

The Symptoms and Treatment of Spiritual Cancer

By Daryl Wingerd

Some who profess to be Christians will fall away from the faith. This is called “apostasy.”

Christians disagree about what falling away means. Some say it is a saved person losing his salvation. Others insist that the person who falls away was never truly saved. I would argue strongly for the latter, but this is not the place to resolve that dispute. The sobering fact is that some who presently think of themselves as Christians will ultimately be condemned to hell as unbelievers. The writer of Hebrews warns professing Christians like this:



Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day . . . so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end (Heb. 3:12-14).

Like cancer, apostasy is a progressive disease that is often curable—if it is detected early enough. The letter to the Hebrews suggests a few symptoms to watch for in your own life and the lives of other “partakers of Christ.”

1. Bitterness Toward God In the Midst of Trials

Do you find yourself questioning the goodness and faithfulness of God when He puts you through difficult trials (Heb. 10:32-36)? Are you questioning God’s promise that He causes all things to work out for your good (Rom. 8:28)? Have you forgotten that the trials God sends are occasions for joy and thankfulness rather than for complaining or doubting (James 1:2-3)? Your bitterness and complaining could be a sign that your faith in the God who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11) is faltering.

2. Secrecy or Withdrawal from Honest Fellowship

Do you find yourself telling half-truths when confessing your sins to other Christians? Do you keep certain associations or practices hidden from Christians? Are you ashamed of being identified with God’s people for fear that you will be less popular with your non-Christian friends (cf. Heb. 11:25)? If so, then you may be pulling God’s rug of support for your faith out from under your own feet. God uses your honest relationships with other believers as a means of encouraging you in your faith. Their involvement in your life is one of His ways of preserving you until the end (Heb. 3:12-14).

3. A Growing List of “Valid” Reasons for Missing Church

“We missed you last Sunday. What happened?” “Well, the baby missed his nap” . . . Or, “I was too tired because I was out late the night before” . . . Or, “I thought it

might snow” . . . Or, “Joey’s soccer game started at 11:00 AM” . . . Or, “Sunday was my company’s annual barbecue. I wish they would hold these events on Saturdays. They just don’t understand how important church is.” If you have been missing the meetings of the church for reasons like these, perhaps *you* don’t understand how important church life is. Your perseverance in the faith depends upon your faithfully gathering with other believers (Heb. 10:23-25).

4. A Decreasing Desire to Learn from God’s Word

Has your passion for learning from the Bible become like the cracked clay in a dry streambed? Has your formerly sharp biblical thinking become dull through lack of use (Heb. 5:11)? If so, you are less equipped to discern between good and evil (Heb. 5:14) and more susceptible to the deceitfulness of sin which hardens your heart.

5. A Growing Affection for Money or Worldly Goods

Has your giving decreased even though your capacity to give hasn’t? Has craving for possessions caused you to divert money from giving in order to use it for getting? If so, this warning is for you—“Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have” (Heb. 13:5). Money is useful and necessary, but “the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith (1 Tim. 6:10).

Other symptoms are hinted at in the letter to the Hebrews: reluctance to pray (4:14-16; 10:19-22); openness to unbiblical teachings (13:8-9); a slackening pursuit of holiness (12:14); an insubordinate attitude toward faithful church leaders (13:17). Any of these symptoms should cause great concern, but none are automatically fatal. They will lead to apostasy if left untreated. So the writer of Hebrews instructs us to “encourage one another day after day . . . so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (3:13).

Since sin hardens hearts, the encouragement you need is more than saying, “I hope you have a great day!” It is a concerned, persistent, probing, exploring, discerning investigation into a fellow believer’s spiritual condition—like a cancer specialist’s care when conducting a surgical biopsy. It involves serious listening, biblical instruction, earnest exhortation, and loving correction, *even when the person who needs it doesn’t want it*. You might even call it godly intrusiveness.

Encouragement is the consistent effort of *all* to prevent *any* from facing “a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:27). Perhaps the one rescued will be you.