

When You Are Slipping

Psalm 94:17–19

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Text

If the LORD had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.
When I thought, "My foot slips,"
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.
When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.
—Psalm 94:17–19

The only sure comfort in affliction comes from God.

Introduction

On a personal note, I want to thank everyone for your prayers and encouragement. My church has been wonderful to my family and me during my six-month health sabbatical. When I returned in August, I honestly didn't know if I would ever come back to ministry. The stress had caused physical problems, which led to emotional and spiritual challenges—not doubt in my faith, but a genuine battle.

To the presbytery, I've been part of the Heartland Presbytery since 1994. We've examined candidates who weren't even born when I joined, which is humbling. This has been my home, and I love you all. So many of you reached out personally during these difficult months. I'll never forget that kindness.

The experience I've had was new to me. I've never faced this kind of difficulty before. I've helped others through similar struggles, but now I understand from a different angle. That's why I bring you to Psalm 94 tonight.

I'm not charismatic—otherwise I wouldn't be in this presbytery—but I came as close as I ever have one February night when I was at my lowest point. Reading through the psalms as I had many times during those months, I came to these three verses. I was half-asleep when verse 17 caught my eye,

and it was as though the Lord was speaking directly to me. As you know, he does speak to us through his word.

Understanding the Context

I don't think it's too much to describe the psalmist here as anxious and depressed. Nine months ago, that would have meant one thing to me. It means something more now. When I read psalms that say, "My tears have been my food day and night," or "My heart is in anguish within me. The terrors of death have fallen upon me," I used to think, "That must be bad for him," grateful it didn't happen to me.

When the psalmist says, "Fear and trembling come upon me and horror overwhelms me"—that's a man after God's own heart—I thought I understood what it meant. Now I relate with much deeper understanding.

Before this past year, I had not known what anxiety and depression truly mean. I thought they meant you worry a lot or get discouraged sometimes. Everyone has periods of worry and despair that last for days, sometimes weeks. But sometimes these things last for months and become more intense. A physiological response occurs—your motor goes on and won't shut off.

Robert Somerville writes in *If I Am a Christian, Why Am I Depressed?* that if you are extremely sad and anxious, feeling hopeless most days for two weeks or longer, you probably don't need anyone to tell you that you're depressed. Everyone feels sad and blue at times, but these feelings typically pass in a few days. However, in major depression, your mood is severely depressed and your activity level minimal over an extended period, greatly interfering with daily functioning and impacting everyone around you.

Spurgeon's Wisdom

A counselor referred me to Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. I had read the book before but probably skipped the chapter titled "The Minister's Fainting Fits," thinking it didn't apply to me. Everyone here should read it.

Spurgeon deals with factors that can spawn anxiety and depression—what he calls "fainting fits" that specifically befall ministers of the gospel. His checklist includes seven contributing factors:

1. **Physical exhaustion and illness** can cause someone to slip into dread and gloom. Your body reacts to overworking and stress, eventually breaking down and shouting, "Stop, slow down." If you don't listen, it will stop you.

2. **Imbalanced sleep, diet, and exercise** become more difficult to manage as you age. When strained, your nervous system short-circuits.
3. **Reaction after great joy or labor**—we all know the Monday blues after a great Sunday, but on a larger scale, this can follow big victories.
4. **Satanic temptation or attack** should not be ruled out. That wicked fiend is especially busy when we are most occupied for God. Remember Elijah defeating the prophets of Baal, then curled up in fear of Jezebel.
5. **Accumulation of ministry burdens** over years—ministerial labor with too little rest, years of suffering with those who suffer—can become a crushing load.
6. **External troubles outside ministry duties**—financial strains, house maintenance, insufficient retirement outlook, various material needs that stress and worry us.
7. **Criticism from without and within**—slander cleverly contrived and flung by malicious hands, or the weight of internal church criticism.

Sometimes there's **mysterious spiritual melancholy** with no clear cause. Spurgeon says we might as well fight with the mist as with this shapeless, undefinable, yet all-be-clouding hopelessness.

All these remind us that we are but dust.

The Psalm Writer's Experience

We don't know much about the psalm writer—he's not identified, and we're uncertain of the timeframe. Many lament psalms originate from terrible national conditions. In antiquity, oppression by another nation meant armies bearing down, crops and animals requisitioned, poverty often resulting. Even under a bad king with no justice, exploitation, and theft, it was easy to become anxious and depressed.

The writer endures something like this nationally, but then speaks personally about his own experience.

Four Ways God Ministers to Us

I. The Lord Helps (v. 17)

■ "If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence."

The psalmist credits the Lord with doing what no one else could do. Only the Lord could have brought him out of this place. God helps because he's close—he is near us. You don't always know

he's near when you're in that mindset, but the psalmist now sees that God was there because he's the one who helped.

Think of teaching a child to ride a bike. You run behind them, staying close because you know if they fall, you need to be there to help. God can help us because he's always close, whether we feel it or not.

The writer sensed he was sinking into "the land of silence"—what the Old Testament calls Sheol. It's not paradise or Abraham's bosom, but a terrible place of silence, worse than quiet. Psalm 31:17 describes it: "Let the wicked be put to shame. Let them go down silently to Sheol."

This kind of anxiety and depression makes a true believer feel like they're not believers. It's the sensation of sinking into a pit leading to a place where there is no care for anyone or anything, and no one can reach you.

Christ as Our Helper

God's ever-presence is most fulfilled as we think upon Christ. He is God with us, our helper because he is present with us. The Spirit of Christ indwells believers. Jesus knows all our sufferings because he suffered them first. Remember Gethsemane—he sweat drops of blood, praying, "If this cup could pass." On the cross he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus went to the land of silence on the cross so we don't have to go to the same place.

Stated another way: Because the Lord is my help, I will not go down to the land of silence.

II. The Lord Holds (v. 18)

■ "When I thought, 'My foot slips,' your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up."

A slipping foot perfectly describes the sudden terror when your foot slips while you're up high. Years ago, learning to be an arborist, I was thirty feet up a tree, roped in but loose, standing on a branch when my foot slipped. I only fell a couple of feet, but that split second felt like death. You get a rush of adrenaline, breathing heavily, shaking afterward—you feel like you're going down for sure.

For the psalmist, God's steadfast love (*hesed*)—covenant love—holds him up. Because of God's covenant promise toward his well-being, God holds him up no matter what he feels like. When your foot's slipping, he will hold you up because he's committed by covenant oath. He will not let us fall into the land of silence.

Christ as Our Keeper

God's upholding of his children is most clearly realized in Christ. Jesus says, "I have not lost one that you have given me." Jesus will not let you fall away. We'll fall into sickness, trouble, and difficulties in

this world, but he will never ultimately let us fall.

John 10: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand."

Jude's benediction takes on new meaning: Christ "is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy." One feeling you have when anxious and depressed is guilt for your sins—you can't imagine God accepting you. That's why you're so scared of dying. But he will not let your foot slip.

Jesus keeps us from falling and intercedes for us constantly, strengthening, guarding, and guiding us through temptation. Our security and perseverance are rooted not in our own strength or obvious weaknesses, but in his unchanging power and faithfulness bound by covenant oath.

Stated another way: My foot cannot slip ultimately because of the steadfast love of the Lord who is holding me.

III. The Lord Consoles (v. 19a)

┃ "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul."

Notice the tenses. Verses 17 and 18 are past tense—he's standing having come through this, or maybe one foot's still in it. Now he has perspective because often when you're in the thick of it, these truths won't grip you. But now they're gripping him as he looks back.

Verse 19 is in the perfect tense—present and into the future. He's learned something from his experience.

There's probably no better way to describe anxiety than "when the cares of my heart are many." The New American Standard says, "when my anxious thoughts multiply within me"—a better translation because it describes the growth as dynamic. That's what anxiety does: it starts to grow and grow, out of control. There's not one thing making you nervous; your motor's on and everything makes you nervous.

Ed Welch describes anxiety as "the fear of future loss all upon you"—imagining that something or many things will happen and living as though it's already true. Tim Keller called it "the painful unease that results when something we value too much is threatened."

When anxious too long, it impacts us physiologically. Multiple anxious thoughts, fears, doubts, and sorrows crowd the mind—all of which you know are irrational. It's like a car engine getting stuck open, revving too high for too long. Minor problems become major as you imagine the worst possible outcome. Your mind is drawn to your saddest memories, the record of your sins, failures, and

disappointments. Negative thoughts crowd out all happy ones, even for the minister who knows the gospel is the answer.

God's Three-Fold Consolation

First, God consoles us with his word. You will understand and cherish the Psalms like never before.

Psalms 119: "Remember your word to your servant in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life."

Second, God consoles us with his Holy Spirit—the helper Jesus sent, the comforter. "Whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Jesus comes to us through his Spirit, reminding us of his promises. Romans 8: "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God." I don't feel like it—but you are. The word says it; the Spirit attests to it.

Third, God consoles us with his people. This is what I had never known like I've come to know it. I always loved being the helper to others. The hardest thing about this whole experience is all the attention people give me, but I've needed it.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 7: "For even when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus."

We need each other most in these times. In the first few weeks, people from this room came over every day, sitting with me for hours. We'd talk a little, read Scripture, pray, and they kept telling me, "God loves you." Support, sympathy, fellowship, understanding, encouragement—God's presence is most known through his people who are indwelt by the Spirit and bear the word.

I now keep a gratitude log in my journal—I never journaled before age 53. I've counted forty-two people who have visited and spent time praying and talking about what I was going through. Six to eight brothers contact me every week, some every day.

IV. The Lord Cheers (v. 19b)

┃ "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul."

God's consolations—his word, Spirit, and people—cheer us at the deepest level of the soul. This doesn't mean God makes us happy in the moment; we all know the difference between happiness and joy. One who's depressed may have a hard time with happiness, but you can have soul-level joy nevertheless.

The ultimate consolation comes by remembering that we belong to God and he has us for eternity. The psalmist needed to be reminded that he belongs to Yahweh. Our ultimate joy comes from

knowing God is our Savior. The land of silence does not await us, but beautiful, eternal rest—rest from anxiety and depression forevermore. No more fears and sadness, no more dread and distress.

Christ as Our Joy

The cheering of our soul is ultimately realized in the person and work of Christ. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy."

He gives us joy by reconciling us to God, transforming our perspective, giving us his presence, and filling our lives with hope and purpose. This joy is much deeper than fleeting happiness—it's unshakable, even in suffering, because it's anchored in him.

Conclusion

These last eight months have changed me forever. I'm still going through it to some degree, but like the psalmist, I've experienced God's consolations and have every reason to trust that he'll continue to provide them.

For the first twenty-eight years of my pastoral ministry, I've seen Colossians 1:28–29 as my mission verses: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

I still love these verses, but I think I emphasized too much the toil and struggle. I'm picking new verses for however many years God gives me: 1 Corinthians 2:2–5:

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

I will now emphasize less my toil and struggle and more my weakness, fear, and trembling, which will by God's grace produce a demonstration of God's Spirit, so that no one's faith would rest in human wisdom, but in the power of God.

Prayer

Father of mercy and grace, I lift to you anyone who is in a period of anxiousness or depression. I lift those who are fearful and sad to your care. Teach each of us to trust you when our feet begin to slip.

When worries multiply, draw us near to you and fill us with the peace that only your presence can give. Help us to remember that your consolations are greater than our cares, and that in Christ we are never alone. Strengthen us to rest in your love, to speak words of hope to those who are hurting, so that all may see the refuge that we have in you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.