

## DUST

2 Samuel 16:13, Job, Luke 10:10& 11, 1 Corinthians 15:49

There is a fascinating small word in the Bible I had given but scant thought to until about a month ago. It's not in Kittel's scholarly list of "Bible Key Words", for, I suppose, its study does not unlock a great deal. But I would at least call it a "minor key word" in the Bible for it unlocks a lot of little things. Maybe the great Kittel did not mention it because he never visited Palestine in the dry season.

Did I tell you the word? No, I didn't. But I will. It is "DUST". If you look up the little word "dust" in your Bible, you will discover Palestine was and is a dry and dusty land. Indeed there is dust scattered all through the Bible: 15 inches of it in the concordance (?) all the way from Genesis, where it says we humans arose from it, to the book of Revelation, where the fallen fling themselves back into it in the final fit. "Dust to dust", the dust of the expanding universe and the dust of the exploding one--and we worry about a speck of it on the coffee table!

It's small wonder those Palestinian Jews, who wrote the Bible, used "dust" as a minor symbol. It was inescapable. From late spring to late fall, it was and is everywhere. So the Bible speaks of "the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle," "the dust at threshing," "whirling dust before the storm", "the dust of Samaria," dusty shepherds, and dust on the head, on the feet, dust in the mouth, and finally, when the hot, dry (...) blew in out of the desert wilderness, stinging the face with bits of dried nettle and salt, coloring the air bitter gray, it is no wonder the old Jews spat and spoke as though "all the dust of the earth" were dumped upon them. No wonder foot-washing, instead of cocktails, was the first courtesy provided by a host for his guests. What a welcome relief it must have been to the weary traveler. No wonder they developed the ritual of holy water used in worship. In that hot country, water was a sacred trust, a gift of God. Thus, you see, water and rain, in this  
(Page 5 missing)

*SoROCC -  
check spelling  
I think it is  
a dessert!  
or something  
about the  
dessert,  
maybe  
sand.*

Dust and gnats are inevitable parts of food and breath in the land of the Bible and became symbols of the plague quite naturally. Secondly, dust was also a symbol of denunciation. If you wanted to curse someone with an added dash of abuse, you threw dust on them. The custom lingers on. It might have been yesterday that King David, in flight for his life,



ran across one of the type who always adds his kick to a man who's down. Poor David, trying to hide in the gullies around Jerusalem, and who helped and comforted him? Nobody, well at least not Shimei, that old elder who went along on the hillside opposite David and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and flung dust (2 Samuel 16:13). There's always some old friend around who'll fling dust on you when you're down. You can count on that. And flinging isn't confined to the far history of the Near East either. I used to know a little lady, none of you know, who flung dust around the house while muttering imprecations against her husband ("that rascal" -- "scoundrel"). At least it got the house cleaned up several times a season! But that's neither there nor here, I assure you. At least you can see how dust could be a symbol of denunciation.

In the third place, it also came to stand for deprivation in the Bible. The poor could never afford enough water to drink, much less to stay clean. Outcasts were always thirsty and dusty and dirty--and to be avoided in close places, especially by pure and prissy Pharisees, with their perfumed souls. The market places, the bazaars, reeked of unpleasant odors, for all types intermingled there: hawkers of fly-covered meats and beggars and lepers and camel drivers and fish mongers and thieves--all of whom carried their dust and dirt wherever they went--an eyesore, a shame and disgrace to those who could afford to smell better. In the Bible, it is said of only God Himself, "he alone raises the poor from the dust"; everyone else runs from them in the market place.

In the fourth place, therefore, it is easy to see how "dust" not only stood for disease, deprecation, and deprivation, but also for despair. Take yourself for example. If you are not feeling well, and people are always yelling unkindly at you, and you feel that you are too poor, too weak, too old, or just unable to hold up your little corner against the world any longer, it's very, very hard not to "sit in dust and ashes" and weep your eyes out. Poor old Job: if anybody ever knew the pain of disease and deprecation, denunciation, and deprivation, he did. He had lost everything: health, friends, money. He had every right to despair, therefore, and say, "I have become like dust and ashes." When health is failing, and people avoid you (or you think they do--which is just as painful), and money is scarce, then life can become so much dust. You choke up and your eyes run water. You don't see things quite straight anymore. How could you? In the depths of despair, things get all mixed up. You flounder. You say things you wouldn't ordinarily say. You curse life. "I have become like dust." That's an understandable symbol.



And two others follow in quick succession, In the Bible, dust is also the symbol of defeat and death. For when you despair, you are close to both. Give up, and where are you? You're out. Quit looking up, and you're soon down. The Biblical phrase for defeat and death is "to lick the dust". It is the figure of the beaten, the captive, the slave, groveling on the ground, his face in the dirt, whipped, "the end" -- finis!

Defeat and death -- by dust. Dust is small, but it mounts up. It creeps up on you. Little by little, it can cover a whole city. It has covered the walls of ancient Jericho. Thirty feet of it covers the Jerusalem of Christ's day. So you must keep cleaning it away to stay above ground. Otherwise, before you know it, it will bury you. I've often thought most of us are destroyed, not by some great disaster, but by an accumulation of small stuff that finally smothers us.

There is a very practical application for all this. You take all the difficulties, all the negative things, in this life that dust stands for in the Bible and you keep piling them on top of you: disease (one more little ache, one more pain, and another and another and another), deprecation (one more unkind word, one more criticism, one more misunderstanding and grudge and other invective, piled endlessly on top of each other), deprivation (the loss of family, or job, or money, or standing, or respect in the community and the feeling of loneliness, nobodyness, outcastness, unwantedness, unnecessariness, piled slowly together), then add despair and you're quite likely to end up in defeat and death, at least wishing you were dead, fulfilling once again the ancient curse: "you are dust....and dust you shall eat all the days...and to dust you shall return..."

But, let me tell you something. Jesus had other ideas for his disciples. He had no intention whatsoever of their "biting the dust", of their being smothered little by little, by the difficulties and dangers, which they surely would face. They were not to die in despair and defeat. There is an alternative to allowing the unpleasant things in life, slowly, slowly, to accumulate and bury you alive. Had not the old testament prophet said, "Shake the dust from you. Arise!"?

So Jesus says the same thing to his disciples, as they are about to face the sick, the demonic, the hellish attitudes of the villages and towns , that they are not to let it all bury them.



That when they have done the very best they can do to proclaim his gospel and are met by militant ignorance and willful rejection, they are not to linger where nothing further can be done. Instead they are to perform a strange little sacrament of defiance: they are to “shake the dust off their feet” in that one small place and go on to victory elsewhere. “ And they went on to another village,” says Luke.

If we could only learn to perform “the act of defiance” when it is needed—to “shake the dust off” and to go on to another day, to another task, another opportunity, and not be buried by the slow accumulation of difficulty. Too often we wait around until we “bite the dust” in despair and defeat. If only we could learn when to leave off: a job we cannot do, or trying to change a person we cannot change, or a group or a town we cannot convert; and go on to do what we can do, there or elsewhere, by the help of God. ( Scotts: “tis a wise man who knows when to lay the barrow down.”)

If only we could rise above the pains common to us all, the disappointments that come to every human being, the disillusionments that come with maturity, and trust God, trust his life of faith and hope and love. In short, if only we could shake the dust off our feet and, unencumbered by guilt or fear or apathy, move out into life eternal to live again’ it might come to pass, by the grace of Christ, as Paul said in first Corinthians, that ,”just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven”. (1 Corinthians 15:49)

#### Let us Pray

O Lord, there comes a time to “repent in dust and ashes” that we have allowed ourselves to be buried by the unpleasant experiences of life. Help us to learn how to leave them behind, and when to take off into a new day of new attitudes and new opportunity. Let us leave behind our (...) guilts, and anxieties, and prejudices; and learn the old command, “O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing!” For Christ’s sake. Amen