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Proverbs 24:15–20 ESV

*¹⁵ Lie not in wait as a wicked man against the dwelling of the righteous;
do no violence to his home;*

*¹⁶ for the righteous falls seven times and rises again,
but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.*

*¹⁷ Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,
and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles,*

*¹⁸ lest the LORD see it and be displeased,
and turn away his anger from him.*

*¹⁹ Fret not yourself because of evildoers,
and be not envious of the wicked,*

*²⁰ for the evil man has no future;
the lamp of the wicked will be put out.*

Psalms 145:14 NLT

*¹⁴ The LORD helps the fallen
and lifts those bent beneath their loads.*

Falling seven times.

When I was in my first two years of college, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I

had gone to a not-so-good high school that didn't even offer all the California

state requirements for college bound students, and I got to college a bit ill-

prepared and not having thought at all about what I might want to study. One of

the first things that struck me as possibly a very fun way to earn a living was being

a geologist. So, I excitedly took the first few geology courses at Occidental College. I did very good at memorizing geologic terms, and at being able to identify rocks and minerals by sight, and I had no problem with the bits of mathematics and chemistry that a geologist had to know. But then came the real test: field work. By the way, before I go on with this tale any further, three thousand miles away, Wendy, whom I did not know at the time, was also a geology student, but she did a lot better at it than me.

I took Historical Geology, which is not the history of geology, but rather, it's the study of how the earth has changed over time, and it includes paleontology, which is the study of fossils. In that class, we studied geologic processes, like volcanos, the shifting of tectonic plates, and the movements of large bodies of water and glaciers. We were near the Mojave Desert; a couple times during the course of the semester, we went out there to test out our academic skills. During one of these trips, we were given the assignment of following and mapping a specific rock formation. It was a sandstone formation that had been laid down when a body of water had gradually disappeared a zillion years ago. Then, the formation was broken up by various geologic events; the layer had been tilted, fractured, and shifted, and our job was to find its distorted segments and map them together and reconstruct the original shape of the formation. It was

actually quite difficult to find the pieces of the formation as they ran across the desert. I remember it being a hot, dusty day. We were each assigned various sections of a desert region, and the goal was to, at the end of the day, unify all our maps into a complete map of this formation. Because the desert had rattlesnakes, we all wore thick boots and tall, very thick leggings. Each of us had a rock hammer and some water. There I was, out there in the desert, far from the rest of my classmates, wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. I discovered that I wasn't that good at orienting myself in the desert. I remember being very concerned that I would not only fail to find and connect up the various displaced chunks of this sedimentary layer, but that I would also get lost in the desert. The professor drove around in a Jeep, checking in on all of us, to see how we were doing and to make sure that nobody wandered too far into the desert.

I managed to find the first couple chunks of the formation. After wandering back and forth, trying to find the next outcropping of this particular rock layer, I remember being very excited when I thought that perhaps I could see it a ways away, along a rise. I jogged over there, sweating madly, hoping that I wasn't going to fall behind my classmates and not be able to complete my section of the map. As I approached what I hoped was the right rock layer, I realized that there was a depression that I would have to walk through to get to it. In my

excitement, I forgot something that the professor had lectured us about: always watch where you place your feet. Look before you step. Remember, there are rattlesnakes in the Mojave. So, like the city boy I was, I just blindly stepped down into a depression. Then, I looked. Sure enough, it was a rattlesnake den and they began slithering around my feet and ankles. I remember hearing their rattles and remembering that I was all alone. I'll get back to this.

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of short sayings that describe basic principles for living a virtuous life. It is one of the so-called "Wisdom" books in the Bible. The others are Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Sometimes these books are referred to as the Books of Poetry in the Bible. The title of the Book of Proverbs is taken from the opening line of the book: The proverbs of Solomon. Usually, a Proverb is a pithy two-line statement, but in ancient Hebrew and Greek writing, the term is used a bit more broadly, and it also includes the parables told by Jesus in the Gospels. In fact, we often say that Jesus teaches in "figures". The Book of Proverbs is sometimes broken into seven pieces, with the proverb we're looking at being in the fourth section, which is called the second "Words of the Wise" section.

The six verses that we're looking at this morning teach us the following three things. First, we are admonished against doing violence to the homes of

righteous people, for they are protected by God. Doing this can only bring disaster to us. In other words, don't strike out at people for no good reason. God does not want us to be hurtful. And importantly, those who are righteous may fail over and over, yes, they may fail seven times, but they will always rise again. Second, when God punishes people who do evil, we shouldn't celebrate. If we do, if we are gleeful when someone we dislike suffers, God's wrath might well be turned away from them and then turned toward us. Third, the future is irrelevant to the evildoer, because those who do not live in a way that respects others and follows the laws of God have no future at all. And so, we should never envy the seeming successes of those who do wrong in order to advance themselves.

Let's look at verse 16: *for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.* Seven is a kind of magic number in the Bible. It represents spiritual perfection and completion. Just as God rested on the seventh day after creating the Earth, when we fail seven times, we have in a sense failed completely, as much as we possibly could imagine failing. I'd like to get back to my adventure in the desert.

When I saw the snakes slithering around my lower legs, I remembered one thing the professor had said: rattlesnakes rarely bite. He said that usually, a rattlesnake bites someone when the person accidentally steps on them. Yes, the

bites can be deadly if you don't get treatment very quickly, but the snake doesn't actually want to bite a human. Their venom is used to paralyze and trap prey that they want to eat. They're not out looking for humans to swallow. I was wondering just what to do when I felt something tapping on my shoulder.

Okay, you probably would rather hear about the Bible than my geology field trip. So, I'll have to get back to my geology fieldtrip and the den of snakes. What our first passage today says, all in all, is that what's important is that we never let our spirit be damaged, that we never come to the conclusion that it was a stupid idea to get sucked into all this Jesus and God stuff, that the people who go out there and do whatever it takes to gather wealth and power, they are the ones who win. We should never look with envy at temporary earthly success or the appearance of happiness on the part of a person who gets ahead by harming others. And when we discover that these people are actually suffering, perhaps because they are incredibly insecure and never can gain enough to feel good about themselves, we shouldn't clap our hands and dance in delight. Because one aspect of being ungodly, of living in ways other than the way Christ taught us to live, is to gloat when others suffer. More importantly, we should remember that there is only one true way of failing, and that is to fail spiritually. We can fail infinitely many times in earthly ways, we can fail at everything that we try to do,

and it means very little if we are following the commandments of our Lord.

Generosity, forgiveness, empathy, and regeneration when we do wrong – that is the way to ensure true and eternal success.

Okay, just in case you're interested, let me finish up the rattlesnake story. I turned and saw that it was my professor tapping on my shoulder. He was standing above me, having not stepped into the depression, and he whispered in my ear. *Just stand there and don't move*, he said. *They'll go away*. And they did. They got bored with me and disappeared into the rocks, then the professor held out a hand and helped me up out of the depression. I thanked him. He asked me why the hell I was way over here, that my section of the formation was maybe a hundred yards back where I had come from. At that moment, I remembered having been told that there was a lot of money in doing computer work, and that as best as I knew, there were very few rattlesnakes in computer labs. You also didn't have to worry about getting lost when you're sitting in front of computer. There is no hot sun beating down on you, no need to worry about heat stroke.

But more seriously, I came to realize that I had failed. It wasn't the snakes. That was just something stupid I did because I wasn't experienced. I just didn't have the situational awareness to keep myself safe, and it was something that I could easily have corrected. The real point is that I was lost. I didn't have the 3D

sense necessary to map out a fragmented, ancient rock formation. I also didn't really enjoy doing that kind of thing. I was glad to get back to campus, glad to get to the end of the semester, glad to put the whole thing behind me. I was, however, somewhat crushed. My first big idea at what I would do with my life had turned into an embarrassing failure. My fellow students teased me unmercifully. For the rest of the semester, they would punch me on the shoulder in class and say, "Hey, Buzz, watch out, there's a snake under your desk," or "Buzz, during the next field trip, we're going to put a leash on you so you don't wander off and get bitten by a rattlesnake". I did realize years later, though, that it was during that moment of failure that my correct future opened up for me. It was in the moments after surviving the rattlesnake den that I actually came to the conclusion that I should do computer work. I did not pursue it immediately. I tried studying chemistry and mathematics, and I decided that those weren't right for me. Only then did I remember that idea of studying computing. I truly think that God made use of my failure to point me in the direction of success.

Our second reading today is from Psalms. It says: *The LORD helps the fallen and lifts those bent beneath their loads.* Psalm 145 is considered one of the great masterpieces of the Book of Psalms. It gives a comprehensive overview of Israel's understanding of the sovereignty, power, and love of God. Our verse points out

that God is always there to lift up those who feel crushed, who are struggling, who are lost or failing. I believe that God often lifts us up at the same time that we find ourselves falling. What's important is that we keep our eyes on the future, that we know that whatever bad is happening, it will pass, and that God will be with us every inch of the way. Sometimes, God puts something in our paths to shock us into opening up our minds and our souls. It might be a sickness, a job loss, having someone we love leave us, or maybe a den of rattlesnakes slithering around our ankles as we stand lost in the blazing desert. In truth, the small failure that I went through is really nothing compared to what all of us must endure at some point in our lives. We need to know that those times will come, and that when they do, God will be there waiting – with his hand held out for us to take. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for never leaving our side. We thank you for giving us rich, widely varied lives, full of joy and sadness. We know that we cannot appreciate your love and your forgiveness, that we cannot find our true path in life if all we ever confront is success and satisfaction. We know that we must fail. But you are always there, lifting us back up, pointing us in the correct direction, helping us use our experiences to reach a level of faith and happiness that we would never have been to achieve otherwise. Amen.