

HOW THE STRONG BECOME WEAK

There is widespread apostasy in the churches of Christ that is now about thirty or forty years old. One of the most often asked questions about this sad spectacle is, "How could brother — have been deceived and lead astray by the error; he was always so strong? The strong are not immune from the onslaughts of the devil. They come under greater attack than anyone. There are many ways in which Satan can ensnare those who many of us thought would never be enslaved by his tactics. This article points to four of them.

Inconsistent practice of spiritual activities: Those who sporadically attend to the worship of God, neglect prayer and study, and who fail to live up to the standards of the Word of God every day, will soon be in weakened spiritual condition. Hebrews 5:13 points out that those who are of full age are "*those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*" It is not the hearer of the Word of God who will cast the appropriate reflection from the mirror, but the one who does it (Jam. 1:22-25). A person who neglects the food and exercise the physical body needs will become weakened and perhaps die: the same thing is true with one's spiritual wellbeing. One who fails to avail himself of the blessing of prayer, will come to depend upon his own strength not God's, and by doing so will be sapped of spiritual vitality. The arm of flesh will fail, but the mighty hand of God will lift us up.

Increased attention to worldly concerns: The devil knows that if he can get a person to take his focus away from spiritual matters, and put his emphasis on the concerns of this world, he can easily become weak. In the description Jesus gave of those choked in the thorny ground, He said they hear the care of the world and the deceitfulness of riches (Matt. 13:7, 22). The thorns win out, and these bring no fruit to perfection. Is it possible that since apostasy has spread in large part because of cowardly elders refusing to stop the mouths of gainsayers (Tit. 1: 9-11), that for many years "elders" have been chosen more for their business acumen than for spiritual qualifications, and that since business success can easily lead to one caring more for the things of the world than for the things of God, not only do they allow the flock to be made vulnerable to the wolves, they become weak themselves? Of course, one does not have to be an elder to be lured by worldly concerns, nor does the worldly concern have to be pursuit of money, it can be worry over circumstances or growing to love pleasure more than God.

Involvement with corrupt companions: The possibility is great that many, if not all of us, have those near and dear to us who have at least partially been made weak from having chosen people of the world as some of their closest friends. Do people believe the inspired Paul wrote the great words of warning just to fill space in a letter? "Be not deceived, evil companionships corrupt good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33 ASV). Evil companions can tempt Christians to skip worship services to do something else, lead them into wicked behavior and impure thoughts, and just generally take their eyes off the goal of heaven. Over time, these evil companions cause them to be severely weakened, if not to depart from Christ and His church completely. One of the saddest things about situations of this kind is that the person or persons in the wrong company may not be able to see their incrementally weakening state, but others can. Because they cannot see it themselves, warnings do them no good. They will not listen. If they would just

realize the very act of choosing such companions in the first place is disobedience to God, they would not find themselves, at least not for this cause, weakened or apostatized from the Lord.

Ignoring changing circumstances: Our hearts are saddened when we observe many congregations and individuals at different points on the road to apostasy. They are all the time slipping farther and farther away from the things they have been taught (Heb. 2:1). Little by little error creeps in, and those who ignore the changing circumstances eventually find themselves defending the very falsehoods they once opposed. Perhaps like this writer, you have often had persons tell you they haven't really kept up with things that are happening in the Lord's church. The admission is never a surprise. They had made previous statements demonstrating they were guilty of such neglect. As a result of their ignorance, such brethren do not know that brethren who could be fellowshiped just a few short years ago can be no longer. Persons who make this mistake may finally end up on the devil's, not the Lord's, side. They are soon guilty of worshipping with, and extending fellowship to, those who are unworthy. Paul knew about the error of Hymenaeus and Philetus, and that their error was responsible for overthrowing the faith of some (2 Tim. 2:16-18). Because of this knowledge, he was able to warn Timothy about them. In first Corinthians 5:1, we read that Paul learned about things that were happening in the church at Corinth through the reports of brethren. Based on the reports, he wrote them with stern rebukes. Do that today, and you will be accused of yellow journalism.

There are many other things that can cause the strong to become weak. Whatever the cause of one's faltering may be, the preventions are easily identified. Study to show one's self approved unto God (2 Tim. 2:15), watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation (Mark 14:38), and walk circumspectly as wise men and not fools (Eph. 5:15). Peter's words are apropos, "**For if ye do these things ye shall never fall**" (2 Pet. 1:10).

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