

## **TO BACKSLIDE IS NOT BEING PROGRESSIVE!**

**Today's Text:** Nahum Chaps 2-3

### **Extracts:**

*Though Nineveh of old was like a pool of water, now they flee away. "Halt! Halt!" they cry, but no one turns back. Take spoil of silver! Take spoil of gold! There is no end of treasure, or wealth of every desirable prize. She is empty, desolate, and waste! The heart melts, and the knees shake; much pain is in every side, and all their faces are drained of colour. ... Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and robbery. Its victim never departs. ...* Behold, I am against you," says the Lord of hosts; "I will lift your skirts over your face; I will show the nations your nakedness, and the kingdoms your shame. I will cast abominable filth upon you, make you vile, and make you a spectacle. *It shall come to pass that all who look upon you will flee from you and say, 'Nineveh is laid waste!'*" [Nah. 2: 8-10; 3: 1, 5-7]

*In France, a man married a woman because she had told him that she was a virgin.<sup>1</sup> After the wedding, the groom discovered that she had lied about her virginity. He went to court to seek an annulment of the marriage on grounds of breach of contract and the judge agreed. However, the ruling raised outcry in that country. Since it was a wedding between two immigrant Moslems, critics decried basing the decision on breach of contract and argued that the said ruling "undermined decades of progress in women's rights." In support of the critics, the French Urban Affairs Minister, Fadela Amara, said the court decision was "against the emancipation and liberty of women" and it was like "returning to the past."*

*Barring accident or rape, a girl loses her virginity through consensual sexual relations. When it is outside of marriage, it is called fornication or adultery, depending on the marital status of her sex partner. According to the word of God, fornication or adultery is a sin [1 Cor. 5: 9-13]. It amounts to backsliding from chastity. But, according to liberals, practising such a sin is progressive but upholding virtues is backward!*

*In today's study, Nineveh backslid a century after Jonah's sermon had led them to repentance. Was that being progressive? Let's find out!*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on 'Virginity ruling raises outcry in France,' The Associated press, Wed., June 4, 2008; [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24971969/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24971969/)

## 1. Background: Nineveh backslides

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. You will recall that a century earlier, God had sent the prophet Jonah to cry out against the city, that God was going to destroy it in forty days [Jon. 3: 4]. The people believed God and immediately “proclaimed a fast and put on sack cloth, from the greatest to the least of them” [v. 5]. The king of Nineveh caused to be proclaimed and published a decree, saying, “Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, *let every one turn from his evil way, and from the violence that is in his hands.*” God saw their repentance and forgave them [vv. 7-10]. Over time, Nineveh and, in deed, Assyria grew to become the most powerful nation of its time. But, a hundred years later, repentant Nineveh had backslidden. Material success went into its head and the city returned to being bloody and “full of lies and robbery” [Nah. 3: 1]. Was that progress?

Nahum used the vision of the destruction of Nineveh to give hope to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah where he was a prophet. Good news was coming for the remnants of God’s people because “the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off” [Nah. 1: 15]. The Lord was going to restore “the excellence of Jacob” and of Israel [Nah. 2: 1-2]. Ultimately, Nineveh (and Assyria) fell to and was destroyed by the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar.

Nahum’s message is also for us, modern believers. When we see what happened to those of old who had backslidden after knowing God, it would be abundantly clear to us that “the Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and *will not acquit the wicked*” [Nah. 1: 3]. What is it that makes people backslide after they have known God? Is it that they do not know they have backslidden or, like the French critics in our opening story, that they are being progressive by giving up “conservative religious practices”? To adequately answer those questions, we need to look more closely at what it actually means to be called a progressive in the sight of God.

## 2. Identifying the Progressive<sup>2</sup>

Let us begin with a basic assumption: *you cannot judge people’s true behaviour until you give them the freedom to choose.* God Himself laid out this principle in the Garden of Eden when He gave Adam the choice between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil [Gen. 2: 16-17]. Also, after Moses had revealed God’s commandments to the children of Israel, he said to them as they were about to enter the Promised Land, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life that both you and your descendants may live” [Deut. 30: 19].

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the ideas used here had earlier been developed in ‘Are you open-minded or empty-minded?’ *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 7, No. 29: 8 October 2006; [www.bibleresourcecentre.com](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com)

Legitimized compliance, on the other hand, limits choice and may only produce hypocrisy. For example, in some societies where only monogamy (one man, one wife) is legally permissible, serial monogamy is commonly practised. In other words, men go on to marry multiple wives but one at a time. So, divorce and adultery are common. In societies where alcohol is prohibited by law, those who can afford it travel abroad to places without similar laws to get drunk and behave wildly. Therefore, *from God's perspective*, a free-choice environment provides the level-playing field to assess who is backslidden or progressive.

The believer's road map can be traced as follows:

*a) The starting point is conversion*

A convert (in the Christian sense) is a person who has given up a past life of sin and accepted Christ as personal Lord and Saviour. Conversion is what puts us in a position to be evaluated as backslidden or progressive because if you have never been a believer, you cannot be said to have backslidden [**1 Cor. 5: 9-13**]. Conversion represents the point at which we have exercised free choice in a specific direction. Thus, converts have chosen Christ because they believe that He is the truth of God. For example, after Peter had preached Jesus to a huge crowd on Pentecost Sunday, they were "cut to the heart," and asked him and his colleagues what they should do. Peter replied, "Repent and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." About three thousand people that had gladly received the word were baptized and added to the body of Christ [**Acts 2: 1-38, 41**].

A convert is not necessarily every one who knows God (or about Him). Many people believe in God but not in Christ. However, since Christ alone is the true way to God [**Jn 14: 6**], they still need to accept Jesus before they can be called converts. For example, Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment, was said to be "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household... and prayed to God always" and could even see angels in visions. Yet, God asked him through an angel to send for Peter to show him the true way. Peter preached to Cornelius and his household about Jesus and while he was still speaking, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word." Peter then commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord [**Acts 10: 1-48**].

*b) Where do you go from there?*

After gladly receiving Christ and water baptism, what next? It is from there that believers tend to go in different directions, some of which are as follows:

### You could become an Apostate

An apostate is one who has fallen away from God's truth. Painfully, apostates hardly move far away from the body of Christ. In fact, they operate from within! They pose as angels of light like their master, Satan, but practise deception [**2 Cor. 11: 14-15**]. They are ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing [**Matt. 7: 15**]. Writing to the young pastor Timothy in the early church, Paul warned, "The Spirit expressly says that in latter times, some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron" [**1 Tim. 4: 1-2**]. Such people resist the truth of God [**2 Tim. 3: 7-8**], and revert to immorality [**2 Pet. 2: 14, 19-22**].

We may not know how we drift into apostasy unless we are careful. For example, we may be following spiritual leaders that we believe are following Christ. Sooner than later, they lead us astray. Out of pride or shame, we may find it difficult to return to the fold. In general, however, apostates do it with their eyes wide opened. For example, sexual perverts have permeated the priesthood in many congregations to perpetrate evil among brethren, and their actions have blasphemed God's name among believers and outsiders. Take the case of the gay Bishop of New Hampshire (USA), Gene Robinson, who plans this June to marry (in a civil union) his male partner of 20 years, and he has anchored his conduct on his love of God and the Scripture!<sup>3</sup> Which God? Which Scripture? Certainly, that kind of deviation from the point of conversion cannot be regarded as progressive. It cannot enhance the glory of God among humans.

### Or a Reprobate

The reprobate is one who rejects the truth of God *after testing it*. As Jesus spelt out in the Parable of the Sower, it is possible that the reprobate's earlier conversion lacked roots, having been planted on wrong motives or a hard heart, and it has been taken away after the first trial by Satan or choked by the cares of this world [**Matt. 13: 3-12**]. Paul has called those with reprobate minds people who have "*exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator*" [**Rom. 1: 25**]. The reprobate practises the following forms of unrighteousness, among many others [**vv. 26-31**]:

- Immoral perversion, especially homosexuality
- Wickedness, covetousness, envy, murder, etc.

<sup>3</sup> 'Gay rites; New Hampshire's Bishop Gene Robinson is about to enter into a civil union,' TimesonLine, April 29, 2008; <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article3833364.ece>

- Strife, deceit, backbiting, whispering
- God-hating, boasting, unforgiving, disobedient to parents, etc.

Again, we may not have consciously gone into being reprobate. It could start when some children raised in Christian homes have the privilege to live alone for the first time. Their praying and bible reading habits begin to break down and may even peter out. They no longer pay their tithes regularly, if at all. They no longer watch religious TV stations, such as TBN and EWTN. Instead, they drift into MTV and adult channels that push pornography. They no longer go to church as often as in the past. Sooner than later, Satan creeps into their lives in the form of seductive colleagues or dubious advisers.

Jesus illustrated that development with the story of a man out of whom an unclean spirit has been cast out. The bad spirit went through dry places looking for rest which it could find. The spirit then said to himself, “I will return to my house from which I came.” When he still found the place empty, swept and in order, he went with seven spirits more wicked than himself and seized control of the man once again. Jesus concluded, “The last state of that man is worse than the first. *So it shall be with the wicked generation*” [Matt. 12: 43-45].

Again, reprobates cannot be said to be progressive. They may be doing what is not legally penalized in their countries, such as fornication and adultery. They may hold views that are politically correct on such sins as abortion and same-sex marriage. But, as long as those things remain unacceptable to God, reprobates have backslidden; they are far from being progressive.

#### Or become Transformed

The transformed person always tests new experiences against the truth of God and holds on to the truth. This point is well made by Paul in the following words, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” [Rom. 12: 2]. With the Spirit of discernment [1 Cor. 12: 10], you are equipped with a spiritual radar to navigate through the trials and deceptions of living in a demented world.

Joshua gives us a good illustration of the transformed person. After bringing the children of Israel to settle in the Promised Land, they were confronted with two sets of values, namely, to stay with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or to succumb to the gods of the pagans of the land that they had just conquered. The latter were more attractive in terms of sexual perversity and moral laxity. He challenged his people with the following words [Josh. 24: 15]:

*If it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you shall serve; whether the gods which were on the other side of the River (Jordan), or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

Was Joshua living in the past? No. He was transformed. He was truly progressive! That is the direction God expects us to go.

### **3. Conclusion: The progressive follows Christ!**

Nineveh's destruction reminds us that the backslidden person's end is inevitably disastrous. However, the progressive road is also tough but it inevitably leads to eternal life with Christ. I believe that your choice will be quite obvious!

It is not easy to remain faithful in Christ because "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" [2 Tim. 3: 12]. That is why you must continue at all times to look up to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2]. It does not mean that you will not stumble and fall; but you must get up each time you fall by confessing your sins and remaining in fellowship with God. That way, you remain progressive right from your conversion until the day God calls you home. Progressive do not follow fashion or human idols. They follow Christ.

How about you?