

Lenny Luchetti

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL SLUMP

A Story of Acedia and
How God Can Get You Back in the Game



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Degeneration	9
Chapter 2 Disruption	27
Chapter 3 Detestation	51
Chapter 4 Disclosure	69
Chapter 5 Decision	89
Conclusion	109
Appendix: The True Story of a Modern-Day David	119
Notes	125

INTRODUCTION

I was a secret slumper. Most people knew me as a seminary professor, a pastor to pastors, and a published author in demand as a speaker for clergy and church events. But deep down in my soul, where only God could see, I was struggling with spiritual stagnation for several years. Praying, reading the Bible, and communing with other Christians seemed more appalling than appealing to me, more like a root canal or colonoscopy than a delight. I was in big trouble and didn't care. What's worse, I didn't care that I didn't care. For the first time in my life I experienced what early Christians called "acedia." Acedia is spiritual apathy that causes one to slowly drift from the divine. I was stuck smack-dab in the middle of a spiritual midlife crisis.

Acedia, a lack of passion for God, was a new experience for me. Ever since entering into a friendship with God

through Christ at age eighteen, my heart beat strong for him. Here's the backstory. Previous to my conversion, I was a mess; so low I could wear a top hat and walk under a snake. My parents, whom I adored, were battling an addiction to heroin. Heroin was winning. I needed an escape from the fear and shame. Cheap beer with a chaser of pot became my bosom buddies. Quickly, they became dominating bullies who led me to places I didn't really want to go.

By the time I was sixteen I was an alcoholic, getting drunk several times each week. In the fall of my junior year of high school, I concluded it was nearly impossible to be a student and a drunk. One of them had to go, high school or the high life. I decided to abstain from school. Now I could get drunk without having to wake up hungover for school in the morning. Yippee! I had no money but was living with my grandmother, who always seemed to forget how much was really in her purse. Lucky me.

The urban, vice-infested streets of Philadelphia were the stage for my five-alarm wake-up call. I was drunk, high, and bored. I started a fight with a guy in his twenties for no other reason but to entertain me and my crew of friends, who were almost as intoxicated as I was, but not quite. I walked up to the guy, my beer muscles growing with every step, and landed a right hook to his head. Seeing I had a sizable posse, he ran. I chased him. When he saw I was alone, he turned to me and put up his hands, Ali-style. I ran

toward him with another right hook, so drunk I failed to see the knife in his left hand. But I felt it. The blade traveled four inches into my right side, puncturing my lung. I almost died, but was internally dead already.

The several days I spent in the hospital attached to a chest tube gave me time to reflect on my dismal life. I internally and intuitively admitted the first two steps of AA: “I’m in trouble and I need help.” Not long after my four-day vacation at the Methodist Hospital in South Philly, I went on another vacation. Since high school wasn’t getting in my way, I suppose I had the time to see the world. I went to an all-inclusive resort in Syracuse, New York, called Teen Challenge, a Christ-centered drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. The lodging and food weren’t five-star, not even close, but the excursions into Christ were transformational. Along with my parents who were in recovery, I entered into a life-saving, dignity-bestowing, and hope-inducing relationship with Jesus Christ. Friends and family members who knew me best back then acknowledged the miracle of me not only being physically, but fully, alive.

I thrived in loving and being loved by Christ for decades. I could exclaim with King David, featured prominently in the following pages, that God “lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand” (Ps. 40:2). His love lifted

Degeneration

Degeneration is a gradual descent into spiritual boredom, complacency, and, ultimately, compromise. The degenerating disciple experiences distance from God that often fosters disobedience and, in time, despondence. A person in this predicament is tempted to cease seeking and obeying God. There is a general lack of care—a spiritual apathy—that leads smack-dab into a spiritual slump. The newly crowned King David experienced devastating degeneration.

The Baseball Slump

If you're a baseball fan the terms *streak* and *slump* are familiar to you. A streak is when a player gets a hit to get on base game after game. The record for the hitting streak is held by Joe DiMaggio, who, in 1941 with the New York Yankees, got a hit to get on base in fifty-six consecutive games. A streak is a good thing for a ball player. A slump is not. When a player fails to get a hit to get on base game after game, it's called a slump. The record for the longest slump in major league baseball history is held by Chris Davis, who, in 2019 with the Baltimore Orioles, went 0 for 54. He came up to bat fifty-four times and didn't get on base once! That's one sorry slump!

Lots of players go from streak to slump in their career. They start off on a hot streak and then fizzle into a slump. Some slumping players end up back in the minor leagues or out of the game of baseball entirely. Streak. Slump. Retire. Here are a couple of notable examples.

Brian Doyle was great. He was brought up to the major league at age twenty-three because of a late-season injury to the great Willie Randolph in 1978. Doyle had a batting average of .438, which is outstanding, and helped the Yankees win the World Series in his first season. After that, his career batting average was a horrific .161 (in just 110

regular-season games in the pros). Streak then slump then out of the game!

Joe Charboneau is another notable. He looked like the savior of the Cleveland Indians franchise. They called him “Super Joe.” He hit twenty-three home runs and batted .289 in 1980, his rookie season. He won the American League Rookie of the Year Award. And then he wasn’t that anymore. The eccentric Charboneau, known for opening beer bottles with his eye socket and doing his own dental work, hit just six more home runs in his career. He was demoted to the minor leagues in 1981. In 1984, just a few years after his incredible rookie season, Super Joe was completely out of pro baseball. Streak then slump then out of the game!

The Spiritual Slump

This happens all the time in baseball. Players go from a hitting streak to a hitting slump. Some never recover. They get demoted to the minors or quit playing. It happens in the church too. The new Christian starts off with a bang, a streak, and then flattens out or falls out of the game. Do you know disciples like this? One minute they’re passionately in love with Christ and the next the love tapers off. Their best days in Christ are behind them, it seems, not

before them. They spend the rest of their life trying to get back to the good ole days of their early walk with Christ, their rookie season spiritual streak. They go to camps and retreats, hoping to get back on a spiritual hitting streak. Know someone like this? Maybe you are that someone.

I know a guy who went from streak to slump. Early on, he thrived in his relationship with God. He came out of the box batting .1000. He was, as they say, on fire. He trusted God so much he was crazy enough (I mean, faithful enough) to do anything God called him to do regardless of the risk and sacrifice involved. He possessed a rare, zealous love for God. He enjoyed victory after victory. Spiritually speaking, he was on a hot streak.

But something happened. He became bored and complacent. His compromises were small at first. He shirked his responsibilities at work. Being a high-level executive, he could use his position to get away with pretty much anything. And he did. He neglected his marriage and slipped into coexistence with his spouse. He didn't worship and pray as often or with the passion of his hitting-streak days. The increasing distance from the Lord allowed him the space to compromise in bigger ways. Distance led to disobedience, and he did unthinkable things he never imagined doing. He had an affair with a married woman. She got pregnant with his child. In order to cover up his infidelity, he used his power to get her husband killed. Streak to slump.

Perhaps by now you recognize this severe slumper. He is one of the so-called heroes of the biblical story. His name is David. He experienced what every slumping Christian does—degeneration. Degeneration is a change to a lower state or level; a gradual sinking and wasting away of mind, body, or spirit; a descent to a state of low moral standards and behavior. How did a spiritual slugger like David degenerate into a spiritual slump?

David's Streak to Slump

David was the youngest son of Jesse, a runt, a shepherd boy, a nobody really. Apparently, David was so lacking in potential that Jesse didn't even present him to Samuel, who was to anoint one of Jesse's sons to be the next king of Israel. David's own dad didn't think David had the goods to be king. Few things in life hurt more than having a dad who doesn't see your potential, who doesn't think much of you.

However, David's divine dad highly valued him. God gave David one miraculous victory after another, starting with Goliath and ending with the Ammonites and Arameans. David was divinely promoted from shepherd to king. Everything he did prospered. Everything! This repeated phrase sums up the early days: "the LORD gave David victory wherever he went" (2 Sam. 8:14; 1 Chron. 18:13). David was not a self-made but a God-made man. God picked

up this shepherd and turned him into a king. God was determined to bless David.

God favored David, and David adored God. First Samuel 17 highlights David's youthful zeal. Faced with Goliath-sized challenges, David saw nothing but God. He said to the Philistine giant, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty . . . whom you have defied. . . . This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands" (vv. 45–46a). David had a one-track mind. He saw past the Goliath-sized problems to the God-sized possibilities. David kept his eyes on the ball, on God, not Goliath. A slumping player once asked the comedic Yogi Berra for hitting advice. Berra said; "If you can see it, hit it." Thanks, Captain Obvious! David saw God and hit the ball out of the park. He was on a spiritual hitting streak. Red hot!

The problems started when David became king at age thirty. On the mountaintop of success, complacency surfaced. David found himself stuck in a spiritual midlife crisis, a slump. The ardent love for God that marked his youth diminished. In the slump, David discovered that the biggest Goliath he had to overcome was not Goliath, not the Philistines, not King Saul, and not the Ammonites. The biggest Goliath David had to conquer was David; David nearly destroyed David.

Slipping into a Slump

Every one of us likely has at least one terrible, horrible, no good, very bad chapter of regret, failure, or humiliation that we'd like to rip out of the story of our lives. I do. For David, the literal chapter is 2 Samuel 11. "At the time when kings go off to war" (v. 1), King David stayed within the palace walls of safe status quo. He was bored in his boxers, channel surfing between his favorite sitcoms. He dragged himself off the sofa and onto the palace rooftop looking for something—anything—to make him feel something—anything—again. He noticed a beautiful woman taking a bubble bath, who was rightly named Bathsheba. One thing led to another, and David invited her to the palace. He slept with her, even though he knew she was married to Uriah, a soldier out fighting David's battle. Bathsheba became pregnant with David's baby. In order to keep the adulterous pregnancy a secret, David had Uriah killed on the battlefield.

Talk about slumping degeneration! Boredom to lust to adultery to murder. Sports journalists love to write catchy headlines for slumping players: "Jeter's Slump Killing Yankees" or "Pujols' Slump the Most Expensive in MLB History." At the end of this terrible chapter in David's story, here is the horrific headline hanging over his head: "The thing David had done displeased the LORD" (v. 27b).

Others quit and hang up their spiritual cleats. Then there are the brave ones who overcome the slump and come out of it every inch a passionate Christ-follower, better than ever. Your willingness to read this book and work through the slump puts you on the path to being one of the overcomers.

What happened to David? The bad news is he hit rock-bottom. The good news is God found him there. Countless kings after David never overcame their spiritual slump. But David followed God through a process that brought him out of the slump and put him back on a streak again. We will probe that transformational process as we journey through the following pages. For now, know that God will not give up on you even if you have given up on yourself. When you find yourself stuck in a slump, God will find you there. It's called grace. Disruptive grace is the focus of the next chapter.

Reflection

- On a scale from 1 to 10, how would rate your current level of joyful intimacy with Christ?
- Are you currently in a spiritual slump? Have you ever been in a spiritual slump? Reflect on the causes and consequences of your slump.
- What symptoms of the spiritual slump have you experienced?

- Do you inquire of the Lord on a consistent basis? If so, what's the evidence? If not, why not?
- Do you know someone who has overcome the spiritual slump? What practices or resources did they engage to grab God's grace?

| Prayer

God, "Hound of Heaven,"¹ sniff out those of us who are in a slump and despondent because of it. Rescue those who are on the verge of giving up hope that they will ever hit the ball again. Give us the capacity to assess whether or not we're in a slump and the courage to admit it to ourselves. God of grace, help us out of the slump and get us back on a streak that glorifies you and inspires people. We pray in the name of the Christ who came to save slumping sinners, amen.