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The road back from national backsliding

An article based upon a message first preached in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church by Rev Ivan Foster on Lord's Day evening, 11th December 1983 and again in Markethill Free Presbyterian Church on Lord's Day morning, 18th November, 2012

"Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, among whom they were, in whose sight I made myself known unto them, in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt," Ezekiel 20:7-9.

As we read the Bible, it becomes clear that the chief characteristic of God's people throughout their pilgrimage down the ages has been that of backsliding. It is marvellously true that in the history of the church of God there have been wonderful times of revival and blessing, marked by a spiritual quickening of believers and an ingathering of precious souls from the paths of wickedness and rebellion against God. In such times we rejoice and find much encouragement for our souls. However, in all honesty we must acknowledge that backsliding and worldliness feature more largely in the affairs of God's people.

On a personal level, every honest believer will acknowledge that it is true. We seem to take two steps backward for every step that we take forward. Did not Paul lament: "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me," Romans 7:14-20?

Addressing the subject of backsliding is therefore a very necessary duty for the minister of God.

COMMENTARY

The 20th chapter of Ezekiel provides us with a valuable commentary on the Exodus. An examination of it shows the Exodus out of Egypt from God's point of view. It is a peep into His secret memoirs. It is appropriate for us to examine what is said here and learn from the Lord's comments on the actions of the fathers of Israel.

For the history of the events referred to in verses 7-9, we must turn back to Exodus 2:23-25 for the details.

Consider what that portion says.

"And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them."

The children of Israel had been descending into bondage over a period of years, likely for more than a generation. They did not awaken one day to discover that a law had been passed making them slaves. No! Just like political changes today, they have their beginnings many years before the full impact is clearly manifest and felt. Israel had been drifting away from the Lord while in Egypt and doubtless had been adopting the ways of Egypt. It is apparent that they especially adopted the gods of Egypt! I am sure that they remained in a state of bondage and slavery for quite a time before they began groaning under the bondage, which groans God heard, Exodus 2:23-24.



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I. IT TAKES MUCH TO PERSUADE MEN TO SEEK GOD'S HELP

1. The Lord is ever ready to hear the repentant sinner. But how reluctant man is to acknowledge his sin and folly and repent and seek the Lord! The Lord is ever more ready to respond to our cries than we are to utter them!

2. The examples in Scripture of this truth are many. The Prodigal is one example that springs to mind, Luke 15:11-32. His departure from the safety and comfort of his father's house was soon followed by poverty, misery and destitution. But how long he lay in his distress before it occurred to him to seek the help that his father could give! In heaven we will meet many whose experiences in life will have the same pattern of stupidity and stubbornness which marked the Prodigal. How many believers listening today will know that it was just so with them. They stoutly resisted God's merciful dealings with them.

Naaman, the Syrian general, is another example, 2 Kings 5:11. He was ready to return home a leper rather than submit to the simple requirement of God's Word whereby healing would have been freely his.

The world will yet have a future manifestation of this defiance of God. "And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory. And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds," Revelation 16:8-11.

That same stoutness of heart is seen today. Men reject and refuse the mercy of God offered in the gospel all across this land. Sin strips a man of all sensitivity regarding evil and any awareness of the downward direction of his life and of the folly of refusing and rejecting the wisdom of the gospel call to faith in Christ.

Furthermore, today there is a defiant spirit amongst God's people also. Few are ready to acknowledge that the church of God is plagued with a spirit of backsliding and worldliness and that includes our own denomination. We Free Presbyterians do not follow faithfully the paths that once we did. We have wandered and gone astray.

3. Here in Ulster, there is no learning from the 30 years of terrorism or the over-running of our country by Irish Republicanism, sodomy and wickedness that has taken place. The lamentable state of affairs in our land is not seen as a mark of God's anger with His people. Rather there is a spirit of denial that a wrong turn was taken in the affairs of Northern Ireland some 5 years ago. Of course, it must be said that the wrong turn had begun many years before that.

If there was a recognising of the wrong-doing of embracing terrorists in government and the offence such an action was in the eyes of God, would there not be a humbling of hearts before God by the Christians who supported this folly? But where is this spirit of humility? Is there a flocking to the prayer meeting? Is there a studying of God's Word, a consulting of God to find out where we went astray? It was God's Word which alerted Josiah to the folly of Judah and the consequences of that folly for the nation. "And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying, Go ye, enquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us," 2 Kings 22:11-13.



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Is there such a spirit of enquiry today amongst us? Is there a willingness to consider our ways? "Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways," Haggai 1:5-7. I think there is no such enquiry or willingness to consider our ways. Rather, the matter is brushed under the carpet lest any mention of it would upset a minority (a declining minority, I believe) who still insist on defending the utter madness of power-sharing with murderers.

The establishing of a Stormont power-sharing executive would, we were told, initiate a time of prosperity! The Lord pointed out to Israel through His servant Haggai, the economic consequences of the disobedience and is there not a parallel for us to consider today? At best Stormont has produced a "bag with holes"!

II. GOD'S HELP WAS FINALLY SOUGHT BUT HIS WILL WAS RESISTED

"But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt," Ezekiel 20:8. They cried we are told in Exodus 3:7, but defied the answer God gave them. They were not willing for God's way of deliverance.

1. Please note this amazing fact. The slaves of Egypt worshipped the gods of Egypt! So says our text in verses 7-8. But do we not have its parallel today? Mass-going today is popular with Protestants! Loyalist orders, supposedly dedicated to upholding the doctrines of the Protestant Reformation have strong movements within them to lift the proscription upon their members attending the mass. There are even Christians who would sympathise with such a notion. We have had Christians, even Free Presbyterians, attending services at which Romish priests have taken part. This is not the position of Protestantism of old. It certainly is not the position and stand of the people and ministers of the Free Presbyterian Church of a few years ago.

2. Idolatry was the cause of Israel's troubles. As a means of deliverance out of the bondage of Egypt, the first thing that had to be done was the casting away of the idols of Egypt. That clearly tells us what it was that had caused their bondage. The cure suggests the disease! They had forfeited God's blessing by embracing the idols of Egypt. Now, the first step out of trouble is the abandoning of idols. "Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am the LORD your God," Ezekiel 20:7.

This has ever been the cause of the troubles of God's people. "They chose new gods; then was war in the gates: was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?" Judges 5:8.

3. The degree of separation God was looking for. "Cast ye away." The words mean to "hurl or fling away." It is the same word as is used in Exodus 1:22. "And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save alive." What distaste the Israelites ought to have had for Egypt and its idols! The same distaste as had the Egyptians for the Israelite offspring! God called the gods of Egypt "dunghill gods", for that is the import of the word in verse 7. Where there is a love for the Lord there will be a hatred for idols. "Ye that love the LORD, hate evil," Psalm 97:10. Where today is the distaste, the abhorrence of popery and ecumenism that once there was amongst us?

No Free Presbyterian, in the past, would ever have dreamt of attending a meeting at which a priest was taking part! We have lost our proper detestation of the doctrines and practices of Romanism and that is because we have drifted from Calvary. It is at the cross we obtain that overwhelming love for Christ which displaces all other loves. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world," Galatians 6:14. It is at Calvary we make Christ King of our lives.

King of my life, I crown Thee now,
Thine shall the glory be;
Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow,
Lead me to Calvary.



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*Lest I forget Gethsemane;
Lest I forget Thine agony;
Lest I forget Thy love for me,
Lead me to Calvary.*

Show me the tomb where Thou wast laid,
Tenderly mourned and wept;
Angels in robes of light arrayed
Guarded Thee whilst Thou slept.

Let me like Mary, thro' the gloom,
Come with a gift to Thee;
Show to me now the empty tomb,
Lead me to Calvary.

May I be willing, Lord, to bear
Daily my cross for Thee;
Even Thy cup of grief to share—
Thou hast borne all for me.

4. Note the personal nature of God's call. "Every man". A reformation is the result of individuals banding together to obey the Lord. So it was at the beginning of that great movement of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost. "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers," Acts 2:42. What a need there is for individuals today to act in obedience to God with a consciousness of personal responsibility about which one day we will give an account. Too many look over their shoulder to see what others are doing. This is not the spirit of a Luther or a Calvin or a Knox or indeed, of a Joshua. "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD," Joshua 24:15.

5. The obedience required by God entailed a declaring of God to be Lord. "I am the LORD your God." Coming right out on the Lord's side, recognising God requires an obedience to Him as Lord. "And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God," John 20:28. He cannot be your God without being your LORD.

6. Being unwilling to part with her idols, Israel rebelled against the Lord. "But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt," verse 8. Refusing to "hearken" they defied God and rebelled against Him. What a shameful and wicked spirit prevailed amongst them! But beware Christian lest such a spirit be discovered in your heart in this day of clinging to the ways of the world, the flesh and the devil.

III. THEIR REBELLION DESERVED JUDGMENT BUT GOD SPARED THEM

1. One thing saved them. "But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen," verse 9. The word "but" introduces a contrast. Remember what the Lord's reaction was to their defiance and rebellion. "But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt," Ezekiel 20:8. Wrath is what they justly deserved. But for His name's sake He forbore. Had the Lord not publicly embraced Israel as His son? "And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn," Exodus 4:22. It would therefore bring dishonour on His name, were He to disown and destroy Israel in full view of the Egyptians before whose eyes He had promised to deliver Israel. When everything



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about them cried out for judgment, for His name's sake He saved them.

Never have the people of God "deserved" deliverance from the troubles their own sins have brought upon their heads. It is certainly so today in Ulster! However, we may cast ourselves upon the promises of God, promises such as: "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," Matthew 16:18; "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips," Psalm 89:34. "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it," Isaiah 55:10-11. "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled," Matthew 5:18. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away," Matthew 24:35.

Dear Christian, seek out such promises and make them your plea, your refuge in this day of declension, lifting them up to God in earnest pleadings. Learn to stand on the promises of God as did David. "I cried with my whole heart; hear me, O LORD: I will keep thy statutes. I cried unto thee; save me, and I shall keep thy testimonies. I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word. Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word. Hear my voice according unto thy lovingkindness: O LORD, quicken me according to thy judgment," Psalm 119:145-149.

That is how we used to pray in Ulster. May it become a feature of our prayer meetings again.

2. That is why the promises of God must form the basis of our prayers today. Let us learn from the example of Daniel as it is set forth in the book he wrote. "In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: and I prayed unto the LORD my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments; we have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments: neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day; to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and unto all Israel, that are near, and that are far off, through all the countries whither thou hast driven them, because of their trespass that they have trespassed against thee. O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee. To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him; neither have we obeyed the voice of the LORD our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him. And he hath confirmed his words, which he spake against us, and against our judges that judged us, by bringing upon us a great evil: for under the whole heaven hath not been done as hath been done upon Jerusalem. As it is written in the law of Moses, all this evil is come upon us: yet made we not our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth. Therefore hath the LORD watched upon the evil, and brought it upon us: for the LORD our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth: for we obeyed not his voice. And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us. Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake. O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee



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for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name," Daniel 9:2-19.

We have failed the Lord and disobeyed His Law but His promise will not fail us.

3. That which God wrought in mercy for Israel. "Wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt," verse 10. He wrought in their hearts and in His glorious sovereignty intervened in the affairs of Pharaoh and his host and brought forth His people from the land of bondage. God works all things "together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose," Romans 8:28. Where there is a humbling of ourselves before Him and the renewing of a right spirit within us, a setting of our hearts upon the Lord alone, then we will see Him answering prayer for His people again and delivering them from their spiritual bondage and granting a spirit of revival and blessing.

A word to the sinner in closing. Your only hope for eternity is the promise of God given in the gospel. "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins," Acts 10:43. It is by this means, by resting upon, by believing what God has said, that sinners obtain the blessing of God. Thus Martin Luther learned the secret of the Bible. "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith," Romans 1:17. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast," Ephesians 2:8-9.

Let us all alike cast our hope on the promises of God.