

“How the Mighty Have Fallen”
Reflections to the Brothers I Care About
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In 2 Sam 1:19 David cries out over the death of Saul and his best friend, Jonathan, *“Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on our high places! How the mighty have fallen!”* Years later the following words were uttered by the prophet Nathan to David, after his sin with Bathsheba and a plot to kill her husband, Uriah, in 2 Sam 12:14: *“Because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme...”*

It is a spiritual conundrum to even imagine how such a great man, David, could lament over the fall of the King of Israel, having felt the very barbs of Saul’s hatred toward him, and the stab of pain over the loss of his best friend...and yet, years later, as King, fall to such depths of deception himself.

During my lifetime of ministry, I have cringed as I heard the names of prominent ministers widely publicized for their mistakes or failures. Some of these men I knew personally. Others I looked up to.

Some great leaders of unimaginable influence have made controversial statements that would almost seem to unravel the very fabric of their solid ministry. I think of two prominent leaders who, as I write this, reversed their stand on biblical marriage. I was especially saddened by an elderly leader, revered for his work in Bible translation, probably cornered by someone with an agenda, suggesting an embrace of same-sex marriage. Then, less than 24 hours later, he had to walk back what was printed from the interview with a written counterstatement that he “believes in a biblical marriage of a man and a woman.” Unfortunately, his motives were now questioned as to whether his conscience, his revenue stream, or public pressure got to him. I choose to believe it was conscience.

I do not dare to judge or even look down on any of these great men. In fact, I rejoice that God has restored a number of them through the years. If ever there was an adage that fit, it is, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”¹ I look back on my life and, unlike some who pound their chest and say, “I have no regrets”, I can look back, fortunately through redemptive pages of merciful history, and regret some decisions I made, words I had spoken, or something I had done. In fact, I shudder to think that I could have been completely shipwrecked as a backslidden teenager. Thank God, He has kept me in His grace.

Shortly after the highly publicized fall of a prominent evangelist, my son, who was a teen at the time, put his arms around me from behind and said, “Dad, you would never fail,

¹ First spoken by the English evangelical preacher and martyr, John Bradford (circa 1510–1555). Also repeated by D.L. Moody when a critic pointed to one of his converts now backslidden.

would you!” Everything inside of me wanted to assure him, “No, Son, your dad would never fail!” However, even the forming of those words, “I would never,” brought the weight of presumption that a man cannot bear. Paul said, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.”² And who, with any spiritual experience, could ignore the warning of Proverbs 16:18 “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before stumbling.” I thank God for the words the Holy Spirit gave me that day when I said to my son, “No, Mark, I think it not wise to say the words, ‘I would never...’ But I can tell you that if you and I will walk in the integrity of our hearts before God, He is able to keep us from falling and present us faultless before the throne.”³

Would it be wise to ask ourselves, without presumption or arrogance, “What are the reasons that make us susceptible to failure? How does this happen?” I want to know, because, if it could happen to these great men, surely, I am exposed to the same temptations or deception as them. In fact, it would seem that the greater the prominence, or the greater the influence, the larger the “bullseye” on the heart of men and women in ministry.

Here are some areas where we must guard our hearts.⁴ **We become vulnerable when...**

1. **We are no longer motivated by God’s glory:** God will not share his glory with another.⁵ He will not tolerate any attempt to abscond with what is rightfully His. Sometimes it is most difficult for us to discern our own motives. Jonathan Edwards once observed about two groups of people that tended to polarize during the first Great Awakening in the 1700s. He said the “responders” are those who examine their own motives; the “resisters” are those who question the motives of others.⁶ Paul instructed us in his letter to the Corinthians that if we would judge ourselves, we would avoid the judgment of God.⁷ I’ll opt for the former!
2. **We reduce the authority of scripture to match culture or convenience:** The Pharisees of the New Testament began as the “Hasidim” (literally Kingdom Loyal Ones) who withstood the Babylonian culture while in captivity. By the time of Christ, they were the very ones who resisted Him. Jesus gives us insight as to why: They began to substitute their traditions for the Spirit of God and God’s Word.⁸ The church was pure when it emerged out of the upper room. However,

² 1 Cor 10:12

³ Jude 24

⁴ Some subtitles adapted from an article by Joseph Mattera, 9-1-2015, charismanews.com, “7 Reasons So Many Mighty Christian Leaders Have Fallen.”

⁵ Is 42:8

⁶ Ref: Dr. Peter G. James, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/vpc-media/PDFs/sermons/2014-09-14%20The%20Big%20Test.pdf>

⁷ 1 Cor 11:31

⁸ Mk 7:8-9

within the first three centuries, the church had become corrupted selling indulgences, praying to saints, Mariology, purgatory and papal *ex cathedra*. Though Protestants, 500 years ago, rejected those errors, the decline of mainline denominations is often parallel with their disregard of the Holy Scriptures.

3. **We fail to stand against immorality:** When the culture speaks louder than the Word of God, it becomes unpopular to stand against the tide. That causes leaders to fear the public on issues like biblical morality. Jesus said we would know a tree by its fruit (Mt 12:33, Gal 5:19-21). In other words, our behavior simply reveals what is in the heart – it identifies our roots. The purpose of the Gospel is to apply the axe to the root of the corrupt tree. That means a change is demanded at the core of our being. Conversion means change. One cannot repent without changing – nor can one be truly saved without repentance.
4. **We disregard the importance of prayer:** The first deacons were chosen as a result of resolving a major problem that could have torn the fragile Early Church to pieces: The accusation of racism. The Gentile widows were accusing the church of giving Hebraic widows favored treatment. God impressed those early church elders to choose deacons who would make righteous judgments regarding the widows, but the elders were to “give themselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer.”⁹ Imagine, a whole ecclesiastical system was born out of the priority God placed on the elders to give themselves to prayer and the Word and not to be distracted by the material affairs of the church. Those priorities kept the church functioning in power and authority. Seeking God is an unspoken declaration of total dependence upon Him. After all, we need His grace and empowerment to affect anything eternal. And, isn't that what it's all about – the eternal?
5. **We are lured by an attraction to worldly possessions:** Wealth is never denounced in the Scriptures. However, the Word is replete with warnings about the attraction of it. I was once asked to talk about “Prosperity and the Lifestyle of the Minister” to a large group of ministers. I wrestled most of the night with the subject, since I knew I was one of four speakers, two whose fame was often characterized as “prosperity gospel.” I did not wish to counter the position I knew they would take – but I had to be true to myself. The Holy Spirit gave me a revelation that night that helped me sort out what I felt God asked me: “What is prosperity?” After a long time of pouring over the Word and testing my own heart, I believe God showed me that prosperity is the ability to reap in the fields where we have sown. If one is a business owner selling cars, prosperity is the ability to reap in that field – selling cars. But the question for us as ministers is this: “What field are we sowing in?” What is the focus of our hearts? Is our field the harvest of souls – or are we endeavoring to find “success” as the lifestyle of the rich and famous? The world sees through the celebrity lifestyle – and questions what field we're sowing in. It is not for me to determine what is the appropriate limit for a

⁹ Acts 6:4

minister's house, cars or property. However, I believe that a precious missionary, Dr. Mark Buntain, was an incredibly prosperous man. He lived in a small apartment in Calcutta, India, and had little by way of personal earthly possessions, in spite of the fact that millions of dollars flowed through his ministry to build hospitals and feed 30,000 people a day! Yet, he was a prosperous man. And, I suspect the harvest of souls that greeted him in heaven was reward enough! John described a precious scene in heaven where the elders cast their crowns at the feet of Jesus.¹⁰ Some have built pretty interesting theories about what that "crown" might be. However, Paul writes to the Philippian converts and calls them "my joy and my crown." If those we bring to salvation are our crown, no wonder we would cast them at the feet of the one who redeemed them!

6. **We are on a quest to find significance in things other than Christ:** Every person has a natural desire for significance. No one wants to be marginalized. However, when we find our identity in ministry other than in Christ, we run the risk of losing our true identity altogether. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me," said Paul.¹¹ Our true identity as redeemed believers is not in our vocation or our history. We are a man or a woman created in the image of God for the purpose of communing with Him. When we are driven by ambition rather than being led by the Holy Spirit, we run the risk of doing things for our own sake rather than His. How many ministries have been started by well-meaning pastors endeavoring to imitate the success of another? How many building programs were started as a memorial to our accomplishments? In Phil 4:12 Paul says, "I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need." This sounds like some sort of "Oh-to-be-nothing" humility – until you get to the next verse, which says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me!"¹² This was neither a glorification of poverty nor wealth. It was simply divine perspective. His identity was clearly in and of Christ, which nullified the pursuit of lesser things.
7. **We neglect our own personal lives:** The maiden in the Song of Solomon said something that has pricked my heart on more than one occasion. She said, in essence, "My brethren have put me in charge of many vineyards, but my own vineyard have I not kept."¹³ I have served on multiple boards and have been asked to oversee numerous ministries. But, at times, I have felt the tug of the Holy Spirit simply asking me to come close again. For many busy ministers, it's not a deliberate or calloused neglect; rather, it's the natural process of our souls getting dry and "leathery" in the work of the noonday sun. It's the wineskin that needs to be refreshed with a cleansing agent, massaged with oil again, and

¹⁰ Rev 4:10

¹¹ Gal 2:20

¹² Phil 4:13

¹³ Song 1:6

refilled with new wine. Truly God wants us to “prosper” in every sense of the word. “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.”¹⁴ There seems to be a direct relationship between our prosperity and health with our soul prospering – enriched by God’s Word and His Spirit.

Let me reverse the negative perspective of these principles and reflect on them as ideals worthy of our embrace:

- 1. Give God the glory.**
- 2. Honor the authority of Scripture.**
- 3. Stand against immorality.**
- 4. Seek the face of God.**
- 5. Avoid worldly motivations.**
- 6. Find your significance in Christ.**
- 7. Maintain your personal walk with God.**

By citing these principles, I am not suggesting we live, as ministers, by some codified holiness defined by our ability to keep the rules. We will inevitably fall short – and even if we were able to keep them perfectly, we would then be subject to the temptation of pride, the subtle trap of Phariseeism. Jesus and Paul cautioned that we are to “guard our hearts.”¹⁵ Apparently that falls on us – our decisions, our will.

Sometimes, we as ministers find ourselves in the awkward place of being lifted up with compliments and accolades. I’ll admit it feels pretty good when someone notices something we’ve done well. It’s when we become enamored by our own headlines that there is a danger. We need to avoid the high altitude of a “pedestal” because it’s such a long way down. Some have probably tried to put us there from time to time. We simply need to remind ourselves and others that there is but one Messiah. Therefore, “Put not your trust in princes, neither the son of man in whom there is no help.”¹⁶ No King but Jesus!

¹⁴ 3 Jn 2

¹⁵ Lu 21:34; Phil 4:7

¹⁶ Ps 146:3