

'RESTING in the SPIRIT?' or the Falling Phenomenon

This article is a summary of some points in the booklet 'Resting in the Spirit'. This booklet – over ten times the length of this – is regarded by many as a standard work on the subject and includes contributions from Don Double and Cardinal Suenens.

It is available from Renewal Servicing. [See the Renewal Servicing page on this website.] It should be consulted by any reader really wanting to study the subject.

1. What *is* Resting in the Spirit?

It is a modern term to describe people collapsing or falling to the ground when they are being prayed-over. This may happen in a service where such ministry is offered. It can be a regular and anticipated feature in the ministry of some.

2. I have heard the term ‘Slaying in the Spirit’, is that the same?

Yes, it is another modern term, but because to be ‘slain’ suggests something violent, most folk opt for the term ‘resting’ since the experience is usually a gentle one, and this seems to describe it better.

3. What does Scripture say?

There are eight incidents that might have a bearing on it. They are as follows –

i) **II Chronicles 5:14** - The **priests** cannot stand in God’s presence.

[When the Ark is brought into the Temple the Lord is praised and we read:
(v.13).... *the house of the Lord was filled with cloud*, (v.14) *so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.*]

ii) **Ezekiel 1:28** - **Ezekiel** falls face down in God’s presence.

[Ezekiel has visions of God enthroned in Glory. We read:
(v.27) *I saw something that looked like fire, and there was splendour all around.*
(v.28) *Like the bow in the cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.*
(Chapter 2. v.1) *He said to me: ‘O mortal, stand up on your feet, for I will speak with you.* (v.2) *And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me.*]

iii) **Daniel 10:9** - **Daniel** falls face down in his vision.

[God speaks to Daniel through a heavenly being. We read:
(v.7) *‘I, Daniel, alone saw the vision; the people who were with me did not see the vision, though a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled and hid themselves.*
(v.8) *So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my*

complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength. (v.9) Then I heard the sound of his words... I fell into a trance, face to the ground. (v.10) But then a hand touched me, and raised me to my hands and knees. (v.11) He said to me, ‘Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet...’]

iv) **Matthew 17:6** - The **Disciples** fall face down at the Transfiguration of Jesus.

[(v.5)...*a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* (v.6) *When the disciples heard this they fell face down to the ground, terrified. (v.7) But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said, "Don't be afraid."* (New International Version, Matthew 17:5-7)

My usual translation, the New RSV, let me down on this verse! It has simply *‘fell to the ground’*. The Greek is very explicit that they fell *on their faces*, hence the use of the N.I.V. above. Except for the New Century Bible and the C.E.V., all other versions translate this Greek phrase explicitly, e.g. *face down*, or implicitly, e.g. *fell forward* or *fell prostrate*.]

v) **Mark 9:14-27** - The **Epileptic demoniac** is convulsed by an evil spirit and collapses.

[(v.20) *And they brought the boy to him [Jesus] . When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground, and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. (v.21) Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him...’*

We read later that Jesus exorcised the spirit which left the boy unconscious. But then, after his deliverance, –

(v.27)... *Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.]*

vi) **John 18:6** - The **crowd** fall back at Jesus’ arrest.

[(v.3) *So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees... (v.4) Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, ‘Whom are you looking for?’ (v.5) They answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus replied. ‘I am he.’ Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. (v.6) When Jesus said to them "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground.]*

vii) **Acts 9:4 and 26:16** - **Saul/Paul** falls when he has a vision of Jesus.

[(v.4) *He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ (v.5) He asked, ‘Who are you Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. (v.6) But get up and enter the city...’ (v.8) Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open he could see nothing...]*

We read later in Acts, Paul's recounting the event to King Agrippa. He adds that his companions fell as well -

(Chapter 26. v.13) ‘...*I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. (v.14) When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice...’*

Jesus words to him include (v.16) ‘*But get up and stand on your feet...*’]

viii) **Revelation 1:17 - John** falls at the feet of the Son of Man.

[(v.17) *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid...(v.19) Now write what you have seen...’]*

4. What can we deduce from these experiences?

(a) There seem to be two causes of falling in Scripture –

- Most falling is in response to the *Presence of God*.
- Some falling is a clash between *good* and *evil*.

Of the eight accounts, **falling at the Presence of God** or his messenger was the experience of the Priests (i), Ezekiel (ii), Daniel (iii), the Disciples (iv), Saul/Paul (vii) and John (viii)

[Note: the numbering refers to their earlier listing.]

Falling as a result of a **clash between good and evil** occurred with the epileptic demoniac (v). This might also be the cause of the crowd falling back at Jesus' arrest (vi)

[But John's emphatic use of Jesus saying 'I am he' has such powerful Old Testament overtones of God disclosing himself (see Exodus 3:14), that John might well have expected us to interpret the falling back of the crowd as a reaction to Jesus' divine Presence.]

(b) The second thing that Scripture shows is that there are two types of falling:

- A voluntary or involuntary **forward** bowing or prostration
- An involuntary or **backward** falling.

Either because it is mentioned or by implication it is clear that Ezekiel (ii), Daniel (iii), the Disciples (iv) and John (viii) fall *forward*. They are all believers who would naturally react in worship.

The crowd at Jesus' arrest are flung backward (vi).

The falling of the Priests (i) and Saul (vii) are not clear.

The demoniac boy (v) was thrown down by an evil spirit.

5. Isn't it quibbling to make a distinction between falling forward or backward?

I think not, because they are two very different things. To fall forward is, in certain situations, a voluntary and natural act. Bowing is a formalised expression of this. To fall backwards, on the other hand, is, for humans, unnatural and dangerous – because we cannot see where we are going!

6. Is not the falling of ‘Resting in the Spirit’ a forward falling? I have never actually seen it, but I always presumed it was.

No. The phenomenon we are considering is almost invariably a backward falling, not the natural worshipping attitude we sometimes sing about – ‘...bow down before him’, or ...’prostrate fall’.

7. What about Saul/Paul's falling?

My guess is that as he was blinded, and as he did not know what the vision was, it was not a forward prostration of worship, but a backward recoil. But we don't know. Artists have sometimes depicted him being thrown from his horse!

However he fell, his experience provides no parallel, but rather the very *opposite* of today's experiences when being prayed-over. Today we would expect the falling to be accompanied by some fresh infilling of

the Holy Spirit or a measure of healing.

Saul's experience was the opposite of this. After his falling Saul was neither Spirit-filled nor healed – in fact he was blinded and needed prayer!

The result of his falling required the ministry of Ananias: it was not Ananias's ministry that produced the falling.

8. Is there any real Biblical precedent for today's experience of 'Resting in the Spirit' when being prayed over?

There is a Scriptural precedent for falling when experiencing God's presence – and that may sometimes be the case today. But there is no basis for collapsing when being prayed over. Indeed, in the Biblical accounts there is usually more emphasis on getting up than on collapsing! Thus, God enabled Ezekiel to stand [Ezekiel 2:2]; Daniel had a divine hand raise him [Daniel 10:10-11]; Jesus touches the disciples and tells them to get up [Matthew 17:7]; the implication is that John gets up and writes [Revelation 1:17-19].

9. Is there any sort of Biblical pointer towards 'Resting in the Spirit'?

Many people were prayed-over in Scripture; but the absence of such falling in Scripture means that –

- Scripture does not teach that it is an indication of Spirit-empowered ministry.
- Scripture does not teach that it is a blessing to be sought.

10. That strikes me as a bit hard and rigid!

My point is not to deny that present-day falling may be the result of Spirit-empowered ministry and a blessing to the person involved. My point (at this stage in this article) is simply to establish that there is *no firm basis in Scripture* for making such claims.

But God, of course, may work in people's lives today in ways that have no exact parallel in Scripture.

11. How does Scripture guide us in this matter?

Simple: Seek God himself, and focus on him! Don't seek non-Scriptural experiences of him or particular outward manifestations. Get your priorities right. Be thirsty for God, and leave the choice of what he gives you to him. If he blesses you and that blessing *was* accompanied by an experience of 'Resting in the Spirit' Alleluia! If he blesses you and that blessing *was not* accompanied by an experience of 'Resting in the Spirit' – Alleluia also! It is not a reward

given on merit; it is not a guarantee of blessing; it is not a mark of holiness; it is not a demonstration of God's favouritism.

Human nature being what it is, Christians can make 'Resting in the Spirit' a sign of spiritual one-upmanship, or a hallmark of sound belief, or a signal of group membership and so on. We need to watch out for these pressures that might lead us to seek it, but for the wrong reasons.

12. How is an experience judged to be 'Christian' if it is not described in Scripture?

To answer *that* adequately would take another article! But, in brief, the following check-list might be applied -

- That it is in harmony with Christ's revelation in Scripture.
- That it is in harmony with the experience of Christ's church.
- That it has Christ-like results in the person concerned.
- That it builds-up rather than divides Christ's church.

13. Is this so-called 'Resting in the Spirit' a totally new thing?

No. It is not just a Pentecostalist import. It has occurred at various times in both Catholic and Protestant spirituality. Both St. Teresa of Avila, John Wesley and the Salvation Army tradition encountered it.

14. What did they think about such things?

John Wesley changed his mind about such things and in his later ministry neither expected nor encouraged any of these manifestations. St. Teresa knew mystical life better than anyone, and recognised that 'spiritual' trance states could be the result of weakness, silliness or sheer exhibitionism! Any of her Order who were prone to such things were told not to pray for too long and made to do plenty of hard work!

The Salvation Army termed it 'Having a Glory Fit', and the Quakers during Wesley's ministry supplied blankets and drinks for the prostrate, and let them be; commenting that in them the 'Spirit was warring with the flesh'.

15. What may we learn from the past?

Christians have always played-down all such fringe items of the Christian life, and we should do the same.

16. Why did they 'play-down' such things?

- i) Because of the tendency to distort and divide the church by an over-emphasis on fringe items at the expense of centralities.
- ii) Because of peoples' over-attraction to the unusual.
- iii) Because such phenomena may find their source in *us*, not God.

iv) Because the devil can so easily lead us astray by apparently ‘spiritual’ experiences. St. John of the Cross summarised it neatly -

‘...though all these may happen to the bodily senses... we must never rely on them, nor encourage them; yea, rather we must fly from them, without examining whether they be good or evil...He who makes much of them mistakes his way, and exposes himself to great danger and delusion; and, at least, places a great obstacle on his road to true spirituality.’

Modern Christians tend to make the mistake of assuming that ‘anti-Christ’ is the *opposite* of Christ; black in contrast to white. But that which is anti-Christ is that which mimics Christ but is not authentic. The work of the devil is therefore to *counterfeit* Christian experiences.

[For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (2 Corinthians 11:13-14)

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits...(1 Timothy 4:1)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God... (1 John 4:1)]

17. Your four criteria for judging Christian experience (question 12) mentioned not dividing the church. Does 'Resting in the Spirit' do so?

It can, which is why I have written about it. That happens when Christians think they know better than those who have gone before, and allow themselves to ‘go-overboard’ on the latest thing.

Men and women are *sacramental by nature*; they *need* ‘outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace’. If their Christian tradition is not sacramental about *things*, (water, bread, wine, oil), they will tend to behave in a sacramental way about *experiences* instead.

The trouble with this is that our experience and feelings are so complex and unreliable that Christian ‘reality’ gets based more on us and our feelings than on God and his faithfulness.

18. What would you recommend?

For your convenience I have, up to this point, used the phrase 'Resting in the Spirit'. This is, of course, a *religious and Christian* interpretation. The snag of using such a phrase is **that it presupposes what is happening before it takes place**. It gives a high-profile spiritual interpretation to an event long before anyone has had time to assess whether it had any real spiritual content at all!

My advice is simple and common sense.

- Use just **physical** terms to describe the **physical**.
- Keep **spiritual** terms to describe the **spiritual** content if/when it becomes known.

Thus when a body collapses we say –

‘He/she collapsed
swooned

sank down
fell back
flaked out
went semi-conscious, etc.’

When, later, the person concerned and local Christians begin to understand what had been going on, having seen its results, they can begin to interpret the event and any spiritual significance it might have had.

We are *then* in a position to begin to use spiritual language about it –

'His life was so changed when he was prayed over, that when he collapsed it seems to have been a 'resting in the Holy Spirit!'

Or

'When she got up she realised that she had been healed, and that God had used that time when unconscious to heal her!'

It is quite possible that nothing of religious significance happened at all. So a person might admit -

'I collapsed when prayed over a long time ago. While it was quite restful, it doesn't really seem to have made the slightest difference to me, then or since.' It would be misleading to describe *that* instance of the falling phenomenon as 'Resting in the Spirit'.

'Resting in the Spirit' is a good term to describe the fairly rare authentic experience.

But to call every collapse in a Christian setting a 'Resting in the Spirit' is misleading, confusing, and should be avoided. Such collapsing occurs, after all, in non-Christian circles.

Let's not prejudge such physical events by giving them spiritual labels long before we know if there was any spiritual blessing accompanying it. It is no criticism of those involved simply to say of a person initially that they 'collapsed' or 'fell'. This is, after all, what the Biblical writers tend to do, i.e. they separate the physical action from the spiritual. Thus the Wise Men **bowed down and worshipped him**, and Christ at Gethsemane **fell to the ground and prayed**. Saul **fell to the ground and heard a voice**. [Matthew 2:11, Mark 14:35 and Acts 9:4 respectively.]

In the 1980's when I suggested that *spiritual* language be not immediately used to describe the physical falling phenomenon, it was immediately acted on positively by Protestant and Catholic leaders both in America and Europe.

Cardinal Suenens wrote (1987):

'An Anglican minister, J. Richards, suggests that, to begin with, we should adopt a neutral term that remains purely descriptive and does not make its spiritual content and interpretation a foregone conclusion. He proposes that we call it the 'falling phenomenon', and not speak too hastily of 'resting in the Spirit'...

I too endorse his suggestion. In short I shall speak more frequently of 'falling' than of 'resting'.

[Quoted from pp. 17-18 Resting in the Spirit: A Controversial Phenomenon, Veritas, Dublin, 1987.

The Cardinal also agreed with the conclusion both of George Malony, S.J. and myself that 'there does not seem to be a [Scriptural] basis for believing that people swooned in a faint when they [were] prayed over [for] the fullness of the Holy Spirit.' pp. 39-40.]

A PRAYER

Lord God,

Help me to focus on you and to thirst for you.

Give me what you think is best

in the way and at the time of your choosing.

Keep my heart and life open to you,

so that your gifts and graces may find no hindrance in me.

Free me from wrong human pressures

and from any tendency to

tell you what you may and may not do!

I ask this so that the Presence and Power of Jesus

may shine and work through me. Amen.