

Lesson Twenty-Two

CHRISTIAN RECOVERS HIS ROLL

We have met again to continue our study in the book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan, which is a description of the experience of a person from the time previous to their conversion and all of their many experiences they go through in their Christian experience until they reach the Celestial City which is heaven. We have progressed thus far into the book where the pilgrim has become a Christian, and he has now been taught some things by the Holy Spirit of God that will be helpful for him on his journey. He is now setting out on his journey, and we have found him as he has come to what is called the "Hill of Difficulty." Even a young Christian will soon find out that being a Christian is not all roses and external joy, but there are difficulties in the way.

We find that at the base of the Hill of Difficulty, Christian left his two former friends in the church, Formalist and Hypocrisy, who would not have anything to do with the difficulties of the Christian life, and would go around the hill. But yet he continues to crawl on up the Hill of Difficulty, and in the midst of that hill, God administers grace unto him and gives him a time of refreshment in the arbor, or a place of rest. Something happened here in this arbor. Get the picture, this is descriptive of difficulties in the lives of Christians. Maybe they have lost a loved one. Maybe they have had a financial setback. Maybe they have had something happen in their life which has discouraged them. In other words, difficult times. Then God comes, and He grants grace, a period of refreshment and victory in that period in his life. Yet something happens. Christian goes to sleep and loses his roll, which we found out was his assurance of his acceptance with God. Then, after he has awakened and spurred on by his conscience and was heading on up to the top of the hill, he met two individuals, who we discussed in our last setting, named Timorous and Mistrust running back down the hill. These were false pilgrims, individuals who would have nothing to do with the danger which lay ahead. They saw lions in the way, and even though they had gone through some difficulties, they would not put up with danger, like the stony ground hearers. There was nothing that can perhaps be more discouraging to a young Christian than as soon as he is converted and going through some difficulties, he sees someone, who has been professing the Christian faith, leave it and go back into the things of the world. And yet this is what Timorous and Mistrust did.

Now we want to come to the part in the book where Christian regains his roll, or his assurance. We are going to take it just as it is stated in the book and make several comments on it. Timorous and Mistrust have already gone down the hill, and we take up at that point.

So Mistrust and Timorous ran down the hill, and Christian went on his way. But thinking again of what he had heard from the men, he felt in his bosom for his roll, that he might read therein and be comforted: but he felt, and found it not. Then was Christian in great distress, and knew not what to do; for he wanted that which used to relieve him, and that which should have been his pass into the celestial city. Here, therefore, he began to be much perplexed, and knew not what to do.

Now try to imagine the picture that Bunyan is setting forth. Christian is going on his way in the path of duty. Yet he begins to think about what these false professors have said to him, that if you keep on in this thing of being a Christian, you are going to run into dangers, and it is just going to destroy every ambition that you have in life. They were saying, "Give it up, go on back." As he is thinking on these things, he has the fiery darts of Satan cast through his mind, and he begins to think, "I need some assurance that I am not just a professor. I need to know again afresh that I am truly one of God's own children." So he reaches inside his coat to find that assurance, the roll that he has been accepted by God, and it isn't there. Then he becomes very perplexed in his mind as to know what has happened, because this was his source of comfort, the assurance of his salvation. Then we read:

At last he bethought himself that he had slept in the arbour that is on the side of the hill; and falling down upon his knees, he asked God forgiveness for that foolish fact, and then went back to look for his roll.

Is it possible for a Christian who has truly been born of God, to lose assurance of his acceptance with God? I want to read to you from the *Baptist Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, a confession of faith which nearly all of the Baptist groups here in the founding of this country ascribed to. Listen carefully to the article regarding, can a Christian lose his/her assurance?

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into

some special sin, which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit, by some sudden or vehement temptation, or by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light; yet are they never destitute of the seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which in the mean time they are preserved from utter despair.¹

Is it possible for a believer to lose his/her assurance? We would say with Bunyan and with the *Baptist Confession of Faith*, yes, it is possible for a person who once felt that they were accepted by God, through different temptations or ways, they may fall into a state where they may no longer feel that they have been accepted by God. So, what are they to do in this state when there is no light from God? This is a very perplexing state for the true Christian. However, it is a state wherein God has not completely forsaken the individual, because He has promised that He will never leave nor forsake us, (Hebrews 13:5), and yet it is a time of great perplexity of mind.

At last, Christian remembers, "Oh my, down there in that time when I was going through difficulty, and when it seemed like I couldn't go any further, then God came and gave me a period of rest. How thankful I was for that time. But wait a

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minute, I remember during that period of rest, I became indifferent to my religious duty to God, and I fell asleep in that duty. I believe that is where I lost my assurance, and I've got to regain it at that point." We pointed out in the last setting that one of the best places to backslide is in the daily ministry of the Word of God. I think I pointed out that some of the coldest periods in my life were when I was in Bible school and being exposed to the Word of God every day. Great victories were being won and great things were being taught, but yet in a period like that there is a danger of becoming indifferent and sort of lax in our duty. So Christian realizes that it was in this time of ease that he sinned against God. Therefore, he realizes that even though he has gone on in this path, he says, "I am going to have to go back there where I lost that assurance and see if I can recover it." so

¹ Philadelphia Confession of Faith With Catechism

falling down upon his knees, he asked God forgiveness for that foolish act, and then went back to look for his roll. But all the way he went back, who can sufficiently set forth the sorrow of Christian's heart? Sometimes he sighed, sometimes he wept, and oftentimes he chid himself for being so foolish to fall asleep in that place, which was erected only for a little refreshment for his weariness.

Why does God give us periods of rest? If you have been in the Lord very long, I am sure you have gone through some Hills of Difficulties. Yet in the midst of those periods, God has been gracious and true, and He has given you a period of rest and special manifestation of His Spirit. However, God does not give us that grace in order to make us lax in our duty,

Remember, God never grants grace in order to relieve us of our duty, but in order to relieve us of the misery and the lack of strength that we have in times of difficulty.

but He gives us an extra measure of grace to give us strength to overcome the difficulties. Think back in your life when God gave you a special victory. At that time, there is a great danger because you may think the victory is won. Therefore, we have a tendency to let up and become lax

in our duty. What about your prayer life? What about your Bible study? What about your assembly with the Saints? When you go through a time of difficulty, and God gives grace to refresh you, then if you are not careful, something begins to happen. You think, "God has so manifested Himself to me, so I am just going to sit here and enjoy it." Then you become lax in your duty. Remember, God never grants grace in order to relieve us of our duty. He grants grace in order to relieve us of the misery and the lack of strength that we have in times of difficulty in which we are serving Him.

Thus, therefore, he went back, carefully looking on this side and on that, all the way as he went, if happily he might find his roll, that had been his comfort so many times in his journey. He went thus till he came again within sight of the arbour where he sat and slept; but that sight renewed his sorrow the more, by bringing again, even afresh, his evil of sleeping into his mind.

Now, Christian is thinking back and examining his life. Try to use your imagination, how does what he is doing relate to you? You realize that you have become cold and indifferent in the things of God. Now what has happened? You begin to examine yourself to see where

it was that you lost this assurance? I am reminded of a time in the Old Testament (see II Kings 6:5), I believe it was in the ministry of Elijah or Elisha in which one of his prophets was chopping with an ax, and the ax head fell off and went into the water. He couldn't do any more service until he recovered the axe head. No matter how many times he chopped, until he got the axe head back on, there was no more service he could render. If you find yourself grown cold and lax in your spiritual duties, then you need to sit down and see where this laxity started. Ask yourself, "what happened in my life that caused me to become lax in my duties before God?" Immediately as Christian examined this, he remembered it was there in the arbor where God gave him rest. He said, "I am going to go back." As he is going back, and he sees the arbor, then he begins to weep. He says, "There it is. There is where I lost my fellowship with my Lord and Savior." So he goes on and says,

Thus, therefore, he now went on, bewailing his sinful sleep, saying, O wretched man that I am,² that I should sleep in the day-time! that I should sleep in the midst of difficulty! that I should so indulge the flesh, as to use that rest for ease to my flesh, which the Lord of the hill hath erected only for the relief of the spirits of true pilgrims!

I think that is a beautiful play on words that Bunyan uses here. Christian says, "Why did I use that period of time to gratify the flesh which God designed for relieving the downcast spirits of his people? Why did I use that great blessing which God gave me only to become lax in my Christian experience? So he is reminded, "how many steps have I taken in vain?" Am I talking to anyone like that tonight? You know that you are not in the relationship that you have enjoyed with God in seasons past, but you don't know why it is. Listen, beloved, you better stop and examine yourself, because every step you take in your Christian life out of fellowship with Jesus Christ is going to be in vain until you go back and re-establish that relationship. It is going to be like **"sounding brass and tinkling cymbal."** (I Corinthians 13:1). You may go through all the externals, going to church, teaching a Sunday School Class, you may preach, sing, or do all of these things, but yet if it be not for love of Jesus Christ, it will be as "sounding brass and tinkling cymbal". Christian says, "All of these steps that I have taken up the hill, they have all been in vain."

Thus it happened to Israel; for their sin they were sent back again by

² Romans 7:24

the way of the Red Sea; and I am made to tread those steps with sorrow, which I might have trod with delight, had it not been for this sinful sleep.

Do you remember how the nation of Israel came within two or three days of crossing the Jordan, and all they had to do was believe the promise of God and take the land? They said, "No, it is too difficult." So then God said, "Alright, you are going to go back and wander for forty years in the wilderness." During all of those time periods, they were just wandering in a circle, never getting anywhere. So when one sins without confessing that sin or examining themselves, they are going to have to walk on, but their life is going to be in vain as far as acceptable service before God.

Now how can this happen? Let me give you an assessment of this. I really believe it is possible for a person to backslide or become indifferent and lax in their Christian service right in their spiritual closeness to Jesus Christ or to His church. I believe that you can sit under the preaching of your pastor week in and week out and yet become cold in the things of the Lord. I think it can happen like this. Perhaps it is possible that you have been put under some form of pressure or guilt complex by some other pastor who expected certain things out of you. Then another pastor comes along and he doesn't make those same demands. Maybe you had a pastor one time that if you missed church on Sunday, you dared not walk down the street because you knew you were going to get scolded for not being there. Then maybe now you have another pastor who doesn't run after you like a truant officer. So you say, "Oh, what a relaxed period I can have now. I don't have to worry about missing the services." Therefore you begin to become indifferent to the things of God. You may or may not attend the services depending on how your particular emotions and feelings are at the moment. Listen, it is not the discipline of a pastor that ought to bring you to church or the assembly, but it is the internal discipline in your relationship to Jesus Christ that ought to motivate your life. Many times when a man's external discipline is removed, then you do not get a guilt complex about missing a service when you see me on the street. You know that I am not going to walk up to you and brow-beat you because you weren't at church. Now listen, just because you have a freedom now, don't misuse that freedom. You are still under a higher discipline than mine or that of this church. You are under the discipline of King Jesus, and He has revealed in His word, ***"Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is."*** (Hebrews 10:25).

So you see there are many different ways in which a person can become lax, at ease and fall into a sleep in the midst of their responsibilities before God. When that happens, "remember Israel and the Red Sea, that when they were at a point of victory in their life, they turned away from God and had to spend the rest of their earthly experience wandering in the wilderness. So Christian says:

How far might I have been on my way by this time! I am made to tread those steps thrice over, which I needed not to have trod but once:

Notice, Christian came up the hill, but he is going to have to come back down and go up that hill again. He said, "I am having to travel this part of my Christian life three times, when I should have only had to do it once if I had not sinned against the Lord." So whenever we sin and lose our fellowship with the Lord, even so far as to lose our assurance, we have to retrace our steps and find out where that point was.

Have you become cold in the things of the Lord? Where did you lose it? Have you stopped reading the Bible? When did you stop reading the Bible? Have you become lax in prayer? When did you become lax in prayer? And what earthly circumstances have come about in your life that have caused this? Have you become lax in the assembling of the saints? What caused this? Examine your heart and renew afresh to see what it is. You see, beloved, it is sort of like working a problem in long division. Do you remember that? I don't know if they have long division in school anymore, not with this modern math and the computers. If you make a mistake in long division, I don't care how far you go ahead adding subtracting and multiplying, you are going to be all wrong from that point forward. Wherever the mistake is made, whatever multiplication, adding and subtracting you do after that, you are going to be wrong from that point. You are going to have to go back to the point where the mistake was made and correct it before you go on. So if we have grown cold in the things of the Lord, don't think that we will suddenly have something mysterious occur that will restore us. Examine afresh to see at what point we lost our joy and fellowship with the Lord. Christian said,

"O that I had not slept."

Now by this time he was come to the arbour again, where for a while

he sat down and wept; but at last, (as God would have it,) looking sorrowfully down under the settle, (bench), there he espied his roll, the which he with trembling and haste caught up and put into his bosom. But who can tell how joyful this man was when he had gotten his roll again! For this roll was the assurance of his life, and acceptance at the desired haven. Therefore he laid it up in his bosom, gave thanks to God for directing his eye to the place where it lay.

Beloved, instead of thinking, "I don't like to examine myself." Self-examination can be one of the most precious things in having God show us our real need. Don't be afraid in thinking, "This is where I have sinned, so I've got to avoid the very thought of that sin." Confess it, and have God restore the joy of your salvation at that point. Do you remember when David sinned? David was going on in his life as much as usual, but God sent a man named Nathan who told David a story. After the story, David became very angry at the individual described in the story. He said, "What that man did was not right." Nathan pointed his finger and said, "David, you are the man God is talking about." David repented. He was brokenhearted, and he recorded the 51st Psalm, which is his Psalm of repentance. He said, ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."*** Renew my fellowship with You, Lord and ***"restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, . . . and then will I teach transgressors Thy ways."*** (Psalm 51: 10-13). So David asked for his joy to be restored, and God was gracious in doing that. So don't be afraid of confronting the sin in your life. Confess it. Then at that point, God is pleased to restore the joy which we once knew in serving Him.

But, O how nimbly did he go up the rest of the hill! Yet before he got up, the sun went down upon Christian;

Now we find Christian coming up to the way where the lions lay. In this, we can see a pattern whereby we ourselves may reach a point in our Christian experience where we may even wonder whether our Christianity is real or not. Has that ever happened to you? Or are there those here tonight who say, "That will never happen to me. I never will doubt whether I am a Christian or not." Remember, there was a very good Christian in the Bible who said that. His name was Peter. He said "if everybody denies you, Lord, I will never deny you." (See Matthew 26:33-35). All it took was the crowing of a rooster and a little maid's accusation to knock the props out from under him for a few hours. You may have never reach the point where you have doubted that you are a Christian, or that you have lost your

assurance, and I would hope that would never happen. But beloved, the Bible makes it clear that through neglecting the means of assurance which is the Word, prayer and fellowship with the saints, by falling into some terrible temptation, or succumbing to some sin, it is possible for God to withdraw His guidance and understanding from you. You say, "Is that really possible, Pastor?" Let me take you to a passage in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, chapter 50. This has been a favorite passage of mine because it has meant much to me. I use it quite frequently in dealing with those who are concerned about their spiritual state and don't know what to do about it. Isaiah 50:10 - **"Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant,** (now here is a Christian, a God-fearing individual. Here is an obedient person, he is obeying the voice of God, but now notice, **"that walketh in darkness, and hath no light?"** Here is an individual who is a Christian, following the guidance and revealed will of God, and yet at the same time the heavens had become brass. He walks as if he walks in darkness and has no light. What is he to do in that time? **"let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay (or depend) upon his God."** Oh, how sad it is to see what is taking place today in the midst of our congregations of believers. When individuals become discouraged, despondent and a little lax in their Christian experience, to have this restored, they will look to many false places when they have no light and walk in darkness. Notice, what are they to do? "Trust in God just as you trust in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Verse 11 gives us a warning. **"Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow."** "Pastor Gables, what is verse 11 talking about?" You can write these words beside that verse in your Bibles, "False religious enthusiasm." One of the worst things you can do when you become cold in your relationship with God and your heart is breaking inside, is to try to kindle up false religious enthusiasm, try to put on a show, try to convince everybody around you that you are just on top of the world. That is one of the worst things that can take place. But God said instead of looking to and trusting in Me when the clouds overhang the sky, when the heavens seem like brass, and when your prayers just bounce back like throwing a tennis ball against a brick wall, then you try to kindle up your own religious enthusiasm. When you do that, and then walk in the light of that enthusiasm, God says this is what you will have, "You will lie down in sorrow." You will have a hangover and a religious let-down like you have never known.

Trust in God and go back to that point in self-examination where you became lax and

indifferent, and re-examine afresh in open confession before God. Pray like this, "God, I am not what I once was, and am not serving you like I once was. I want You to reveal to me the point in time this occurred, and what I have allowed to come into my life that has now robbed me of the joy of my salvation." Confess this, and bring it out in the open. Have God reveal it to you and get up from your knees knowing that this sin has been confessed and it is pardoned and cleansed by the blood. Then go right on up the hill. There are things that lie ahead in your Christian experience, so do not remain in that cold indifferent backslidden state in which God is not ministering to you. Evidences of this state are when the preacher preaches the word, there is no fresh ministry from the Holy Spirit, and that when the songs of Zion are sung, there is no spirit from the heart that bears witness with your spirit that these are the things of the Lord. If the things of God have lost their sharp cutting edge, re-examine afresh at what point did this happen?

Notice that Christian did not put the blame on Timorous and Mistrust, and he didn't blame God. Also, he didn't blame the Evangelist or his circumstances. He said "It was me that caused this." There is a little song that we used to sing in school that goes like this, *"Its me, its me, its me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."* Usually, the ones we tend to blame when we get cold and indifferent are the other people in the church, because they are not spiritual enough, or it is the pastor, or it is the deacons, the song leader or its my Sunday School teacher. The reason may be something like, "they just don't teach the way that excites me." But do you know where the real problem lies? It is not very far away. It is just about 12 inches from the brain to the heart. If you start re-examining in your mind where the real problem lies, you will see it is your internal relationship with the Savior. And rather than shifting the blame as Adam and Eve did through all their circumstances around about them, go afresh to the point where you lost that sharpness and renew that commitment to God, and then go on in your Christian experience. If there is no one here this evening that is in that particular state in your spiritual life, then may God be pleased to seal what you have heard here tonight, that if and when that time period does come, you will be able to draw afresh from memory that which you have received this evening. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father and our God, we thank You for the gospel and for the assurance of our acceptance with Thee. We thank You for the ministry of the Holy Spirit that reveals unto us our need of You every hour. We ask for a cleansing by Your Spirit that we might have our zeal and enthusiasm renewed afresh for Thee, and with our zeal and enthusiasm that we

might have knowledge to go with that so that we might be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. And we pray that as a church You might restore unto us the joy of our salvation. Help us not to take for granted these sacred things which we minister with each week. Help us not to become indifferent to the ministry of the Word of God. Help us not to just sing the external forms of the songs, but help us to sing from the heart as You have told us to in your Word. As we, who are ministers and teachers of the Word, as we minister to others, we pray that the things that we are ministering, that we might view them as your Holy Word, and not just things that we can take and apply as so many rules of mathematics, but that they are Your things, Holy things, Sacred things, and that as we minister unto the men, women, boys and girls who You have called us to, that we might ever be fresh and vibrant in applying the preaching of the gospel. Apply this and seal our hearts with the Holy Spirit. Restore unto us the joy of our salvation so that we may with renewed zeal teach sinners their ways. May you be pleased to add converts to our midst and souls rededicated to the cause of Your kingdom, for we ask it in Jesus' wonderful name and for His sake, Amen.