



# PRIDE BEFORE A FALL

## Home Truths

My mother used to quote scripture across the kitchen table at her children - and perhaps especially at me! One of the verses she would quote (and this may say something about me as a boy) was “pride comes before a fall” She was paraphrasing Proverbs 16:18

KJV

**Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.**

NIV

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We need to focus on this reality of ‘pride’. I’m going to ignore ‘haughty spirit’, largely, because I think it is virtually the same thing. If you are proud then you tend to have a haughty spirit. Haughty comes from the word ‘high’ – haughty people look down on others. Haughtiness and pride are really two sides of the same coin. Whilst haughtiness never has a good connotation, in some people’s estimation “pride” does have a good connotation. So that is why we look at it in depth:

If we have a “key text” in this article, it is Proverbs 16:18 - ***Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.***

'Destruction' and a 'fall', of course, are two things we want to avoid, if we are wise and sensible. Destruction means loss. A fall means injury – and perhaps loss as well. In both cases that loss may well be eternal, as we shall consider from a specifically Scriptural vantage point. So let us reflect for a few moments on pride, before we turn to consider two Scriptures in depth.

There can be a good connotation around the idea of pride. It can be something quite reasonable. We speak of taking a pride in our appearance, or taking pride in our work. In both cases this carries about it the idea of not being sloppy – and doing things as well as we can so that others get the kudos (or due recognition) that goes with our good work. If you do well in your exams, your school gets the kudos – for having taught well. Your teacher gets the kudos for being a good teacher. And you get the deserved reputation of being a good student, hard-working, capable - and all those good things.

There is something vital about *how* we show our pride, *in what* we take pride, and that *any* pride is tempered with good common sense. If I am good at one thing, like History, then I may not be so good at something else, like Mathematics. So I don't have an over high (or haughty) attitude; I recognize that I'm gifted in history and I am modest about my mathematical achievements. And I may then decide to concentrate more on Mathematics whilst taking a well earned pride in my History achievements. In that sense pride and a healthily competitive spirit can be both good and positive.

The apostle Paul expressed a positive kind of pride when speaking of the confidence of the true Christian believer (2 Cor 7:4) or of our strength in the Lord (2 Cor 12: 5,9):

**Great is my boldness of speech toward you. Great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation** (2 Cor 7:4). Here Paul is expressing a good sort of pride. He says that God is active even in the reality of opposition and persecution. And so Paul can "boast" about the good things that the Corinthian believers have achieved, by God's grace and power.

**Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities** (2 Cor 12: 5). Paul has certain weaknesses. Because of that he can take pride in, and boast about, God's strength.

**And [God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me** (2 Cor 12: 9). Once again Paul takes delight in God's holy strength that makes up for his own physical weaknesses. When we place our pride and yes – our boasting – in Jesus, then there is no problem. That sort of 'pride' is good and it is saving. Our pride is not in ourselves, it is simply in Jesus and all that He has achieved.

We do need to note very carefully though, that the Bible has little to say that is positive about pride – and a lot to say that is negative. Pride, generally speaking, is a bad thing in Biblical terms. We need to know why .....

## **Pride – a way of life**

There are 10 Hebrew and 2 Geek words generally translated as 'pride'. In biblical terms this is about having an excessive attitude of pride, which is the opposite of the biblically exalted attitude of humility. Humility is so often praised and rewarded by God. One other Greek word refers to a person being puffed up, or inflated, with pride or egotism. The truth that is revealed in this is that something or someone that appears to be filled with substance, is in reality filled only with hot air.

Of course humility is not something that is welcomed or valued by this world. In this world we are supposed to parade ourselves and our all our too often meager achievements. I'm always in two minds about those TV programmes where they search for 'talent' (X-Factor, Britain's Got Talent, etc). People with perhaps very little natural talent are never-the-less paraded and lauded as though they have some innate importance that we all should be obliged to recognize ..... Winston Churchill was famous for his sarcastic quipps: he once said of another MP "Ahh! A humble man ..... with much to be

humble about!" Humility is not something that is readily celebrated in this, our world. What did the apostle Paul say about being puffed up?

(1 Corinthians 5:2)

**you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.**

(1 Corinthians 13:4)

**Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;**

So plainly there is something we are to avoid in being puffed up with our own self importance. Allow me to share something with you from the always useful ***Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible***, in its entry on pride (page 1752, volume 4):

*Pride is basically a sin of attitude and of the heart and spirit. Hence we read "Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin" (Proverbs 21:4). Ecclesiastes 7:8 speaks of the "proud in spirit" and the psalmist declares "O Lord, my heart is not proud, or my eyes haughty". ((Ps 131:1). Pride is cited in the two lists of the most glaring sins in the Bible. Along with the sins for which God is going to judge the Gentiles, one finds insolence, arrogance and boasting (Romans 1:30). Included with the sins that will be prevalent in the last days, Paul includes boasting, arrogance and conceit (2 Timothy 3: 2,4).*

*As with so many of the sins of attitude, pride cannot remain internalized. It can infect one's speech, and boasting is one way in which this sin can appear (see e.g. Malachi 3:13). Pride can appear in the way that one looks at another person. Hence the scriptures speak of "haughty eyes" (Proverbs 6:17). The psalmist speaks of a person with "haughty looks and arrogant heart" as one he cannot endure (Ps 101:5, see also Proverbs 30:13). Pride may take the form of contemptible treatment of others (Proverbs 21: 24). One of the illustrations of this is the way in which the Pharisees and other leaders treated and spoke about those beneath their social level (e.g.*

*Matthew 23:6-12; John 9:34). They especially despised tax collectors as sinners.*

*Outstanding examples of proud people can be found in both testaments. Pride was the downfall of King Uzziah who, because of his sin, dated to offer incense on the Altar of Incense, and was smitten with leprosy as His punishment from God. (2 Chronicles 26:16)<sup>1</sup>. Hezekiah, after his healing by the Lord, became proud of heart and brought wrath upon himself, on Judah and on Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32: 25,26). ..... Ezekiel 28, which describes the pride of the leader of Tyre, is taken by many biblical scholars to refer, in a deeper sense, to the fall of Satan back in the beginning.*

In that final sense of course, we can observe that - quite simply - sitting behind any excessive attitude of pride, is Satan himself. So for a true Believer in Jesus pride is something to be avoided like the plague .....

## **Pride in practice .....**

Pride is the one thing that prevents most men (and women) from coming to Jesus in faith and repentance. Ultimately, people want to be “god” over their own lives, and to be left in their state of sin. What are the normal “excuses” that people make for their own prideful attitude?

- “I don’t need the crutch of religion – I’m master of my own destiny” (that’s pride speaking)
- “We know so much more these days, we don’t need “stories” from the Bible” (that’s pride speaking)
- “I’m too intelligent to believe the stories about Jesus” (that’s pride speaking)

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<sup>1</sup> Uzziah wanted to be both King and Priest. In fact this office is reserved solely for the Lord Jesus.

I could go on, but I'm sure you get the picture here. Let's turn to Scripture: from the Old Testament we get a clear warning in 2 Chronicles chapter 26 of the danger of pride – and of getting over confident:

**2 Chronicles 26: 3 – 15** show us how Uzziah started off well, but his success “went to his head”. Let us summarize:

26:3-8

Uzziah became a noted kingly success in that he successfully built Israel as a power to be reckoned with. But the Bible is quite clear that he did this not by his own power or wisdom, but by God's gift – verse 5 “as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper”. We can learn from that. Yes Uzziah was successful:

26:14-15

There's always a “but”, however, and the next verse begins with the word “but” .....

26:16-21

So King Uzziah's pride led directly to his downfall. It is an object lesson for any one of us that we should not assume (as I think we can be tempted to assume) that any worldly success that we enjoy is down to us. If we enjoy success in whatever sphere it may be – our success, as Christians, is always directly attributable to Jesus – and to Jesus should go all the honour and praise.

Let's turn to the New Testament.

2Timothy 3: 1 – 17

Wow! What do we see from this letter of Paul to Timothy? We note straightway that Paul makes specific mention of the end times (“last days” – verse 1). In the last days men will be ..... rather horrible! I think we can assume that the list of characteristics marking out the last days in some ways reflects the list of deadly sins that have afflicted mankind since the beginning. There have always been ..... 3:1 – 3:5 ....., but it becomes worse at the end.

## The Last Days

Is there anything that especially gets worse in those “last days”? There is something here about pride, I think. Pride has always been one of the so-called seven deadly sins. Wherever people rebel against Jesus, what sits behind their rebellion is pride. They are unwilling to come under Jesus’ Lordship in this life, and they try to ignore the fact of His judgement upon them in the next life. Truly it must be said “**pride goes before destruction**”. The pride of the individual who remains unrepentant, will lead to their eternal separation – and I think we can call that “destruction” to all intents and purposes. Pride goes inevitably before eternal, living, destruction.

(If you are shocked by what I have just said then I apologize. But you do not make unpleasant truths go away by ignoring them or denying them. Almost everything we know about *eternal destruction* comes from the lips of Jesus. When Jesus speaks about heaven, He almost always speaks of Hell in the same breath. It seems perverse to me to say that Jesus was right about Heaven, but was wrong about Hell; however that seems to be the position adopted by at least some within the umbrella of the Christian Church).

The warnings in 2 Timothy are, then, about the last days or *the end times*. We can safely conclude that SOME of the things to which Paul refers will grow markedly worse in the end days than anything encountered broadly through history. What seems apparent from Paul, and from the Lord Jesus, is that *rebellion within the church itself will become more widespread*. Furthermore, as technology becomes ever more sophisticated and as material wealth becomes ever more

widely distributed across this planet <sup>2</sup>, so Mankind will become ever more filled with pride. It will be a misplaced pride, to be sure, but the pride will be there. The despising of what is “good” (3:3) will perhaps be a clear marker of the end times. Certainly the church itself is increasingly hated even in those places that were once nominally “Christianized cultures” – think here broadly of the western world <sup>3</sup>. What is in reality good, is today is being described as bad. Surely that very fact causes us to reflect on the prophet Isaiah, who, in Isaiah 5:20 states plainly: **Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!** Again, in Isaiah’s prophecy, there is this distinct idea of pride and *rebellion against God* going before the inevitable destruction that must follow.

Disobedience towards parents also seems to have a special resonance in this modern age. We do not have to think very hard or very long to see how, so very often, and with increasing incidence, young people reject what their parents brought them up to be - sometimes covering themselves with tattoos<sup>4</sup>, sometimes changing their names or their fundamental identities. What does Paul warn us in his letter to Timothy?

**“lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy.”**

We have always been aware of these things from and within individuals – but what happens when an entire culture adopt and absorb these traits as their “norms” ?

**“headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God”**. Our culture speaks of hedonism as being the ideal state and ambition for the individual. But what does Proverbs tell us? **“A haughty spirit goes before a fall”**. I think we can be assured that there is a fall coming .....

In recent years as the western, so-called democratic world has begun to unravel, so we have seen an increasing use of the “pride” word in

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<sup>2</sup> albeit unequally

<sup>3</sup> persecution in non-Christianized cultures has always been common

<sup>4</sup> an attempt to obliterate what Nature made them?



public discourse. It's a matter of observable fact that after the spate of terrorist outrages (2015-17) there was zero attempt to confront, or even to acknowledge, the real underlying causes of Islamic militancy. Perhaps our politicians are just too timid to do so, and too short of fresh ideas .....

Instead after the attacks in Paris we learned that the people of France were proud of their country and their secular culture. After the 9-11 attacks in America their first (and it seems last) determination was to rebuild the twin towers even bigger and better than what had been knocked down. It is almost as though they were saying "We are proud of our ability to build ever bigger, ever better, and anything you knock down we will simply rebuild!" I used to hear that sort of defiance in the playground of my infants' school.

After the outrage in Manchester the Mayor of Manchester had nothing to say about the need for repentance. Perhaps it would be humanly speaking too much to expect him to do so – he is after all, no Christian. Instead his words were these:

*"We are grieving today, but we are strong. Today it will be business as usual as far as possible in our great city ..... it will be that 'spirit of Manchester' that will prevail and hold us together".* The same day he spoke about his immense pride in Manchester. To me that smacks very much of the pride of place. Nothing in his words to acknowledge that without God's grace and mercy, there can be ultimately no safe society and no safe city. Nothing of the need to, as it were, *wear sackcloth and ashes* in acknowledgement of our national defiance against a Holy God at the most profound and foundational level. No, what instead we got was *pride of place*. And we all remember the cry that went up across the western world after the Charlie Hebdo attack. What was the cry? Was it "Lord Have Mercy?" No. It was "Je suis Charlie". I hope it does not sound too much of a play on words, or too trite, to point out that this virtually translates to "I am a Charlie"!

Whenever a politician uses the word 'pride' or tells us what he or she is proud of – just listen extra carefully for the spiritual sub-text; I don't think I deserve any prizes for suggesting what where the 'P' word is mentioned, in almost any context, it will be pride in something that is

diametrically opposed to the things of God. Remember this as well, when you next hear some theologian, or cleric or church- an talking publically about their pride. If it is not pride in Jesus that is being vaunted, then again I suggest we need to listen extra carefully to the sub-text .....

## Lift up your heads

But let us not allow ourselves as Jesus' disciples to lose hope in times such as these. Far from it. Our Lord Jesus warned us *ahead of time* what to expect as the times draw to a close; I do not think He did this in order to excite our interest as to precise timings of events. These issues are unlikely to be plain until the *very end* – until that time that the Bible refers to as The Great Tribulation. Jesus spoke in Luke chapter 21 about the end – also in Matthew chapters 24 and 25. In Luke 21: 28 Jesus says quite simply: **“Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.”**

We are not to go around with long faces bemoaning how harsh things are becoming. No, we are to “lift up our heads”, surely in joyous expectation, because at this point we know with certainty that our “redemption draws near.” In other words the Lord Jesus is coming, and He is coming soon. The penultimate verse in the last chapter of the Bible is **“even so, come Lord Jesus”**. That must be our cry and our confident, holy, anticipation each and every day. As He taught us how to pray the first “clause”, if you like, of the Lord’s Prayer is quite simply: **“Thy Kingdom Come”**. We are not to be satisfied, nor are we to be content, until His Kingdom is established here on earth. We are, very truly, exiles living here in a foreign land (1 Peter 2: 11). This land in which we live is not (truly) our own.

Perhaps at this point I should draw things together with the very last verse of the Bible, having just referred to the penultimate verse. Let’s summarize: pride is a deadly enemy to the Christian – as it is to the non-Christian. How we deal with the issue of pride may, of course, be very different. Christians avoid it, recognize it and understand it as (perhaps) the ultimate spiritual inoculation against the claims of

Jesus. If men (and women) are filled with pride, they simply cannot be filled with Holy Spirit – the two simply will not mix. Pride undoubtedly leads to ultimate destruction – a destruction in this world, probably, and certainly in the next, if that pride is not repented. It is never too late to turn to Jesus in faith and repentance – although I do believe that generally speaking as people grow older, if they remain determinedly unrepentant, so their hearts become more and more calloused to sin, and so the act of repentance (perhaps) becomes progressively harder. In that sense (alone) there is a manner in which a person *can* leave it too late. Eventually, perhaps, they just no longer care. But Jesus patiently awaits, with His loving and embracing arms outstretched to welcome all who will humbly receive Him.

And what about that last verse of the Bible? **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen”**.

That is the ultimate good news! In twelve simple words in the English language, we have the concept of grace – of God’s unmerited favour poured out on people who ultimately do not deserve it, and yet are granted it *because* Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, IS with those who receive Him as Lord and as Saviour. And that word “Amen” – which is a word of affirmation and agreement, means that we assent to Jesus’ Lordship.

**“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen”**.

Peter Sammons - 30 July 2017