

Spiritual Depression

Is it possible for a Christian to be depressed? Years ago a Pentecostal lady asked if she could talk to me about some of her problems. I asked of course why she did not want to confide in her own pastor. She told me that her pastor had said to her that born again Christians should have no spiritual or emotional problems. They should be able to sing, "I am happy all the day." So I listened to her story. I mentioned to her that every Christian has problems at one time or another. There is nothing so misleading as to give the impression that the moment you believe and are converted, all your troubles are overcome and you will never have another problem in your life. We must realize that there are general problems which are common to all Christians and common to the whole of life simply because we are human beings and Christians in addition. We are not immune to what happens round about us. If we assume that the Christian life means only coming to Christ and we will never have any worry in the whole of our life, we are harbouring a terrible fallacy. In fact it is a delusion. *In Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments: "If you never had any trouble in your Christian life I should very much doubt whether you are a Christian at all. From the moment we become Christians we become the special objects of the attention of the devil."

The Darkness of the Soul

Some Christians may go through a period of spiritual darkness, sometimes called "the darkness of the soul." They ask desperately, "How can I know that I am truly a child of God?" They are not usually asking to be reminded that they are saved by grace through faith. They know that. They are asking how they can know that their faith is real. It will be a great advantage to the struggling Christians to remember that struggles are normal in the Christian life. In Psalm 40:1-3 David tells about his experience with spiritual darkness. It is as if David had fallen into a deep, dark well and plunged into the life-threatening mud. There was one other time when David wrote about this kind of experience. He cries out to God, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me" (Ps. 69:1-2). In these verses he expresses his helplessness and desperation. In *When I don't Desire God. How to Fight for Joy*, John Piper observes, "There are times when our faith is the size of a mustard seed and barely visible. In fact the darkest experience for the child of God is when his faith sinks out of his own sight. Not out of God's sight, but his. Yes, it is possible to be so overwhelmed with darkness that you do not know if you are a Christian - and still be one."

Deserted by God

In the Christian life one often finds variations in feelings and sentiments. One matter that often troubles and perplexes God's people is the feeling of desertion. A Christian may find that for some reason or another, the closeness with God he has been

enjoying, suddenly comes to an end. No matter how diligent he seeks God, He seems nowhere to be found. And he says with Job: "O that I knew where I might find Him." He prays but the door of heaven seems slammed shut. He wonders, "Does God really hear me?" The Bible, once a source of strength, has little to say. God seems to have withdrawn Himself. The Dutch leader of the Second Reformation, Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) describes this spiritual condition as "an inner cross or a spiritual sorrow and trial as a result of which a person, now being truly converted to God, fails to feel his or her heart's delight in God and divine things. It results from the darkening of one's assurance and clarity with respect to appropriation by a personal faith." But this is not an unusual experience. God undoubtedly at times seems to withdraw Himself and hide His face from us. This is the great theme of the book of Job. As Job was tested, God may test us by withdrawing from us the sense of His consoling grace and fatherly favour. We should remember that the true subjects of spiritual desertion are believers. Even in the spiritual darkness God does not abandon us. He is for us. He will sustain us.

Spiritual Trials

Christians should not be surprised by trials in their walk with God. According to the Scriptures the more we seek to come closer to the Lord Jesus Christ in our life and living, the more likely we are to meet troubles in the world. The world in its heart of hearts hates Christ and it hates Christians. Someone wrote, not without good reason, "Let this be a sign to you that when you are advancing on the road to the city of the King and are coming closer, that you will undergo the greatest temptations; the further you go, the greater the temptations. Because God does not give great gifts without great temptations."

We must not be surprised when God chastises us. The argument in Hebrews 12:10 is as strong as this. "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness." The apostle Peter wrote, "You may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6,7). That is the theme of all the Scriptures. Indeed, it is particularly the theme of the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. Storms and trials are allowed by God. We must start by understanding that we may well find ourselves in a position in which our faith is going to be tried. Difficulties and suffering make us face up to wrong attitudes, values and goals in life. Times of loss or frustration, may be times of spiritual change and growth.

Guilt Feelings

We must take objective guilt seriously. A Christian can be plagued with feelings of guilt. He searches his mind to find some unconfessed sin. He gets depressed by dwelling on past sins. He prays to the Lord to show him his sin and his disobedience, and when the Lord does not lay His finger on some wilful sin he continues his own unrelenting self scrutiny. Or he decides he never was a Christian or that he had committed the unpardonable sin. There is a self-examination, which is desirable and profitable. But we

must understand the difference between true guilt and guilt feelings. Remember that if there is a sin in depression it's connected with not accepting forgiveness, rather than not asking for it.

Unconfessed sin can lead to the darkness of the soul. We quench the joy of fellowship with God when we refuse to confess our offences. This is powerfully expressed in Ps. 32. David had sinned grievously and his adultery with Bethsheba had been covered up, but God had seen it and David's conscience was not clear. He recalls the misery of it all. "When I kept silent. My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me (Ps. 32:3-4). The apostle Peter related this to marriage and said that if a husband sins against his wife, his prayers will be hindered (1 Pet. 3:7). Like bitterness and resentment, guilt can eat into hearts and cause psychological and physical problems.

Some Christians fear that they are not good enough. They reach for perfection. There is a deep-seated sense that either they can make themselves good enough for God by their own efforts, or they deserve some punishment for justice to be done. They are very self-critical. They set for themselves unreasonable high standards and struggle to reach impossible goals. They are more vulnerable to depression and self-defeat. This perfectionism is sometimes inherited, sometimes learned from parents, and is sometimes a way of coping with insecurity. The fact is that being a Christian does not mean that you are perfect. Some Christians are continually burdened by a deep sense of sinfulness. They say, "I am not good enough. God will not accept me the way I am." But they will never be good enough. The essence of Christian salvation is to say that the Lord is good enough and that I am in Him. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones comments, "As long as you go on thinking about yourself and saying: 'I am not good enough; I am a sinner, a great sinner,' you are denying God and you will never be happy." In summary, spiritual depression can emerge from a failure to appreciate the completeness of God's forgiveness. The glory of the Gospel is that God does forgive even the most terrible sin. David was forgiven for adultery and murder and his famous prayer in Psalm 51 has been used by many Christians when they have come to their senses after doing things which they thought might bring them some happiness and satisfaction but later realized were terribly wrong.

The Attention of the Devil.

One continuing element in a Christian's life is the unremitting attention of Satan. He will attempt to accentuate the sin in such a way as to cast doubt on the forgiveness of God. But it is not fashionable in our time to mention the role of Satan in spiritual depression. The idea of demonic forces is viewed as a relic from Medieval times. While the supernatural is denied by the "secular intelligentsia," all the major bookstores feature large sections with books about astrologers, mediums and occult power. And for commonplace leisure activity many dabble in seances, spiritual healing, parapsychology and black magic. But the demonic is real. Satan is always at work trying to lead Christians astray, to destroy the work of God in their lives and to wreak confusion and havoc in society. Voetius observed: "Diabolic temptation occurs when the devil

(especially called the tempter, Matt. 4:3) opposes people, either externally with his agitations and torments or internally with his evil promptings, to bring them to unbelief, despair, disobedience, and all kinds of sins."

We must not forget the existence of the devil, the adversary of our souls. In the New Testament, in many places, illness is clearly distinguished from demon possession (Matt. 4:24, Mark 6:13, Luke 6:17-19, Acts 19:11-12). Those who were not demon-possessed were not healed by exorcism or binding of spirits. There is no Scriptural evidence for saying that the manifestations of demon activity - the activity of evil spirits - came to an end in the apostolic era. The Reformers, therefore, took seriously the activity of demons. Luther testified about himself, "We are all doing well, except Luther himself; being healthy in body, he is tried externally by the whole world and internally by the devil and all his angels."

Today the work of the demonic is still real. And Satan who, though he cannot rob us of our salvation, can definitely rob us of our joy. And it is cruel and harmful to tell someone in the depth of depression that he/she is possessed by a demon unless there is very clear evidence of such activity. We need the timely reminder of C. S. Lewis: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our face can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. And the other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors." Satan is anxious that we remain confused. He constantly seeks to lead us on a wrong path, away from God. His most common way of working with us as individuals is described by C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* when Uncle Screwtape, the senior devil, gives his young pupil Wormwood very practical advice about exploiting times of depression in the "trough periods of life."

The Good News

But this is the good news. Although the devil and his forces try to make life miserable for Christians, we can overcome them in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are Good Friday and Easter Christians. When we look at the Cross and the empty tomb, we can see not only the relentless tragedy of human suffering but also a complete victory and triumph. The victory over Satan has already been won. On that foundation of a triumph already won by Christ the lives of the first Christians were built. This is the good news of the Gospel. God sent Christ into the world to die for our spiritual blindness, pay for its penalty, and absorb the wrath it deserves. Because of Christ's shed blood for our sins, the devil cannot destroy those who are in Christ. The reason is that his accusations are no longer valid. The cross obtained complete forgiveness. The promises of Christ are not empty. Suffering, whether physical or mental, cannot separate the Christian from Christ (Rom. 8:18-25). What are we? Forgiven. We are reconciled to God by the Blood of His Son on the Cross. We are glory bound. All these truths show that the great antidote to spiritual depression is the knowledge of Bible doctrine, Christian doctrine. We must remind ourselves of God, Who God is, and what God has done.

The Community of Saints

Christians who experience the darkness of the soul need the warm embrace of the church community. But this is easier talked about than done. It is sad to see many Christians today whose relationships are so superficial that they have to pay to relate to somebody on a deeper level whether it be psychiatrist, counsellor or therapy group. Of course, the essential task to the church is to restore men and women to the right relationship with God. But it is high time that the Church restores the Biblical perspective of church membership because we live in a day when people shun responsibility and accountability. We are the family of God. We are called to encourage fellow church members in the faith, seek their welfare. The church should make sure it looks after the depressed it will have within its community.

The Psalms

What help does the Bible offer when we walk through a dark valley of despair? We can turn to the psalms. They have always been a great source of solace and encouragement to God's people throughout the centuries. The psalmists often referred to the heights and the depths they had experienced. The fourth century church father, Athanasius, noted: "All God's Scripture certainly teaches virtue and true faith, but the Book of Psalms is like a mirror in which one observes the condition of the soul." One psalmist wrote, "Why are you downcast, o my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Ps. 42:11). While the psalmist was deeply troubled, he reminded himself of the true perspective on life. When everything seemed to be going against him and could not see things very clearly, he clung onto the Lord Whom had been his real source of hope in the past - the only One who had a true perspective on his situation - God.

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