he committed into the care of the local pastor to raise up and disciple. The pastor accepted the charge and promised to care for the youth and teach him all the ways of the Lord.

John then left for Ephesus. Meanwhile, this pastor endeavored to care for the young man. He reared, kept, and cherished him and finally baptized him. After this however he left off leading him in the Way believing the Lord would ‘take it from there’.

The youth though became involved with a crowd of friends that truly corrupted his as yet unsteady heart. They enticed him with costly entertainment and eventually got him involved in vandalism and robbery. Each time they dared him to carry out something worse which he came to do with increasing enthusiasm.

At last, having entirely despaired of his salvation, he no longer plotted anything insignificant. After having committed what he considered to be the ‘ultimate transgression’, he made up his mind that he was now

lost and resigned himself to the hellish path of his associates. In course, he formed them into a band of brutal robbers with himself the head and cruelest of all.

Time passed, and John returned to the Church. Upon inquiring about the young man placed into the pastor’s care, the pastor said, “He is dead.”

“How did it happen and what kind of death?” John asked.

“He is dead to God,” he answered. “He has turned out wicked and immoral, becoming a robber. He has now taken possession of the mountain in front of the church with a band of men like him.”

Tearing his clothes and crying with great lamentation, the apostle said to bring a horse and someone to guide him to the leader of thieves.

Upon reaching the hideout, he was taken prisoner. At once, he cried out for the men to take him to their captain who was standing afar off heavily armed. As John approached, the head bandit recognized the old saint and being ashamed, he turned to flee away.

John followed hard after him with all his might, forgetting his age (approx. 99) and cried out, “Why, my son, do you flee from me your father, your unarmed old father? Please son, have pity on me. Don’t be afraid. You still have hope for life. I will give an account to Christ for you. If necessary, I will willingly endure death for you as the Lord did for us. For you, I will surrender my life. Stop and stand still. Believe that Christ has sent me.”

When he heard this, he at first stood still, looking down. Then he threw his weapons down, trembling

and weeping bitterly. When the old man approached, he embraced him, and was baptized, if it were possible, a second time with tears.

John led him back to the church where he prayed and fasted for him and cared for him tenderly. John did not leave until he had restored the youth who demonstrated a great example of repentance and evidence of regeneration in Christ.

Dear friend, if you perhaps have slid backward to any degree or turned away – hear this – God still loves you and He has not given up on you! You haven’t even surprised Him. On the contrary, He’s given all FOR you. You are incredibly precious and welcomed. Turn again to see His face. Do an ‘about face.’ Come into His light. And you will know His relentless love as He says, “I do not condemn you. I love you and it thrills Me that you’re home. Come, let’s fellowship together!”

No, it’s NOT too good to be true – it is the way of our God and Father Who is ALL good and ALL true. Face it, He loves you. Turn to Him now.

“For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. But whoso hearkens unto Me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil” (Pro 1:32:33)

“I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, as a cloud, your sins: return unto Me; for I have redeemed you.” (Isa 44:22)