



The
William Booth
Collection

THE GENERAL'S LETTERS

BACKSLIDERS I

From the "War Cry," January 10th, 1885.

MY DEAR COMRADES,

My mind has been a good deal exercised the last few days on the subject of backsliders. By a backslider, I mean, one who has known the forgiveness of sins, felt the power of the Holy Ghost in the changing of his heart and life, rejoiced in the prospect of Heaven, and gone about doing good; but who has, by disobedience and unbelief, fallen again under the power of sin, and gone back like the sow that was washed to be pleased and occupied with the amusements, pleasures, works, and anxieties of the world.

It is a common charge brought against The Army that a large number of those who profess to be saved in our meetings become backsliders, and I suppose there is some truth in it. If so, it is only in accordance with what we see in the natural world around us. Every spring shows us a large amount of blossom that never comes to fruit. A great number of children are born into the world who never reach maturity. And there is no doubt amongst us a multitude of souls in whom the beginnings of the Divine life are implanted, who are filled with holy purpose and spiritual longings and solemn submission and sincere repentance, and who, through the Blood of the Lord Jesus, enter into the Divine favour, who yet, for various reasons, go back from following the Master when the hour of adversity comes, when the cup of anguish is put to their lips, when the Baptism of tears and blood is about to descend upon them. The good seed is sown in their hearts; it takes root, bursts into life, and springs up; but from various causes it dies away again. The soil of poverty and difficulty is too poor, or the sun of prosperity shines too hotly, or the tares of worldly relationships are sown too thickly, or the wild blasts of persecution beat on them too fiercely, so that they do not grow at all; or, growing, they are soon terrified by tribulation, or choked with prosperity.

But has it not always been so? Can any one point me to any page in the history of soul-saving in any part of the world or in any gone-by age, when there has not been a certain proportion of those gathered into the fold – whether those gathered be many or few – who have turned back from following the Lord? I defy them to do so.



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I am not aware that there is a larger proportion of those saved in The Army who fall away than is the case in other great awakenings. At the same time, I should not be surprised if it were so, considering the terrible ordeal of trial and difficulty and persecution our people have to suffer, oft-times through the influence of the very people who bring the charge against us.

But enough. There is the fact. As in the days of the Saviour, many fall back. Of these no doubt many return; many wander away into other parts of the world to be restored through other agencies; and at every Barracks are a number like moths at a candle, who are constantly hovering round, to be ultimately caught again in the holy flame; while many who have grown weary in well-doing, throng the haunts of sin, or sleep idly on the banks of the course on which awhile ago they were contending for an everlasting crown.

What can we do for them? They proclaim our weakness as saviours of men, and throw constant discredit upon the power of God to save and to keep. They are a standing disgrace to us, and to the Kingdom of God. They are in continual danger of the damnation of Hell. We will not enter into a theological dispute with any who may deny the possibility of those who have once been truly saved being everlastingly lost. There can be no dispute about the fact – alas! alas! too patent to all – that in this land there are tens of thousands of men and women who at one time or another, in connection with some Divine agency or other, professed to be children of God, and walked in the joy of His Salvation, who are now confessedly outcasts from His favour, and who are as weak and worldly and godless as other men.

These backsliders die every year, every month, every day. These men die in their sins, and therefore cannot go where God is. They die without the knowledge of God, in their wickedness; and consequently, if the Bible is true, they are driven away to Hell.

Many of these have been at our penitent forms, borne their testimony with streaming eyes and joyful hearts in our Free-and-Easys, marched in our ranks, worn our badges, and sung with rapture our songs. What can we do for them? Shall we leave them to perish? Shall we say to ourselves, "We can find more to fill their places"? Shall we be guilty of the hideous selfishness



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of contentedly leaving them, without compunction, to sin and perish because we can fill up their places – because we can find others to sing, and march, and fight with us? God forbid. Something must be done, and done quickly.

Among other things, let us make 1885 a memorable year for the restoration of our lost comrades. Let us survey the field – find the lost tribes. If we sought them when they were yet sinners – strangers to us, before we had clasped their hands and looked into their eyes – how much more ought we to love and seek and suffer for them now? We shouted, and laughed, and rejoiced when we first got them to the Mercy Seat. Get them there again. They are our prodigals. They have gone away from the Barracks, which was their Father's house. Some may have gone into a far country, but multitudes are nigh at hand. They companion with the enemies of God and man. They are feeding on husks and tending swine. They hunger and thirst, and no man has power to give unto them that which will satisfy their hunger or quench their thirst. They are dying of this hunger. After having known the sprinkled Blood, and had the Holy Ghost, and calculated upon Heaven, they are dying in their sins, and being damned for ever.

My comrades, something must be done. Something shall be done. In recent Officers' Meetings I have been pleading for a special campaign in favour of the backsliders, and the Officers have promised me and promised God that they will go back to their Corps and ask for special help from their Soldiers, make out lists of the wanderers, hunt them up, visit them at their houses, close with them in the streets, write to them if at a distance, and pray for them continually. In short, let them have no rest until they come back to God and righteousness.

I appeal now to the Army throughout the world to join in this campaign – this Christ-like work. I say Christ-like, because is not this acting out one of the most beautiful and emphatic instructions that the Master ever gave? Did He not say in substance and meaning that if we had ninety-and-nine good soldiers who marched and sang, and did all we could desire, and only one who had gone away to the public-house, the brothel, the sing-song, or to a life of sleepy indulgence or do-nothingism, we were to spend more strength, and sympathy, and money



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upon the one wandering sheep, than upon the whole ninety-and-nine who are safely in the fold of the Barracks, and in the path of duty?

My comrades, never mind the unpleasantness. Don't be influenced by what other officers do, or by what you have done yourself up to the present hour. Listen to the commands of your Master. Consider His example. He was safe and glorious, and worshiped in the Celestial Barracks, surrounded by myriads of faithful soldiers, who had never wandered one hair's breadth from the path of duty from the moment of their creation. But far away he saw this backsliding world, with its perishing multitudes, the rescue of whom meant to Him such self-denial and anguish as is not to be imagined; but His pitying heart overcame all His love of ease and pleasure, and brought Him into this wilderness to seek the wandering sheep.

Commissioners, Majors. Divisional Officers, Captains, Lieutenants, Sergeants, Treasurers, Secretaries, Bandsmen, and every other Officer, and every other Soldier, I commend this example to your imitation. Let us search the wilderness, and find the stray lambs and sheep, and carry home. Then angels and men will bless us, and say that we are Christ men and Christ women not in name only, but in truth.

More about how to do it next week.

Yours, seeking the lost,

WILLIAM BOOTH.