

Introduction: Prone to Wander

I can't pray! My tongue feels spiritually tied and guilt churns in my stomach as I glimpse my dust-ridden Bible, untouched for weeks. I find no strength in my arm to lift it; I have no desire, yet feel some longing and mourning for the things of God. I am in a land as dry as Ezekiel's valley; the parched earth is as cracked as my lips. I know I should turn around and trudge back up to the cool mountain springs. But I am robbed of muscle and passion. I am just a wandering pile of dry, lifeless bones.

Yet I am hunted ... hunted by the grace that saved me.

Straying from God

As Christians, many of us experience times when we struggle in our faith. Times when we get distracted, like dumb sheep, and stray away from the safety of the fold and our faithful Shepherd. Some of us wander for months or even years, backsliding into unbelief and serious sin. Others of us fall into spiritual apathy where our passion for Christ cools and we can't pray or pick up our Bibles.

Whether we are lukewarm or backsliding, no matter how far we roam away from God, it is a painful and horrible place to be. We grow unnaturally numb to the goodness of God, the gospel loses its punch, and our sin fails to repulse us.

Honest to God

Robert Robinson was a man who was honest about his tendency to drift from the Lord. In his hymn ‘Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing’, Robinson confesses that he isn’t just at risk of straying away from God ... he is susceptible to it.

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love.¹

Robinson’s words have always resonated with me. I too feel this stupid inclination inside me. Not a week goes by when I don’t wrestle with a distracted or cold heart towards God. Sure, this is because I am just human. But it is mostly because I am a sinner.

As we shall see, sometimes we are lukewarm because life has knocked us down, and we are dry and burnt out. Other times it is because we are deliberately wandering away: choosing sin. For ‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — *every one* — to his own way’ (Isa. 53:6, emphasis added). As believers in Christ we are saved by grace but our sin can still drive us away from our loving God.

1. ‘Come thou fount of every blessing’, Robert Robinson, 1758.

Luke Warm

Meet Mr Luke Warm. After every church service Luke would always stand with his arms crossed, resting against the wall of the church bookshop, looking sharp in his faded jeans and designer sunglasses. About a year or so ago Luke started to leave his Bible at church during the week. 'So I know it's here when I need it,' he would say. Although he helped with the chairs every week and hosted Christianity Explored in his apartment, Luke never prayed publicly anymore. And he talked about sermons in the same way he talked about Michael McIntyre. Luke had just become too cool to burn passionately for Christ ... so he carried on spiritually tepid.

In the book of Revelation Christ rebukes the Christians in Laodicea because their faith had turned lukewarm and flat; like a bottle of Coke left out in the sun too long. Although they looked the same on the outside, they had shrivelled up on the inside and lost their fire for Jesus (Rev. 3:14-22). Their problem was their materialism and comfort (v. 17), and this can be our pitfall too.

Life Pressures

Some time ago my love for Christ cooled into a pool of disgusting complacency. I suddenly found it hard to make personal sense of the gospel, and uninvited doubts about the existence of God or whether I was really a Christian would pop into my head. Most of all, my prayer life resembled road-kill.

A host of things contributed to this: as a family we were burnt out in the ministry, dog-tired from broken sleep with our new-born baby and witnessing the end of

a family marriage. These were my *triggers* but they were not my *pitfalls*. Such triggers can knock us but they never make us sin. We sin because we choose to. Like the church in Laodicea, my comfort was my stumbling block. Things were hard going and so I looked for the easy ride. I became mentally preoccupied with physical and material ease instead of the comfort given by Jesus Christ.

But grace saved me from my lukewarm Christianity. You've met grace too ... when you first came to Christ.

Rescuing the Backslider

We also wander away from God because we fall into serious sin. This is frequently described as 'backsliding' — a term that suggests a slippery slope and someone sliding down it backwards. Perhaps you are a 'backslidden' Christian. You once were a believer in Christ but now you are in the habit of deliberately choosing sin instead of running from it. Maybe you have even denounced your faith and walked away from the church, or committed adultery, or got stuck into some heavy-duty sin that is crushing you. You know you are lost and you need God to rescue you. Don't be discouraged! God told Ezekiel: 'I *will* seek the lost, and I *will* bring back the strayed' (Ezek. 34:16, emphasis added). Even when we are stuck in a mess of rebellion and unbelief, if we belong to Christ He will rescue us by the grace of His cross.

That Same Grace

So here is hope! The fact you have this book in your hands is a sign that you want out of your apathy and backsliding. Hope lies in the fact that the same grace that first brought

you to Christ is available to you now. The grace of the Lord Jesus carries us through the Christian life; it doesn't just dump us at the door and leave the rest to us. Grace is ready for you in Christ ... grab it!

Am I a Christian?

'That's all fair enough ... But I've been backsliding for a long time now and I don't know whether I was really ever saved.' The point is, whether you are a lukewarm Christian, a backsliding believer, or a wayward prodigal who learnt of God's grace in his younger years but has lived many without it, *we all need the gospel*. In this book we are not going to get caught up in the past and questions of 'when was I saved?' We are going to focus on the gospel and taking hold of Christ now.

This Book

So, whether you would describe yourself as sliding, straying, running, or drifting from God; if you are spiritually cold, lukewarm, dry, thirsty or just plain worn out — whatever the metaphor — this book has been written to give you gospel comfort and practical counsel to help you move Godward.

In three parts, we will explore why as Christians we stray from God, offer comfort in your time of lukewarmness or apathy, and unpack some practical essentials that safeguard us from stumbling in the future. If you are in a place of deep spiritual pain and wrestling then I recommend reading part two first. There are also optional activities to encourage you to take further action and again take hold of King Jesus.