

Caught in the Undertow Of Grace

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Psalm 25:12-15

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Psalm 25:12-15 - Caught in the Undertow of Grace

I have a memory of going, as a kid, to the beach with my family one time, to Tofino on Vancouver Island. If I remember correctly, we were travelling with some friends from England. In any case, I remember some older kids body surfing on the big waves. The waves are really what people are attracted to most there. Long Beach, near Tofino, connects with other beaches to form 25km of unbroken, pristine, Pacific beachfront. With nothing protecting Long Beach, it gets the full force of the open ocean pounding its shores. When the tide is all the way out you can walk out in shallow water for hundreds of meters. When the tide comes in, the giant waves pulverize that same stretch of sand. One memory that stands out to me of our visit there at that time is of my brother and I playing in the water, pretty far out. Suddenly we were aware that the tide had changed and our mom had warned us to get back to shore quickly when that happened. As we ran for shore, through the water, it felt like my legs were being suctioned back toward the ocean. What I was feeling is called an undertow. When the tide is retreating, waves crash onto the beach and the water rushes back along the ground creating a sometimes very powerful current than can even pull very strong swimmers out into deep water. This is an undertow. One reason tidal undertows can be so dangerous is that the real current is under the surface-you can't see it from above. You can feel it though, and it's force can catch you unaware.

In these verses, Psalm 25:12-15, David reflects on the work of God's grace in the life of the true believer. This morning I want to show you from this text that God's grace works in our lives like a powerful undertow. We can't usually see it, though we can feel its effects at times. And the force of it can surprise us. In fact, I think that often times the busier we are, the less aware we are of the current of God's grace pulling us, at work within us. But there are times when we slow down to notice, or get stuck and caught in sin and sinful circumstances, when we may, to our great relief, become aware of God's presence and the undertow of His grace. You see God's grace is not tame and controllable and, though it is fearsome, it is not deadly. But most people resist the common grace of God and run the other way-like Jay and I ran from the changing tide-back to safe ground. David sees in verse 12 that the true believer gets swept up in the powerful grace of God and pulled into the eternal ocean of God's love.

So the question asked in verse 12, is a question each one of us must answer. "Who is the man who fears the LORD?" Each one of us needs to answer this question. In fact, I daresay there is no question we will ever ask or be asked more important than this question. "Who is the man, or woman, who fears the LORD? Is it me?" The question we are asking is about God's covenant. His covenant is His one-way, unconditional, solemn promise to be gracious with those who are His chosen people. And that raises another question, doesn't it? "Who are God's chosen people?" In a moment I'll read you a passage from Isaiah that speaks to this question in God's own words. But to prepare you I want you to know that this prophecy is about Jesus Christ-that He is the Covenant that God gives to His people, resulting in rich blessings for those fortunate people. So a member of God's covenant people is someone who has received Jesus Christ Himself. Have you received Jesus, God's sin-forgiving, soul-saving, life-giving Promised One? Have you received His forgiveness for your sin? It means leaving your sin in His hands, trusting that He's forgiven you. Have you received His salvation of your soul? It means leaving your soul in His hands, worshipping Him alone and forever. Have you received His gift of life? It means giving over your rights and self-rule to Him. You don't call the shots; He does. You don't govern yourself; He governs you. That's what each person does if he or she is that man or woman who "fears the LORD". Here's the promise from Isaiah: [read Isaiah 49:7-13]. Jesus Christ has a "Promised Land" in store for the people He calls out from darkness; for the sinners He rescues from sin. Are you in darkness? Do you need rescue?

After asking, "Who is the man who fears the LORD?" These verses in Psalm 25, up to verse 15, introduce four benefits of the Covenant for God's people, four effects of the undertow of God's grace for you and me. Although this passage is an ancient hymn of Israel, to be sung in worship, the verses found here are for reflection-meditation. Verse 11 was to be prayed; verses 12-15 are to be contemplated in light of verse 11, with each man examining himself to see whether he trusts in God's grace truly, or whether he has been presumptuous. As you listen to this sermon, God may give you a sense of which person you are, in that you may feel comforted or distressed in your soul. If you feel comforted it is the Holy Spirit at work to strengthen your faith in Christ, to encourage you and glorify the God in whom you trust. If you feel distressed it is the Holy Spirit at work, not to make you despair but to turn you to Christ for rescue: today may be the day of your salvation.

Verse 12 reveals God's sovereign grace in the way He conforms a Christian's will to choose His will. The words, "he will instruct him" in Hebrew, is the word yara, which is really interesting word: it means, to point, shoot and teach. Let me show you how these meanings fit together and what they have to do with what God does for the true believer. In Gen 46:28, it says that Judah went on ahead of Jacob to "point out the way" to Egypt. Again the word is used in Prov 6:13, in the sense of "pointing with a finger". In Exodus 19:13 the word is used of shooting an arrow and hitting the target. The basic idea is of aiming at something and hitting what was aimed at. Judah points the way, Jacob reaches his destination; a finger points at someone; an arrow shot hits what it was aimed at. You can picture a father teaching his son to read by pointing a finger at the words in a book-it's in this sense that this word means to "instruct" or "teach". The meaning here becomes clear when we read in this verse that God instructs the man who fears Him "in the way he should choose". The Hebrew does not mean, "in the way he ought to choose" but rather, "in the way he will choose". God does not fail when He teaches us. He hits what He aims at. The true believer, instructed by God in his will, in what he chooses, will choose what God wants him to choose.

There is a very close connection between the believing heart that fears God and the mind that makes choices under the influence of God's instruction. Spurgeon had a neat way of putting this:

Where God sanctifies the heart he enlightens the head. We all wish to choose our way; but what a mercy is it when the Lord directs that choice, and makes free will to be goodwill! If we make our will God's will, God will let us have our will. God does not violate our will, but leaves much to our choice; nevertheless, he instructs our wills, and so we choose that which is well pleasing in his sight.[i]

Verse 13 reveals God's sovereign grace in the way He makes the Christian's heart content. The word, "abide" means here to settle down and live. I think for me, though 99.9 percent of the blessings of God for the Christian are going to be enjoyed after the resurrection of our bodies, this is one of the blessings I have enjoyed most and been most thankful for in my life. As God has taught me-though I am a poor student and stubborn-He has formed in my heart the desire to choose over and over again what He wants me to do. I often choose sinfully, but still God leads me to choose His ways, in spite of my other choices. And the result in my life is that I enjoy so much that He has blessed me with. I may not have everything I want; but He has given me much to be content with. The Promised Land was a blessing God promised to Abraham's descendants. When they had been living there a couple of centuries, most of them complained about it. But a few of the faithful, those who feared the LORD, took pleasure in the material blessings God had given to their people. And they knew that the land they had inherited was also a symbol of the everlasting inheritance that we have still to look forward to.

Verse 14 reveals God's sovereign grace in the way He counsels a Christian's understanding. I say, "counsels" for verse 14 because of the meaning of the Hebrew word translated, "friendship". As the ESV footnote points out it means, "secret counsel"-like a General letting a subordinate soldier in on secret strategies... or like a close friend sharing intimate secrets with us when we hurt, and giving us words of wisdom and insight that we can trust. But the verse goes on to show that the most important content of God's secret counsel is "friendship" because it is about His covenant with those God-fearing believers He has chosen and saved. I won't belabour this point any further than to say that we can see here that no part of a Christian's spiritual life depends on his or her own strength or effort: not coming to faith in the Gospel, not growing in faith and maturity, and not arriving at the resurrection-destination of glory. God teaches us, in "making known" to us "His covenant", that all depends on Jesus Christ.

See here the growing understanding God gives the maturing Christian into the workings of His grace: like the ebb and flow of the ocean's tide, I see in these verses the ebb of personal effectiveness and the flow of the power of Grace. If you look carefully at verses 12-14 you will notice that the activity of the God-fearing Christian slows down and comes to a halt as the verses progress: verse 12 has the Christian walking; verse 13 has him settling down; verse 14 has him listening to God's "secret counsel" and learning; verse 15 has him stuck with his feet in sin-the believer's own power has truly ebbed as much as it can, hasn't it? Have you ever been stuck like that and helpless? At times like that I know it can seem so

long ago when we were walking along, making choices, trying to serve and please God, right? But we need to see the flow of God's grace that overflows our need with His strength. In verse 12, God is instructing our choices; in verse 13, providing good things for us; in verse 14, teaching us secret truths as a Friend; in verse 15, plucking our feet from the net of our sins.

Verse 15 reveals God's sovereign grace in the way He captures the Christian from sin.

I got an email from my dad on Friday evening in which he told me that early that at about 5 a.m., his wife, Sandra's heart had stopped. But it so happened that this happened when she was in the hospital in Kamloops, where he had taken her at around 2 a.m., because her heart was racing. So the doctor was right at hand, and, in my dad's words, he "did the paddle thing". Sandra's now at home recovering.

In verse 12 David lifted his tear streaked face from prayer and looked from the greatness of his sin to the covenant graciousness of God's forgiveness made possible by the Promised Messiah, the Lamb of God. As he thought about God's grace he recognized that God was at work in his life so often when he was completely unaware of it. And he saw the power of the movement of God's friendship and favour guiding him, blessing him, teaching him and rescuing him. Now if you have been caught with your feet stuck in your sin this week and discouraged by it and overcome with guilt because of it, then listen up. Remember that in verse 12 David began by thinking about the true God-fearer-asking a self-examining question, "who is that man?" Now look at those humble words in verse 15: David says, "My eyes are ever," always and continuously, "toward the LORD"! When David says, "My eyes", he is saying, "I am that man!" (of verse 12.) I fear God, so I look to Him for rescue! Because who else can save me from His wrath, but Him whose grace is so rich and free? Who else can save me from myself and my sin, but Him who loved me and gave Himself up for me?

Why is it that in that moment of helplessness we only then really understand our weakness and God's power? Why do we fight against the current of God's love, thinking we can get by on our own strength? From a stand-still, in verse 15, when our feet are caught, the undertow of God's grace pulls the mature, repentant, God-fearing Christian into deeper water-back to verse 12! Back to the realization that God's grace is at work in the believer's life often quietly, shaping our desires, bringing good into our lives and giving us understanding of His gracious covenant. Perhaps in His gentle and friendly and patient way with us, His chosen people, our God will hold us by the hand and take us a little farther in maturity? Perhaps then we will find that the next time, instead of fighting against grace, we will fight a little harder against temptation?

1 Corinthians 10:13-14 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. 14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

And so run this week: when you see temptation, flee; when you see signs of God's grace, run toward it.

[i] Charles H. Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Vol. 1. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1892). pp 445-446.