

You May Fall, But You Won't Be Lost

I've been calling this series of messages "Psalms for Living" because **the Psalms give us direction and hope for living as God intends.** Jesus himself embodied the message of the Psalms: God's will for justice, righteousness, a fulfilling life, and peace among all peoples and all nations.

The psalms cover the whole range of human emotion and the human reaction to the vagaries of life. Psalm 138 is a song of gratitude teaching us that there is much in our lives for which we can thank God, and that an "attitude of gratitude" grows the holiness of character that God intends. You might recall that it is a counterpoint to Psalm 137, which expressed the despair and anger, and a desire for revenge, when the Israelites were defeated and taken away as slaves. It took them a couple of generations to get past their vengeful hatred and to see that God was teaching them in their tribulations. The lesson applies to us: A set back in life is often a set up for our Savior to walk through and guide us to a new place in life.

We began this series with Psalm 1 and its message of hope for those who follow divine guidance. The one who trusts in God and seeks to follow His ways **"... is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers,"** Psalm 1:3. **Those who follow God's ways are rooted in eternity.** It is fitting, then, today that we conclude our series of messages with Psalm 37, which encourages us to stay the course with God. **"Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away,"** Psalm 37:1.

Remember the message from August 18th? Lament of a backslider found in Psalm 73? It was about slipping in faith, envying the unrighteous and their success and ease in life, while believers seem to struggle and have tragedy stalking their lives. There is an addendum to that psalm. It's found in Psalm 37: **"The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand,"** Psalm 37:23-24.

The Christian Stumble

No it's not a dance step or a Christian trying to dance. It's about stumbling in life, most especially stumbling in your walk with God. If you live long enough your faith is sure to be challenged ... many times. You might look at the world around you, maybe look at your own life and wonder, even doubt, that our faith has any meaning or is worth pursuing.

Psalm 37 says: **“... though he may stumble, he will not fall...”** Some translations say, **“When he falls.”** Note that it does not say, **“If he falls.”** There is a big difference between **“when”** and **“if.”** **“If”** is a probability. **“When”** is a certainty. King David, I think, understood that all believers fall at some point. He certainly did. No one is exempt. Christians who trust in God — the God who limits his own will out of respect for the will of humans and the desire for a love that is not coerced, but is voluntary and true—Christians who trust in this God, should understand that **the potential for stumbling before God is genuine.** God allows us to exercise our free will, even if it means we make wrong choices.

Our **“fall”** may be a fall into trouble, calamity or catastrophe or it may be a fall into serious moral sin, anything that takes our eyes off of God. It could be the loss of a job, a health problem, the breakup of a marriage, the end of a friendship, bankruptcy, or any sort of personal crisis that causes you to lose hope. It could be a series of foolish choices that led you in a wrong direction so that you hurt your walk with God and hurt those around you. Sometimes the **“fall”** in our circumstances causes a **“fall”** into bitterness, substance abuse, anger, rage, abusive speech, rash decisions, lust, adultery, or other sinful action.

The Bible repeatedly shows how easily this can happen to even the best people. **The Bible tells us the whole truth about human nature.** We see men and women who are faithful one day and fickle the next. We see Peter boasting just before he’s busted by his own sin. We see worship mixed with worry, courage followed by cowardice, faith matched with doubt, generosity followed by greed, kindness overcome by arrogance. We learn that strong people sometimes do very stupid things. Saints can act like sinners.

Noah heeded God’s direction, built an ark to save his family, and when the flood was over, he got drunk and exposed himself to his sons. By faith Abraham followed God’s call to the Promised Land. When he got there, he lied about his wife Sarah—not once, but twice! Before Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he killed an Egyptian and tried to cover up the evidence. After David wrote, **“The Lord is my shepherd,”** he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had Uriah the Hittite murdered in a vain attempt to cover his sin.

These stories are in the Bible teach us that even the best people, under pressure, can do dumb and faithless things. **No one is beyond the reach of temptation.** Very godly people can make some very wrong choices—and suffer greatly as a result. And cause others to suffer with them. It’s good that the Bible shows this to us—or we would be tempted to deny this reality. Don’t ever think you’re beyond temptation. You don’t know what you might do. Today’s **“victory”** may actually set you up for tomorrow’s **“defeat.”** Satan roams the world like a mighty lion, looking for overconfident Christians he can devour (1 Peter 5:8). We all fall sooner or later. It’s what happens when we fall that makes all the difference.

Not Down Forever

Some versions say, ***"Though he stumbles, he will not fall."*** A hiker is on a trail that winds through a dense forest. As she walks forward, she doesn't see the half buried root and so she trips and stumbles badly, scraping a hand and knee, or maybe falls, landing hard on her bum. Life is like that. We all stumble in many ways.

One translation says, ***"When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong."*** That's what happens when you stand at the Grand Canyon peering over the edge, looking down 3,000 feet, when someone pushes you from behind. When you finally hit bottom, you won't dust yourself off and walk away. You will be a crumpled mess, totally destroyed.

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out. A self-described "caring" person came along and said, "I feel your pain." A fire-and-brimstone preacher said, "You deserve your pit." A mathematician calculated how deep the pit was. A news reporter wanted the exclusive story on the pit. A Congressman said, "Don't worry, I'll pass a law requiring safety rails around pits." Quickly followed the IRS agent asking if anyone was paying taxes on the pit. A self-pitying person said, "You think that pit is bad, you should see mine!" A self-esteem therapist said, "Believe in yourself and you can get out of that pit." An optimist said, "Things could be worse." A pessimist claimed, "Things *will* get worse."

Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit. Spiritually speaking, too often the opinion of others colors what we may think about our situation. And a lot of times our choice to act on our own opinion, keeps us from being connected to our Heavenly Father who is our constant provider! ***If you fall into the pit of sin and despair of ever getting out ... cry out to God, He is your Savior.***

God promises that trials and calamities that test and try our faith in Him won't destroy us. Though we may face desperate, life-changing circumstances next year, God will not allow us to be utterly destroyed. Nothing can happen that will sever our relationship with him.

The reason is clear: ***"Because the Lord is the One who holds his hand ..."*** When you walk with God He's got a grip on your hand. Think of a father walking along with his toddler by his side. The father places his larger hand around his son's little hand. When the boy stumbles his father's hand "upholds" him. God's got your hand so that you may walk through life with confidence.

God Will Walk With You

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way. The Lord Himself delights in his ways!" Simply put: ***If you're willing to walk with God, God is certainly willing to walk with you!*** He will even guide your steps, if you allow Him. You might say, "I don't know where I'm going." God says "I do"! You might say, "I don't know how I'm going to get there." God says,

“I do”! God knows the best destination for you and the best way to get there. That doesn’t mean you follow a carrot on a stick. It means that as you make decisions you can continually check in with God for directions. A path blazed by God paves the way with confidence.

Martin Luther said that it takes three things to make a man or woman of God—meditation, prayer, and temptation. The first two sound good because we know we need to read the Bible and pray. But most of us would not include “temptation” on the list. Luther meant that godly character can only be developed in the crucible of life where we fight many battles with the world, the flesh, and the devil. The temptation is to quit, to despair, to give in to bitterness, to flee into drugs or alcohol, to yield to lust, to give in to greed, to walk in pride. Those temptations either destroy us or they make us stronger. In addition to prayer and Bible reading we need the struggles of life to make us spiritually strong.

Christians: get real! We suffer just like everyone else on this sin-sick planet. And yes, falling into sin is bad ... really bad. Ask any Christian who fell into serious moral sin how “good” it was. Sin’s delight is fleeting. All Satan’s apples have worms. But here’s an important truth from the psalm: God is at work in our trials and in our falls in a way we never dreamed and never saw at the time. “... he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus,” Phil. 1:6. God walks alongside us in our struggle to walk in holiness.

Though they are not pleasant or easy to endure our struggles are necessary. Yes, God “permits” us to fall when he could stop it. That’s because He respects our freedom and He knows ultimately it will be for our spiritual benefit. Sin and suffering itself are not good and God takes no pleasure when we fall and suffer for it. But it is often the pathway to enormous blessing for us. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,” Rom. 8:26. Nothing is wasted with God.

God Never Lets Go

When you are in Christ, you are a new person, now being shaped by Christ, renewed in spirit to be the person God meant you to be. You may get off track but God will bring you back. Last week I talked about those who trust something or someone other than God. But the more you depend on other means – like drugs, alcohol, sex, human power – the weaker and more enslaved you become and the less you become like your true self. Two weeks ago I told you about Asaph, the worship director in ancient Israel, and how he stumbled in his faith. **We too can stumble in faith, but God doesn’t let go. Psalm 37:25 says this “I have been young and now I am old, Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken...” Those could be my own words ... Despite all my failures and sins God hasn’t let me go, neither will He let go of you.**

Consider what Jesus said to Peter in the Upper Room on the night before he was crucified: ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers,”*** Luke 22:31-32. Jesus said this only hours before Peter’s threefold denial. In fact, Jesus said it just before Peter made his boastful promise of unending faithfulness. The point is, Jesus saw it all coming, knew everything before it took place: The boasting, the girl around the fire who identified him, the swearing, the repeated denials, the shame, the guilt, then at last the restoration.

Jesus knew the “steps” Peter was about to take in the wrong direction. In a sense, He knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. By himself, Peter was but a man. But Jesus said, ***“I have prayed for you.”*** He didn’t stop Peter from boasting or from denying. He let matters take their natural course, but he prayed for Peter, knowing that Peter at heart loved him, and knowing that his denial was not the “real” Peter. **The “real” Peter** was the man who declared, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** Jesus allowed Peter to fall away, knowing that through his prayers, Peter would eventually return, and when he did, he would be a better, stronger man, humbled by his failure, ready to serve the Lord with a humility born of painful failure.

In the very same manner God has a hold on you ... so don’t you let go. **If you fail to live by God’s intentions that doesn’t mean you are a failure.** You are not destined for the pit – your destiny is a heavenly one. You are not your addiction. You are not your sin. You are not your mistakes and failures. You are God’s own.

“Trust in the LORD and do good; Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness,”
Psalm 37:3.

Sermon Take-Away

If you fail to live by God’s intentions that doesn’t mean you are a failure.

You can stumble in faith, but God doesn’t let go.

If you’re willing to walk with God, God is willing to walk with you!