



The Word: Life for the Depressed Psalm 119:25-32

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Consistently upward spiritual growth isn't a constant for most Christians. Some of us do tend to grow in a more or less steady and upward trend as we walk in the way of God's Word. Some of us tend to jump from one spiritual plateau to another, each time getting a little bit higher. But the fact is that even the saintliest saint sometimes falls down or slides back to a lower level. In the last two stanza of Psalm 119 we've seen the Psalmist—probably David—growing from an immature young man in need of guidance from God's Word to a more mature saint who has learned to lean on God even in the face of the world's persecutions. Even when princes sat plotting against him, his response was to meditate on God's Word (v. 23). As the world took counsel against him, he delighted in the statues of God and made them his counsellors (v. 24). David's response to persecution was much like that of Jesus. St. Peter writes of Jesus, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). David was growing as he walked according to God's Word, so the next stanza, beginning in v. 25, comes as a real surprise—like a two-by-four between the eyes. After all this growth and striving after God, David begins the fourth stanza writing:

My soul clings to the dust...

The older translations say, "My soul *cleaves* to the dust." Dust is symbolic in the Old Testament. First, it was associated with sin and with being brought low as a result of sin. After the serpent tempted Adam and Eve to sin, God cursed him to crawl on his belly and eat dust. But dust was also symbolic of death and mourning. Man was made from dust and to dust he returns when he dies. And when death or some other calamity was being mourned, the people of the ancient world would rub ashes on themselves and pour dust on their heads. Dust is always associated with being low and with sin and death. And here this maturing man of God suddenly tells us, "My soul cleaves to the dust. My soul—my very being—is at one

with the dust—with sin and death and sorrow." Suddenly David's in mourning. What he's describing is a spiritual depression.

From the high of verse 24, the Psalmist drops to a real low in verse 25, and yet it's true that even growing Christian struggle with discouragement and depression. Sometimes circumstances in life over which we have no control can drag us down. Often, as I think is the case with David here, sin and the guilt we feel afterward—especially when we keep falling repeatedly into the same sin—can drag us down too. Being down is a part of life. The problem is when being down becomes an occasion to fall into further sin. Then we're both down *and* out. That's when we fall into depression. One of the best passages to illustrate this is found in Genesis 4.

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. (Genesis 4:1-5)

Hebrews 11:4 suggests that Cain's problem was that his offering was not made in faith—that he was offering it as a mechanistic way to secure God's blessing. The fact that he became angry about the situation and that he resented Abel shows that his heart certainly wasn't in the right place. Cain's problem wasn't the content of his offering so much as it was the rebellious content of his heart. He may have been going through the outward motions, but he was living in sin inwardly. He was convicted of his sins when God refused his offering, but rather than repent, Cain just got mad. He let resentment and bitterness fester in his soul, and the text says, "his face fell." That's a Hebraism for "he became depressed." Like David, he felt like his soul was stuck in the dust. And that's exactly how we feel when we become depressed. There's nothing wrong with feeling down. Being down is an often a healthy indicator that there's something in life that we need to deal with: a damaged relationship, some good that we've been neglecting, or some sin that we've been failing to deal with. Sometimes being down is the natural result of things we have no control over: the death of a loved one, losing a job, or health problems.

In Cain's case, his being down was a healthy indicator of a spiritual problem that he wasn't dealing with. He was walking apart from God. But instead of letting this gentle nudge put him back on track, he kept walking further and further apart from God and his sinful response to being down turned into a spiritual depression. That's when God came to him. Look at verse 6-7:

The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

God gives Cain the remedy for spiritual depression. Cain has two choices: He can either "do well"—he can repent of the sin in his life that was causing him to walk apart from God—or he can continue in his sin, which God describes as a ravening beast crouching at his door, waiting to devour him—waiting to bring him down to total destruction. God understood, sin was real and it was a challenge for Cain just as it is for all of us, but God also makes it clear that he expected Cain—and us—to rule over sin rather than letting sin rule over us. His promise is that if we are obedient, if we "do well," our faces will "look up." The way out of depression is to stop responding sinfully to the situation. That's not the advice you're likely to get from a psychiatrist. Much of modern psychiatry is based on the principle of blame-shifting. If there's something wrong with you—if you're depressed—it's someone else's fault. If it can't be pinned on someone else, then it's simply due to a chemical imbalance in the brain that has to be medicated. Depressed people spiral down as they let their obligations slip, whether it's working to mend that broken relationship or taking care of obligations at work or around the house. The deeper the spiral gets, the more we don't feel like dealing with things—the more we don't feel like "doing well." The Psychiatrist's solution is to try to make your "face look up"—to make you feel better—so that you'll feel more like taking care of your obligations. He'll medicate you or he'll make you feel better by telling you to blame someone else for your problems. Maybe someone else did wrong you. Maybe you've been dealing with things out of your control. And yet Scripture tells us that we are always responsible for how we *respond* to the problems in our lives. God requires us to take responsibility for our actions—for our responses. And so he tells us, for the solution is to first to "do well"—to fulfil your obligations. Work to mend that relationship. Return to your job. Stop letting the dishes and the laundry pile up.

Once you've stopped neglecting doing what is right, his promise is that your face will look up. God's rule is that *right feelings follow right actions*.

You're probably familiar with the rest of the story. Cain chose not to "do well," and continued to brood in his depression and resentment. He spiralled further and further down into the pit of depression, eventually getting to the point that his anger and resentment led him into even greater sin: he murdered his brother, Abel. That's commonly what happens when depression hits bottom. Death is the only way out, whether it's to murder the one you resent or, more commonly, to murder yourself—suicide.

Back to Psalm 119: David's face had fallen just like Cain's. He could have spiralled into depression, but he knew God's principles. Look at verse 25 again:

My soul clings to the dust; give me life according to your word!

David knew that God's Word was the source of life. The Word offers us God's instructions for "doing well"—for living righteously. Not unlike Cain, David was stuck in sin and was spiritually depressed, but he also knew that the solution was to leave his sin behind and get back to living according to God's way. And brothers and sisters, the only way to know God's way, as we've been seeing over these last few weeks, is the Scriptures. And so David pleads God's promise of life by the Word back to him. Thomas Manton wrote, "One way to get comfort is to plead the promise of God in prayer...show him his handwriting; God is tender of his word." And yet Manton also writes, "These arguings in prayer, are not to work upon God, but ourselves." When we're stuck in sin, the solution isn't for God to change, but to allow his Word to change us—to get us back on track following him. David was spiralling down into depression, but he knew the solution wasn't to keep sliding down the spiral. Some people do that: they're sliding down, so they pray, but they keep sliding—praying that somehow God's going to turn the pit upside down and that they can just keep doing what they're doing and slide back out of depression. Friends, prayer doesn't change God so much as it changes us. David prayed that God's Word would correct him so that he could quit sliding down and begin actively walking back up—that he would stop responding to life's problems sinfully and begin to respond righteously.

The place to start is with confession. Look at verse 26:

When I told of my ways, you answered me; teach me your statutes!

Now, God already knows about our sins. When we confess them, we aren't telling him anything he doesn't already know. Confession is about our owning up to our sins. The real root of depression is pride, and confession breaks down our pride as we humbly admit that we have done wrong and that we need his mercy and forgiveness. And so we humbly lay before God our lives. We admit our times of wandering and straying, our doubts and our griefs. But we do so knowing that God is always ready to forgive and, by his Holy Spirit, to open our eyes to his way as he teaches us his statutes. God's promise of forgiveness leads us naturally to want to follow him more closely and so David pleads with God to teach him his statutes. Spurgeon wrote that, "Mercy, which pardons transgressions, sets us longing for grace which prevents transgressions." Scripture teaches us over and over that God doesn't clean us up so that we can run right back into the mud. We often do just that, but when he cleans us up, he always offers us the knowledge and grace that will keep us out of the mud. We just need to live by the knowledge and grace he offers.

Knowing this he pleads in verse 27:

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

David wants more than just a set of rules. Raw rules only get us so far. David wants to truly understand God's precepts so that he can know God himself. And understanding leads to meditation on, or in some translations, talking about God's wondrous works. The ESV reads "meditate," but "talk" or "tell" is right too. The Hebrew word can actually be translated either way, but as I was meditating on this verse myself this week, I realized that it makes sense that this Hebrew word can mean either "meditate" or "talk." Consider that meditation is what drives something into our heart. As a priest people sometimes come to me asking for help, because they just don't seem to have the feelings for God that they know they should. They may sing praises on Sunday morning, but they're often just words. The solution is to meditate on the wondrous works of God—on his Word. It's through meditation that we take the Word

into our heart and we begin to have genuine feelings for God that motivate us to true worship. In Matthew 12:34 Jesus reminds us: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." If we charge the source of our feelings, the heart, with God, our mouths will naturally follow with praise.

But David's still struggling. He knows that he needs to turn around and start walking back up that spiral, but he doesn't have the strength to do it. That's how depression is. In verse 28 he pleads:

My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word!

Being down is never fun, but David reminds us that it's better to be melted with grief over our sins than to be hardened in impenitence. In his weakness he cries out to God for strength. Have you ever felt that way? You know the good you need to do, but you just don't have the power within you to do it? That's where David was. But notice the source of strength: it's God's Word. This is something we all really need to consider. How often do we pray to God for strength? We regularly ask God for strength to be obedient in the face of temptation. We ask God for strength to do what we know is right. We ask him for strength as we deal with the trials of life, whether it's a health problem or work or finances. And yet when we ask him for strength, how often do we go to his Word to find it? Prayer is good. In fact, it's necessary. But God expects action from us. Too often we pray and then do nothing. If you need strength, pray for it, but remember too that we have this promise here that we will find strength in proportion to our knowledge of God's Word.

Now look at the next three verses. David finds his strength in the Word and with each verse we can see him standing taller and getting stronger—coming out of his depression. If we're struggling with sin, we need to take these same steps. First, he starts with acknowledging his need in verse 29:

Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law!

He acknowledges his sin. It's not clear if he was confessing some occasion or situation in which he lied or been blatantly dishonest or whether he's talking more abstractly about living dishonestly in general. There's a sense in which self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and pride are all false and dishonest ways, because when we live in those ways we deny the reality of our sin and our need for God's forgiveness. Whatever the situation, David

asks God to remove the dishonesty from his life and to replace it with the truth found in his law.

Brothers and sisters, our hearts are always going to be full of something. If the truth of God's law isn't there, the lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil will be. That's why we need to steep ourselves in God's Word. Where the heart leads, our feet will follow. The more we fill our hearts and minds with the ways of God, the less our feet will stray into the ways of the world!

Second he resolves to change. Look at verse 30:

I have *chosen* the way of faithfulness; I set your rules before me.

Matthew Henry's summary of this verse has been stuck in my head for days now: "The choosing Christian is likely to be the sticking Christian; when those that are Christians by chance tack about in the wind." David deliberately chooses faithfulness to God, but notice that in each of these verses, whether it's acknowledging his sin in verse 29 or resolving to be faithful to God, Scripture is always his focus. Again, his source of strength was the Word. And so as he chooses to follow God, he sets God's rules in front of him, right where he can see them. As David writes this, we can see him gaining strength. He was weak and melting away at the bottom of his pit of depression, but strengthened by God's Word he's climbing out. God's word is a chain. He's grabbed hold of it and as he uses it to pull himself up and out of that spiral, we can see him going from a crawl to a walk and then to a very determined, intent, and joyful striding upward.

Look at the complete 180-degree turn-around now in verse 31:

I cling to your testimonies, O LORD; let me not be put to shame!

When we started, he was clinging to the dust. And yet that's what got him into trouble. If things are bad, responding sinfully only makes them worse and before we know it, we're spiralling downward and out of control. The lower we go, the harder it is and the longer it takes to spiral back up and out of it. But strong in the knowledge that "doing well"—living righteously and according to God's Word and fulfilling our obligations—is the only way to reverse the downward spiral, David let go of the dust. He's let go of the sins that got him into trouble and now he's holding just as tightly

to the Lord's testimonies. He's cleaving to them. He's glued to them. He's at one with them. And as things start to look up, he pleads with God, "I brought shame on myself, but by your grace I'm back on the right track and now I beg of you to keep me there. Keep me from falling into sin and shaming myself again."

And now that he's back out of the pit, he writes in verse 32:

I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart!

You can feel the weight of sin is gone, and yet the gravity of his need for holiness is still here. Someone stuck in depression doesn't run. Depression tends to spiral down and down and the lower it goes the more lethargic the person gets—the more difficult it is to "do well" and to fulfil their obligations. That's why depression needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible. The longer it's allowed to fester, the harder it is to pull out of it. The longer we live in a sinful response to life, the more we train our brain to stay in that rut. But the opposite is true too. The more we choose to respond righteously to life, the more we train ourselves to live righteously—the more we run in the ways of God's commandments. But again, God is the one who makes it possible. If this is you and you're so low that you can't even imagine running, ask God for help. Another comment on this passage that's been running through my head all week is from Archbishop Leighton. In commenting on this verse he wrote, "It were a...wise and comfortable way to be endeavouring onwards, and if thou make little progress, at least to be desiring to make more; to be praying and walking, and praying that thou mayest walk faster, and that in the end thou mayest run...We must not be so dejected as to sit down, or to stand still, but rather we must be excited to go on."

Brothers and sisters, the key is to make *some* move in the right direction. You can choose to do well—to live righteously—or to continue in your sin. One will take you out of the pit, the other will drive you deeper. Cain shows us the danger of continuing in our sinful response to life's problems. His sin grew and compounded until he saw murder as the answer to his problems. Don't let that happen to you. If you're in the pit, start "doing well." If you're way down in the bottom and can't even take a step, start by crawling. As Leighton said, if you can't run, walk, but walk *and pray*. Immerse yourself in God's Word the way David did

and let yourself steep. Let the Word soak in and ask God to enlarge your heart, ask him to give you the grace to walk in the way of his Word. Archbishop Leighton went on to say, "Here then is enlargement, to see purity and beauty of his law, how just and reasonable, yea, how pleasant and amiable it is; that his commandments are not grievous, that they are beds of spices; the more we walk in them, still the more of their fragrant smell and sweetness we find."

Life happens. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad, but regardless, God tells us that we're responsible for how we respond. Hard situations in life never justify sinful responses. The more we're full of God's Word, the less likely we'll be to respond sinfully in the first place, but David assures us here that even when we do sin and get ourselves into trouble, God is always there with his Word to give us both strength and guidance and to help us out of the pit we've made. Let me close with a word of encouragement that God gave Isaiah:

They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

Brothers and sisters, we just need to remember that the key is to wait on the Lord and to live according to his life-giving Word.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you are our source of life. You brought the Creation into being with the power of your Word. You teach us your ways through your Spirit-inspired written Word. And you have redeemed us from our sins and given us eternal spiritual life through your Word Incarnate. Let us be so immersed in and enriched by your Word that we might never find ourselves clinging to the dust as David did, but we pray also, if and when we do find ourselves there, strengthen us according to your Word. Enlarge our hearts that we might run again in your ways. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our light and life. Amen.