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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

BACKSLIDING HEALED.

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A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 1ST MARCH, 1868,

BY MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

“I will heal their backsliding.—HOSEA xiv. 4.

OUR text simply divides itself into two parts;—we have first *the disease*, and secondly *the remedy*. We have first the backsliding, and then secondly we have the promise to the persons here included,—“I will heal their backsliding.”

First, then, *the disease*—the backsliding. I am fully aware that it is customary among men to draw a line of distinction between apostasy and backsliding; but it did appear to me many years ago that backsliding and apostasy, as named in the holy Scriptures, are one and the same thing; and it appears so to me now; and that this is a term never used except in the old covenant. I must therefore be careful this morning to point out the disease—what this backsliding is or was; and, if I think of it as I go along, in what way it applies to the Gentiles; for I shall have to deal with the word, in the first place, as it applied to the Jews. Let us, then, take the word of the Lord to be our guide. One object I have in view is to show the difference between the new and the old covenant; a difference which you cannot too clearly understand, and which you cannot be too firmly established in; for by mixing up the two we have an artificial religion—a religion made up of a little of that which is absolute and a little of that which is conditional; a little of the Lord's doing and a great deal of the creature's doing, a little of the Lord's holiness and a great deal of fleshly sanctity. So men wrap it up, and so Satan is delighted. First then I notice that backsliding and apostasy are the same thing. One proof of this, which is but a poor proof in comparison of those I shall name, but one proof, is that wherever the word “backslider” or “backsliding” is named you may with propriety substitute for it the words “apostate,” “apostasy,” or “apostatizing.” Now take the 14th verse of the 14th of Proverbs;—“The backslider in heart,” the apostate in heart, “shall be filled with his own ways.” Then go to the first chapter of Proverbs, and you will get what is meant by this apostate, this backslider in heart, being filled with his own ways. The Lord there, speaking to his old covenant people in old covenant language, saith, “Ye have set at

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nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof; therefore I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh." Then go to the 31st verse, and there it saith of these same people that were thus apostates in heart, "Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices." Then saith Solomon, in contrast to this, "A good man shall be satisfied from himself." If you ask what that apostasy consisted in, I will tell you. The holy prophet mourned that apostasy; he was grieved to see that apostasy, and he describes it thus, for that is in reality the backsliding;—"The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." Are you going to persuade me that these are real Christians that did this? Yet these are the persons that are called backsliders; that is to say, apostates, for that is the meaning; and we shall have stronger proof presently. Now "the good man shall be satisfied from himself." There is not a good man upon the earth by nature. If any man be a good man, it is by receiving from God that which makes him good, and that which he has received from God that makes him good is Christ Jesus the Lord. When Jesus Christ is received as your life, then you have a good life, and you will live a good life; you will live a life of faith by the Son of God. When you receive Jesus Christ, you will receive him as your sanctification, and by that you are made good by faith as you stand in him. And, receiving Jesus Christ, you receive his righteousness, by which you stand accepted before God, and shall be brought into the bond of the better covenant. That is the good man washed in the blood of the Lamb; his evils are washed away, his sins forgiven and covered, not imputed to him, but unto him is imputed righteousness. Then he is a good man. He shall be satisfied not with himself, nor by himself, nor by his own doings; but he shall be satisfied *from* himself—that is, from his own personal experience. Here am I at the end of forty-two years since the Lord, by the 8th verse of the 54th of Isaiah, brought my soul into the bond of the everlasting covenant, and I can say this morning, with the deepest reverence, with a heart full of love and gratitude to God, that those forty-two years have not been able to move me one inch from where I was then brought to. I was brought into the liberty of the gospel, into the bond of God's covenant, and I am a total stranger to change. As the Lord liveth, from that day to this the same eternal truth has been dear to my heart, and I feel, grace enabling me, what I hope and believe hundreds of you feel, more willing, like the martyrs of the Old and New Testament dispensations, to give up anything rather than give up God's truth. I am satisfied from myself of the suitability of that truth, I am satisfied from my own experience that nothing else can save me. What does the Lord say? "I will satiate the soul of the priests." Now remember, all God's people are priests; they are consecrated to him by faith in the blood of the Lamb. "I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness." Oh, my hearer, what sayest thou? I have been satisfied not *with* myself—oh no, ten thousand times twicfold, no; I have cause every day of my life to be more and more dissatisfied with myself; yet *from* myself, from my own experience, I am perfectly satisfied with the goodness of God, and can say with one of old, "How great is thy goodness which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee, which thou has wrought before the sons of men." Thus the apostate in heart shall be filled with his own ways, according to the 1st of Proverbs, when God will laugh at his calamity, where grace does not step in and prevent, and will mock when his fear cometh, even his desolation, that shall come as a whirlwind—suddenly and effectually. Backsliding, then, and apostasy are one and the same thing. Who can read the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Jeremiah and not arrive at the conclusion that the persons

there called backsliders were apostates from God's covenant, God's altar, God's prophets, God's truth, and God's ways? Why, it is said of them, "According to the number of thy cities are thy gods." The very persons who are called backsliders there have as many gods as they have cities. And is there not a spirit of that kind in our day? Well, saith one, I am not tied down to one sect, or the other sect; I receive them all. Then you are not tied down to the sect everywhere spoken against; and so you pride yourself, do you, in having as many gospels as there are cities? You pride yourself, do you, in placing your hope in as many gospels as men choose to make? Ah, poor creature, this is indeed a delusion, and thou wilt find it to be a delusion when thou shalt lift up thine eyes in hell. Now these persons who are called backsliders had forsaken the Lord for other gods; and shall I tell you one of the reasons why they forsook him? I hope this will sink down into your hearts. You must not be afraid to be misrepresented for the truth's sake. Never mind what men say, never mind if they misrepresent us as they have done; do not take any notice of that; you go on, and be satisfied in your own mind. One of the reasons why they apostatised or backslid was that God's truth was not holy in their estimation. God's truth was dangerous doctrine, and therefore, being dangerous, they went away after something that would be more holy in their eyes, and more safe. I will come to the proof presently, after I have asked this assembly, as in the sight of the living God, can you point out one age in which God's prophets were holy men in the sight of the world? Can you point out one age in which the truth has been pure and holy in the eyes of the world? "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted?" And when the Saviour came, was he holy in the world's eyes? You know he was not; you know that they called him what in modern phrase would be Antinomian; you know they called his testimonies what in modern phrase would be Antinomianism. They were so pure, so holy, and he was so unholy, that they said, "If we let him thus alone, and suffer such an one to live among us, the Romans will come"—look at the devil's power over them!—"and take away both our place and nation." The judgments of heaven will fall upon us if we do not banish from our midst this awful character, this dreadful Jesus of Nazareth. And so they verily thought they ought to crucify him, they verily thought they ought to put him away, for that it was not fit that he should live. Was there since the foundation of the world, will there ever be again, a class of men, servants of God, so holy, so heavenly, so spiritual, so devoted, so earnest, so given up body and soul to God as were the holy apostles of the Lamb? And what were they in the eyes of the world? The offscouring of all things; and they were charged with holding the doctrine, "Let us do evil that good may come;" they were charged with setting aside God's law, and advocating everything but that which men called holiness. Look at the martyr Stephen. Was there ever a holier man, a more devoted man? Was there ever a man who was enabled to throw his body and his soul more wondrously into the service of God, to the good of immortal souls, than Stephen? What was their accusation against him? "He hath spoken against this holy place, and against the Lord." The hypocrites!—I wish I could pronounce that word more emphatically;—the hypocrites! Why, we must not allow such a man as this to live. And so, without even the formality of law, they dragged him out, and stoned him to death. But with all their malice, his face shone as an angel's; the heavens were opened, Christ appeared, Stephen was happy, and pitied them from his heart. "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Did you ever hear a free will parson or a duty faith parson speak well morally of the people of God? I never did. Their own artificial religion, their own book read, book acquired religion, their own learning, their own fleshly and mere intellectual religion, has never rooted up either the blindness or enmity of their hearts;

and therefore their charity is universal except to the people of God. Fight with none but these men, get rid of these Antinomians; then we shall convert the world. These, then, are the backsliders. God's truth is not holy enough for them. You say, Where is your proof? Here it is;—2nd of Jeremiah; “What iniquity have your fathers found in me,”—in this covenant by which I brought you out of Egypt, sustained you through the wilderness, and brought you into a plentiful country, provided everything for you;—“What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity,”—namely, idolatry,—“and are become vain?” Just compare that with the Saviour's challenge, “Which of you convinceth me of sin?” We there see that God's truth in their estimation was not pure enough; it did not lead to good works. They adopted the system that led to good works. And I will tell you one or two of their good works, and what they were in their own estimation. And these are called backsliders. What were they but apostates. Tell me that such people as these were regenerated! Tell me that these people were of the same spirit as Jeremiah, and of the same spirit as those who knew the Lord. You might as well try to persuade me that Satan himself is a Christian, as to try to persuade me that these murderers of the prophets were Christians. Well, they adopted a system that led to good works. Ah, saith the priest, you ought to do anything in order to be holy, you ought to do anything in order to be righteous. So they went to the people's houses, and visited them, and they told the mother that she would be damned to eternity if she was not holy; and one of the things you ought to do is, you ought to sacrifice to the gods as we instruct you; you ought to sacrifice your children if we bid you. So they literally cast their poor little infants into the fire and burned them, to prove their zeal! Make me believe these were Christians! And yet these were the backsliders. Yet our divines go twaddling on, trying to make out that there is a difference between backsliding and apostasy. Now in that same chapter what does the Lord say? “Also in thy skirts”—what! is that the Lamb's bride? is that the virtuous woman united to Christ, that loves her offspring? is that the woman who is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet? is that the woman who riseth while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household? is that the Lamb's bride? “Also in thy skirts is found the blood of the souls of the poor innocents,” the poor little infants: “I have not found it by secret search;” this abominable sacrifice, this unnatural, horrid service, is public to all. What do you think these people were in their own eyes? The very next verse will tell you. Oh, I have not sinned; I am free from iniquity; as for you high doctrine people, who confess that you have no goodness and no righteousness of your own, you ought to be ashamed of it; as for me, I am innocent, I have not sinned. These are the apostates, these are the backsliders. Is it not, allowing for difference of national custom, just so now? The man that is the farthest from God's truth, is sure to be the most holy in his own eyes; the man that has the greatest enmity against that truth possible, is sure to be of all men the most righteous in his own eyes. What man since the fall was ever more righteous in his own eyes than was Saul of Tarsus? Thus, then, you see here what a state of blindness and enmity they were in. Nevertheless, bad as they were, low as they were sunken, the Lord did from time to time send his prophets and invite these backsliding children,—“Return unto me, ye backsliding children; return unto me, ye apostatising children, for I am married unto you.” Ah, but that marriage was a mere moral tie—that's all. The Lord distinguishes in Jeremiah between the two covenants. “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt”—which

is recorded in the 26th, 27th, and 28th chapters of Deuteronomy;—“which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord.” That marriage was a mere moral tie, and God, on the ground of that tie into which he had entered, invited them to return. But the new covenant marriage is something more than a mere moral tie. I am not going to exclude the idea of a moral tie, but the new covenant marriage is a vital unity of spirit to Christ; the new covenant marriage is a vital unity with God the Father in his love and counsel; the new covenant marriage is by an incorruptible seed brought into the soul, that liveth and abideth for ever. “I will put my law into their minds, and write it in their hearts;” and they will live a very happy life, for “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” I will declare from time to time that there is no spot in thee, that thou art glorious within, and that as thou hast mine heart, so I have thine heart; and I know thou art saying in thy heart, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon the earth I desire beside thee.” A marriage when it is a mere moral tie is a cold affair, because the heart is not there. When the wife finds she has not the heart, she hangs her head down; when the husband finds he has not the heart, he hangs his head down; it is not a reality. But here is a reality; and the true Christian can say what the backslider—that is the apostate—could not say;—the true Christian can look up to his covenant God, can lay his hand upon his breast, if he had to die the next moment, and say,—

“Thou hast my heart, it shall be thine,
Thine it shall ever be.”

There are six apostacies recorded in the Book of Judges. I will just name three. There were six reformations. But were those reformations their leaving the idols to which they had gone? Were they regenerations? I trow not, but only reformations; so they went back again. Othniel, the first reformer, did he go back? did he apostatize? Never, never. Did our good old mother Deborah go back? Never, never; she abode by the truth,—she never went back. The people brought themselves into captivity, having forsaken God’s truth, but Deborah never went back; she went forward and witnessed the victory of the Lord’s people, and celebrated it in those beautiful words, “So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.” And did our good friend, cautious, fearing, suspicious, doubting Gideon go back? No; he abode by the stuff, and was mighty by faith, though weak in himself. Gideon had seen so much of the enmity of these backsliders and opponents to God’s truth, that he was afraid to undertake their cause; so the Lord, as you know, encouraged him by one sign, and then by another; and poor Gideon, like the rest of us, after repeated tokens in his favour, gained a little strength and went, and we know how he gained the victory. Did he go back? Never, never. Jeremiah, in whose book the word “backslide,” which answers to “apostatise,” is mentioned more than in any other book, did he go back? See his first chapter. “I have made thee a brasen wall, an iron pillar, a defenced city, against the whole land.” Was he ever frightened back? Let us hear, and let us see. “They shall fight against thee,”—the kings, the princes, and the priests, as a matter of course, and the people,—“but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.” See Jeremiah, pretty well forty years after this, in his 31st chapter, recording the sanctions of the new, the better, the immutable covenant, showing that he had stood fast therein, and therefore was at the last favoured with glorious revelations thereof; for unto him that hath shall be given yet more abundantly.” If, then, a man can be a regenerated man, and know God’s truth, and yet set it at nought, and hate with all his soul those who love it; and if he can sacrifice to idols, if he can be at home in the devil’s service, if he can do as the

people I have described did, then I must confess that I am a total stranger to such an experience, to such a condition. And I will go farther, and say that it was the same apostate, backsliding spirit that slew the prophets, slew the Saviour, slew the apostles, and has slain the people of God since. All I can say is, "O my soul, come not thou into their secret; to their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united." They would break down the wall of separation that God has set up, they would slay the man Christ Jesus, and put themselves into the place thereof, that we may look to them instead of looking to the Lord our God.

But, secondly, I notice *the remedy*. Well, say you, what do you gain by all this? First, I gain what I believe to be the meaning of the holy Spirit in those scriptures where the people are called "backsliders." And if we are honest before him, he will stand by us as he did by Jeremiah. The second thing I gain by it is to see the blessedness of the better covenant. Now among those backsliders were some that in God's secret purpose were included in the new covenant. And how does he deal with them? "Turn, O backsliding children, for I am married unto you." That is the language of the old covenant; so I view it. Then the next words really belong to the new covenant. The Bible was not originally given in verses, and sometimes by the division into verses portions are put asunder that ought to be joined together, and sometimes parts are joined together that ought to be put asunder; but, notwithstanding that, the advantages of its being in verses are much greater than some few disadvantages that arise therefrom. "I will take you,"—here is the new covenant; here comes in our text,—"I will heal their backsliding." There are some among you that I have loved, do love, and shall love,—"I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion,"—there is the new covenant,—"and I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding. And it shall come to pass, when ye be multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, saith the Lord, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord,"—they shall have done with the old covenant,—but "at that time they shall call Jerusalem,"—that is the new Jerusalem,—"the throne of the Lord;" and into this Jerusalem, where Jesus reigns, "shall all the nations,"—as was the case in the sense there intended, in the apostolic age,—"be gathered." "But I said, How shall I put thee among the children." Why, if that were old covenant language I am upon now, the Lord would have said, How shall I persuade thee to be among the children? I have sent my prophets, and ye despise all my reproof, and will none of my counsel; how shall I persuade you? Ah, it is quite a change here; this is the new covenant. "I said, How shall I put thee among the children, and give thee a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the hosts of nations? and I said, Thou shalt call me, My Father; and shalt not turn away from me." Here, then, is a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the hosts of nations. Revelation 7th shows what this pleasant land, this goodly heritage of the host of nations is, and when they come into that, they see so much of the blessedness of their condition that they backslide no more, they apostatize no more—it is the same thing—they go back no more. "How shall I put thee among the children?" The 3rd chapter of John will answer this—by regeneration, by the manifestation of Christ in his mediation, by the interposition of God's immutable oath. Here the backsliding and apostacy are healed; the man is a new creature, he is born anew, brought into the new and living way, into the new covenant; the breach is made up, and there is never again to be a deadly quarrel between that soul and the blessed God. Is there not a mighty difference between the two covenants? In this new covenant there is no fatal apostacy. If we had no better covenant to be saved by than that recorded in the 28th of Deuteronomy, which the Lord made with the Jews, not a soul could be saved. But in this new covenant, of which

Jesus Christ is the better mediator, that better covenant, standing upon better promises, here we have all that vitally and eternally differs from the old. 32nd of Jeremiah, "I will make an everlasting covenant with them." Has he done so with you? Has not your soul drank in the testimony of that immutable covenant? I have been enabled to do so, and am not ashamed of it, nor afraid of it, nor tired of it, and never shall be. It is a remedy for everything. "I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not"—here is the sworn, positive engagement—"that I will not turn away from them, to do them good." God will not turn away from them now. He turned from Adam, for Adam sinned; he turned from the Jews, for he gave a bill of divorcement, as you read in the 3rd of Jeremiah. But here is another covenant, in Christ Jesus, that he will not turn away from them to do them good. "I will put my fear"—this new covenant fear—"in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." Believest thou this? If you do not, you are not convinced of your need of it, or you do not understand it. And now mark—not only so, but I will do it with infinite and eternal delight; "yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good; is not that strong enough." And stronger still—enough to win the heart of a flint stone if it could see it,—not only will I make this everlasting covenant not to turn away from them to do them good, and put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me, and not only will I rejoice over them to do them good, but "I will plant them in this land," this new covenant, incorruptible, undefiled inheritance; "I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and with my whole soul."

Job, I suppose you will be a backslider. Do you mean me? Yes; I mean you, brother Job. That is not my opinion, for "when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold." How do you know that? "Because my foot hath held his steps." He walked towards me in love, and choice, and redemption, and promise, and my foot, that is, my faith, shall never backslide. Ah, but you have cursed the day of your birth. Ah, but the devil wanted me to curse God, and said I should, but I have not, "My foot hath held his steps, his way"—and Jesus Christ is his way—"have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips." He said unto me "Live," and I did live, and I do live; and if you ask how, my answer is, In the knowledge of him who is my life; for "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth;" and though the devil has destroyed my skin, and by and by worms will eat my flesh, yet I shall rise by virtue of this Redeemer descending at the last day, and in my glorified body I shall see God—God manifest in the flesh, my Lord, my God, and my portion for ever. Well but, Job, after the Lord has afflicted you as he has, you do not love his truth, do you? Ah, "I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food;" and "though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." I know that all will come right at last. Well, David, what do you and your friends say in the 44th Psalm? You seem to have a great deal of trouble. "Our heart is not turned back, neither have our steps declined from thy way; though thou hast sore broken us in the place of dragons, and covered us with the shadow of death." How is that? Because they remembered his covenant. "All this is come upon us; yet have we not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant." All the apostle endured could not make him deal falsely in God's covenant. "None of these things move me." Now "in the mouth of two witnesses every word shall be established." Let us hear the apostle Paul. It is said in that 44th Psalm, "For thy sake are we killed all the day long;" and the apostle Paul quotes that, Now, Paul, will not you be an apostate, a backslider? "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." "None of these things move me." What a difference between the

religion of Paul and the religion of these backsliders or apostates. But you might some day, though, Paul. Oh no; "I am persuaded." But who persuaded you? Not men, you may depend upon it; men would not have persuaded me of that; but the Lord himself has persuaded me; "I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How beautifully, then, do the words of our text follow those of last Sunday morning—"In thee the fatherless findeth mercy." The Lord steps in in his new covenant, heals their backsliding; they become established in his truth, and so appreciate it as to say with the disciples, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." And you thus see, at least I do, that backsliding and apostasy are one and the same thing. Secondly, you see the necessity of a better covenant. Thirdly, you see that it is by the bringing in of this better covenant that there is a stop put to this apostasy, and you become established in the truth to be thrown down and plucked up, as Jeremiah says in the last verse of his 31st chapter, no more for ever. And how does this apply to the Gentiles? Well, all of us in the first Adam are apostates; we have all apostatized from God. I have not the gifts to point out as I would the awfulness of that apostasy. Oh, my hearer, to have an apostate heart, a heart full of enmity against God! why, it is to apostatise from the only thing that can do us good; it is to hate the only thing that can befriend us. It is godliness, and godliness only, that hath the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. Ah then, happy the man that knows something of his lost condition, so as to be led to receive the testimonies of this covenant, to understand the difference between the two, so as not to attempt to stand upon that that is decayed, waxed old, and ready to vanish away.

All, then, are backsliders or apostates, having all backslidden from all we had in the first Adam; but when convinced of our state, and made to seek mercy, then unto such is the promise, "I will heal their backsliding." And so the Lord takes them in hand, and perfects that which concerneth them, for his mercy unto such endureth for ever; they are formed for him as that special work of his own hands, which he will not forsake. They may draw back from many things, such as troubles and trials, and fiery furnaces,—that is, they may partially draw back from these,—but to draw back from the faith and from the truth as it is in Jesus, would be to draw back unto perdition; and if any man thus draw back, "my soul, saith the Lord, shall have no pleasure in him." "But we," saith the apostle, "are not of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul." We will suppose Noah had drawn back from the plan of the ark which God gave unto him, and had built an ark after his own fashion, what would have been the consequence? Why, the consequence would have been that both Noah and the ark of his own devising would have been swept away by the flood. Just so now if we are not found in the faith of God's elect; if we are not found in the completeness that is in Christ, and in the bond of the new and immutable covenant, we shall be lost, and that for ever. But Noah did not backslide from the truth. Rahab did not backslide, but was faithful, with a faithfulness that hypocrites are shocked at. God justified her; men condemn her. Be it so;—we know who is right in the matter. It is, then, by our backsliding—that is, our apostasy—from God in the first Adam, being healed by faith in Christ Jesus, that we shall be faithful unto death.