

Inner Turmoil and Despair

We saw in our previous study that it is okay to doubt. Doubt is simply an evidence of our humanness - and our fallenness. The world in which Christian faith operates is not a fairy-tale, make-believe world, question-free and problem-proof, but a world where doubt is never far from faith itself.

It is true that many suffer from the doubts caused by deep intellectual questions about Christianity. But as author Os Guinness says, that is not all there is to doubt: *"While God is the answer to all doubt, theologically correct God-answers are not necessarily the answer – there are also spiritual, moral, and especially psychological dimensions to doubt."* (*In Two Minds*, p. 35). Battered emotions can be just as devastating as the militant atheists' toughest questions.

I've gone through times in my life that could best be described by the title of this chapter: times of inner turmoil and despair. How about you? Have you gone through some of those times? Describe the situation - and then write out how you felt during those times.

Jackie Hudson, herself plagued by years of doubting, asks a series of questions which help identify if one's doubts are emotionally based. Spend several moments meditating on each question and see if these are issues with which you struggle.

1. Are your doubts obsessive? In other words, are they difficult to stop even when you have reasonable answers to your questions?
2. Do you doubt your salvation?
3. Are you overly concerned as to whether you committed the "unpardonable sin"?
4. Are you wanting to believe with all your heart, yet unable to stop the doubts?
5. Are you afraid you might be demon-possessed?
6. Do your doubts center on unanswerable questions? (I.e., Who is the author of evil? Why did God create man if He knew he would sin? How can God allow suffering?)
7. Are you experiencing anxiety, guilt and fear?
8. When you read the Bible, do you feel condemned?
9. Do you have a hard time sleeping?
10. Are you too hard on yourself?
11. Do you set high standards for yourself, bordering on perfectionism?
12. Do you feel helpless? Have you tried everything to stop your doubts and found that nothing has worked?

Jackie Hudson, *Doubt: A Road To Growth*, p. 133-134

If you answered "yes" to some or many of these questions, then your doubt may be emotionally based. This does not mean that no other issues are involved, but the root of your doubt probably is emotional.

I. Exposition

The Psalter, Israel's ancient songbook, gives us some hope and direction in response to the emotional side of doubt. Psalms 42 and 43 form a single, sadly beautiful poem in which the writer pours out his heart to the Lord. Theologians tell us that there are two reasons why these Psalms should be taken together as a unit.

- a. Psalm 43 has no superscription or introductory statements that appear before verse one. It is the only such psalm in the second "book" of Psalms (42-72) that is like that. Remember, the chapter breaks, like the punctuation markings, were added to the text of Scripture in later centuries.
- b. The phrase repeated twice in Psalm 42 (verses 5 and 11) also appears in identical form in Psalm 43:5, linking the two Psalms together.

Read Psalm 42:3-6 and 9-11. Describe what emotions the psalmist is going through.

Psalm 42:3-6 *My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. 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. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon from Mount Mizar. (NIV)*

Psalm 42:9-11 *I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?" 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. (NIV)*

The superscription before Psalm 42:1 gives us some insight into the theme of this song. It reads, "For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah." A Maskil is a Hebrew title given to a song that was designed to give insight and wisdom when dealing with certain situations.

What is the situation here in these two songs? Read the thrice-mentioned statement in Psalm 42:5, 11 and 43:5. The emotional terms *despair* and *disturbed* are clearly predominant. *Shahkakh*, the Hebrew words translated "despair," means "to crouch, bow down." It is used in Job 38:40 to describe a lion in a crouched position, lying in wait for its prey. These songs talk about those days when we feel like curling up in the fetal position and quitting!

We just read where David asked himself, “Why are you in despair, O my soul?” (42:5). It's a good time for you to do that. Ask yourself why? It is a great help to pinpoint the reason(s) behind inner turmoil.

These psalms are also intensely personal. In his despair, David was focusing on himself. In the sixteen verses of the two psalms, 51 personal pronouns are used. David's eyes are focused on himself as he struggles with his inner turmoil.

Where has your focus been lately? Like David, has your focus been on yourself or on the Lord?

Have you been experiencing victory or defeat on a consistent basis?

If your answer was defeat, you've got some good company. Dr. John Henry Jowett, an outstanding preacher of yesteryear, was honest enough to admit in a letter to a friend:

I wish you wouldn't think I'm such a saint. You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky. I often feel as though my religious life had only just begun, and that I am in the kindergarten stage. But I can usually trace these miserable seasons to some personal cause, and the first thing to do is to attend to that cause, and get into the sunshine again.

Can you identify with Jowett? I sure can! It is important to realize there are no “super-saints.” We are all fellow-strugglers in this thing called life. And sometimes it gets to us.

So what do we do? Psalms 42 and 43 give us some much needed help. Read Psalm 42:1-2. What was David's attitude toward God?

Turn for a moment to Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13. What phrase was used to describe God?

Jeremiah 2:13 *My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. (NIV)*

Jeremiah 17:13 *O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water. (NIV)*

In what ways is God like a fountain of living water to us?

II. Application

Back to Psalm 42. How can God become real again when we are feeling low? There are several suggestions tucked in these verses.

- a. Read verse 4. What did David do to reassure himself of the presence of God?

David reminded himself of the great days of old. He REMEMBERED the times of joy he had in walking with God. He took the pressure off himself by recognizing that the problem was not with God or his faith; rather it was damaged emotions. But, according to verse 5, he was still depressed.

- b. Read verses 6-8. David uses graphic images from nature to communicate the intense emotions he was feeling. What do you think David was feeling at this time?

David also knew God would communicate ultimate truth to him through His Spirit, reminding him of His lovingkindness and placing His song within him. He REFOCUSED on the character of God and sought to cultivate a correct view of who God is.

The Living Bible paraphrases verse 8 in this way:

Yet day by day the Lord also pours out His steadfast love upon me, and through the night I sing His songs and pray to God who gives me life.

The next time depression and despair strike, remind yourself, "I am the recipient of my Lord's steadfast love." Recall the words of a favorite hymn or praise song and sing them back to the Lord. As we sing praises to our God, our spirits will be lifted up. A spirit of praise and a spirit of discouragement cannot inhabit the same heart.

- c. Read Psalm 43:1-2. David is back under attack, plagued with "people problems." What does he do? He prays.

Read verses 3-4. He asked for two specific things: God's light and God's truth. He REFLECTED on the Word of God.

Turn to Psalm 119:105 and John 17:17 and read those passages.

Psalm 119:105 *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (NIV)*

John 17:17 *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (NIV)*

In these verses, what are Light and truth are symbols of?

Chuck Swindoll has written,

Every believer in Jesus Christ must ultimately come to the place where he is going to trust God's Word completely before he can experience consistent victory. His Book is our single source of tangible truth. We try every over crutch – we lean on self . . . on others . . . on feelings . . . on bank accounts . . . on good works . . . on logic and reason . . . on human perspective – and we continually end up with the short straw and churning. God has given His written Word and the promise of His light to all His children. WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN TO BELIEVE IT AND LIVE IN IT AND USE IT AND CLAIM IT? I often wonder how many of His personal promises to His people exist in His Book unclaimed and ignored." (Living Beyond The Daily Grind, p. 127)

Conclusion

Let's try to summarize. David writes of three things in his prescription for despair:

1. Remember the joyful times of walking with God.
2. Refocus on the character of God.
3. Reflect on the Word of God and His promises.

With that understanding in mind, go back through these two psalms and list all of the things David did to overcome the intense inner turmoil and despair in his life. (Example: in verse 4, he pours out his soul to God.)

It is important to realize that growth is a process. We won't "arrive" overnight. Author Miles Stanford writes, *"It seems that most believers have difficulty in realizing and facing up to the inexorable fact that God does not hurry in His development of our Christian life. He is working from and for eternity!"* (*The Green Letters*, p. 5).

Those who would suggest that we can have immediate spiritual victory over all problems in our lives offer only a simplistic (and harmful) remedy.

Dr. Cyril Barber was one of my professors in seminary. Someone once asked this scholar and author what his response was to those who give the simplistic advice, 'Confess doubt as sin, and decide once and for all you will never doubt again.' He replied,

Such advice . . . is theologically inaccurate because no one can resolve never to doubt again. It's not in us. Our frailty and the effects of sin in our lives have so devastated us that we will be hedged about by doubts and fears all our lives. So, theologically, that advice is very inappropriate.

Psychologically, it is devastating. You create in people expectations which are going to be shattered in the future and that will only increase their feelings of guilt and misgiving and destroy any sense of worth that had been built up. It is a tragedy that this advice ever appeared in print and I wish it had never seen the light of day. Those who conceived of it had a utopian expectation of perfection that they themselves could never live up to.

That is good advice. Allow God the time - and the path - He chooses to work in your life. It was Augustine who, after a time of trial, despair and darkness, wrote: “*You were guiding me as a helmsman steers a ship, but the course You steered was beyond my understanding.*” (*Confessions*, p. 84).

Finally, go back and pray through these psalms. Direct your prayer to the Father in heaven who cares for you as much as he cared for King David.

Suggested Reading

The Trusts We Must Believe, Chris Thurman (Thomas Nelson Publishers)

Happiness is a Choice, Frank Minirth and Paul Meier (Baker Book House)