

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life: (9) Following Jesus Christ Rightly –
#5: Keeping Your Heart**

Introduction:

In order for the Christian to follow Jesus Christ rightly and in order to continue to follow Jesus Christ rightly, the Christian must be very diligent to guard and preserve his heart. His devotion and commitment to the Lord must be maintained, or else defection and departure from the Lord may and probably will take place. We may look to many places in the Holy Scriptures that speak to this matter. But for our purpose we will first consider **Proverbs 4:23**. However, I would like us to read it in its context of **Proverbs 4:20-27**. Here a father gives instruction to his son, in order to guide him in a life blessed of the Lord.

- ²⁰My son, give attention to my words;
Incline your ear to my sayings.
²¹Do not let them depart from your eyes;
Keep them in the midst of your heart;
²²For they are life to those who find them,
And health to all their flesh.
²³***Keep your heart with all diligence,
For out of it spring the issues of life.***
²⁴Put away from you a deceitful mouth,
And put perverse lips far from you.
²⁵Let your eyes look straight ahead,
And your eyelids look right before you.
²⁶Ponder the path of your feet,
And let all your ways be established.
²⁷Do not turn to the right or the left;
Remove your foot from evil.

This is to be the interest and occupation of everyone who claims to be a Christian, “***Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.***” It has been asserted that “to keep your heart” is the most important and continuous duty and activity of the Christian. **John Flavel** (17th c.) once wrote, “It is the most important business of a Christian’s life. Without this we are but formalists in religion; all our professions, gifts and duties signify nothing.”¹

That it is the great business for the Christian to keep his heart betrays the great deficiency of our hearts, even though we are Christians. The fact is that we are a sorry lot, all with weak and defective hearts, spiritually speaking. That we could and that we would allow our hearts to grow indifferent to the things of God, in disregard of all the blessings that He has so freely bestowed upon us in Christ, confirms that even though we are Christians, we are deficient and unstable. We must keep our hearts with all diligence because of their weakness and deficiency in staying strong and fixed.

Octavius Winslow (19th c.) commented on this spiritual weakness of the Christian in the opening paragraph of his book entitled, ***Personal Declension***.

¹ John Flavel, ***Keeping the Heart*** (Sola Deo Gloria, 1998), p. 10.

If there is one consideration more humbling than another to a spiritually-minded believer, it is, that, after all God has done for him,—after all the rich displays of His grace, the patience and tenderness of His instructions, the repeated discipline of His covenant, the tokens of love received, and the lessons of experience learned, there should still exist in the heart a principle, the tendency of which is to secret, perpetual, and alarming departure from God. Truly, there is in this solemn fact, that might well lead to the deepest self-abasement before Him.²

Now when we speak of the heart of the Christian “departing” from God, it should not be concluded that a true Christian can so depart from God that he may lose his salvation. For the true Christian to lose his salvation is an impossibility. Salvation is the work of God’s grace in the soul. God Himself gave us saving grace, for He “has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (2 Tim. 1:9). God, Who gave us this grace in eternity, bestowed this grace upon us when He saved us (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:10). God by His grace keeps us unto Him even unto eternity (Cf. 1 Pet. 1:5). God *justified* us by His grace when we first believed the gospel, having forgiven us fully of our sin. God *adopted* us by His grace into His family in that we became His children. God *sealed* us by His grace with the Blessed Holy Spirit until the day of redemption. God *seated* us with Christ by His grace in the heavenly places in Christ, in whom we abide and will remain. To say that a true Christian can lose his salvation is to claim that a justified man can unjustify himself, that though his sins had been cast into the depths of the sea, he brings them back upon himself, and that even though God had adopted him as his child, he ceased to be a child of God. For a Christian to lose his salvation is to assert that sin and satan has defeated the power of God and the grace of God that held him, that the former Christian was able to unseal what the Holy Spirit had sealed, and that he was able to thwart the power of God that had kept him. That a true Christian can lose his salvation is a biblical absurdity. Again, as **Winslow** set forth:

We must here, however, guard a precious and important truth; viz., the *indestructible nature* of true grace. Divine grace in the soul can never really die; true faith can never utterly and finally fail. We are speaking now but of their *decay*. A flower may droop, and yet live; a plant may be sickly, and yet not die. In the lowest stage of spiritual declension, in the feeblest state of grace, there is a life that never dies. In the midst of all his startings aside, the ebb and flow, the wandering and restoring, the believer in Jesus is “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.” He cannot utterly fall; he cannot finally be lost. The immutability of God keeps him,—the indwelling of the Spirit keeps him, and keeps him to eternal glory. We say, then, true grace is indestructible grace; it can never die. But it may *decay*; and to the consideration of this solemn and important subject, the reader’s serious attention is now invited.³

But sadly spiritual decay does take place, and it does so all too frequently. And sometimes it occurs without clear perception by us. It often occurs gradually, we have our slowly squeezing out the spiritual vitality of our souls. The process of spiritual decay can, therefore, occur to some degree before we are awakened to just how far we have backslid from the Lord. Again, **Winslow** wrote:

And yet, without changing its nature, divine grace may decline to an alarming extent in its power and exercise. It may become sickly, drooping, and ready to die; it may become so enfeebled through its decay, as to present an ineffectual resistance to the inroads of strong corruption; so low, that the enemy may ride rough-shod over it at his will; so inoperative and yielding, that sloth, worldliness, pride, carnality, and their kindred vices, may obtain an easy and unresisted conquest.⁴

² Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993, orig. 1841), p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14f.

Because this is true of every Christian, it is vitally important for us to follow the injunction of Scripture:

Keep your heart with all diligence,
For out of it spring the issues of life. (Prov. 14:3)

Let us consider this matter by first attempting to understand precisely what our text is saying and suggesting to us. First, let us consider...

I. What is the “heart”?

We read, “Keep the heart.” What precisely is meant by the word, “heart”?

The common conception of the “heart” by most people has been shaped by what may be described as the romanticism of our culture. We think of heart primarily in terms of one’s affections, what one “loves.” “Love is the principle idea of the heart” or so it is commonly assumed. To love the Lord with all your heart is understood as “loving” the Lord sincerely and supremely. But actually, this is not how the Holy Scriptures use the term, “heart.” For example, sometimes the “heart” is used to identify one’s intellect--his *mind*. We read in Proverbs 23:7, “For as he (a man) *thinks* in his heart, so is he.” Another place where this is evident is in Romans 1:20-22, which reads,

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their *thoughts*, and their foolish *hearts* were darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools...

In other places the word, heart, is used to depict the *conscience* of a person. **1 John 3:20** reads, “For *if our heart condemns us*, God is greater than our *heart*, and knows all things.” That which condemns us is our conscience, which John referred to as the “heart.” Elsewhere in Scripture the “heart” is a reference to one’s *memory*. In Psalm 119:11 we read the familiar verse, “Thy word have *I hid in mine heart*, that I might not sin against thee.” Here heart is used for one’s memory. And then the heart is also used to convey the idea of one’s volition, or *will*. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “So let each one give as *he purposes in his heart*, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). We may conclude that it is best to understand the word, “heart”, in Scripture to speak of all aspects of a man’s being apart from his body. The heart speaks to a man’s mind, his affections (emotions), and his will. In other words, the heart of a man is his whole soul. “The state of the whole body depends upon the soundness and vigour of the heart, and the everlasting state of the whole man upon the good or ill condition of his soul.”⁵

II. What is it, then, to “keep the heart”?

To keep the heart is to strive to keep one’s soul, with all its faculties of mind, emotion, and will, devoted principally to the Lord. To keep one’s heart is to use all the means that God has given us so that we keep Him and His kingdom as foremost in our thinking, foremost is our desires and delights, and foremost in our efforts to live for Him and advance His glory.

John Gill (18th c.) wrote on this matter:

Keep thy heart with all diligence. God, who gave us these souls, gave us a strict charge with them: Man, woman, *keep thy heart; take heed to thy spirit.* We must maintain a holy jealousy of ourselves, and set a strict guard, accordingly, upon all the avenues of the soul; keep our hearts from doing hurt and getting hurt, from being defiled by sin and disturbed by trouble; keep them as our jewel,

⁵ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed* (Joseph Martin, 1826), p. 8. (A more modern version of this book is *Keeping the Heart*, by Sola Deo Gloria publishing, 1998.)

as our vineyard; keep a conscience void of offence; keep out bad thoughts; keep up good thoughts; keep the affections upon right objects and in due bounds. *Keep them with all keepings* (so the word is); there are many ways of keeping things—by care, by strength, by calling in help, and we must use them all in keeping our hearts; and all little enough, so deceitful are they. Or *above all keepings*; we must keep our hearts with more care and diligence than we keep anything else. We must keep our eyes, keep our tongues, keep our feet, but, above all, keep our hearts.

Consider God’s law on this matter. Moses commanded his people, “Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life” (Deut. 4:9). And then consider God’s prophet that speaks of the evil of our hearts: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).

III. What is it, then, to keep the heart with all “*diligence*”?

First, let us consider the great effort that we are to give to this matter. Those who fail to keep their heart, fail because they did not use *diligence* in doing so. They did not see the need. They did not see the danger. They did not see their own proneness to spiritual decay. They failed to use the means of grace diligently, that would have prevented their declension.

Most of us probably view ourselves as somewhat stable Christians. We walk with the Lord daily. We are faithful to pray and to attend the house of the Lord to meet with God along with His people. But the truth of the matter is that most of us are not as stable as we ought to be. The Christian life is not generally characterized by consistent communion with God, with us always living fully according to His Word. Decay and recovery, backsliding and renewal, commonly characterize the Christian life. Our hearts are prone to wander, and often we do. But we are to give all diligence that decay not occur.

The Apostle Paul gave warning to the Christians at Corinth: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” Paul gave this exhortation after first citing the example of the Israelites that the Lord has set before New Testament Christians. Paul first wrote of the privileges that Israel had experienced, blessings that parallel Christian blessing.

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ²all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. (1 Cor. 10:1-4)

But then Paul recounted what had happened to them and how God was warning us through them:

⁵But with most of them God was not well pleased, for *their bodies* were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. ⁷And do not become idolaters as *were* some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” ⁸Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; ⁹nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

It is then that Paul gave the exhortation, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”

And yet it is the sad experience of many who failed to know and acknowledge the vulnerable condition in which they exist. They are presumptuous, self-willed, self-secure, or so they think. I could recount the terrible remorse of some who would have spared themselves and their families much pain and grief had they been more watchful and less confident of their ability and stability before the Lord.

John Gill wrote of this great need to give great diligence to keeping the heart:

Keep thy heart with all diligence. The mind from vanity, the understanding from error, the will from perverseness, the conscience clear of guilt, the affections from being inordinate and set on evil objects, the thoughts from being employed on bad subjects; and the whole from falling into the hands of the enemy, or being the possession of Satan: great diligence had need be used in keeping it, since it is naturally so deceitful and treacherous; a strict eye is to be kept upon it; all the avenues to it to be watched, that nothing hurtful enters, or evil comes out; it is to be kept by all manner of means that can be thought of, by prayer, hearing, reading, meditation; and, above all, by applying to Christ for his grace and Spirit to sanctify, preserve, and keep it. Or, “above all keeping, keep thine heart”; though other things are to be kept, and care taken of them, as kingdoms and cities, and towns and families, and treasures and riches; yet the heart above all...⁶

IV. Why are we to keep the heart with all diligence? *Because out of it spring the issues of life.*

The heart, that is the soul, is the source of all our thoughts and actions in this life. All actions of life spring from the heart. A man’s life is what he thinks in his heart. As we read earlier, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Pro. 23:7). What his heart is, so will his life be. The condition of a man’s heart in this life, will result in the state to which he will be consigned for eternity. What he is here, will be how he is hereafter. If the things that come forth from his heart are true, are noble, are just, are pure, are lovely, are of good report, if they are things of virtue in accordance with godliness, they will give way to an eternal enjoyment of these in the presence of the Lord (Cf. Phil. 4:8). This why we are to meditate on these things, so that they will spring forth in the issues of our lives.

But it is a sad fact that probably very few of us obey consistently this command throughout our Christian lives: “***Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.***” Some have failed in this matter so terribly that they have fallen far from where they once were. Perhaps their backslidden condition has desensitized them to their condition. They are spiritually numb due to the hardness of their hearts. Thankfully, however, even when we stray and resist and fail to use the means of grace God has given us to keep our hearts, He will do what He has to do to restore our souls. But before we address the manner of restoration, let us perform a self-assessment.

V. How may we know that we have failed to keep our heart with all diligence?

Spiritual declension can happen almost unnoticeably to the one thus affected.

This state of secret departure from God may exist in connexion with an outward and rigid observance of the means of grace; and yet there shall be no spiritual use of, or enjoyment in the means. And this may be the great lullaby of his soul. Rocked to sleep by a mere formal religion, the believer is beguiled into the delusion that his heart is right, and his soul prosperous in the sight of God. Even more than this,--a declining believer may have sunk so deeply into a state of formality, as to substitute the outward and the public means of grace for a close and secret walk with God.⁷

How then, may we know that we have failed to keep the heart with all diligence? First, when a Christian can continue to observe his customary duties of church attendance and service in the church, but he receives no enjoyment from God for doing so, no closeness and sense of God being pleased in his service, he probably has failed to keep his heart with all diligence.

Secondly, when a Christian can read his Bible faithfully, but with no sense of joy or delight in doing so, his spiritual life has ebbed from what it once was and should be. The Scriptures are God’s holy Word to

⁶ John Gill, *Commentary on Proverbs*.

⁷ Winslow, *Declension*, p. 16.

us in which He reveals Himself to us and instructs us and directs us in His ways. May we all be as Paul who could write, "I delight in the law of God according to the inward man" (Rom. 7:22).

Thirdly, when a Christian can pray, but when he does, he does not sense that he is before the throne of God. He prays but he has no fellowship with God with whom he is communicating. When he calls God his Father, but without the least sense of his adoption as His son, when He calls Jesus Lord, but without the bowing of the heart with an inquisitive mind to know His will, this would indicate a decline in spiritual vitality.

Fourthly, when the believer has unloving thoughts toward his spiritual family, his brothers and sisters in Christ, when he has no desire to be with them, to have fellowship with them, but the desire is to be separated from their company, this is a sign of spiritual deterioration.

Fifthly, when our speech becomes characterized as coarse, uncharitable, confrontive, cutting, and cruel, it reveals that something is coming forth from the heart other than the gracious impulses of the Spirit born from a heart that is in sweet fellowship with God.

But thankfully God has placed in us a nature that makes us miserable when we sense we are not right with Him. Before long we begin to long once again for the Lord's blessing to be experienced by us. He then takes action to restore us unto Himself. God is a God who brings recovery to His own. He comes to them in their sin, even though they have neglected Him or forsaken Him, and through His own power He secures their restoration.

Perhaps at one time you were very tender-hearted before the Lord. But through your own neglect and failure, you did not attend to the well-being of your soul. You increasingly and more frequently transgressed God's Word in violation of your former confession that you would abstain from sin and live for Him, and you sinned against your conscience. Perhaps you have allowed your heart to grow indifferent and then it grew hardened toward God and God's people.

Charles Spurgeon addressed his congregation, knowing that some of them needed to be restored to fellowship with the Savior.

You live as hired servants and not as sons, you get the duty of religion but not the enjoyment of religion; you wear its yoke but do not feed in its pasture, you seem to me to forego all the cream of your holy faith, and to partake of nothing but its skimmed milk. You leave the sunny plains of communion for the frozen regions of negligent living, and hence you shiver with fear while others exult with gladness. You have chosen your position in the outer courts of the temple, you never enter the holy of holies: you do not pass within the veil, to behold the glory of the Lord. You are sailing to heaven, but you are stowed away in the hold in the dark. You appear to me in your religion to live like the beggars who come around to the back doors for the bones and the stale crusts; and therefore I am not surprised that some of you feel the craving for amusements and say that you are very bored, and need lively company and gaiety to make life bearable. If my child were to say that he must continually go to the candy store or the eating house, I should say to myself, "Surely the food on my table is sufficient for him;" but if upon inquiry I found that he did not eat at my table except occasionally, and that he always made choice of the barest bones and driest crusts, I should be at a loss to comprehend why he was so frequently seen at other places of supply. If you are not living upon Jesus, and rejoicing in the measureless bliss which He is capable of bestowing upon you, I do not marvel if you go off to the world for your sweetmeats, and feel a leaning towards the leeks and the garlic and the onions of Egypt.⁸

Are you walking with the Lord Jesus in fellowship and communion? Do you sense His presence with you? God does manifest awareness in His people that He is with them. That is what gives them their confidence and sense of well being. **John 14:21** reads,

⁸ Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 19, p. 726.

“He that has my commandments, and keeps them, he it is that loves me: and he that loves me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and *I will manifest myself to him.*”

Again, **Spurgeon** wrote,

The fittest condition of the believer is in communion with Christ. It ought not to be a privilege occasionally enjoyed, it should be the everyday life of the soul. We are to abide in Jesus, walk with Him, and live in Him... How sluggish our hearts, how dull our spirits, that we do not chase after Jesus with rapture of desire, and do not perpetually labor to abide in Him.

Can you say that He is with you and that you are by His side? Or through neglect or rebellion, have you strayed from His side? Then your soul is in need of restoration.

VI. How may we experience recovery in our souls, so that our hearts are restored and increasingly be conformed to our life in Christ?

A. First, let us consider God’s work of restoring our souls.

For many people Psalm 23 is the most familiar passage of the Old Testament. It is a passage that has brought much encouragement to many beleaguered souls. Psalm 23 is a psalm of David. David, of course, had been a shepherd himself. As a boy he had cared for many of his father’s sheep. He provided protection for them. On one occasion, he killed a bear that had threatened them. On another occasion, he rescued a lamb from a lion’s mouth. He provided his sheep with food. He had led them to green pastures. He had sought out many stray sheep. Because he was the shepherd and he cared for his sheep. He sought them out and brought them back to the fold. It would be fitting that David would see the relationship of His God toward him as the Shepherd to His sheep. And that is what we have here in Psalm 23.

The first clause of **verse 3** is in itself a cause for much comfort for the Christian. We read about God as a Restorer of souls. David wrote, “*He restoreth my soul.*” The analogy depicted is that of a shepherd and a wayward sheep. God is as a shepherd who seeks out His straying people, and brings them back to His side. David said, “*The Lord is my shepherd.*” David uses God’s proper name, Jehovah. It is the name that God Himself used when He speaks of His relationship with His people. In John’s Gospel we have recorded for us Jesus Christ’s claim to deity in His statement, “*I am the Good Shepherd.*” So what can be said of Jehovah in Psalm 23 may be said of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

David described God as His Shepherd in that the Lord provided for all of his needs. “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want of any good thing.*” David speaks of the peaceful existence and the sense of security and well being he has because the Lord is His shepherd. “*He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me besides the still waters.*”

But I would like us to focus on the work of God on behalf of David depicted in verse 3: “*He restores my soul.*” David had seen himself as a sheep who had strayed from his master’s side, but who had been restored by His heavenly Father. Of course, David is not unique to this experience. Later the prophet **Isaiah** would speak in similar terms of all of Israel, “*All we like sheep have gone astray*” (Isa. 53:6). But the problem with straying from God’s side is the common experience of all New Testament believers. **Peter** wrote, assured by his own experience, “*You were as sheep going astray; but you are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls*” (1 Pet. 2:25). The fact is that we were astray before coming to Christ, and even after having come to Christ we tend to stray from God’s side. Our hearts are prone to wander. But thankfully our Lord is a restorer of souls. He comes after us and finds us and brings us back into fellowship with Himself.

And so, **how is the soul restored?** The answer is simple. David said it plainly: “*He restoreth my soul.*” If a straying Christian is to find recovery, a work of grace will have to be manifest by Christ Himself.

Everything we have said with respect to the blessings of the Christian in fellowship is due to the work of the Shepherd. How is it that we are able to enjoy “green pastures”? “Because **“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.”** And how is it that we can walk beside “still waters”? Because **“He leads me beside still waters.”** How is it that you may experience peace and a sense of well being even in the face of the “valley of the shadow of death”? It is because **He** is “with you.”

All that we are and all that we have is because of the work of grace that He does for us and in us. If then, we are to see recovery from a backslidden condition and be restored to the Master’s side, it will have to be a work of His grace on our behalf. He is going to have to take action. David wrote that it is **He, that is, the Shepherd, who restores my soul.** This is what shepherds do. They go after stray sheep and bring them back to the fold. And this is what must be done for us when we stray, for as poor lost sheep we have no ability in ourselves to find our way back into the fold. He must take the initiative. He must come to us and effect recovery. Christ is our Good Shepherd Who restores our Souls.

How does He do this?

1. Christ seeks the one who has strayed until He finds him (Cf. Luke 15:4-7).

Christ seeks His own. One day our Lord asked, “Which one of you having 100 sheep, if he lose **one** of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and goes after that which is lost, until he find it?”

Are you in the wilderness this morning child of God? Are you feeling so alienated and far from Christ that you feel yourself a stranger among us? Do you, Christian, see yourself as having strayed so far from the Master’s side that you no longer sense the love, care, and protection of your Lord? Take heart in this: He is seeking you out. You are the object of His desire and He longs to have you with Him more than you desire to be with Him. He regards you as one of His own; you, if you are one of His, are the object of His tender affection.

But Christ not only seeks His straying sheep, He always finds them. The Scriptures describe our Shepherd as most certainly **finding** each and all of His own. “Which one of you” the Lord asked one day, “having 100 sheep, if he lose **one** of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and goes after that which is lost, **until he find it?** We are not speaking of a Savior Who has the will but not the power to bring restoration to His people. If you are His, He will not stop seeking you until He finds you. Jesus said this of His own:

And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose **nothing**, but should raise it up again at the last day. (John 6:39)

Again, we read in Luke’s Gospel of the Lord Jesus seeks His own sheep until He finds it. And then, “when he hath found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing” (Luke 15:5). Do you see yourself as having so far strayed from Christ through your own carelessness, indifference, hardness of heart, sin and rebellion, that you are beyond recovery and outside of the realm of God’s love? Child of God be assured that He loves you. And He is seeking you. And if you are His, **He will find you and restore you to Himself.** He loves you with an everlasting love. He cannot nor will not forget you and abandon you to your sin. He knows where to find you--infinite omniscience cannot but know. And He will most certainly bring you back--infinite omnipotence can do no other. He will seek you and He will find you, because He seeks you with all of His heart.

2. He rejoices when He brings recovery to His own.

He is seeking you, if you have strayed. He will most certainly find you. And when He finds you, He will **rejoice** over you. He finds His sheep and when He does, “He lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” If you are far from His side, be assured of this, He would delight to have you return. We read in numerous places that God expresses great joy over the sinner that repents. This is a description of a Shepherd Who deeply cares for His sheep. It expresses the great care that Christ has for His own.

3. Christ chastises the straying one so that he strays no longer.

I have read that occasionally when the shepherd encountered a lamb that habitually strayed from him, he would deal with it so as to prevent its straying again. We might see this as rather as harsh, but its end is good. With the crook of his staff he would break two legs of the lamb so that it could not walk. The shepherd would then carry that lamb about day by day until the legs were healed. The sheep was thereafter cured of its wandering spirit. For by the time of healing the sheep had grown sufficiently close to the Master that he would not desire to stray again.

So it is with us. Sometimes if we fail to heed His voice, and He has repeatedly sought us and brought us back to Himself, only to see us stray again, He will chastise us severely so as to permanently cure us of our backsliding. He sometimes does this by allowing us to wallow in our misery for a while before coming to our rescue. God said of Israel,

Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts. (Jer. 2:19)

In another place God says,

I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. (Hos. 14:4)

But thankfully, He does this for the well being of His own. When He does come, and He takes these steps for our betterment, then we are restored to His side and again enjoy the blessings of His presence.

God uses calamity to purify and restore believers. God's afflictions help His people. He trains them and teaches them by their trials. He humbles them and strengthens them. He rebukes them and chastens them. The point we might make directly at this point, due to the time, is that when Christians are not fully submitted to Jesus Christ their King, they will stray from Him. God then designs events to come into their lives to chasten them. The design of God with them is not to destroy, put to purify and train His people in holiness. David could write, "I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Psa. 119:75). And so, by these calamities He seeks

1) To humble them, showing their weakness,

2) To show them of His power and sufficiency.

3) To restore them to right priorities.

4) To move them to renew their repentance. Consider David's sin with Bathsheba and the terrible consequences for himself, his family and his kingdom. God used these consequences to bring David to repentance and to cure him of his backsliding. We read of David's renewal through adversity in Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word."

5) To reveal to them the nature of His ways. Psalm 119:71 "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes."

6) To make them stronger in faith and more holy in life. Job, a man thoroughly acquainted with trouble, could in faith say:

But He knows the way that I take;
When he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.
My foot hath held His steps,
I have kept His way and have not turned aside.
I have not departed from the commandment of His lips;
I have treasured the words of His mouth
More than my necessary food. (Job 23:10-12)

B. What action should we take to have our hearts (souls) restored?

We have emphasized that if restoration is to be experienced by the straying Christian, that God in grace must do it. The Good Shepherd must recover His own, for they cannot effect their own recovery. But does this mean the sheep is to sit passively by and do nothing with respect to his condition? No, there are things that wayward sheep may do. Let me list three.

1. Have faith that the Shepherd is seeking you.

The Lord is not lost so as that we need to *find Him*. No, if any are lost it is we. He is not lost and we are trying to find Him; we are lost and He will most certainly find us and we should be assured of this.

This is not to deny those passages that urge people to be seeking God. We read of encouragement to seek God in numbers of places. Several of these include:

Proverbs 8:17. “I love them that love me; and those that *seek* me early shall find me.”

Jeremiah 29:13. “And ye shall *seek* me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.”

But we should recognize that ***God Himself might withdraw or stand aloof from His own so that they will see their need for Him.*** They then begin to seek Him, but in actuality they are doing so because of His gracious working in their lives. God spoke of His dealings with Israel:

I will go and return to my place, until they acknowledge their offence, and **seek** my face: in their affliction they will **seek me** early. (Hos. 5:15)

Here God speaks of His removing Himself from His own for a time, so that they would desire Him and seek Him.

Now, we want to stress this point: Although we desire to assure the backslidden child of God that is desirous of recovery that God is most certainly seeking and will most certainly find His own that are in need of spiritual restoration, ***we do not want to encourage presumption on the part of the careless and indifferent.*** Spiritual recovery is an act of God’s grace. It must come freely from God and God must be free to bestow or withhold if it is of grace. He is not bound by anything other than His own commitment that He has made to His people. But to presume that God is under obligation to come and get us whenever we feel like it is not suggested in Scripture. ***Simply because a person seeks, does not automatically assure that God will be found.*** The sinner must come to God by God’s grace and on His terms. Some think that they can harden their hearts and indulge in any way of living and think that they may return to God whenever they desire to do so and that somehow God is under compulsion to receive them back. This is not so. We cannot presume upon God’s mercy. We are told,

Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall **seek me** early, but they shall not find **me**” (Pro. 1:28).

The continual admonition in Scripture is not to put off responding to God's gracious call.

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.’ (Heb. 3:7-9)

We have every encouragement to come to Christ today, but no encouragement that we might come tomorrow. God may withdraw His grace and the Holy Spirit may stop calling. Then, the erring and straying one may cry and wail, but he may be left in his sin.

But I do not want to undercut the legitimate basis of your assurance if you are one of God's own people that He will most certainly bring recovery to you. Be assured, if you are a child of God, He will come to you and restore you to Himself. Have faith in Him and His Word that this is so. This itself brings a measure of comfort to you, does it not? Be assured of this child of God, He is more concerned about finding you than you are even concerned about being found. One of the characteristics of sheep is that they are ignorant of the danger that is around them. In contrast, the shepherd fully knows what threatens his own. He is more concerned for your recovery than even you are. If you are a child of God you are a gift of God the Father to His Son and He regards you as His precious and beloved possession. He will not lose you. Take heart. Jesus said, *“My father Who gave My sheep to Me is greater than all, and no man can pluck them out of My hand.”*

2. Cry out to Him.

In prayer, call out for His mercy to be extended to you so that restoration may be yours. Ask God to reveal His Son afresh to you. He is seeking. A sheep cries out and thus enables a shepherd to locate him. Of course our Shepherd has no trouble locating us, but He would have us know what a difficult spot we have put ourselves in and so He stands back until He hears us cry for Him. Cry out as the two blind men, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” And do not stop crying out until He has turned aside to you.

3. Listen for His voice.

Do you hear Him calling for you? Do you hear the prompting of the Holy Spirit telling you just how far you have departed from His side? Then hearing His word, respond to Him. You will hear the voice of your Shepherd in your Bible. Merely reading the Bible can be quite profitless, but if while reading you are also crying out to Him, you will hear His voice and your will be found by Him. Our Restorer! He comes seeking us in times of failure, in times of discouragement, in times of loneliness. He seeks us daily as we should be seeking Him.

One final word to any here that might be **non-Christians**. Everything that we have said today has respect to God's people, the sheep of His fold. But there may be a word here for you. As we stated earlier, the metaphor of sheep in the Bible is used not only of those who believe on Jesus, but it is also used of those who will yet believe on Him. You may be in your sin and quite content to be so. But if you are one of the Lord's, you too will hear His voice. He is going to come and get you and see to it that you are also numbered among His people. The Lord Jesus said,

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. (John 10:16)

These ones who have not yet come to Him are also objects of His affection and will be the objects of His saving action. Do you hear His voice calling to you? You may be the farthest from His fold. But if you

are His, He will find you where you are and bring you to Himself. I would urge you to listen to Him and stop running from Him and yield to His loving action to save you from your sin.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, ²¹to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:20 NKJ)

A Further Word on the Restoration of One's Soul

Read good books that will lead you to consider your heart, your ways, and the way of renewal and restoration. I quoted earlier from a book by **Octavius Winslow**, entitled, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*. In it he has these chapter headings:

1. Incipient Declension
2. Declension in Love
3. Declension in Faith
4. Declension in Prayer
5. Declension in Connexion with Doctrinal Error
6. On Grieving the Spirit
7. The Fruitless and the Fruitful Professor (i.e. professing Christian)
8. The Lord, the Restorer of His people
9. The Lord, the Keeper of His People.

Winslow gave this instruction to those who would see the Lord restore their souls:

1. The first direction which we would give in the way of recovery is *acquaint yourself thoroughly with the real state of your soul as before God*. As the first step in your conversion was to know yourself to be a lost, helpless, condemned sinner; so now, in your *re-conversion* to God, you must know the exact state of your soul. Be honest with yourself; let there be a thorough, faithful examination of your spiritual condition; let all disguise be removed, the eye withdrawn from the opinion of men, and the soul shut in with God in a close scrutiny of your worst state.

2. The second step is, to *discover and bring to light the cause of the soul's declension*. "Is there not a cause?" Search and see what has fallen as a blight upon thy soul, what is feeding at the root of thy Christianity. What is it? Is it the world, creature love, covetousness, ambition, presumptuous sin, unmortified corruption, the old leaven unpurged? *Search it out*. Rest not until it is discovered.

3. The next step in the work of personal revival, is, to *take the cause of the soul's declension immediately to the throne of grace, and lay it before the Lord*. There must be no parleying with it, no compromise, no concealment: there must be a full and unreserved disclosure before God, without palliation or disguise. Let your sin be confessed in all its guilt, aggravation, and consequences.

Nor must this great work be undertaken in your own strength. It is pre-eminently the result of God the Holy Ghost working in, and blessing the self-efforts of the believer: "If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Rom. 8:13).

4. *Endeavor to enrich and enlarge your mind with more spiritual apprehensions of the personal glory, love, and fulness of Christ.* All soul-declension arises from the admission of things into the mind contrary to the nature of indwelling grace. The world,—its pleasures, its vanities, its cares, its varied temptations,—these enter the mind, disguised in the shape often of lawful undertakings and duties, and draw off the mind from God, and the affections from Christ.

5. But that which forms the great secret of all personal revival is yet to be disclosed; we allude to a *fresh baptism of the Holy Ghost*. [This is not to be confused with modern Pentecostal teaching about this matter, but it is in conformity with the Puritan understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit empowering His people—Pastor Lars]

And this is the state, dear reader, you must pass through, would you experience a revival of God's work in your soul: you must be *re-converted*, and that through a fresh baptism of the Holy Ghost. Nothing short of this will quicken your dying graces, and melt your frozen love; nothing save this will arrest your secret declension, and restore your backsliding heart. *You must be baptized afresh with the Spirit*; that Spirit whom you have so often and so deeply wounded, grieved, slighted and quenched, must enter you anew, and seal, and sanctify, and reconvert you. O arise, and pray, and agonize for the outpouring of the Spirit upon your soul; give up your lifeless religion, your form without power, your prayer without communion, your confessions without brokenness, your zeal without love... Seek, the, above and beyond all other blessings, the renewed baptism of the Holy Ghost. "Be filled with the Spirit"; seek it *earnestly*,-- seek it under deep conviction of your absolute *need* of it,--seek it *perseveringly*,-- seek it *believingly*. God has promised, "I will pour out My Spirit upon you"; and asking in the name of Jesus, you *shall* receive.
