

BACKSLIDING



By Bud Brown¹

An image from a childhood adventure - screaming down a grassy hill in a roughed up refrigerator box with no semblance of control and no idea what waited at the bottom - came to mind the first time I heard it. "Poor thing," someone whispered, "she's backslidden."

It was a term of opprobrium in the congregation that enculturated me into the fundamentalist view the Christian life. Not a proper, fitting term for upstanding members; it was of a category with words like "politician", "welfare queen" and "pointy-headed university professor." In time I learned that backslidden could only be described, not defined. It was more of an expansive list than a precise field of meaning. Said list included such nefarious activities as playing a game of cards with the guys, sneaking a peek at the cleavage displayed in the magazine rack at the grocery checkout counter, buying gas at a service station that sold beer or voting for a Democrat.

In retrospect I see that backsliding involved crossing a boundary or violating a legal barrier. The church had erected barriers intended to protect the faithful from the world, the flesh and the devil. These were also intended to protect the church's preferred internal culture from the relentless corruption of a godless society.

So, to backslide was to relapse into bad habits or sinful behavior one supposedly abandoned if the repentance that preceded or attends (take your pick) one's saving faith were genuine. It was to violate the rules, regulations and unspoken behavioral code that bound church members to the sanctioned behaviors expected of all good Christians. A backslider was a church member who reversed course to swim upstream against the currents of sanctification-by-law.

BACKSLIDING IN THE OT

In part this view of Christian backsliding stems from a misreading of the "backsliding passages" in the Old Testament. After all, several passages in Jeremiah appear to connect backsliding with failure to obey the Law of Moses. Jeremiah 2:9-19

“ **Therefore I bring charges against you again," declares the Lord. "And I will bring charges against your children's children." Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols... Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me," declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty. (NIV)**

This text illustrates that the primary Old Testament term for "backsliding" carries the idea of "turning back or away." The prophets repeatedly criticized Israel for turning away from God to embrace the sinful practices of their idolatrous pagan neighbors. At its core backsliding was lusting after abominable things. Backsliding resulted in disobedience to the Lord's covenant commandments (Ezr 9:10; Is 1:4; Ez 11:21). But disobedience was one symptom of "turning away" from the memory of God's saving works and from faith in him. Breaking specific legal regulations (which is how Christians typically define backsliding) is a symptom, not the disease. Consider one more text in Jeremiah. Jeremiah 3:21-25

“ **A cry is heard on the barren heights, the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel, because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the Lord their God. "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding." "Yes, we will come to you, for you are the Lord our God. Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception; surely in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel. From our youth shameful gods have consumed the fruits of our fathers' labor... their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters. 25 Let us lie down in our shame, and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the Lord our God, both we and our fathers; from our youth till this day we have not obeyed the Lord our God.**

BACKSLIDING IN THE NT

Would it surprise you to learn that the term "backsliding" does not occur in the New Testament? The New Testament term is "falling from grace." The New Testament does not entertain the idea that backsliding is violating a rule that is intended to help us become mature disciples.

In fact, it teaches the exact opposite. True backsliding is the cure many churches urge for what they see as backsliding. Urging people to cultivate their sanctification by rules and regulations is the very definition of backsliding in the New Testament.

Genuine backsliding, in the New Testament sense, is a retrograde return to life lived by rules and regulations.

How's that for a shocker?

“ **"You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace." (Galatians 5:4)**

This verse wraps up a line of reasoning that began several chapters earlier. The crux of the argument, which Galatians 5:4 draws into a sharp point, is stated in Galatians 2.

“ **If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.**

If we die to the law as v. 19 says, then resurrecting ourselves to the law (by trying to keep it) is a violation of the law! I break the law if I try to keep the law instead of abiding in what Christ has already accomplished for me (in his death) and what he continues to accomplish in me by his life (so Romans 5:10)! Jesus objectively fulfilled the demands the law established. Law was satisfied. Trying to return to the law is the same as telling the law, "I'm sorry, but the satisfaction you precipitated by crucifying Jesus wasn't enough."

And when you do that you have effectively cut yourself off from the only source of power that enables you to live a sanctified life. You no longer believe that Christ's life in you, nurtured by the Word and the Spirit, is enough. You have fallen from grace in the attempt to be sanctified by keeping rules and regulations that other people think are in your best interest.

Oh, the irony!

CONCLUDING ILLUSTRATION

Roscoe was arrested for DUI in a rural County hidden away in the Deep South. Since it was his first offense, the Public Defender worked out a plea agreement with the local DA. Roscoe pled guilty and the judge sentenced him to 200 hours of community service under the Sheriff's supervision.

Two gallons of yellow paint and a dozen rollers awaited Roscoe when he appeared at the Sheriff's Office to begin his community service. The Sheriff told him he'd be painting a yellow line down the center of a recently repaved County road.

Day one was great. Roscoe painted almost 2 miles of yellow line. The Sheriff was impressed.

Day two saw an additional mile's progress. Day three saw only an additional quarter mile covered.

On the fourth morning the Sheriff quizzed Roscoe. "You haven't been painting as much road as you did on the first day. What's the problem?"

Roscoe replied, "I'd be painting more, but I keep getting farther and farther from the bucket!"

That's what happens to Christians who are under the law's thumb. It moves them further and further from the source of power and strength for sanctified living.

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BOLD GRACE MINISTRIES EXISTS TO:

Unite believers under the banner of God's grace (Eph 4:3-6), **share** the gospel and aid those who will proclaim it faithfully (Rom 10:14-15), **increase** believers' confidence in the power of the indwelling Christ (Gal 2:20), **love** without hypocrisy (Rom 12:9a), **proclaim** the hope of Christ's glorious kingdom (Rom 8:18-21), and **equip** the saints to share Christ's matchless grace and love with others (2 Tim 2:2).

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