

Backsliding

In the church I spent much of my youth in, I would often hear the word *backslidden*. It was almost always used for someone who used to attend church, but had now completely dropped out. We would sometimes pray for the backslidden, who were long lists of people who had once made a profession of faith, but had never really shown any evidence of fruit. People who were indistinguishable from the unsaved were anointed with the title “backslidden” if they had once prayed the sinner's prayer. As I went on in my Christian life, I found the Bible didn't have a category for someone with no fruit, no evidence of Christianity, who could still be a Christian, and just be called *backslidden*. Actually, when the Old Testament uses the word *backslide*, it usually refers to total apostasy, not a true Christian with no fruit.

But at the same time, I also found that the Bible does have a category for a Christian who is in a state of spiritual decline. The Bible does record Christians who drift, who leave their first love, who walk according to the flesh. The Bible records people like John Mark, who take steps back in their Christian life, but later come back. People like Peter, who fall into fearful denial of the Lord, but who return.

And the Bible records the life of David. More than once in David's life there was a drift away from God, a spiritual decline. One of those times is recorded for us in 1 Samuel 27 through 29. After many victories and successful responses to trials, David declined and fell into a pattern of sin.

David's slide back gives us a remarkable insight into what it looks like when a believer declines. David goes down a path of despair, followed by deception, followed by defection. Once again, looking into David's life is something of a mirror. We look into his life to see ourselves, our own failings, falls, and flaws, as well as the way back.

I. David's Despair

1 Samuel 27:1 And David said in his heart, "Now I shall perish someday by the hand of Saul. *There is* nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape to the land of the Philistines; and Saul will despair of me, to seek me anymore in any part of Israel. So I shall escape out of his hand."

2 Then David arose and went over with the six hundred men who *were* with him to Achish the son of Maach, king of Gath. 3 So David dwelt with Achish at Gath, he and his men, each man with his household, *and* David with his two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the Carmelitess, Nabal's widow.

4 And it was told Saul that David had fled to Gath; so he sought him no more.

5 Then David said to Achish, "If I have now found favor in your eyes, let them give me a place in some town in the country, that I may dwell there. For why should your servant dwell in the royal city with you?"

6 So Achish gave him Ziklag that day. Therefore Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day.

7 Now the time that David dwelt in the country of the Philistines was one full year and four months.

Here is the first sign of David's backsliding. He despairs of God's goodness in his life. He says, “Now I shall surely perish someday by the hand of Saul”. This is a far cry from what he wrote in Psalm 16: Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust. (Ps. 16:1)

One of the first signs of backsliding is that our hope in God evaporates. We become pessimistic, and look at the world through unbelieving eyes. “This will never get better. There is no solution. This cannot improve. Nothing ever changes.” But unbelieving pessimism doesn't come from Scripture. The person speaking this way is not quoting a Bible verse. God has never put a pessimistic thought in a man's head.

This is purely man-centred reasoning. The only way to escape Saul will be to defect to a foreign nation. The only way to solve this situation will be to take matters into my own hands, because

prayer and waiting on God and obeying just seem to keep the same trial going, and pretty soon Saul will win.

How does one get to this place of despair?

This is the result of an extended trial, of going through the same painful lessons, of being tested again and again. David has been on the run for five years. He has endured the hardship of being a fugitive, of being slandered, of being wronged for years. And probably one of the hardest trials of all is the trial of uncertainty. Years and years of an uncertain future, and uncertain outcome.

Despair is the result of the fatigue of resisting temptation steadily eroding our defences. It is not that the trial must do this; it is that the longer it goes on, the more we are tempted in this direction. And we are tempted to take our eyes off the Lord, off His Word, off His promises, and onto our own reasoning.

Notice verse 1 says, David said in his heart. David is not addressing the Lord here, he is addressing himself. David is speaking like an unbeliever. He has forgotten that he has been anointed by God, and cannot perish until God's purposes are fulfilled in him. He is immortal until God is finished with him.

But David is weary of his trial. The length of the trial is tempting David to take his eyes off the Lord and view his circumstances through unbelieving, human eyes.

Contrast this with what the Lord Jesus did. When He faced the cross, He said "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (12:27–28).

In that moment, the Lord Jesus kept His eyes on the Father. But David has taken his eyes off the Lord, and is looking for humanistic solutions.

He now looks for deliverance from Israel's enemies. Practically speaking, he is right. If he escapes to the Philistines, Saul won't hunt him there, because that would be an act of war if Saul went into their territory. But to do this, David will be abandoning Israel, turning to live among idolaters. Philistia was full of idol temples and idolatrous priests (2 Sam. 5:21). David is turning to the world to help him, instead of waiting on the Lord.

So he does that: he goes to Achish, the king of Gath. This seems to be the same king he pretended to be mad in front of, all those years before. But at that time, he was alone. Now he has a formidable force of 600 men, so David is not in danger of being arrested or imprisoned. It's even something of a threat to this king if he doesn't treat them well. David can bargain with this king.

Just think of what he will be exposing these six hundred men, and their wives and their children to. What will happen to their consciences as they see the idol temples to Dagon and other gods? What kind of vileness and immorality will their children be exposed to? When you backslide, you affect others.

But he is received and goes in the city of Gath. Soon, David asks if he and his men can live in a more secluded location. He claims it is because he is not worthy to dwell with the king, but it is probably because he didn't want the king to see what he was up to when he starts raiding people. With women and children, this could easily have been a group of over 2000, which would have put quite a drain on the resources of the city of Gath. He is given the town of Ziklag, which is quite a

way away, almost 40 kilometres to the south.

Now think what David's backsliding has produced. First, he has a false sense of security. Things seem to be going well, as they often do, while we backslide. It looks like his troubles with Saul are over. But at what price? He has now become a servant to the enemy. He calls himself the servant of king Achish. And it leads him to a lengthy period of compromise: living among God's enemies for a full sixteen months. All this comes from taking his eyes off the promises of God and turning inward to his own unbelieving reason.

Now whenever there is the spiritual decline that comes from despair, soon there will be another sign of backsliding:

II. David's Deception

8 And David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. For those *nations* were the inhabitants of the land from of old, as you go to Shur, even as far as the land of Egypt. 9 Whenever David attacked the land, he left neither man nor woman alive, but took away the sheep, the oxen, the donkeys, the camels, and the apparel, and returned and came to Achish. 10 Then Achish would say, "Where have you made a raid today?" And David would say, "Against the southern *area* of Judah, or against the southern *area* of the Jerahmeelites, or against the southern *area* of the Kenites." 11 David would save neither man nor woman alive, to bring *news* to Gath, saying, "Lest they should inform on us, saying, 'Thus David did.'" And thus *was* his behavior all the time he dwelt in the country of the Philistines.

When you are a group of over a thousand, and you go and live in a town, the chances are, all you have are same run-down houses needing repair. There wouldn't be any cultivated farms around, and so the only way you can survive for the time being is to raid other people, and steal their stuff. So that's what David and his men do.

David chooses to raid only non-Israelites: Geshurites, Girshites, Amalekites. These are Canaanites who were never driven out of the land, and Amalek was still around because Saul hadn't obeyed the Lord. So, in one sense, David is just raiding people who shouldn't be in the land: people who refused to submit to Israel, or who just intimidated Israel in the time of Joshua. He is destroying them, the way Israel was originally commanded to. But he also does that because he is deceiving king Achish, and does not want any survivors to report to king Achish on what he is doing. And he is keeping their cattle. But he must nevertheless adopt cruelty without mercy to protect his lies.

He tells king Achish that he is raiding Israelite towns, towns of southern Judah. He wants Achish to think that he is well and truly a loyal Philistine. But, in fact, he is not touching or harming anyone in Israel. When he comes back with all these animals and goods, the explanation is that they come from Judah, when in fact they all come from the enemies of Israel.

And the deception works:

12 So Achish believed David, saying, "He has made his people Israel utterly abhor him; therefore he will be my servant forever."

David is now deceiving the man he claims to be serving. He is beginning to live a double-life. He can show one face to one group of people, and another to another. He can speak the right language to the right people at the right time.

As you backslide, this kind of deception grows. With deception comes duplicity – living a double-life. You have a church face, and church-speak for church people. But then you also have worldly-

speak and worldly jokes and worldly attitudes for when you're with the world. And neither of those groups would ever suspect you belong to the other. Both think you're a member of their group alone. Live like this for long enough, and you start to congratulate yourself for how clever you are, how easily you can switch personas, for how socially flexible you are. You can look down on those naïve people at church, or those simpletons at work who don't know how complex you are.

But what's really happening is you are losing your own soul. Who you really are is disappearing from yourself. You no longer really know where you belong, because by your own doing, you belong nowhere. You are a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. You are neither hot, nor cold, but lukewarm, neither refreshing nor comforting, but revolting.

Notice, this period of David's life is one when he wrote no psalms. No prayers come from his lips, no hymns to charm the people of God. When you are living a double-life, you have no taste for the things of God, no relish for worship, no desire to look in to the things of God.

David is living a double-life, and you can only do that for so long. At some point, the chickens come home to roost, and David's faked loyalty is finally put to a real test. Despair leads to the compromise of deception, and with deception comes the possibility of the worst compromise: defection, when you go over to the other side. You renounce your former loyalties, and become loyal to the other side. This is apostasy, full-blown denial. This is what David is faced with.

III. David's Defection

1 Samuel 28:1 Now it happened in those days that the Philistines gathered their armies together for war, to fight with Israel. And Achish said to David, "You assuredly know that you will go out with me to battle, you and your men."

2 And David said to Achish, "Surely you know what your servant can do." And Achish said to David, "Therefore I will make you one of my chief guardians forever." 3 Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. 4 Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa.

It has been many years since the last full war with Israel, when Goliath faced David. But now, it seems the Philistines are ready for another full assault on Israel. They choose to gather their armies from their five main cities first at a rendezvous point, a town called Aphek, and then they head north to a place called Shunem for the actual battle. This quite far north. In fact, Shunem is only 11 kilometres from Nazareth. Saul gather his armies opposite them onto Mount Gilboa, above the valley of Jezreel. Jezreel was where Gideon with his three hundred had defeated the hosts of Midian.

But before this battle begins, king Achish gives David the ultimate test of loyalty – a command to go out with the Philistine armies and do battle against Israel. David must prove he is a Philistine by fighting the armies of Israel. If he will, Achish will promote him to being his personal bodyguard, much like a second in command. If he will not, his wives and children are living in Ziklag, at the mercy of the Philistines.

David's response is a mixture of pride and being cryptic. "You know what your servant can do". He is claiming to be Achish's servant, not God's. He is claiming he will achieve things. But at the same time, what exactly will David do? I think David is being deliberately evasive. "Will you attack the Israelites?" "You know what I'm capable of!"

We know David is capable on the battlefield, but to whom will he turn his sword against? Was David planning on attacking his fellow Israelites? Was he planning on turning on the Philistines in

mid-battle, and then rallying the Israelites to himself? He has been deceiving Achish till now, so it is quite possible he planned on doing it again. But it is also possible that he had no plan at all, and that he was simply going to see how things went.

That's what happens with extended periods of backsliding. You keep losing your identity more and more, until finally you find yourself in some very unexpected situation that you have to extricate yourself from. You've been flirting with the world, now they make a proposition. You've been backslapping liars and thieves, now they ask you to join them. You've been hanging out with the bad girls, now they expect you to join them on Friday night. You've been treating the godless like friends, so they expect you to join them on Sunday morning.

David is now in a true dilemma. His double-life has caught up with him. He must now either act like an apostate, attacking God's inheritance, the people of Israel, and strike God's anointed; or he must turn against the Philistines in the heat of battle, risk capture by Saul, and risk having all their women and children waiting back in Ziklag be slaughtered by the Philistines. He's been trying to cheat and have his cake and eat it, now he will lose no matter what he chooses.

But God graciously intervenes. David's foolishness is overruled.

1 Samuel 29:1 Then the Philistines gathered together all their armies at Aphek, and the Israelites encamped by a fountain which *is* in Jezreel. ² And the lords of the Philistines passed in review by hundreds and by thousands, but David and his men passed in review at the rear with Achish. ³ Then the princes of the Philistines said, "What *are* these Hebrews *doing here*?" And Achish said to the princes of the Philistines, "/s this not David, the servant of Saul king of Israel, who has been with me these days, or these years? And to this day I have found no fault in him since he defected *to me*."

⁴ But the princes of the Philistines were angry with him; so the princes of the Philistines said to him, "Make this fellow return, that he may go back to the place which you have appointed for him, and do not let him go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become our adversary. For with what could he reconcile himself to his master, if not with the heads of these men?" ⁵ "/s this not David, of whom they sang to one another in dances, saying: 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands'?"

As the Philistines rendezvous at Aphek, the princes of the Philistines notice David and his six hundred. Achish defends the loyalty of David, but the princes of the Philistines don't trust David. They remember that many years previously there had been Hebrews fighting for them who turned on them in the middle of the battle and joined Saul and Jonathan. They weren't going to make that mistake again.

And this is not just any Hebrew: this is the famous David, the subject of the songs. If he's heroic in battle, he might just reconcile himself to Saul. They simply won't tolerate the chance of a double defection, because if a man defects once, it's easy to defect a second time.

⁶ Then Achish called David and said to him, "Surely, as the LORD lives, you have been upright, and your going out and your coming in with me in the army *is* good in my sight. For to this day I have not found evil in you since the day of your coming to me. Nevertheless the lords do not favor you.

⁷ "Therefore return now, and go in peace, that you may not displease the lords of the Philistines."

⁸ So David said to Achish, "But what have I done? And to this day what have you found in your servant as long as I have been with you, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?"

⁹ Then Achish answered and said to David, "I know that you *are* as good in my sight as an angel of God; nevertheless the princes of the Philistines have said, 'He shall not go up with us to the battle.'

¹⁰ "Now therefore, rise early in the morning with your master's servants who have come with you. And as soon as you are up early in the morning and have light, depart." ¹¹ So David and his men rose early to depart in the morning, to return to the land of the Philistines. And the Philistines went up to Jezreel. (1 Sam. 29:6-11)

Achish is upset with this decision, and even invokes the name of Israel's God to say that he thinks

David is blameless, but the decision of the lords of the Philistines overrules his.

Now David is almost certainly relieved beyond measure to hear this, but such is his double-life that he now has to fake disappointment. You know how hard that is, right? When someone tells you to do something you'd rather not, and then at the last minute lets you off the hook, you have to do the "Oh, really, are you sure – ? I was really just about to..."

So David has to put up this fake face of "I was so ready to fight the enemies of my lord". He may even be telling himself "I mean the Lord God, he thinks I mean him" but it is still a lie. Achish repeats the fact that he thinks David is blameless, and tells him to depart the next day. Actually, this is the last time David and Achish will see each other, at least this way, because David is about to be catapulted to king of Israel.

God has mercifully prevented David from having to deny his faith or commit suicide and see his wives and children destroyed. But that doesn't mean God is done with David. As we'll see in chapter 30, God is going to discipline David. He will bring more than just a trial on him, but the painful consequences of his double-life, strip him down to being alone, until David finally strengthens Himself in the Lord his God, and not in himself.

That is the lesson and the call to the backslidden. However far you have drifted, however cold your heart, however much you have give up, God has not given up on you. God is so committed to your good, so committed to making you into the beautiful image of His Son, that He will never stop training you, teaching you, pursuing you. And unlike human parents, God does not grow weary, God does not get tired. God will outlast your stubbornness. Your heart may get hard, but His will is harder.

So what to do? How do I know if I have backslidden? Have you stopped talking to God, and resorted to just talking to yourself? Has your interpretation of your life become man-centred, resorting to salvation by your own hand? Have you found yourself living a life of two faces, double-minded? Are you becoming increasingly identified with the world? Are you even tempted to defect, to give up, change sides?

Then it is time to come back. Like at salvation it begins with repentance. It goes on to faith – placing your trust in Him again. Returning to the first works: prayer, the Word, worship, obedience.

Charles Spurgeon: "The Christian life is very much like climbing a hill of ice. You cannot slide up. You have to cut every step with an ice ax. Only with incessant labor in cutting and chipping can you make any progress. If you want to know how to backslide, leave off going forward. Cease going upward and you will go downward of necessity. You can never stand still."