

Spiritual Stumbling

Because we are all human and contaminated with the original sin, we are all capable of spiritual stumbling or backsliding from time to time. Apparently it is even possible under some circumstances for God's most loyal and faithful and dedicated apostles to stumble, to lose control, to be charmed or misled. Clearly there are conditions or influences, which can cause even these elect to make tragic mistakes through the flaring up of their old natural selves or through other even more subtle influences. Often this happens as a result of long enduring stress, weariness, disillusionment over work and sorrow, pain, depression, or even loneliness or feelings of being unappreciated. These can each manifest in rationalized solutions not of the Spirit but instead from one's own thoughts, emotions and desires. The danger of this, of course, is always present, especially because it is Satan himself who often adds to, or causes the burdens, and then orchestrates the temptations and the natural ungodly, and soon regretted actions. None of us ever completely escapes from the inherent evilness of our old selves, such as pride, arrogance, hypocrisy, and especially self-will as expressed in these thoughts, emotions and desires. Taking the easy way and choosing to do what seems right in your own eyes, are always tempting options during moments of spiritual weakness. The potential of this always lurks beneath the thin skin of our own souls no matter how certain we may be that our old selves are safely chained and inoperative. The old self as well as Satan are always alert to possible weak links in the chain, or in the spiritual armor which protects the new self. The more highly esteemed, the more successful one is in our Lord's service, the greater seems to be the danger of some form of backsliding or deflection from the narrow path.

Scripture is rich with examples provided precisely for our understanding that these things can happen. A perfect example is Moses, the greatest of all prophets, and a man whom our Lord "knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10). For just one act of disobedience, that is, striking the stone rather than speaking to it (Numbers 20:8), our Lord punished Him by denying him the privilege of entering the Promised Land. Here was our Lord's most faithful and enduring servant, who spent 40 years, from age 80 to 120, in the wilderness guiding, serving, and suffering a million plus band of rebellious people,

obeying our Lord under the most difficult imaginable conditions, and who was then denied his most cherished dream. Who knows what stresses, fatigue, anguish and pain he may have been enduring at that weak moment when he ignored and thus failed to obey God's instructions. After all, sometime earlier our Lord did instruct him to strike the stone to bring forth water. Now our Lord said, "speak" to the stone. Why the difference in instructions? Doesn't the difference seem trivial and unimportant? Not in God's view. His will was subordinated by Moses' will.

While it is not relevant to the subject, this seemingly innocent violation is a good example of how seriously God views His instruction to us whether we like them or not. To understand the significance of this act we must recognize the symbolic nature of what God was doing. The rock is symbolic of Jesus throughout the Scriptures while the water symbolizes His Word. The first time they sought relief from thirst, God ordered Moses to strike a certain rock to bring forth the life giving water. This striking symbolized His death (crucifixion), and brought forth His Word and His promise of salvation and eternal life. But for the second miracle of bringing forth the sacred water from the rock, striking was no longer the way. At His second coming, Jesus will not be struck but will be spoken to, prayed to and worshiped, as He then sits on the throne of David. From there the flow of living water, His word, will forever satisfy everyone's thirst. Through Moses' faulty response to God's instruction, God's plan for a prophetic analogy or symbolic representations of the first and second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ was thwarted. In our daily efforts to serve our Lord as we encounter temptations or stresses or grow weary, how often do we miss or misinterpret His prompting or even choose to avoid or thwart His will, as our natural selves gain even momentary control? Are we then failing our Lord in some action he would have performed through us, or putting ourselves into unfortunate or tragic future circumstances? When it comes to choosing to avoid or thwart God's will, we should all remember the lesson our Lord is teaching us in the Book of Jonah. As we know, Jonah fled in the opposite direction after God gave him his marching orders. In order to set him straight, God was obliged by means of the storm and the whale to impress on him more clearly, exactly what his job description really was! We can learn much about how to please our Lord from this as well as from the

failings of the other great characters of the Bible. Their stories are included precisely for that purpose if we will but study them.

Samson is another Scriptural example of where man's own weakness and/or Satan's involvement can seduce even the most favored of God's chosen. Sampson's was a prophetic miracle birth to a barren woman. He was preordained to become a Nazarite and to "...deliver Israel out of the hands of the Philistine" (Judges 13:5.). Clearly the "Spirit of the Lord" was in Sampson, yet for 20 years, instead of delivering Israel, he merely played the champion but not the leader God had chosen him to be. He was a faithful man but hardly a man of faith. In spite of his faith, he violated every Nazarite vow. Then he met Delilah, whose charms awakened his natural desires, which then clouded his vision and completely thwarted his mission. Clearly, here was one ordained by God, but whose good work was negated and essentially brought to a halt, his life destroyed, all through his yielding to his ego and pride as well as his own pent-up self centered desires aroused through the enticements of both her charm and beauty as well as by Satan's deceptive powers. Again, we don't know what stresses, sorrows, loneliness and other forces or difficulties may have been at work in his life up to that point or how momentarily powerful may have been these natural emotions and desires which may have led him to lower his guard, to rationalize, to ignore, or to not hear clearly God's promptings. Thus, it was that another agent of our Lord paying dearly for letting his human nature subordinate his God given supernatural nature and mission. Variations of this theme appear throughout the Scripture in characters such as Kings Saul, David and Solomon where the natural man's ego and desires are allowed, for whatever reasons, to overwhelm their Spiritual selves.

So how did Saul stumble? He was ordained by God to be the first King of Israel for "...there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he" (1 Samuel 9:2), and "...God gave him another heart" (1 Samuel 10:9), and finally "...the spirit of God came upon him" (1 Samuel 10:10). From this, one must conclude that he was a true man of God when he began his reign and surely did very well initially by following God's instructions to defeat Israel's enemies. But then he broke God's sacred ordinance and

provided a burnt offering to God. This, of course, was a gross violation of law, which he must have known for only priests could offer sacrifice; Kings could not. There are three official positions in God's ordained hierarchy, they are Kings, Priests and Prophets and they are always distinct, individual and not combinable, with but three exceptions. Scripture tells us that both Jesus and Melchizedek, were Kings, Priests and Prophets, while 1Corinthians 12:10, Revelation 1:6, 5:10 tell us that born-again Christians also have these qualities.

Next, Saul clearly disobeyed God's directive through Samuel to "utterly destroy the Amalekites but instead spared the King Agag and also took the best of the sheep and cattle for future sacrifice to the Lord. Here again, Saul's great transgression was that he too often chose to do what was right in his own eyes, but not as the Lord had commanded. It is the way of the world for man to do what is right in his own eyes rather than to seek the Lord's way. Here we have a perfect, though somewhat obscured example of man's will versus God's will, and of God's permissive nature, which often allows His will to be thwarted. Because Saul acted contrary to God's will, the Amalekite bloodline continued. Haman, the villain in the Book of Ester, was a survivor of that bloodline. Because of Haman's "bloodline" hatred of the Hebrews, divine intervention was required these many generations after Saul, otherwise the entire Hebrew race would have been eliminated.

This is a perfect example of how, while man has the power to choose his actions, right as well as wrong, only God has power over the consequences. As an aside, it is also revealing of God's nature and His perfect way, that Mordecai, the man who was responsible for exposing and causing the failure of Haman's plan, was a descendant of the man Shimel whom King David spared from death. Thus, one could say that had Saul obeyed God, the whole story of Ester would not have been necessary. However, God allowed Saul to assert his own will and the resulting consequences, in order to demonstrate the merits of His own perfect will and how, by His love and grace, He so often chooses to intervene in order to "bail us out" of the consequences of our own sinful ways. Saul's failure to eliminate the seed of the Amalekites as God had decreed, resulted

in the existence of Haman. So God put it in David's heart to spare Shimel whereby his progeny, Mordecai would, in that later generation, be there as God's agent to prevent the otherwise inevitable destruction of the entire Hebrew race, which Saul's disobedience would have caused. After that, the Holy Spirit left Saul, and after many other transgressions, his reign as King ended. The life of Saul as narrated, is rich with lessons for all of us who seek to know the nature of God and to learn how to better walk His way. We see in Saul, a man of many attributes and much early promise as an affective agent of our Lord. Yet this availed him little in the long run. Here we see evidence of how great sins can evolve from little matters. We see incomplete obedience growing into irreverent presumptions, willful impatience, and deceit. We see excuses being substituted for confession. If we are truly honest with ourselves, it should not be difficult to see variations of these same weaknesses being manifested in our own souls at various times.

Prior to Pentecost, the Holy Spirit could enter and leave the heart depending on the spiritual condition of the individual at any given time as it did several times with Saul. Today, however, we are greatly blessed, for since Pentecost, once we are born-again the Holy Spirit dwells in us permanently. He never leaves us, because once we are saved we can never lose our salvation. If it were possible to loose our salvation, which we receive by the grace of God, it would be necessary for us to conclude that God didn't know what He was doing when He first so blessed us. We cannot lose our salvation once we have it. However, our transgressions can and do cause us to lose any crowns or rewards our good works may have earned (2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:12, 1 Peter 5:4, Revelation 3:11). Also these transgressions (sins) quench the Holy Spirit and until they are purged, they prevent or severely limit His activity in us and, therefore, also our fruitfulness for our Lord.

The story of Saul should also point each of us to another level of concern. Was Saul saved or not? Only God knows. But the evidence presented does not seem strong enough to confirm him of being one of God's eternal family. Does your life contain sufficient evidence to confirm you of being God's own? Are you sure?

Taking a quick glance at David, we see one whom God called “a man after his own heart.” Yet, what did he do instead of tending to his duties as King? As such, he should have been off to war; instead, he remained idle at home, where he was tempted into adultery, and then murdered in an attempt to cover up his own sins. He surely paid dearly for these sins during his lifetime, as did each of the others. Even earlier when he was being chased by Saul, he sought sanctuary with the priest Ahimelech in Nob. There, rather than seeking God for help, he lied to the priest as to his relationship with Saul in order to receive the priest’s help. This lie by David cost the lives of Ahimelech and his 80 attending priests, because, even though they were innocent of deliberate treason, Saul had them all executed for helping David. What was in David’s mind and heart as he so seriously transgressed? Who knows, but most certainly he allowed self will to subordinate God’s will in his life, as did all the others.

The lesson to be learned here applies to all dedicated born-again Christians, but most pointedly to those who are the most fruitful and dedicated to our Lord. This is because it is these in particular who are the most attacked by Satan. He waits patiently for moments of vulnerability when they are tired and weary, and often stressed to the limits of physical and emotional endurance. He also delights particularly when his victim succumbs to what we perhaps can call “clinical depression,” where rational reasoning, decision-making and even the recognition of reality become compromised. It is during those times when the great deceiver attacks. Perhaps his most effective methods are using our own weaknesses inherent in our natural selves to foster doubts, confusions and disillusionments in order to compromise our faithfulness. If he fails in this, he has many other ways to direct us down diverse paths along which we can no longer be as effective servants to our Lord. He will do anything and everything, use any device to compromise our Lord’s fruitful agents.

Remember Satan is desperate. He knows his days are numbered and the end is growing near. He knows the Scriptures better than most of us, probably better than anyone. He knows that the count-down to his ignominious end starts when the “fullness of the gentiles be done.” He knows, therefore, that there is a specific number of born-again Christians who represent this “fullness of the gentiles” after which Jesus will come to

collect His own (the rapture) and that this will signal the final days of Satan's control of this earth. Obviously, he wants to delay this as long as possible. Therefore, whenever he can foil God's plan by preventing someone from coming to Jesus it's very important to him. How better to affect this than to attack and suffer our Lord's best and most faithful apostles? What better way than to appeal to their human weaknesses at their weakest moments. We each live our entire lives with a natural inborn free will. When we are born-again in Christ, we each receive new hearts indwelt by the Holy Spirit. From that moment on we each have two wills, the natural one and the Spiritual one, that is, the will of God. The one we feed the most is the one, which will be strongest and will dominate our lives. As our faith grows, we tend to subordinate the natural in favor of the Spiritual. However, the natural will always remains, for only the Son of Man, Jesus, was able to totally eliminate the natural will. It could be said that as we grow in faith, we starve the natural will and feed the Spiritual will through prayer, Scriptural knowledge, church, fellowship, etc. However, earthly temptations, trials and inherent weaknesses even in the strongest do tend to keep the natural will alive and always available to facilitate backsliding. This then is always Satan's favorite point of entry, that natural will, which is so full of propensities for those damaging natural thoughts, emotions and desires. Even some measures of spiritual pride, arrogance, and hypocrisy can subtly worm their way into the hearts of the most gifted and blessed apostles. Paul says we fight the devil by putting on the "full armor of God". In Ephesians 6:15, Paul says we have our feet shod with the "gospel of peace" knowing God is with us, so we can stand firmly without spiritual backsliding or emotional slipping. But this isn't even about backsliding in the sense of any loss of faith, or righteousness, or innate goodness, or even salvation. In most instances it is simply a temporary, but regrettable reversion to, or welling up of the natural self, a temporary blindness or clouded visions causing a slipping away from the very straight and very narrow path, which these pillars of spiritual strength did so faithfully follow. Those who were already saved could not lose their salvation but they most likely did lose their crowns and also paid dearly in earthly suffering.

So what is the answer? Why do these great pillars of faith stumble and sometimes fall, and how might this be prevented? From evidence available, I believe that they overwork,

become overtired, perhaps neglect themselves and thus compromise their health as well as their mental stability. But even more important than that, they often have no one to discipline them but themselves; they lack a spiritual fellowship, a faith partner, someone of similar spiritual status to help them stay on the narrow path by pointing out the little transgressions before they become big ones. They, as do we all, fail to take each thought captive and take time to discern and put to flight those, which are not of God. Satan, the world, and our old selves are always seeking opportunities to reset our compasses ever so slightly off course. This adjustment can be so minute as to escape detection until it is too late. It is far more difficult for the affected individual to see this than it is for a sensitive, loving faith partner of equal yoking. Once even tiny bits of spiritual pride and arrogance have set in, it becomes even more difficult for the individual, especially one who is highly esteemed, to see these things in themselves or even to accept any such rebuking from others. Unless such a faith partnership is long established, who would even dare point out these flaws much less rebuke the great? Who could effectively rebuke Billy Graham, even though rebuke is sorely needed based on some of his recent writings and public statements.

When one sits in an exalted position, and adulation is a constant occurrence, Godly humbleness tends to slowly give way to spiritual pride and arrogance. Paul urges us to put on the Spiritual armor of God to protect us from Satan, our ego and the world. Unless this armor is constantly maintained and kept in good repair, chinks are bound to form through which these enemies who are all masters of finding even the slightest weak points, will enter and corrupt even the purest of God's chosen. Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Bakker were both thieves and adulterers, and Martin Luther King was a plagiarizer and adulterer. Yet, our Lord used them for some good and they were, no doubt, fruitful for Him. I suspect that they too may have stood high, virtuous, and alone, before they fell. As has been seen, a greatest of dangers lies in doing what seems to be right in our own eyes, rather than what is right in God's eyes. Without a constant affirmation of what is surely God's way, we are in constant danger of slipping unknowingly onto our own way and to one of the worst of the ultimate darknesses.

Having said all this, what is the message? It is simply this. None of us can or should stand alone in our faith and spiritual walk. Scripture tells us we are part of the Christian body through Christ Jesus and each has specific spiritual gifts to contribute to that body. Only the Christian body has the strength to effectively resist the common enemies. Yet, to be effectively protected even within that body, each member must have at least one spiritual partner of equal yoking whereby each can keep vigil against the other's personal enemies, where each will faithfully keep examining the other's armor, and seeing to it that it remains strong and in good repair. Does anyone really do this? The most glorious condition where this works best is in the loving marriage partnership of the equally yoked, though not necessarily endowed with the same spiritual gifts. Perhaps this is another reason why our Lord uses this, His most sacred institution, as an analogy for so many important precepts He presents to us. Thus, it is evident that any apostle or disciple of our Lord who is without a companion of "equal yoking" is one who is very vulnerable to the pressures of the world, of his or her natural self, and of Satan.

Looking to the New Testament we see something quite different and potentially more supportive of this premise than the examples from the Old Testament. After the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to dwell in them, and the apostles took on their ministries, Scriptures suggest that the apostles were seldom alone. In Acts, we find that first Paul had Barnabas as a companion, then Silas, then Timothy. Later in the book of Romans and Corinthians it would seem that throughout his journeys, Paul had Timothy or someone else accompanying him. Even in prison he had worthy companionship; Peter had Luke. Where there is no direct evidence of an "evenly yoked" companionship, it should be able to be inferred that it might have been reasonably so from the precedent Jesus Himself set in Luke 10:1 where it is said, "...after these things the Lord appointed other seventy-two also and sent them two and two before the face of every city...." Thus our Lord Himself decreed faith partners for His apostles, surely for reasons at least in part as has been here suggested.

It is evident that the higher and mightier usually carry heavier burdens and have greater temptations than the rest of us, and, therefore, need more powerful checks on themselves,

which only spiritually competent faith partners can provide. Those of us who have fewer demands, and who may not be as stressed and as attacked, do nevertheless also need faith partners, or some certain means of being held accountable so as to be kept from straying off the narrow path. For Jesus said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Only the perfect, that is the spiritually clean and holy can enter heaven. All Christians become clean and holy and thereby eligible for entry into heaven at the moment of their rebirth. This holiness is verified through an ever growing and strengthening faith as confirmed by their love of Him, by their obedience to Him, by their love of their fellow Christians, and by their Christian walk as expressed by their works performed in gratitude to Him. This is true even though the residual remains of the old self will occasionally sin, as long as these sins tend to diminish with time, are completely confessed, and sincere repentance is made. That’s the problem, to be able to recognize the seemingly minor applications of sins such as, pride, hypocrisy, dishonesty, omission, etc, which our minds are so adept at not seeing but instead insist on rationalizing or excusing out of existence, unless there is another trusted competent soul to point them out! Also it must be noted here, that holiness means living to please God alone, not man or self, and that it must be from God to be genuine. It is impossible to imitate true spirituality. Sentimental religious feelings, zeal, church attendance, scriptural quoting or even writing these tomes are no assurance that we are pleasing God. There are many elegant counterfeits both in and out of the places of worship as well as at the pulpits. There is no growth in holiness except through close fellowship with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. From Matthew 5 -7, the Sermon on the Mount, we learn the law of intent that is of the heart. This law which governs the Christian walk is much more severe than one could possibly conclude from the Ten Commandments. And we also find that we learn of God from His Word, but our fear (awe) of God is from a devotional life. Clearly it’s evident that there is danger in individual Christianity. Believers simply cannot go it alone without risking this danger. So what can one do if in this sense one is alone?

While no doubt there are better ways perhaps for starters, one might consider doing as I try to do each day. When I first awaken each morning, I praise God, pray to Him in very

sincere gratitude, seek His council and commit to living out the day honoring His commandments. Then I used to try to pass through the day conscious of His presence and asking at every turn, what would Jesus do? But because so often I found that Jesus would never have gotten Himself in this circumstance, I now ask instead what would Jesus have me do, and then I attempt to do that, as I perceive I must, and as the Holy Spirit prompts me. At night I pray again in gratitude for having been allowed this day, and for having received so many blessings, after which I try remembering all thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions of the entire day to see if they conformed to Scriptural teachings and were of God. After that, I ask Him to reveal to me how I could have done better, and to remind me of any transgressions I may have forgotten. Then I try to confess all thoughts and actions, which were not of the Lord, and sincerely resolve to not repeat them.

Clearly nothing can be as effective as a true, loving, trusted, born-again faith partner who is well grounded in Scripture. However, absent that, the daily process as described above is, I believe, the very least one can do in trying to avoid the pitfalls of going it alone. It should be noted again that frequent and close fellowship with members of the Christian body is very important and often capable of keeping us in line as far as gross, clearly evident transgressions are concerned. However, what is of greater concern as has been already noted are the seemingly little, more subtle transgressions that only a close intimate loving faith partner can see and proceed to “nip in the bud.”

In this regard, and also very important, I have learned to ask our Lord for His precious wisdom to help me understand His plan for me and what I should be doing regarding the major issues in my life. In James 1:5 He has promised us His wisdom if we ask with singleness of mind, that is, a mind and a heart which are both free of our own self-centered agendas, and if we ask with a strong faith that He will answer us. While I shouldn't be, I am always amazed at the clarity, relevance, and righteousness of the responses I receive when my heart is right and when these requests are sincere, consistent with His purpose, and centered on a faith that He is true to His promise. I believe that Chronicles 16:11 gives us the same message as James, but in Old Testament semantics,

when it says, “Seek the Lord and His strength, seek His face continually.” That is exactly what we must do if we are to remain steadfast in the faith and not stray from the “path.” Always remember that the world, and our old selves, and Satan continually seek to gang up on each and every one of us, both large and small, whenever they can and wherever our armor is weakest. They want us to falter, fail and fall from that precious narrow path. We must battle them continually, fight them and though they may win battles, we must never let them win the war.