

Our Apostasy

Psalm 23

Charles Whitaker

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During this past summer, my good friend from Normandy, Mr. Gilbert Boyer, wrote to me in uppercase letters of the, "FRENCH SPIRITUAL DISASTER. And more so," he continued, "that is much worse than the defeat of 1940 during the Second World War." He is speaking of the defeat of France by the Germans. He goes on to talk of the resistance movement. Those of you old enough to remember, or who are like me and get your history by watching, "Hogan's Heroes," may remember that Charles De Gaulle, and others, established a French government abroad during the war. Its purpose was to discomfort what is called traitor France, the Vichy government, a government that collaborated with the German occupation forces there in France. Loyal Frenchmen looked upon that government, the Vichy, as a government of, "deserters and turncoats."

"Then," says Mr. Boyer, "a few Frenchmen and a few Frenchwomen joined the Resistance!" Mr. Boyer goes on to recognize a difference between this resistance movement and the current apostasy that is in God's church. "But, after this great apostasy," referring to the church of God, "nobody offered resistance!" He laments what he calls the "new Blitzkrieg of the spirit," which he defines as a "brutal and rapid attack, which brethren have put up with." And, he brings the matter down to earth, "My family and I were very sorrowful, alone, at a loss, and distraught."

Mr. Boyer's is a stunning letter. So pointedly and poignantly does it describe the extent of our loss in recent years, that the length, width, and breadth of the current unrelenting apostasy has not failed to bereave a single one of us of friends, and/or relatives; indeed it has bereaved everybody in the church organization, which taught us the truth for so many years.

The keynote of my comments today is Luke 18:8, you know it so well, "Nevertheless when the Son of man comes, shall he find faith on the earth?"

Today, let us look at apostasy. That is a big subject, so I will limit my scope to looking at its almost overwhelming dimensions, the vast proportions of the prophesied "falling away" of these last days. It has affected the Church of the Great God significantly this past year. I will conclude by looking at some steps we can take to ensure that we will not be a part of this apostasy, but rather a part of the remnant, which God will save from this world's corruption.

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The word "apostasy" comes to us from two Greek words, which together mean, "a standing off from, a revolt, a renunciation." *Webster's Second Edition* defines it this way: "An abandonment of what one has voluntarily professed; a total desertion or departure from one's faith, principles or party."

Apostasy involves time, what one once subscribed to, versus what one currently subscribes to. An apostate, therefore, is one who fails to resist—a turncoat. He is one who "stands off," or, in our idiom, "backs away" from his earlier beliefs. One is not born an apostate; one becomes an apostate. That is important. Apostasy involves change in the wrong direction.

Let us begin in the writings to see what they say about the extent of apostasy:

Psalm 53:1-4 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity; there is none that does good. God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back; they are altogether become filthy; there is none that does good, no, not one. Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge? Who eat up My people as they eat bread: they have not called on God.

First, notice that these people—they are not identified here, nor are the circumstances—were not filthy from the outset; that is important. They became filthy somewhere along the line.

Second, the force of the words 'every one' is not just a vast majority, as some who seek to explain away God's truth assert. Rather, it means "each individual of the whole." The psalmist is taking note of the ubiquity of godlessness. It is everywhere.

So ubiquitous is the falling away that Paul, in Romans 3, applies this scripture to the whole world. But, most specifically, as applied by the psalmist here in Psalm 53, he comments on the vast number of the "workers of iniquity. . . . who eat up My people." (verse 4) Who makes up this large body of apostates, those who became filthy, who once knew the Truth, but who became filthy?

Can Psalm 53 refer to people in God's church? Turn to Isaiah 58, where God speaks further about, "My people." We will be spending a while here in Isaiah. God makes plain His audience in the very first verse,

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Isaiah 58:1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet, and show My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

This is principally addressed to God's own people. Now, notice what He has to say about His people in chapter 59. We will not have time to go through the rest of chapter 58, but there is no change of audience. God is still speaking about His people.

Isaiah 59:1-3 Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perverseness.

Can we believe our ears when we read this? Is God talking about His church when He uses that kind of language? What an indictment of God's people! Consider the virtual state of warfare in God's church today, and you will have no problem figuring out about whom verse 8 is talking.

Isaiah 59:8-9 The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings; they have made them crooked paths: whoever goes therein shall not know peace. Therefore is judgment far from us, neither does justice overtake us; we wait for light, but behold obscurity.

All the jawing and all the doctrinal papers are seeking to "illuminate" the ministry with so-called new truth. But, the fruit is only more obscurity; people miss the mark now more than ever.

The prophet's cry rises to a horrible crescendo in verse 14:

Isaiah 59:14 And judgment is turned away backward, and justice stands afar off; for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter. Yes, truth falls, and he that departs from evil makes himself a prey.

Yes, brethren, some do depart from evil. Hang on to that fact.

Isaiah 59:15-16 So truth fails, and he who departs from evil makes himself a

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prey. Then the LORD saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor.

There it is. Of course God is not looking for an intercessor among those in the world. God's people have an intercessory role. But, the church's apostasy has become so pervasive that He cannot find anyone who will serve as an intercessor like Abraham did with Sodom, or Moses, Aaron, and Phinehas. The list goes on. God can find no one to serve as an intercessor.

Now, this does not mean that everybody in God's church will be an apostate at the end of the day. Of course not. Some do, as we saw, depart from evil. Drop down to verse 20, and you will see where Isaiah addresses these few:

Isaiah 59:20 And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and to them that turn from transgression in Jacob, says the Lord.

Those who faithfully "turn from transgression" make up the remnant, which is God's church. Isaiah 59 speaks of a great falling away, of a highly apostate church. He is talking about a very small remnant remaining loyal to God.

Isaiah 63:1-3 Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this One who is glorious in His apparel, traveling in the greatness of His strength?—I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save." Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like one who treads in the winepress? "I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me.

God finds no one on His side.

Isaiah 63:4-6 For the day of vengeance is in My heart, and the year of My redeemed has come. I looked, but there was no one to help, and I wondered that there was no one to uphold; therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me; and My own fury, it sustained Me. I have trodden down the peoples in My anger.

Brethren, these are [the feast of] Trumpets' words. God will bring salvation.

In verse 7 we see a different tone, a different mood as it were. It is a mood of thanksgiving, of supplication, and of repentance, not unlike Daniel 9. Also notice the number of plurals Isaiah uses there.

Isaiah 63:7 I will mention the loving kindnesses of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has bestowed on them according to His mercies, and according to the multitude of His loving kindnesses.

What a calming, beautiful verse! In all the midst of all this fearful vengeance on God's enemies—on those who seek to destroy God's Israel and the earth, which is Israel's inheritance—amid all this, those who are God's friends have the ability to quietly remember His mercy, thank Him for His goodness. There is a tremendous amount of peace and reassurance in that verse.

In verse 9, Isaiah continues his prayer. He remembers "the angel of His presence . . . who carried them all the days of old." The prophet remarks that God Himself was present with His people in the fire and cloud in the wilderness. But, notice the difference in verse 15, where Isaiah says,

Isaiah 63:15 Look down from heaven, and behold from the habitation of Your holiness and of Your glory: where is Your zeal and Your strength, the sounding of Your bowels and of Your mercies toward me? Are they restrained?

By the way, brethren, we are the habitation of God's holiness today.

Here, Isaiah sees God has withdrawn from His people. Isaiah cannot entreat God in the sanctuary, the tent of His presence, or in the temple, but only in heaven. We will come back to that theme in a minute.

Isaiah makes a statement which can be so easily misunderstood,

Isaiah 63:17 O Lord, why have You made us to err from Your ways, and hardened our hearts from Your fear?

This of course does not mean that God *makes* us sin. But it certainly indicates the *depth* of the apostasy, the extent of the falling away, the rebellion against God among His own people. A people can come to the point where they take "pleasure in unrighteousness," as Paul says in II Thessalonians 2:12. They begin to sin blatantly and repeatedly, with no restraint at all. Paul mentions in II Thessalonians 2:11, God's response to such obduracy of heart. God will eventually send "strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." Such people, who will not obey God, come to the point where they cannot obey God and they become hardened.

In Romans, Paul addresses hardness of heart early in his comments to the church at Rome. In Romans 1:18, he mentions the consequence first, then the cause, of this hardening.

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God [consequence, result] is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [suppress] the truth in unrighteousness.

The result is God's wrath; the cause of that wrath is the suppression of God's truth. These people are not ignorant of God, not outsiders. That is why they are "without excuse" as he says in verse 20. Notice verse 21, where Paul restates cause and effect relationship, this time in that order.

Romans 1:21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.

That is the result of their vain imaginations—darkness. "When they '*knew*' God!" That is the Greek word *ginosko* and it is in fact the experiential, relational 'know.' It is the same 'know' of Philippians 3:10, where Paul speaks, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings."

Make no mistake about it, brethren, these are people who once knew God, they had a relationship with God. What happened? They came to believe a lie after He sent them "strong delusion." And God did that because they were vain, and thankless, and continually suppressed the truth that they once knew. Their hardness of heart is the result of their on-going, obstinate refusal to humbly obey God. Do you understand that the hardness is the result of their unrelenting apostasy! They fell away, and refused to

repent.

Let us get back to Isaiah 63. That is why the prophet can say in Isaiah 63:17, that God hardened their hearts. What happened is that the church sinned repeatedly, and without restraint. Isaiah will pointedly admit that in the next chapter. The Church sinned to the extent that God withdrew Himself from it. We read about that earlier, in Isaiah 59,

Isaiah 59:2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God.

This is not a reference to the primal sin of Adam and Eve way back when. No, it says your sins that have separated you, not someone else's. We were once with it, but we became separated. We did it; we were the apostates. God simply responded, and we repented, I hope.

Let us continue with Isaiah's prayer, in verse 18, and this well expresses the almost immeasurable devastation that we have seen in the last years.

Isaiah 63:18 The people of Your Holiness have possessed it but a little while: our adversaries have trodden down Your sanctuary.

The clause, "[We] possessed it but a little while" indicates a slipping back, a falling away—apostasy. We once possessed it for a short time, but we do not possess it now! Remember the '50s and '60s. We were not perfect of course, and not always wise either. But, God's people at that time did zealously seek to serve, obey, and please Him at that time.

Remember how they drove miles, Sabbath after Sabbath, in old, broken-down cars "just" to go to services because they understood how vitally important Sabbath attendance is? They endured all sorts of hardships "just" to reach and to keep the Feast. They even positioned themselves to sell their homes to be ready to flee in the '70s, remember? Not necessarily wise, but their hearts were right in many ways. They loved Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong. They respected the ministry. They quietly served God.

There were exceptions, of course. My comments are meant to reflect the general tenor of that time.

God's people possessed something then, which seems so far from us now. Time was, when many in God's church were on the path of righteousness, oriented as they were to

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loving and serving Him first. For a short time we "possessed it," we possessed the right orientation, the right mindset of the Kingdom.

But, it slipped away. The '70s came, and with them worldliness. I do not need to catalog the problems and the shortcomings for you; you know them all too well. We lived through that era; in many ways, to some extent or other we *were* the problem. And, when the apostle died in the mid '80s, we watched in dismay as "our adversaries trod down God's sanctuary," His church. And, they continue to do so.

The King James poorly translates the last verse of Isaiah 63. So, I am going to read it from the New American Standard Version.

Isaiah 63:19 (NASV) We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, like those who were not called by Your name.

The commentaries point out that the word like (or, as if) really is not there. Without the like, it would read something as, "We have become those who were not called by Your name." We were not that way originally, but we became that way. Just how far can apostasy lead a people? How far did it take us? How far has it taken some of us as I speak today?

Isaiah 64:1 Oh that You would rend the heavens, that You would come down, that the mountains might flow down at Your presence.

Isaiah continues his prayer with a reference to Sinai, when the mountains shook and figuratively melted at God's presence. The prophet is pleading for God to come down from heaven and to manifest His presence again for His people, as He did at Sinai. He wants God to return to His people.

Let us drop down to the middle of verse 5, where Isaiah's prayer turns deeply penitential, as he recognizes and admits the sin of God's people.

Isaiah 64:5 (NASV) Behold, You were angry, for we sinned, we continued in them a long time; and shall we be saved?

And shall we be saved? Pathetic that he would have to ask that! How can we possibly be saved? We are so sinful—the awful extent of sin of God's people, who should know

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better. Oh, if we only had the eyes to see our poverty! We must have the Spirit to respond correctly, not in anger, not gnashing our teeth, but in repentance.

Isaiah 64:6 (New American Standard Version) For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.

We were not unclean at one time, but we became that way. When we came into the church, somewhere along the line we were clean, but became unclean again, and that is apostasy! We saw this earlier in Psalm 53,

Psalm 53:3 Every one of them has turned aside; they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one.

We saw it in Isaiah 63:

Isaiah 63:19 We have become like those over whom You have never ruled.

But, there is an important difference between these scriptures and Isaiah 64:6. Psalm 53 and Isaiah 59 are indictments—judgments, if you will—against a sinful people. But, Isaiah 64:6 is a climax to a prayer of repentance. Here Isaiah is speaking on behalf of the church, and confessing the sin of God's church.

Let us continue in verse 7, where Isaiah speaks of the extent of the apostasy of his time:

Isaiah 64:7 And there is no one who calls on Your name, who arouses himself to take hold of You; for you have hidden Your face from us, and have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.

We were Laodicean, and God woke us up.

In Micah 7:19, we read that that God would subdue our iniquities. God subdues our iniquities, but at this point with an apostate church that had left Him, He simply abandoned Israel to the power of their own iniquity.

We are going to be saved in spite of ourselves. We are not yet at the place where we realize just how much God's mercy, His loving kindnesses, will play in our final

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salvation. But, at the end of the day, we will understand the depths of Paul's phrase, "saved by grace."

God answers Isaiah's prayer in the two closing chapters of the book, Isaiah 65 and 66. And, it is a remarkable answer indeed. I recommend that you study these chapters as we do not have time to go through them.

Let us just notice a few points:

I will read Isaiah 65:1 and 2 from the *New American Standard Version*. Verse 1 refers to our calling. God is speaking.

Isaiah 65:1 (NASV) I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, 'Here am I, here am I,' to a nation which did not call on My name.

None of us were seeking God, brethren, when He called us. In verse 2, God addresses our rebellion and later on, the apostasy in so many of us:

Isaiah 65:2 (NASV) I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts, a people who continually provoke Me to My face.

Like the church in the wilderness, we know God's way, and, just like the church in the wilderness, we provoke God by our disobedience. The following verses (we will not have time to review them) elaborate on the nature of our sins.

1. God begins by castigating His people. Isaiah 65 is not about the Gentiles: it is about Israel! This is an answer to Isaiah's prayer for Israel, and in context, it applies to God's church, His true Israel. Paul makes this absolutely clear in Romans 10:21. Here, Paul cites Isaiah 65:2, but notice what he prefaces with, "To Israel He says, 'All day long I have stretched forth My hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people.'" To Israel! God is here addressing His people.
2. In verse 8, God speaks of saving the remnant we mentioned a bit earlier. This passage bears a connection to John 15, which I want to mention. Right now, we read Isaiah 65:8 from the *King James Version*:

Isaiah 65:8 Thus says the Lord, as the new wine is found in the cluster, and

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one says, destroy it not; for a blessing is in it; so will I do for My servants' sakes, that I may not destroy them all.

The word "all" there means whole. God will not destroy the whole vineyard, but will spare His true servants. Christ is referring to this passage in John 15:5, where He says: "He is the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in Me, and I in Him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered: and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned".

In Isaiah 65:8, God is saying He will not destroy the good cluster. But, those clusters which have become separated from Him, the apostates, will be burned. That will be the end of those apostates who do not follow the course of the prodigal son. Remember the prodigal son returned to his father. If caught in time, we can repent of apostasy.

Let us turn to the New Testament, and see what James has to say about the apostasy of the last times. Actually, we could turn to almost any page of the general epistles, but I will focus on James. Years ago, I was taught that the book of James was written to physical Israel, "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad," as the book's first verse puts it. But in James 1:2, James addresses his audience as "my brethren". He uses the term "my brethren" or variants thereof, no less than twelve times in that short book. He is not talking to national Israel by any means.

James is addressing his brothers and sisters in the church. Read practically any single verse in the book and that becomes clear. Notice verse 3, for instance: "Knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience."

Is God now trying the faith of national Israel right now? What faith is that? James 4 tells us what the end-time scoffers among the people of God's church are going to produce for us: "Among" is the key word. Because chapter four does not describe people foreign to God's truth, but people who once espoused it. Just listen to what James is talking about going on in the church: wars, fighting, lusts, and killing.

James 4:1-3 From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? You lust, and have not; you kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: you fight and war, yet you have not, because you ask not. You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts.

That could be a plot outline for "As the World Turns". James is talking about people who consider themselves godly enough to ask for things from God in prayer, but who are denied, because they are in fact motivated only by their own lusts, and they do not know it. They are blind, and they are Laodicean.

Now, I understand that some soften the meaning of the word kill here. Some say it "only" refers to spiritually breaking the sixth commandment, that God's people as a whole would never break it physically. But, we need to remember that often, spiritually breaking God's laws leads to physically breaking them. What we need to consider also is that the word kill in James 4:2 is the same Greek word that is used elsewhere in the New Testament for just plain cold-blooded murder. It is the word 'slew' in Matthew 23:35, to which you need not turn. Christ speaks to the Pharisees: "That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias. . . . whom you slew between the temple and the altar."

James is talking about the very same people of whom Christ warned us in John 16:2. Read that passage carefully sometime; we do not have time to review it now. It speaks of people so deceived they believe that, whosoever they may be, of the ministry or of the laity, seasoned elder, or novice, if they kill us they do God service. These are people who have the same mindset exactly as those today who deny hierarchy, government, and claim: "We need no teachers, no ministry; whosoever we are, we can teach ourselves".

James and Christ are talking about what is already starting to happen within God's church. And that is the point that I want to make, it has already started, and it has been going on for some time. Are we recognizing the apostasy, brethren? There is no secret to why.

James 4:4 You adulterers and adulteresses, know you not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

The end-time church will have in it more properly, among it people who try to mix God's way of life with that of Satan. Hence James calls them guilty of spiritual adultery.

The attack of the apostates comes from those among us and not with us, to wear us out, as Daniel put it, or to try our faith, as James put it there in James 1:3. And, we are already seeing it start now, even now, in the church.

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I will conclude by looking again at Isaiah 65 and James 4. In Isaiah 64:8 near the conclusion of his prayer, Isaiah reminds God that, "We are the clay, and You our potter; and we are all the work of Your hand."

Well, with that in mind, God in His answer to Isaiah, in Isaiah 65:18, tells Isaiah just what, as our Potter, He is creating.

Isaiah 65:18 But be you glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

Brethren, God is creating a people of joy. Yes He will complete His work of salvation for His remnant.

When the Son of man comes, shall he find faith on the earth? The answer is encouraging. Yes, even through the awful times, which have started now and will get a whole lot worse before they get better, God will, as He has promised, preserve a remnant.

The nitty-gritty questions remain: Will you and I be a part of that remnant? How can we ensure that we will? We have already looked at the answer in James 4, "Know you not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?"

The apostle shows us how to avoid this very appealing, but very deadly friendship with the world:

James 4:7-8 Submit yourself therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts you double minded.

At the beginning of this Feast, I will leave it to you to consider how these imperatives, these commands apply in your life, as I will consider their application in mine. Never stop resisting; never stop repenting. And, always remember, that God will deliver His remnant, those people who abide in friendship with Him.