



When good men fall

Christians cannot fall away; but they can fall far. Good men can lose great mercies through their falls. Some have lost their authority as witnesses of Christ. Some have eclipsed their reputations for ever. Some have left ugly stains on otherwise bright ministries. Noah fell through strong drink. Lot through worldliness. Moses through impatience with his congregation. Samson through women. David through lust. Hezekiah through arrogance. Zacharias through unbelief. Peter through self-confidence. The list does not end there. History shows that the good and even the great are liable to sad lapses.

Few are the Christians in or out of Scripture who can stand up to a rigorous scrutiny of their personal record and still emerge with no blemish visible to the eye of their fellows. Even those who have a clear record are conscious that there were innumerable times when their foot was ready to slide and when only the mercy of the Almighty held them up. The memory of some scorching heat which was felt in time of fierce temptation is a present reality in every Christian's heart. The times when he almost made shipwreck or almost gave way to the burning suggestions of the evil one make him sweat even now at the mere recollection of them. Could Joseph ever forget the moment when he fled from Potiphar's wife? Could Peter ever again hear without anguish the cockerel's call? Or could Cranmer ever forgive the right hand that signed his recantation till he at last indignantly thrust it into the fire of martyrdom?

The soul's wormwood

There is nothing half so bitter to a good man as the realisation that he has brought disgrace on the name of the Lord. That is truly the wormwood of the soul. It is as near as the believer will ever come to the miseries of hell.

When a good man falls and he becomes conscious of his MI, he does not need to be scourged with the tongues of men. His own conscience will heap coals of fire on his head. Like David, he is ready to melt and to confess, *'I have sinned'*. Like Uzziah, he is more than ready to hasten back from the path of disobedience since he feels in himself that he is visited with leprosy in his innermost conscience. To a good man, the rebuke of God is more dreadful than a thousand stripes. But worse still is the consciousness that he has dragged down the honour of God in the sight of his enemies. Samson's blindness was not so entire but that he could inwardly picture the malicious triumphing of the Philistines over the God of Israel. To set the record straight by rendering them a recompense was easy work for him even at the cost of his own life. *'Let me die with the Philistines'* was a prayer taught by holy indignation and by jealousy for the honour of the God whose name he had injured.

Good men who fall are in deep need of our mercy and compassion, though there must always be appropriate discipline. Good men who have defiled their garments in public are their own tormentors and they commonly do that work as thoroughly as the Inquisition ever went about it with thumb-screw or burning faggot. They cannot see their own face in the mirror without self-loathing. They cry by night and sigh by day. Their only motto now is the forlorn: 'If only'. If only time could be recalled or events effaced from one's past life forever! If only the clock could be put back or the sun made to return to that moment before the scandalous sin was committed! In the morning they say, 'Would God it were evening'. At night they toss to and fro upon their bed and wait for the dawning of the day. Like Elizabeth I of England at her end, they cry, 'Call time!'

It needs only one fall

To err is human. But one grave error is sufficient sometimes to humiliate a trusted servant of Christ. Though he should repent he may only partly get back in this life the place he has lost. He will get it back with God. But *men* may hardly trust him any more. It is one of the wonders of the apostolic age that Peter was restored to such a place of usefulness after so great a fall as that of denying the Lord. Many men have offended in less spectacular ways and been left on the shelf of popular distrust evermore.

It was said by C. H. Spurgeon that he could write his life-story in the sky for all to read and had nothing to be ashamed of. That was a wonderful testimony and one that fully fits that good man of God. However, such life-stories are rare, even among the famous. Mercifully, Spurgeon had had a choice upbringing. It is not so easy for the believer today to keep himself spotless when there is mud continually being thrown up into his face and on to his clothes by every artifice of modern technology. Christians do not live in a thought-world which is hermetically sealed off from the rest of mankind. Nor do they wear asbestos clothing which is proof against all flame and fire.

There is only one safe course to follow and that is the unglamorous one of taking heed to the injunction: 'Watch and pray'. Dull and uninventive and old-fashioned as that may read to some who name the name of Christ in our day, this is the only sure route by which to win a blameless reputation. It probably yields less in the way of excitement or exhilaration or popular acclaim to tread in the path of self-watchfulness and self-mistrust than to walk upon the dizzy tight-rope of temptation. The fruits of quiet obedience, however, are more satisfying in the end.

There is a giddy sort of Christianity in the air these days which feeds on being as like the world as it dare. Christians of this sort talk confidently about their 'liberty' and their 'freedom'. But it is to be feared that such liberty is used all too often as an occasion for the flesh. The secret drink, the stealthy romance, the private indulgence, the undisclosed attachment to some compromising idol of the heart — these are tolerated because they make one happy or as compensations for an otherwise humdrum life.

God in his mercy may give to men who indulge in such vices as these a period of time in which to repent. He commonly bears with them that they may come to a better state of mind. If they will not mend they shall feel his rod of correction. That may be nothing short of exposure to all the world. The anger of an offended Deity smokes white-hot against secret sin in the children of his own family. If space to repent is ignored, he will bring the secret scandal into public view. The feelings of the Christian will not be spared. Rebuke and chastening will break the Christian's bones. The scourge will tear the Christian's flesh. He will vomit up the dainty morsel and curse the day he rolled his sin round in his mouth.

The root which feeds our madness

The root of our folly and the cause of our falls is pride. '*Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall*' (Proverbs 16:18). The words come readily to mind and are as readily forgotten.

Pride is a more deadly sin than man recognises on this side of eternity. Pride is only possible to a highly-developed being. It is possible only to a self-conscious creature because it is a disorder in the self-consciousness. Pride is that cancer of the soul by which the creature sees itself above its place and aspires to the place of God. It is not only the '*man of sin*' who '*exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped*' (2 Thessalonians 2:4). He does it, no doubt, in a unique way and to a unique degree. But the sin is common to man. It was pride that cast the devil out of heaven. It was pride that excluded our first parents from paradise. Pride toppled the tower of Babel, drew down fire on Sodom, reduced Nebuchadnezzar to eating grass like a brute, slew Herod and devoured him with worms (Acts 12). Pride reduces kingdoms, wastes whole civilisations and will call down ultimate wrath upon all the universe.

Who, in the light of such well-known facts as these, dare make light of his own pride of heart? Every Christian knows by daily experience that pride is his constant companion. Pride is the

shadow that haunts his steps and snaps at his heels. The believer who takes small account of his pride is either about to fall or, more probably, has just picked himself up from a fall already. Nowhere on earth is immune to the entrance of this pride. Not the throne. Not the prison. Not the monastery. Not the pulpit.

It is not hard to see why God hates man's pride so intensely. It is because pride in man's heart sets up a rival in the soul to God's very existence and authority. Pride knows no limit and no boundary. What, but pride, makes the absurd theory of mechanical evolution so palatable to man? It is thrilling to the proud heart to have a scheme by which God can be ungodded. In this way, science, which claims the modest role of handling matter to learn its nature and its laws, is now made to stand on its head and to invent a Cause of the world's existence which is less than its effect! Out of Nothing, something has come!

But pride can go one better still. No act of pride is more superbly arrogant or blasphemous than the action of the Roman Catholic priesthood in the Mass. The pagan worshipper who carved an idol out of wood or stone was but an infant in guilt beside the papal priesthood. They make God out of a wafer and do it devoutly in the name of the Holy Trinity! In this action the arrogance of man's heart is complete. Man commands and cries, 'Let there be God, and there is God'. Man manipulates and the Creator helplessly appears at his dictation. It is the acme of pride's long evolution that man has in this way tied his Maker down to appearing at the muttering of a religious incantation. It is all of a piece with the first lie on record, '*Ye shall be as God*' (Genesis 3:5). But the Mass goes one better and offers to us '*Ye shall make God*'. The unimaginable is now commonplace. This spirit is in every fallen soul of man and the believer is not any more immune than the rest from the disease of inordinate self-love.

The believer's reassurance

It follows that the best and the safest course is to study humility. There ought to be nothing flashy or cock-sure in the Christian. Humility is a poor, threadbare, unpretty and unwelcome guest at the world's table. The man of God, however, ought to see that humility is the spirit of heaven itself and the mind of Christ. It is the meek whom God favours with his grace and they will be given their heart's desire. The rest he will feed with husks and not with the rich blessings of his love.

'He that is down need fear no fall', declared Bunyan sagely. That is the golden rule. It is the believer's reassurance in times when tempted to envy the proud. All the best blessings are on the bottom shelf. The man who stoops low may be ridiculed by the worldly-wise. But the humble man will be on his feet when others are in the ditch. Then let humility be our study every day we live.

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