

## **Losing Ground**

### *Backsliding and Falling Away*

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So often in our lives, we lose things by not doing anything. In relationships, not moving ahead rarely means you're standing still. So does this principle of needing to move forward in our relationships apply to our relationship with God? When we don't know God better or love Him more every day of our lives, does that mean that we are beyond hope?

How long does losing just a bit of ground take before we are no longer in a relationship with a spouse, a friend, a family member? We all know that when we don't keep up in our relationships, there is a point of no return. Sometimes it's called divorce. Sometimes it's called "friendly fire." And sometimes it's called disowning loved ones. But that point exists in our relationships.

What does the Bible say about the possibility of this happening in our relationship with God? Is it possible to fall away or to disengage ourselves from the wonderful opportunity of walking the road of life with the Creator of life? I believe it is possible, but in the same breath, I would say that it isn't as easy as some would suggest. Paul reminds us of the strong bond between Christ's love for us and our relationship with Him in Romans 8:37-39.

The Bible speaks of this possibility using different words like apostasy (the Greek word for falling away) and several other words as well. However, many of the

examples I will give as evidence for the possibility of falling away have to do with what surrounds the warnings in the Bible or conditions that bring up the subject of apostasy, not specific words that are only used for this idea.

One of the most popular references is found in the book of Hebrews. When you take into account the whole of the book, you would find that this idea of not making it in the Christian walk is a major concern of the author. Keep in mind that the author is chiding the Jewish church to not use the same doctrines from Judaism and apply them to Christ, such as the Law, the High Priest, the Temple, Sacrifices, and the list goes on.

Hebrews 6:4-6. "For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt."

In this poignant passage the author desires to expound the nature of apostasy. He wants his listeners and readers to know that falling away is dangerous because there is a possibility that they will reach a point of

no return and be eternally cut off from the inheritance found in Christ. All of the words describing the actions of this person in verses 4-5 are passive and aorist. An aorist means that the action has taken place in the past at some point. That's how we know that this person is a full-fledged believer living within the Christian community. They accepted Christ at some point in their past. The passive verbs show that all of these wonderful benefits are given to the believer by God, not earned on the believer's own merit.

Now the first verb in verse 6, have fallen away, is an active verb. This means that the believer's own choice has been made to fall away from this relationship and its benefits. It is an active choice. With that choice, the believer crucifies the Son of God all over again. It is as if the person joined in with the crowd on Golgotha demanding with a hoarse throat, "Crucify Him."

We know that there are other instances in the New Testament of the Church dealing with wayward believers. For instance, Paul describes the importance of helping one another through transgressions and temptations with a strong inference that these have the ability to damage our relationship with God (Galatians 6:1-5). James ends his entire letter by praising those who reconcile believers to the faith and bring them back, covering over their sins with such a ministry (James 5:19-20). Paul speaks of grieving the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), which unchecked can lead to apostasy.

In fact, the Old Testament demonstrates on a large scale the principle that one can fall away from God with eternal consequences. The people of Israel so ingrained sin into their lives that God

scattered them and sent them into Exile. Then, only a small remnant of the people returned. Many people fell away and were not recovered. God's grace and His judgment have not changed because they are part of His character. God does not change.

Although there are other biblical examples, such as the taking of the mark of the beast and the mark of God in Revelation, and the overarching theme of Revelation to stay committed to God through adversity, trial and tribulation, this article cannot contain an exhaustive detail. I would like to quickly entertain the standing of some that these passages are hypothetical. Oftentimes, those against the idea of apostasy in the Bible claim that the author of Hebrews was thinking merely of a possible example or setting up a character to make his point. But this view does not explain other occurrence in Hebrews alone of warnings to not fall away. The author refers to the Jewish Christians as themselves, not as some hypothetical person posed for an example. The context speaks to and of his audience specifically.

People who want to reason away the possibility of apostasy also ignore the conditional statements surrounding salvation passages. Any time there is an "if" in a statement about salvation or growing in God, they ignore it or reason it away. The reason that they do this is because it does not fit their theological framework, their grid for interpreting and explaining the Bible and God. When the Bible does not fit your framework, either you change the Bible or your framework. These people have changed the Bible to fit their framework.

Such a startling and somber possibility of apostasy demands reasons. I cannot explain why some would give up the

relationship and blessings of salvation for the momentary pleasures of sin. I cannot even get into that frame of reference. But it happens. And I wonder why. Possibly some day I may have a closer experience as people who fall away and understand their situation and reasoning better. But from afar, I have noticed some factors that may cause or permit a believer to begin entertaining such a choice.

1. **Persecution.** Inasmuch as persecution has the ability to engender and strengthen faith in God, it also has the ability to tear down and destroy one's faith. While its purpose is to build up, some may lack a firm foundation, which enables them to fall when the winds and waves come (James 1:6). Persecution will either increase and strengthen faith, or tear it down to its very roots, dismantling false understanding of God and His Word.
2. **Neglect.** By far the most common reason for apostasy is a love that grows cold over time (Revelation 2:1-7). We allow the circumstances and situations in our lives to dominate our relationship with God and our discipline gradually. This takes much time and much neglect. Although it is the most common, it is also the most easily repaired. As the Lord said to the church of Ephesus, repent and do the works you did at first. Neglect can be solved with passion and purpose.
3. **Evil Desires.** Our evil desires are our baby steps toward sin, which leads to death (James 1:14-15). This is a strong inclination in us to do evil because of its monumental pleasure. But that pleasure is temporary. Once we have begun to listen to our evil

desires rather than God's voice, we have begun to step toward the edge.

To be sure, such a falling away is not instant, but rather gradual. We give in to our evil desires just a bit more, or we decide that we've had enough with doing the right thing and not getting ahead, or we simply let our relationship with our Lord stagnate or drop off bit by bit. However, falling away is not easy to do. It is a choice that must be actively made and pursued. But it begins with a passive gradual decline in relationship intimacy between a believer and the Lord.

I am asked by many Christians if what they're doing could be catalogued as sin and if it would take away their salvation. First, I tell them that I am not God, so I do not catalogue sin. That's God's area of expertise and He knows them better than I ever will. He is the Judge. Then I ask them this: You are driving on a mountain. To your left is a nice big mountainside with plenty of space to pull over, and to your right a steep cliff jettisoning into the valley. If you were speeding, taking 30 mph curves at 75 mph, would you want to be closer to the left or right side? In our relationship with God, we can spend our time seeing how far away from Him we can get and still reap the benefits, or we can wholeheartedly embrace the grace and love of that relationship.

But I have a greater image for you. Imagine a believer who is not stifled in zeal for the Lord, who passionately searches the Bible from cover to cover for no other reason than wanting to know Christ more. Imagine a believer who has no time for stagnant waters, but rushes in ankle deep, then knee deep, and then dives into the flowing currents of God's love. Imagine what kind of love God can lavish on

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someone who returns the favor. And this is my image of you right now. There is no need to worry of the possibility of looking

back or falling away when we are in the midst of seeking and pleasing our divine Lover.