

## WHAT ABOUT THE LAPSIS?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 16, 1955 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

One of the major problems facing the church down through the centuries is the problem of the lapsis. The word lapsis is new to most of us, but it comes from the ancient Latin word which means “to fall.” The problem of the lapsis is simply the problem occasioned by those who have become Christians and then have faltered along the way. This is one of the heaviest problems the church has faced. As the centuries have come and gone it has changed in many of its aspects, yet no problem has had deeper ramifications than the problem of what to do about the lapsis.

### Once in Grace, Always in Grace

There are those who would tell us that it is not possible for people to fall away from the church. They contend, “once saved, always saved; once in grace always in grace.” Yet it is not hard to find passages in the scriptures which indicate that it is quite possible for people who are saved to fall away and be lost. For example, in the fifth chapter of the letter that Paul wrote to the Galatians, he says, “Ye are severed from Christ, ye who would be justified by the law; ye are fallen away from grace.” (Gal. 5:4). Fallen away from the law of Christ, the gospel, they were going back under the law of Moses.

Perhaps an even clearer passage is the one in the sixth chapter of the Hebrew letter, which reads, “For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucified themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” (Heb. 6:4-6). This passage makes it abundantly clear that it is possible for people who have become Christians to fall away and be lost.

In I Corinthians, chapter 9, the apostle Paul says, “I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected.” (I Cor. 9:27). Now he says this after he had been preaching for many years, after he had established many congregations and after he had brought many people into the family of God. Even so, there was danger of his being lost. With these and other passages we can easily dispose of the idea that it is not possible to be lost. It is a very real possibility for any one of us.

### History of the Lapsis

The history of the doctrines relating to the lapsis is particularly interesting. At the end of the first century, which means about the time that the last apostle died, we find that the general feeling was that there was no chance for one who had rejected the church to return. A little later on the thinking changed a bit for they thought this too severe. About the year 148 AD, Hermas, “the Shepherd,” wrote quite extensively concerning the problem of the lapsis. He contended for one forgiveness. If a man who is a Christian falls away let him come back once but no more. He also mentioned the doing of penance.

Hermas divided sins into three categories: (1) Trivial sins, such as losing one’s temper or telling a small lie; (2) Serious sins, which included drunkenness, stealing, serious lying, etc.; and (3) Unforgivable sins, among which were idolatry, adultery and murder. Trivial and serious sins could be forgiven once upon the doing of penance, but for the last group there was no forgiveness.

He wrote of a vision, as he called it, in which he saw some archangels in heaven building a great white building. He saw some large, square, white stones. They represented faithful Christians, and were used immediately. He also saw some round, soiled stones. They were Christians who had sinned. They were put aside at first, but after a while they were used also. They represented people who had to repent and done penance. Then, there were some black, ruined stones. These were cast into the sea and never used. All of this is his way of saying that for those who sin once and then repent there is forgiveness.

### A Second Forgiveness

When you move into the third century you find that this doctrine of forgiveness has progressed a bit. Callixtus, the bishop of Rome, makes a pronouncement on the subject of the lapsis. His problem is particularly severe, for persecution has been heavy and there are a great many lapsis--people who under heavy persecution denied that they were Christians. For these he decreed that it is possible to be forgiven more than once. He advocated receiving back those who fell away twice.

Across from Italy on the north coast of Africa, was Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. He did not like this second forgiveness, but he faced the same problem during heavy persecution. During one period more than half the church denied that they were Christians, but after the persecution ended they all wanted back into the church. Cyprian did not think that they ought to be allowed to come back, for that would not be fair to those who had remained loyal under persecution. Finally, however, not knowing what to do with so large a group

of lapsis, he decided that they should be forgiven, yet he placed on them the restriction that they would have to come to him and signify their genuineness of repentance. Notice the central role that the bishop was to play in the forgiveness of sins. He also assigned the works of penance.

### Penance and Purgatory

In the sixth century Gregory the Great carried the doctrine of the lapsis still further. Unlimited repentance was introduced. Now a man could be forgiven not once or twice but many times, provided he conformed to the routine established by Gregory. There were four essential steps: (1) The first of these was contrition, which means sorrow for sin. He specified that it was not to be attrition, which means sorrow because of punishment, but contrition which is genuine penitence--a kind of heavenly sorrow for sins. (2) Next, there must be confession. In the sixth century the church was not like it had been in the first. Now, there were prominent people in the church. There were lords, and princes, and even kings. One could hardly expect to get these people to make public confession. They had too much pride. A feudal lord with hundreds of peasants working for him and living on his property could hardly be expected to confess his sins publicly, so Gregory allowed that public confession might now be changed to private confession. Privately a sinner could come to the priest, privately he could confess his sins. (3) If the priest thought that the repentance was genuine, he could absolve the sinner of guilt. Absolution, according to Gregory, was the priest acting on behalf of God to forgive man's sins.

(4) Step number four was satisfaction. This is especially interesting for here the priest meets out penance. Penance might be fasting for a certain number of days, or the wearing of rough clothing, or the making of a pilgrimage to some shrine, or entering a monastery or a nunnery. The priest would try to measure out penance equal to the sin. Those who were particularly prominent might hire somebody to do their penance for them. It was also possible to pay for a portion of a new cathedral as penance. Gregory also added the idea of purgatory for those who in this life were not able to pay their whole debt. For them, there was a temporary period of punishment after death where they would complete the job. The doctrine of the Roman Catholic church today is much the same as Gregory left it. It included the idea of contrition, followed by confession, followed by absolution, followed by satisfaction.

### What Does the Bible Say?

We are not concerned, however, primarily with this recital of the history of what should be done with the lapsis. The traditions of men mean little to us. We are primarily concerned with what the Bible says. In the beginning of our study we read the question: "Is it possible to fall away from the church and be lost?" I read a clear cut answer from the scriptures. The scriptures say that every man can sin so as to be lost, even after once being a Christian.

### God's Forgiving Love

A second question arises. "Does God really forgive man and let him come back?" Standing out above all the other passages I know as an answer to this question is the fifteenth chapter of the gospel according to Luke. There, the Lord himself tells three stories in quick succession. All of them, though different in background, tell the same thing. Notice story number one: A shepherd had a hundred sheep. One of them was lost. He left the ninety and nine and sought the one that was lost until he found it. And when he found it he brought it back and asked his friends to rejoice with him. Then Jesus added, "I say unto you, that even so there shall be more joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine righteous persons that need no repentance." (Luke 15:7).

Story number two is of the lost coin: A woman had ten pieces of silver and lost one. She lighted a candle, swept the house, and looked for it until she found it. Then she invited her neighbors to come in and rejoice over the lost coin that had been found. Story number three is of the lost boy. We refer to it more often as the story of the prodigal son. A father had two boys, one of whom went into a far country and wasted his substance in riotous living. Later, he repented and came back home. The father was moved with compassion, ran to meet him, fell on his neck and kissed him. The meaning of these three stories is the same. God loved us enough in the beginning to send his Son to die that we might be saved. He loves us enough now that he is willing to forgive us when we stumble and fall, if we meet his conditions of penitence. He yearns for his wayward children to come home and he completely forgives our sins.

### What Are the Conditions?

There is a third question in our discussion today: What are the conditions of man's return? What is involved in coming back?" The answer is found in a clear example in the eighth chapter of Acts. The church was relatively young. Preaching had gone out from Judea until it had reached into Samaria. The evangelist, Philip, was in Samaria preaching the gospel. "There was a certain man, Simon by name, who beforetimes in the city used sorcery, and amazed the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest saying, This man has the power of God which is called Great. And they gave heed to him, because that of a long time he had amazed them with his sorceries, but when they believed Philip preaching good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized both men and women. And Simon also himself believed: and being baptized, he continued with Philip; and beholding signs and great miracles wrought, he was amazed." (Acts 8:9-13). Simon, the former sorcerer, was now a Christian.

Then, in the verses which follow, we read about Peter and John coming up from Jerusalem for the purpose of laying hands on some at Samaria to give them the power of working miracles. Simon saw this--the genuine power to work miracles--and it was the most wonderful thing that he had ever seen. The scripture says again, "Now when Simon saw that with the laying-on of the apostle's hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I shall lay my hands, he shall receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter said unto him, "Thy silver perish with thee, because thou hast thought to obtain the gift of God with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right with God ... For I see that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." (Acts 8:18-21, 23). Here is a man who has become a Christian and the apostle says, "you are in the bond of iniquity, in the gall of bitterness." Now what was he told to do? Listen to Peter's answer, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the thought of thy heart should be forgiven thee ... And Simon answered and said, Pray ye for me to the Lord that none of the things which ye have spoken come unto me." (Acts 8:22-24) Genuine repentance is step number one and earnest prayer for forgiveness is step number two. Sometimes a person comes to me and says, "I want to come back to the church and I would just feel better if I could be baptized all over again." If one has ever been baptized scripturally for the remission of his sins, he never needs to be baptized again. For those of us who have become Christians, baptism cleaned the slate of our pre-baptismal sins. If we then sin again, deep, genuine penitence and earnest prayer are all that a Christian need do. Penitence involves making right the wrong we have done. It involves living a pure, clean life in the future.

#### Public Confession

James, the Lord's brother added, "Confess your sins one to another, and pray ye one for another that ye may be healed." (James 5:16). At the end of a worship service, we often call upon those who have neglected the assembly of the Lord, or who have neglected some other duty to the Lord, or who have done something that they ought not to have done, to come and confess their sins and make known their desires for the prayers of the church. The backsliding Christian needs to confess his sins publicly lest he become a stumbling block to others. His repentance needs to be made as widely known as his sin was known. This is the primary reason for public confession. If we confess our public sins privately someone, not knowing of our penitence, may consider us hypocrites in the church. Genuine penitence, confession of our sins as widely as the sins were known and prayer for forgiveness--this is God's way. When we have done this we have the promise of God that he will receive us back into full fellowship with the other saints and with himself.

#### Conclusion

We live in an evil world and it sometimes creeps into our lives. Quite often we need to pray a private prayer for what we have said, or done, or thought. Sometimes we need to make a public statement of our penitence and ask the prayers of Christians. Let each one of us examine himself. Is there something in your life that stands as a stumbling block to others? If so, remove it that neither you nor they may be lost. It is a wonderful thing to know that God will forgive. The infinite love of our heavenly Father reaches out to us. When we stumble, is it not grand to know that our Father loves us enough that he will forgive us, if our penitence is genuine and our prayers are sincere? Whatever you need to do, do it now.