

The Need for Guardrails

The Goodness and the Severity of God

By Kenneth L. Birks

For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you will also be cut off. – Romans 11:21-22

As you travel south along the Pacific Coast on Highway 101, there are many places where you are very thankful for guardrails. The guardrails are there for your safety and protection because of the many places where the road is very narrow and winding. If it weren't for the guardrails, it would be rather frightening. Even with the guardrails, it can be quite scary. On a trip there last year, my wife informed me this is the last time she will ever come on this road. Sometimes, it feels like you could end up down a cliff and into the ocean if you were to make the slightest mistake. On the other side of the road, the steep hills act as guardrails for your protection.

I live in Northern California, about two hours from South Lake Tahoe. When traveling East towards Lake Tahoe on Highway 50, there's a place where you are about 7250 feet in elevation on a winding two lane road with a deep canyon to your right. When looking out your window, from the passenger side, it seems like an abyss below. On the driver's side, you have the mountain for your protection which acts as a natural guardrail. If it weren't for the guardrails, you would, most likely, be traveling slowly with much precaution and trepidation. The guardrails are there for your protection and precaution so that you feel safe and secure.

As we continue our journey with Christ, we need spiritual guardrails in place for our security and protection. There will be innumerable occasions along the way where we will need them to keep us on track with God and His purpose for our lives. Without them, we could easily injure ourselves and end up emotionally wounded with the potential of causing us to shipwreck in our faith towards God. (*1Timothy 1:19*) Because we all have a propensity towards foolishness and stubbornness at times, we desperately need these guardrails in place.

There are two major guardrails in the Christian experience which are designed to keep us on the straight and narrow path so we don't lose sight

of our eternal destiny and purpose. They are 1) the goodness and the 2) severity of God as we saw in the opening Scripture.

For the most part, it is the goodness of God that continually keeps us safe and secure in Him. It was the goodness of God that led us to repentance and then keeps us in a continuous state of repentance. There are also times in which we need a healthy dose of the severity or the fear of God to keep us safe and secure.

The Goodness of God

We experience the goodness of God in many ways. It comes from being redeemed from the hand of the enemy, delivered in times of trouble, being led by the Spirit, satisfying our hungry souls, being comforted during times of distress, deliverance from our destructive ways, blessings beyond measure, successful seasons and much more. (*Psalm 107*) God's desire is to pour His goodness into us in ways beyond our imagination. He has given to us all things that pertain unto life and godliness.

The goodness of God is one of the Father's divine attributes that helps us to understand His nature and who He is. In coming to the Lord and being drawn to Him through His goodness, we soon discover He is inherently good. As a result, we take refuge in Him, knowing that He will always be there to protect us and act as a guardrail while keeping us from the harmful tactics of the enemy.

Psalm 34:8 "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him."

Over and over in the first chapter of Genesis, God describes His works. He saw all that He had made, and it was excellent. (*Genesis 1:31*) In the same way God's goodness was displayed in all that He created, it appears to us as His created beings. We are products of His goodness or the fruit of His works. It doesn't matter who we are or what station in life we're in, we cannot earn His goodness. It is simply freely made available to us in spite of ourselves. God is good to all and has compassion on all that He has made. That's you and me! His tender mercies can't be denied nor stopped.

Psalm 145:9 The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works.

Because of God's goodness, we can put our trust in Him in a way that enables our hearts to respond with a resounding, "Yes, I'll receive it!" As we receive His goodness that endures forever, it becomes a stronghold or a guardrail to us in times of trouble, hardship, and discouragement.

Nahum 1:7 The Lord is good, a stronghold (guardrail) in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him. (I added guardrail)

As seen here, the goodness of God is a strong guardrail for us. It offers us the security and encouragement we need during difficult and trying times. It's something that is continually there for us, in that God's character never changes. Through His goodness, He continually provides for us according to His plans and purposes.

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

James 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

God's goodness never changes with the shifting shadows of time. However, good things are sometimes disguised as adversity or hardship. But don't worry! God even causes those things to work together for our good. He cannot deny who He is. It's impossible! In all circumstances, His goodness works to keep us from going over the edge, and continually acts as a guardrail to protect us.

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

As stated earlier, it is the goodness of God that initially draws us unto Him and begins to produce in us the repentance that continually brings us into a deeper relationship with God, the Father. The goodness of God is at the core of our faith as we grow and mature and move forward. As we keep our eyes and heart open to God's goodness, it becomes the stronghold of righteousness and the guardrail God intended it to be.

Keeping our Hearts Open to God's Goodness

One of the ways in which we keep our hearts open is by giving God praise and thanksgiving for His goodness. David had a revelation of God's goodness and often praised and thanked Him for it.

Psalm 107:1-2 Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy.

Psalm 107:8 Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!

David went on to repeat this phrase three more times in this chapter after writing about the wonderful works of the Lord. (*Psalm 107:15, 21, 31*) He then sums it up in verse 43 by saying, *“Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the lovingkindness of the Lord.”*

The more we thank and praise God for His goodness, the greater the revelation we receive of how it affects us with it becoming more of a stronghold for protection.

Do you understand the goodness of the Lord towards you? If not, give yourself to Him in thanksgiving. I would encourage you to read and meditate on this chapter in Psalms over and over until it gets lodged deep in the recesses of your heart *“Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!”*

Gratitude is what is required as we contemplate how great God’s love and goodness are. We often lightly esteem His goodness or take it for granted by withholding our thanksgiving because it’s such a common occurrence with God. It is through our gratitude that we don’t take it for granted and even come to despise it.

You may say you’d never come to the place of taking it for granted, but it happens so easily through the hardness of our hearts. An indicator that His goodness is despised is when it no longer leads us to repentance. If our hearts have grown cold towards Him, it’s a good sign that we have grown cold in our appreciation of His goodness towards us. A heart examination may be in order.

Romans 2:4 Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance.

“Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!”

As a young Bible College student, I had acquired a job working at a warehouse. We had a large break room where we would all gather during our breaks and at lunch time. One day while hanging out and eating lunch with everyone, while some were shooting pool and playing ping pong, the conversation began to shift to what everyone had done over the weekend. They were telling stories about their wild escapades while laughing, cursing and swearing. In the midst of this, I had an overwhelming sense of gratitude and joy that came over me. I began to thank the Lord for bringing me out of all that and thinking, “Who am I that God would pour out His mercy, grace and goodness towards me?” I had such an overwhelming sense of the deliverance God had brought me through that my heart began to swell with gratitude and joy. Now, some 40 years later, I still remember it like it was yesterday.

I often still find myself taking a few minutes here and there to think about all that God has done for me over the years. His faithfulness and goodness have always abounded towards me. I am so thankful that He sought me out—a poor helpless sinner to pour into His goodness and grace.

My desire is to be like David who prayed, *“Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!”* My prayer is that this is your heart cry as well. “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.”

The Severity of God

Now that we have discussed the goodness of God and how wonderful it is, we must also take a look at the severity of God—the other guardrail that is necessary for our protection. This guardrail is required for when we begin to take for granted the goodness of God and lose sight of all that God has done for us. When we lose sight of God’s goodness, it has the potential of producing a recklessness in us that could cause us to crash hard. (*Romans 11:22*) Because God is a faithful and merciful God, He has put this guardrail in place to keep us from going over the edge and crashing into the abyss below. It is also called the fear of God.

Jesus spoke of it when He said, *“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who can destroy both the soul and body in Hell.”* (*Matthew 10:28*) Solomon spoke of it when he said, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”* (*Proverbs 9:10*)

I understand how the fear of the Lord is an awesome respect and reverence for God, but it also entails what Jesus spoke when He said, *“Fear Him, who can destroy the soul and body in Hell.”* With this comes the necessity of a healthy Biblical understanding of what Hell is and who’s going there.

The Reality of Hell

There is much to say in both the Old and New Testaments concerning Hell and the Lake of Fire. The Bible teaches that life continues after the physical death of the body. God created man with a natural, physical body and an eternal soul. The soul of man consists of who we are. It is the center of our mind, will, and emotions. The Bible teaches that life is eternal. Because the soul is immortal, we will either spend eternity in Heaven or Hell.

Daniel 12:2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall wake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.

God created Hell for the devil and his demons to inhabit. It is such an awful place that Jesus said it would be better to cut off your hand or gouge out your eye rather than to go there. There will be crying and total darkness in Hell—a lake made of unquenchable fire and brimstone with intense pain and agony.

Mark 9:43 And if your hand makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched.

Mark 9:45 And if your foot makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched.

It is true that people can partially experience hell on earth. Those who live in rebellion against God and His ways do experience, to a small degree, some of the things that those in Hell are suffering. This experience is, however, only a slight foretaste of the miseries that the occupants of hell will experience forever.

Hell will be a place of intense torment, pain, and weeping, described as a furnace of fire where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (*Matthew 13:42,50*) The story of the *“Rich Man and Lazarus”* illustrates to us the intensity of the pain that will exist in Hell. The rich man tormented in the flame did not wish this place of torment upon anyone. (*Luke 16:19-28*) He cried out

saying, *“Father, Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.”* (Luke 16:24)

I’ve heard people say at various times they would rather be partying in Hell with their friends than walking in gardens with their enemies. What an absurd statement! If they only realized how ridiculous it is. There will be no partying going on in Hell, only extreme loneliness, blackness and darkness forever as the Bible describes it. (*Jude 13*) Now is the day of salvation that will save you from this terrible existence throughout eternity.

Hell will be an awful place, separated from the presence of God, the rejected Lamb, the holy angels, and the redeemed. There will be no light, life, peace, joy, righteousness, nor salvation. Only darkness and torment of conscience will be there for those who rejected and despised God’s grace.

The important thing to keep in mind is that Jesus did not come to condemn the world. He came to save the world from this awful place of torment. (*The Foundations of Christian Doctrine - Kevin Conner*)

John 3:17-19 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

2Peter 3:9-11 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

A Lot of People Will End up in Hell

They will come from every background, race, society, religion, and culture. Among their numbers will include those who the Bible describes as:

- Those who do not know God - *2Thessalonians 1:8*
- Those who don’t obey the Gospel -*2Thessalonians 1:8*
- Sinners and hypocrites - *Isaiah 33:14*
- Those who practice lawlessness – *Matthew 13:41*
- Cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murders, sorcerers, sexually immoral, idolaters, and all liars - *Revelation 21:8*

- Adulterers, thieves, homosexuals, covetous people, drunkards, and extortioners - *1Corinthians 6:9-10*

The Bible says the road to Hell is wide, and the road to heaven is narrow. Which road are you traveling? *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” (Galatians 6:7)*

Are We Secure in our Salvation?

You may be thinking, “I’m secure in my salvation. I can never lose it.” If that’s what you believe, this next section may be somewhat challenging for you. I would encourage you to read it and ponder it. Allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves without trying to interpret them through any school of thought. Our loyalty needs to be to God’s Word, not to schools of thought.

Personally, I do not believe a person goes through a continuous cycle of being saved and lost over and over again. Therefore, I do not think because a person is in a backslidden condition they have necessarily lost their salvation, but I do believe there is a point where you can become so deceived in your backsliding that you eventually disown Christ by no longer believing. At this point, you fulfill the Scriptures that speak of disowning Christ. Notice in the following passages, Christ cannot disown you, unless you, first of all, disown Him. Keep in mind, you cannot be disowned by Christ unless you are first owned by Him.

Matthew 10:33 (NIV) But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

2Timothy 2:12 (NIV) If we endure, we will also reign with him, if we disown him, he will also disown us.

You may think you could never get to the place where you could disown Christ. The problem with that kind of thinking is, once you begin the slippery slope of backsliding, you open yourself up to Satan’s devices and deception to a greater degree. You have no idea where deception could lead you. Jesus speaks of a strong delusion that is coming upon the world before His second coming. He says, *“If it were possible even the elect would be deceived.”* Paul speaks of a great falling away before the coming of Christ—a time when many will disown Christ. A great deception is coming. To keep from being deceived, we will need both guardrails in place. Those whose hearts are cold towards the Lord through their backsliding wouldn’t have a

chance. The enemy is already walking around looking for those whom he can devour. A backslider is easy pickings for him.

I tell my Bible students that I'm afraid to backslide because I just don't know what would happen once deep deception begins to settle in. That's the fear of God—my guardrail for protection! I understand the severity of God as much as I understand the goodness of God. I understand that it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God. Do you?

Now that I've disarmed you somewhat, let's continue to see what the Bible has to say concerning our eternal salvation and security. Without this guardrail in place, we are all in extreme danger.

There will be a Great Falling Away

Paul speaks of a great falling away. (*2Thessalonians 2:3*) Those who fall away are those who have defected from the truth of the Christian faith. To fall away implies a strong rebellion or revolt that happens before the Second Coming of Christ. The point is, there will be people who will fall into this category. They are the ones who disown Christ.

Is it Possible to Fall Away Never to be Saved Again?

There is a point where the once saved believers are completely reprobate in their minds and actions. The writer of the Book of Hebrews addresses this very issue in the following passage. However, the stipulations shown below reveal that it is only a mature believer that is capable of committing this sin.

Hebrews 6:4-9 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God and put Him to an open shame.

This passage shows, very clearly, there is a point where a Christian has backslidden so far that they can't come back. The Greek word for "fall away" is "*parapipto*," which means to fall aside or to apostatize. (*Strong's Greek Dictionary Concordance #3895*)

These Christian believers were once:

- Enlightened - *John 1:6-12*
- Tasted of the Heavenly Gift - *John 3:16 & Romans 6:23*

- Made Partakers of the Holy Spirit - *Acts 19:2*
- Tasted of the Good Word of God - *Hebrews 5:12-14*
- Tasted of the Powers of the World to Come - *Acts 1:8*

This person has given up their birthright in the same way that Esau did. Giving up one's birthright is when backsliding leads to the extreme position of disowning Christ as Paul warned Timothy. (*2 Timothy 2:12*) John refers to disowning Christ as the sin that leads unto death. (*1 John 5:16*) The writer of the Book of Hebrews refers to it as "willful sin" in a later chapter about the person who has trodden underfoot the Son of God and insulted the Holy Spirit. Jesus referred to it when He spoke of the individual who blasphemes the Holy Spirit and commits the unpardonable sin.

Mark 3:29 (NIV) But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.

The words "fall away" describe the person's willful and independent position. It means to walk alongside or out of the will of God with no intent of returning to God's way—total apostasy. There is an open renunciation of Jesus Christ and a gathering together of the enemies of Christ.

There Is a Point Where God Cuts Off Those Who Disown Him

If God did not spare natural Israel when they committed apostasy, what makes us think that He will save us if we fall away? We must continue in the goodness and severity of God. Otherwise, we, too, will be cut off.

Romans 11:21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews gives us a strong warning about drawing back unto perdition by letting us know that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. He takes no pleasure in those who draw back. We see this again in chapter ten.

Hebrews 10:31,38-39 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. ³⁸Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

When the above passage speaks of those who "draw back unto perdition" or waste and destruction, it is a possibility, or it would not have been written to

warn us. The word perdition indicates loss of well-being, not of being. The destruction then is everlasting without annihilation.

Hebrews 10:26-27 If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice of sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

Some would like to say this is referring to a person who continually rejects Jesus after they are convicted many times. It's just not so, as we see in the following Scriptures.

Hebrews 10:29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? ³¹It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

This person:

- **Was sanctified by the blood of Jesus:** To be sanctified means to be set apart from the world unto God.
- **Has trodden underfoot the Son of God:** To trample underfoot the person of Jesus and all that **He is and has done is to count Him as refuse**. Trodding underfoot the Son of God is an act of utter contempt for Christ.
- **Has counted the blood of Jesus as unholy:** To value the precious, sinless blood of Jesus as that of a pig or unclean thing.
- **Has done despite unto the Spirit of Grace:** He insults the Holy Spirit, who he had received by God's grace by insulting all the work of the Spirit he had been a partaker of, such as salvation, baptism, healing, gifts, fruit, etc.

As we have seen, to "*fall away*" consists of total renunciation or disowning of Christ and Christianity. However, we must keep in mind; backsliding is where the process begins. Once a person begins to backslide, they open themselves up to greater deception from Satan. Our enemy is a devouring lion, who goes after those who are weak in the faith. Don't be fooled! He will come after you with everything he has. As you begin the downward spiral of backsliding, His goal will be to get you to commit apostasy. That's why I'm

afraid to backslide. I am well aware that I have fallen into the hands of a living God.

I don't believe anyone knows where this cut-off point is. We are not the judge nor could we because we don't have all the facts in each case. Even if we did, we would not have the wisdom to analyze them. God is the righteous judge, and there is a point where God says, "No more—that's it!"

Judgement Awaits Those Who Have Blasphemed the Holy Spirit

The entire second chapter of Peter's second epistle describes believers who go back and become apostate.

2Peter 2:20-21 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. ²¹For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.

These People Were Saved:

- The Lord had bought them—Verse 1.
- They had forsaken (to leave down or behind, to abandon, to forsake) the way—Verse 15.
- They had escaped the pollutions (uncleanness) of the world.
- They are again entangled and overcome in the world.
- They had known the way of righteousness and turned from it.

We must give serious consideration to this passage. It says, "*It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness.*" How could it possibly be better not to have known the way of righteousness? Could it be because they have committed the unpardonable sin and eternal judgment is what awaits them? There's no opportunity for them to turn back to the Lord. They're done!

Hebrews 10:26-27 If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice of sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

2Peter 3:17 You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked.

As seen from the testimony of Scripture, there is an agreement that it is possible to lose your salvation. I have been purposely laborious so that you can see for yourself how the Scriptures on this subject are in agreement with one another. As you take this to heart, you will have built a stronghold of righteousness as a strong guardrail to keep you safe and secure.

Be assured, as you stay close to the guardrail of God's goodness with a heart of thanksgiving you will be safe and secure. If not, the guardrail of the severity of God is there to stop you from your foolishness and from falling into the abyss. As you take the time to build both of these guardrails by getting these Scriptures and principles embedded in your heart, you will be safe and secure throughout your journey in the Lord. As you are careful to build your guardrails, you will experience eternal security!

Psalm 107:43 "Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the lovingkindness of the Lord."

This article was taken from a chapter in my new book

"The Journey – Discovering the Invisible Path"

To Purchase the book or learn more about it, please go to the following website: <http://booksbyken.com>

