

(How to Get Out of a Religious Rut): Dealing With Spiritual Problems

by A.W. Tozer

A.W. Tozer encourages Christians to stir up the gift of God within them, through confession, repentance, and self-examination, to overcome spiritual stagnation and achieve revival.

Duration: 36:05

Scripture: Psalm 77:6, Psalm 119:11, Psalm 119:15, Psalm 119:28, Isaiah 42:3, 2 Timothy 1:5-6

Topics: "Religious Rut"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the passage from 2nd Timothy where the apostle Paul writes to his young coworker Timothy. Paul urges Timothy to stir up the gift of God that is within him, as he is in danger of getting into a rut. The preacher emphasizes that many Christians are in a spiritual rut and not making progress. He encourages the audience to not be ashamed of the cross and to actively stir up the gift of God within them. The preacher concludes by urging the audience to personally engage with the Lord through prayer and Bible study to experience a transformative week.

Transcript

Tonight I want to read from 2 Timothy 1, Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus. To Timothy, my dearly beloved son, grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers, with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day.

Now the old man is praying for the young man, greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy. But when I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, it testifies to the sincere faith of the man, Timothy, and says, verse 6, wherefore, I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God which is in thee, by the putting on of my hand. So God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me as prisoner. Be thou a partaker of the affliction of the gospel according to the power of God. Stir up the gift of God which is in thee, by the putting on of my hand.

Now, briefly, I have been saying that most Christians are in a rut, a circular grave. We're not making spiritual progress, and I have been trying to describe our situation and point out how we can correct it, how we can get out of the rut. I select this passage from 2 Timothy, as a classic example of a man who was in danger.

If he was not already in the rut, he was in danger of getting into it. Here is Timothy, the old soldier is about to retire. That's the Apostle.

That is, the Lord is about to take him home, and before he goes, he writes a letter to the young co-worker, so much younger than he, but such a noble young man, so full of faith, being reared in a family where the faith of God was strong, proving himself a hundred ways in working with the great man, Paul. But even this man, though very busy, and even maybe because he was so busy, if he was not in a rut, he was in danger of settling into a rut. Otherwise, the man of God would not have said, stir up.

I want you to notice about the scriptures that God never uses any superfluous words. And he never says to a man who is wide awake, wake up. He never says to a man that is lying down, lie down.

He never says to a man that is standing, get up. And he never says to a man that is stirred up, stir up. God never wastes his words, and he never makes any little speeches like a man called to the laying of a cornerstone.

I think that if I were forced to do it, that I could make a cornerstone-laying speech or a ribbon-cutting speech, or almost any kind of a speech, and never just string a lot of clichés together, talk nice and fast and sit down. But the Holy Ghost never did it, and he never allowed any of these people to do it. David never did it, Isaiah, nor Paul, nor Moses, nor Peter, nor John.

They talked to a situation always. They talked to what the Quakers called a condition. And this man, the old man, was not wasting his words here or giving a little talk that would be good anyplace.

Stir up the gift of God that is in thee. This man needed this, or it wouldn't have been put here. And the evidences that the man Timothy, even though a hard-working and faithful man, was in danger of getting into a rut, he said, Don't be ashamed of the cross.

It's possible to be just beaten until you're numb. Do you ever get that way, just beaten until you're numb? Be able to smile and praise the Lord and say, Jesus, thy and my cross have taken for a while. And then slowly be beaten until you're numb, and you get into a sort of a rut, you can't fight back.

And here was a man, Timothy, who had been with Paul so long, and Paul had been in so much trouble so much of the time, and Timothy was tagging along behind in the same trouble. And he had noticed a little temptation to be ashamed of the cross, and he said, Don't be ashamed of the cross. And don't shrink from the affliction of the gospel, that's here, too.

And he said, God has not given us the spirit of fear. And he said in 2 Timothy 2, endure hardness as a good soldier, Jesus Christ, as though he might have detected in the young man a little temptation to just recoil a little bit from the hard life that he had called him into. And he knew that he was basically a sound man.

He knew that Timothy had been reared, as I've said, in a Christian home. He said, Thy grandmother Lois and thy mother Eunice, Eunice I think we call it now, but Eunice here in this English Bible, he said the

grandmother and the mother were Christians and good ones, and the young Timothy had learned to be a Christian, had become a Christian early in life, and he knew he was basically sound, but he was afraid that just the pressure of things, just the boredom of always being in the minority group, and always having to bring in the minority report, he just figured that this young man might be in a little danger of leveling off. So he said, Stir up the gift of God that is in thee, stir it up, Timothy, I'm about to leave you and my race is about finished, but you'll be around for a while, stir yourself up, Timothy, you stir yourself up, he said, you is the subject of the sentence, and don't get you in a rut.

Now, I have a conviction, I've been telling it here for 3 years, I don't know whether it has registered yet with anybody much, but I've been saying for 2 1/2, 2 3/4 years here that there is such a thing as a renaissance, such a thing as a personal revival. The best illustration that I know of it is the coming of the springtime to the farm. The farm boy never is out of my system.

I grew up on the farm, and I remember the wonder and the beauty of the spring. I remember the snow lay on all winter long, and we never saw the ground from the first snowfall or the second at most right on until the break-up in the spring. And how utterly dead everything was, but you know the life was still there, the trees were stark, but there was life in them, the roots in the ground were all quiet, but there was life down there, and just below the frost line were the worms and the bugs and the other little creatures and the mice and the moles, and in their safe nest were the chipmunks and the squirrels.

They were all there, and there was life there. And the bear and the woodchuck, they were all there, and there was life there, but they were waiting for something. They were hearing mother nature saying, Stir up the gift of God that is in thee.

And then comes the springtime, and the snow goes, and the spots and patches begin to appear here and there, and the bug-whites begin to whistle their happy but monotonous song on the sunny side of the hill, always on the sunny side of the hill. And the cattle begin to kick up their heels and run about the field, and particularly the young horses with their long hair that they couldn't even carry out, waiting for that new coat. Along about the second week of it, the new coat began to appear, and they used to run about and whinny into the sunshine, lie down and roll, my father said they were rolling to get rid of the old hair that had been on over winter.

And pretty soon they stood up as smooth as if they'd been oiled, shining there in the light, daffled gray or bay or roan or plain black, beauties that they were. And the cattle then moved about, and everything began to stir. The leaves came on, and the worms came up, and after a warm rain would stretch themselves out from about this long to about this long and flat.

You've seen them night crawlers over the ground, crawling by day. And little gray toads that the superstitious farmers said that had rained down, but actually had been asleep all the while, had just crawled out to have a stretch in the new sunshine. Well, then come the cowslips and the crocus and the tulips in the garden and the leaves on the trees, and the birds were back, those treacherous birds, those summer friends that always go to Florida for the winter and only come back when it's safe.

So back they come and sing like everything. We thought that they were singing for our delight. The scientists say that the male was singing to win the female and get her to work making the nest.

I don't know which is correct. I like my view of it better. But that's the spring, and pretty soon all the snow's gone, and the calves are born, and the lambs are about, and we started all over.

Thank God now it's all new. You know, I believe there's such a thing as that in the Christian life. I believe there's such a thing as going under for the winter.

I mean by that, having something happen to you a little at a time, and you get snowed under and frozen over. Now there's life there. Thou had faith, man of God, and thou had the faith that was in thy grandmother and thy mother.

I know you. You've been faithful, Timothy. And I don't say you're dead.

I only say watch it, watch it, because you need a stirring up. I believe it's possible for us to go through spiritual experiences that can rouse us and be the spiritual equivalent of the springtime in the meadow. I believe that with all my heart.

I've seen it happen, and I'd like to see it happen here. Now my illustration, as all illustrations, breaks down. There aren't any illustrations that hold good all the way.

The theologians say, never make your illustration stand on all four legs, because if you do, you'll find one short. Here's the point. The field cannot be talked to.

You never heard a farmer out along about February 19th standing on a stump lecturing his field. Stir up the gift of God, you! Stir up yourself, you trees! We'd think he was the 2nd St. Francis of Assisi or else that he needed to be led away. If we heard a farmer out lecturing his field saying, wake up, wake up, stir up yourself, it isn't done that way for this reason.

These creatures have no moral perception and no will of their own, and they're dependent upon the position of the sun. They can't do anything about it. But we can do something about it, and we can have the spiritual equivalent of a springtime in the meadow, but we have to enter in.

The tree waits it out, and even the animals have to wait it out. There's nobody can go to them and say, stir yourself. But you being made in the image of God and having a will of your own, you can do something about it.

So we appeal direct to your heart and say, you don't have to lie like a field covered with snow. You don't need to, because you can stir yourself. You can run to meet the sun.

You can create your own crisis, for the job you have is not for meadows and grass, but for your own heart. These other things only illustrate them. So we can stir up ourselves, and we can bring out the sun, and we can bring on the springtime.

Now, how do we get to the bottom of things so this can come about and that it'll happen? So we just don't talk about it, but it'll actually happen. First, to the individual. I have no faith in anything that happens to a church that doesn't happen to the individual.

If it doesn't affect the individual, numbers of individuals, if it's only a sort of social overtone that affects everybody momentarily, I have no faith in it at all. I believe that a revived church, every bear came out by himself and every mouse by himself, and every tree by itself and every meadow by itself, and everything had to come by itself. And by combining all that springtime glory, then you had the spring.

And so it is with the church. Now, how do we go about it? What do we do? Well, David set us the pattern. For you see how David confessed and repented.

Now, you say, I knew he'd get around to it. Yes, sir, I get around to it. Spurgeon preached on repentance week after week, and somebody said, when are you going to quit preaching on repentance, Pastor? He said, when you repent.

And when we talk about confession and repentance, we keep right on talking about it until it's had its effect, or we know that it'll have none. And the Lord said, in that case, get the dust off your feet and hunt up some place where they will hear. I have better hopes for you and things that accompany salvation, and I believe you will hear.

There was a man named Finney, I mentioned him this morning. Not every one of us agrees with everything that he taught. But we do believe that he was one of God's great men, perhaps the greatest evangelist that ever lived since St. Paul, or since St. Paul, yes, the greatest of them all.

And he said there were times, there were periods, occasionally it would come to him when he'd get into a rap, and he said definitely there was a dimming down of the power in his life. He didn't have the power either in prayer or in his preaching. He said, When that happened, I took time off and waited on God in fasting and prayer till I was restored.

That's the old-fashioned way of doing it, and that seems to be the way David did it. David's psalms are wet with his salty tears as he confesses his sins to God and repents and takes forgiveness and goes his happy way. And there's what I call the pad and pencil method.

Well, the pad and pencil method is very simple. It consists of this, getting down on your knees. Now, if you've learned to pray sitting up, if you've got rheumatism, I say, All right, sit up.

But it seems to be in the tradition of the saints back to the beginning that when a man's heart is moved, he wants to get down on his knees. So get down on your knees. If you can't get down on your knees, if you've got something wrong with your bones, then you can sit up.

But if you're supple, get down on your knees and get your Bible here and get a pad and pencil here. Read your Bible and then take down what's wrong with you. I do that.

Somebody wants to know if I walk around on clouds and all the rest, I get letters as though I were just this far off the ground all the time. Boy, if they knew the facts, they'd know a lot better. I can only keep myself spiritual by keeping after myself.

I don't mean always in prospecting, but I do mean that the pad and pencil method is a good method. Say the Sermon on the Mount, read it. When you read it and the Holy Ghost says, Thou art the man, write it down.

Read on. When he says, Hey, you're wrong here, write it down. Then set your Bible aside and go over your list before God in confession with a promise you'll never be caught doing it again.

You'll find that it will bring sunshine to your life, and you'll find that the birds that hadn't sung for a long time will begin to sing. You'll find that the green foliage that had not been will appear, and you'll find the little springs that had been frozen will begin to flow again, and you'll have springtime in your heart. Stand in awe and sin not, says the Holy Ghost.

Commune with your own heart and be still, and question yourself like a doctor with the open Bible before you. Question yourself like a doctor. Don't fight it now.

Don't fight it. Sometimes we fight it. I think I mentioned this before, but the preacher has a right to repeat his illustrations, I suppose.

But I remember some years ago, and I was quite a young man, I had something wrong with my stomach, I thought I had. Never did have, really, but I thought I had. So I went to see this fellow.

He was a sour, tart old doctor, and he kept asking questions, personal questions. They were as personal as you can get. I was answering him, but unknown to me, I was answering in a manner the lawyers call evasively.

So he said to me, What happens to you when you eat an apple? I said, I don't eat apples anymore. He said, Why? I said, Because they hurt my stomach, and he blew that high. He said, Oh, you fellows.

He said a lot of things and said them in a nasty way, and I had it coming. He said, Hiding and defending yourself. Why don't you answer my question? He wanted to know whether I could digest an apple, and asked me what happened when I ate an apple.

I told him I didn't eat apples. You see, that's an elusive answer. He got me finally pinned down, and I lived.

But now I'll tell you something, my dear friends. When we get before God with our open Bible, and realizing that there's been a bit of snow on the ground, and that the happy song of birds not heard in the land, and that the sweet smell of the flower is not within us, then we begin to question ourselves before God with the open Bible. And the symptoms we already know, but now we're trying to get at causes.

And if we are evasive with God, then there'll be no help. If we're evasive with ourselves, if we rationalize to our weaknesses, we get no help. Now, here are some questions that I recommend you ask yourself.

Ask yourself, ask your own heart in quiet silence, Am I always truthful and honest? I claim to be a Christian, and I believe that the root of the matter is in me and the seed of God is in my heart. I think and believe and truly that I am the Lord's child, but I'm not satisfied with this frozen over rut. Oh, Lord, help me to be honest.

While I answer the question, am I always truthful on the telephone, am I always honest with my creditors, with my employers, with my employees, and in all social contracts and contacts? Am I always honest and am I always truthful? Somebody may say, What's the difference? The answer is Jesus Christ, name was called Jesus, that he might save his people from their sins. And dishonesty and shading of the truth, they are sins that grieve the Holy Ghost and bring on the winter. The winter of our discontent is upon us.

While there may be and is life there, as there is life in the leafless tree, as there is life in the brown meadow, so there is life there, but we grieve the Holy Ghost by untruthfulness. Junior, tell him I'm not home when you are home. We've not only lied, but we've taught Junior to lie.

Say to my secretary, Tell him that I have another engagement. When I have no other engagement, I don't want to see him. This is lying and this is making a secretary lie.

Now, this is done so commonly, I don't know about Canada, but I know that if this was ruled out of the business in the United States, it would collapse overnight. So this is built right into business. But a

Christian, one of the first things a Christian has to do is to become perfectly honest with God and perfectly truthful in everything he says.

And you ask yourself, Have I any habits I am ashamed to let anybody know that I have? Have I any habits, any personal habits that I'm ashamed of? Do I hide something when the pastor is coming? If everything was known in this church about how I live, would I come back to church? A lot of people wouldn't, I think, some churches at any rate. What about it? Habits that I'm ashamed to make known. Now, I can dodge this and I can twist around it and I can answer evasively, but the snow will lie on my heart.

But if I answer God honestly and then go to work to get rid of this and get it cleaned, the birds will come back from the south. Is my mouth clean? All my Christian life that I can remember, I have been shocked by dirty-mouthed Christians. I don't think there's anybody in this church that I have met here or know here that I would include in that category, but I don't know you as well as I might.

And I would suppose that that habit is here too, as well as down where I come from. The dirty-mouthed Christians that can always go the borderline. Now, brothers and sisters, sex isn't funny.

And nothing about the human body is funny if your mind is clean. And there's no place for borderline stories that embarrass some people. They tell about George Washington.

They said that one time there was a gathering of officers and Washington was present in the room, and a young officer began to think about a dirty story he wanted to tell, and he got a smirk on his face and he looked about and he said, I'm thinking of a story. I guess there are no ladies present. Washington straightened up and said, No, young man, but there are gentlemen.

He shut his mouth all right. He kept that dirty one inside of his dirty head and heart. Now, anything that you couldn't tell was Jesus present, don't you tell.

And anything you couldn't laugh at was Jesus present, don't you laugh at. If you have them, then that's what's the matter. Ask another question.

Am I using my money wisely? We've got so much money we can polish our shoes with crumpled bills on this continent, not only down south, but right up here where we're lousy with it. All right, am I using it wisely? God gave it to these two nations as he never gave money to any nation in the world before. You know that? Are we using it wisely and carefully? And are we using it to bless people? Are we using it to help find the lost sheep? Are we using it to help feed the hungry children? Ask yourself the question, do I gossip about people? Ask yourself the question, have I been a troublemaker? They say that there is such a thing as disease carriers who aren't sick themselves.

They carry, say, typhoid fever or typhus, but they themselves are not ill, but they're carriers. I've read a few stories about women, some certain ladies that were themselves seemingly perfectly healthy, but everywhere they went epidemics broke out. And when they finally pinned the lady down, they found that somehow she was a carrier.

Now, she was innocent, of course, but I have met Christians that are carriers. They're carriers of the disease. They can say amen with the best and sing nearer my God to thee with the loudest.

But they're not around very long until suspicions begin to enter the minds of Christians. They're trouble carriers and troublemakers. Paul talked about them very sternly.

Then have I judged other Christians. My present frozen condition may be a judgment of God, for as I judge others, so I'll be judged. And my present frozen condition may be that I have judged somebody else to be frozen, and the Lord let the thing turn around on me.

Am I heavenly minded or earthly minded? Where do my thoughts tend to stray when they're free to stray where they will? What do I brood over? And are my thoughts pure and charitable? Remember that if you can find out what you brood over, you will know what kind of a Christian you are and what kind of a heart you have. For we always brood over the things that we love or that we hate if we're holding a grudge against somebody. Am I faithful in prayer? Ask yourself that.

But I'm busy, you say. Yes, you're busy, so is the Lord Jesus, so is the Chinese Gordon, so are they all, so is Luther. Luther said in the morning, I have so much work to do that I'm going to have to pray longer today.

Am I faithful in prayer, and do I meditate on the Word? How much of the scripture have I read lately, and have I read it with meditation and tenderness? All right, now there are just a few questions. I can answer them evasively in the snow lies there, but I want to close again tonight with a little text. No matter what you find, the answer to these questions are, don't let it discourage you.

The devil would like nothing more than for some of you to hang your head like the bulrush and go home and say, that preacher is right, but I'm just such a bad wretch, there's no help for me at all. Listen to the A text. A bruised reed will he not break, and the smoking flax will he not quench, until he's brought forth judgment unto victory.

This is spoken of Jesus, a bruised reed, changing the figure a little. What are we when we have allowed these things to break us and bruise us? A bruised reed will he not break? A farmer who raises flax, he sees one and it's bruised and he figures, oh well, this won't come to anything, and he breaks it off, pulls it out and throws it away. Jesus had seen that.

He said, no, I won't treat them like that. A bruised reed I will not break, but a bruised reed I will bind up. I know that a busy city man, if he were plowing corn in the spring and the horse tramped on the stalk of corn or the cultivator knocked it over, I know what the busy city man would do, he'd ride it off to breakage and overhead expense.

But I suppose I walked quite a number of thousand miles along behind my dad. A horse was going ahead pulling his cultivator, and the horse would occasionally move his big foot over and knock over a stalk of green corn, or the plow would do it, and it was my job to do what they called setting up corn. Oh, how I hated that job.

It was so hot and so discouraging. Setting up corn, and I went along behind the cultivator, and I had set up I wouldn't know how many tens of thousands of those little green things. Now, I say that the expert who was hired to come out from Ottawa to teach us how to be efficient probably would say, pull it up and throw it away.

No, no, my dad would say, don't do that, son, set it up. So I set it up, and with a bruised reed we did not break, and the smoking flax, that is the smoking wick, was just about out. My grandmother would say, time to light the lamp.

So she would take the glass globe off and run a newspaper through it to get out the lamp black, the blackest thing in the world, the lamp black, the artists say, and she'd get that out. Then she would go and with her shears cut off the black carbon from the wick. She didn't quench it.

Even when it was burning sometimes, it began to burn and smoke, she'd slip in with her little scissors and cut away the carbon, and it would burn up bright and even, so brightly and evenly as you like. So this is what I'm trying to say to you tonight. I sound rough and harsh in my digging into your insides and trying to get at you and help you, but I am the representative of one who never was harsh in his life, and who never was hard and who never raised his voice angrily, but who said, I'll never break a bruised reed, but I'll bind it up.

I'll never quench the smoking flax, but I'll trim it and fix it so it'll burn evenly. Put yourself in the hands of the one who loves you infinitely and loves you now infinitely, as much as that is as much as love can be. He loves you that much.

And if you have failed him and you have to admit that there is a rut there, or you'll figure I usually snow on the middle, tell him so. Don't hide it. And he won't turn his back in anger and say, you disappointed me and betrayed me, and turn away.

You know the old dramatic pictures of the girl who went away from home and was gone in a couple of years. Then she came crying back, carrying a toddlerless baby in her arms. They opened the door to see their daughter, and when they saw what she had, their faces went hard, and they turned her back into the snow, and he went over and turned her picture to the wall and stomped off the bed.

That's the melodramatic story we heard so many of when we were kids. But you know I don't believe a word of it. There isn't a father who loves his daughter anywhere in the world that would chase her back out into the snow no matter what she's done.

And there isn't a father that I've ever known that would turn his daughter's picture to the wall and stomp off to bed. Oh, brother, love doesn't work that way. Love is too big and wonderful and sweet and glorious, and it doesn't work that way.

So the love of God and the beautiful healing power of the blood of Jesus, they're all here for your cure tonight. But God doesn't want any evasive answers. He wants the truth.

He wants you to tell him what's wrong. He knows, but he wants you to tell him. Then there is a balm in Gilead, there is plenty of it, and balm and healing in the blood of the Lamb.

That'll get you out of the religious rut. That's it, my brother. Now we're going to sing a song.

We're deliberately going to sing a song and close. I want you to take this home with you. That's where you're going to need it.

And I want you to deal with the Lord personally, yourself, with your Bible, and on your knees, and see whether you don't come next week, hunt me up, and say, brother, told you it worked. Thank God it worked, and I've had a wonderful week. Brother, what'll we sing?

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