

Introduction: How can it be that committed believers may seriously wander from God's ways, like Peter, David and the author of Psalm 119:176 did? We will consider this question further in this week's Bible reading notes.

Monday: read Matthew 18:12-14 and Psalm 119:67. It is a fact that even believers fall into sin - even after they have come to know the Lord - deceived by Satan and driven by their own hearts. However, let us not despair when sin humiliates us or when we fail to resist it. God has ordained all our afflictions and temptations, designing ultimately that we learn from our mistakes to rely on Him more and more. With the Psalmist in Psalm 119:67, we confess that "it was good for us to be afflicted, that we might learn not to go astray". Let us learn the necessity of each day confessing our sins anew, and let us daily know the joy of God's gentle restoration.

Meditate and Pray: Let us rejoice in the fact of God's tireless commitment to forgiving our sins, using these words from Rev. William Harrell:

God always loves His people! No matter how far they stray, no matter how often they sin, no matter how bad they become, His steadfast love for them never ceases! God always forgives His sinning children, no matter how many times they may ask for it, and He teaches us to ask at least daily not only for our bread but also for His forgiving our incessant debts (Matthew 6:9-13).

The shocking, if not scandalous, thing that the Word of God shows us through the pattern of believers' ungrateful sinning and God's gracious forgiveness is that where our sin increases, His grace really does abound all the more.

(Rev. William Harrell, June 2013 Minister's Letter)

Tues/Weds: read Matthew 18:12-20, Psalm 119:176 and John 16:8-11. When God ordains that for a time we will be subject to the sinful desires of our own sinful hearts, we must be careful to define what we are *not* saying: God is not the author or approver of sin. In terms of James 1:13, God cannot tempt anyone to sin – especially not His own beloved children. But how is it, then, that believers can find themselves wandering repeatedly? If we pray on a daily basis, "Lead us not into temptation", why then are we compelled by our succumbing to temptation to pray just as regularly, "Forgive us our debts"?

Why doesn't God answer all our prayers to be kept from sin? Well, there are elements of this which are a deep mystery. God's wise and holy judgment, which sovereignly ordains that we *will be* sheep that tend to wander and must be sought (Matthew 18:10-14), and that we *will need* instruction in how to be reconciled when we offend our brethren and they offend us (Matthew 18:15-20), also ordains the *means* of our recovery, namely, the effective convicting work of the Holy Spirit. Think of it! God the Father would not dare to allow us to be "tempted, tried and sometimes failing", as the hymn says, if He did not have full confidence in His Holy Spirit's power to bring us back. The Good Shepherd can let His sheep learn from their mistakes because *He knows* the quality of the "Sheep Dog" of the Holy Spirit to bring us back into the fold.

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank God for His Holy Spirit's convicting and restoring power in our lives when we do in fact wander like sheep into sin, even as John 16:8-11 promises. Since this mighty Spirit can convict the whole world of "*sin and righteousness and judgment*", can He not

also break through our hardened hearts in the very course of committing sin? Yes He can. “Oh, mighty Spirit, break our hearts when we wander, and thereby drive us back into the arms of the Savior we love. At the very moment when sin is at its height, break into our lives! Amen”.

Thursday: read Matthew 18:12-20 and Psalm 119:67. We are learning this week about the Father’s wise handling of our sinful hearts, and about the holy way in which He “tests us, in order to know” what is in those hearts. This work of God to use our sins for our benefit, is described in the Westminster Confession of Faith’s chapter on Providence, as follows:

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends. (WCF 5:5)

Meditate and Pray: Let us bow before the Father with gratitude as we confess after times of testing, “that it was good for us to be afflicted”, in order to learn not to go astray in future times of temptation.

Friday: read Matthew 18:15-20 and Luke 22:31-32. A second, hopeful reason why God at times leaves us to our heart’s sinful devices – is in order to magnify Christ’s shepherding skill in finding and restoring us – even when we are deeply mired in sin. Alas, if all were sunshine and success for us in our resisting sin, how quickly we would forget to rely upon the Lord Jesus’ daily help and prayers for us! This is exactly what happened to Peter. Determined to rely upon his own resources in the face of Satanic temptation, Peter denies his Lord, even as Luke 22:31-32 prophesies he would.

Meditate and Pray: *“Jesus, thank you for your ceaseless prayers for us, when Satan seeks to sift us as he sifted Peter. Help us to learn to turn back quickly to you in answer to your prayers for our restoration. And when we turn back, help us to strengthen others with the good news of Christ’s restoring power in their lives as well as ours. Amen”.*

Sat/Sun: read Matthew 18:15-35, Isaiah 40:11 and Luke 22:32. One of the most precious and important reasons why God ordains that we struggle with sin is that we might learn deep, real sympathy for those caught in the snare of sin themselves. Even when we see a believer apparently *captive to the bondage of, and even fainted from the deadly effects of sin*, let us learn not to give up hope in Jesus’ power to restore and even resurrect them! In terms of Isaiah 40:11, let us remember that Jesus can even carry broken sheep when no remedy has appeared to work! As John Owen wrote about such deadly cases of sin’s power falling on ensnared believers, with words that we should own as true even of ourselves at times:

“I shall grant this, that spiritual life may be in a swoon, when the spiritual man is not dead. There is a kind of ‘fainting of the spirits’, called swooning away, that may befall believers, which suspends all acts of life, when yet the man is not dead. So I say, if I should see a man, through the prevalency of corruption, have all the evidences of a spiritual life cast into a swoon, yet I will

not presently conclude the spiritual man is dead. Take the case of David, from the time of his great fall and transgression in the matter of Uriah until the coming of Nathan the prophet. Persons are generally inclined to believe that his spiritual life was in a swoon, when the spiritual man was not dead. His fall, as it were, beat the breath out of his body, and he lay a long time like a man dead, by reason of that one signal sin in his life.” (Owen Vol 9 pg. 388)

(John Owen also stresses that all of us, if we honestly examined ourselves more closely in the light of God’s Law, would see such spiritual fainting spells as part of our lives):

“I take it for granted, that there are few professors of religion, who have had any long continuance in the ways of faith, but that they have been overtaken with decays of some sort or another, either with respect unto spiritual or moral duties – in their churches or families, in their judgments or their affections, or in their inward frames or outward actions. We have all been overtaken with the effects of sloth, negligence, or the lack of being continually watchful. I wish it were otherwise.”

(Then he asks us directly...)

“... Have you, in the way of your profession, had any experience of these spiritual decays? I doubt not but that there are some who have been preserved green and flourishing from their first conversion unto God, who never fell under the power of sloth, neglect, or temptation, at least not for any remarkable season; but they are but few. It was not so with scarce any of those believers under the Old Testament whose lives are recorded for our instruction; and they were people who lived in an exact and diligent course of mortification.” (Owen Vol. 1 pg. 444-445)

So then: what should we do when faced with our tendency to wander? We should run to Christ with a real sense of how dangerous sin is. This is Owen’s instruction to the tempted Christian:

“He should labor to affect his mind with the danger of sin. It is not conceivable how subtle sin is to shift off an apprehension of the danger of it. “Notwithstanding this,” says the man, “yet I hope I am in a state of grace, and shall be saved, and come to the issue of it at one time or other;” and so the mind keeps off a due sense of the danger of it”. (Owen Vol. 9 pg. 390)

And how can we pray in the light of the traitorous nature of our hearts?

Pastor Carl’s closing prayer for these notes: *“Lord, please heal our wayward examples and crooked walking, whereby, even to our closest loved ones, we distort the clear witness of the Gospel. Forgive us when we have not led others in a straight line towards Jesus – but have caused others’ feet to wander as they follow our crooked steps. Please Lord Jesus, no matter how many times it takes: confront us, chastise us, stand up to us, until the obstacles to others’ believing are removed from the path of our Gospel witness and lives. Forgive us when **we** are the biggest stumbling block towards the conversion of others, or when **we** cause those “little ones who believe in you” to stumble through our lack of loving concern. How hurt you must be, Lord Jesus, when you see us turn our back on you in order to please old associates and friends. Have mercy upon us. Make us loyal above all else to the pure and true Gospel of grace and to our Savior. Amen.”*