

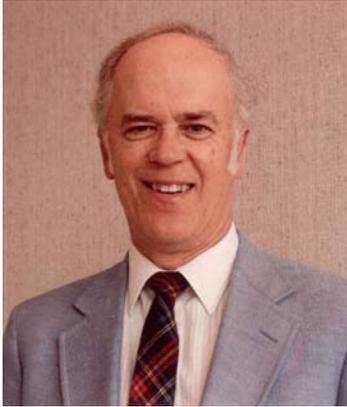
When You're Feeling Down

LIVING THROUGH LOW TIMES

by

William C. Brownson

These messages were delivered by Dr. Brownson on weekly broadcasts of Words of Hope, an international radio broadcast of the Reformed Church in America.



About the author

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In addition to a widespread speaking ministry in churches, on university campuses and at conferences, Dr. Brownson has written extensively for *the Church Herald* and other Christian periodicals. He is the author of 17 books.

His wife Helen has served as an educator and as Minister of Outreach at Christ Memorial Church in Holland, Michigan. The Brownsons reside in Holland. They are the parents of four sons, William and David deceased, James (Kathy) and Jonathan (Jeannette), and have six grandchildren, Rachel, Anna, Benjamin, Joanna, Will and Samuel.

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Words of Hope's mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ by radio and literature in the languages of the world's peoples, seeking with our partners in ministry to win the uncommitted everywhere to faith in Christ and to encourage Christians in the life of discipleship.

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Preface

Life for all of us has its low moments. We wrestle with emotions that are painful, with experiences that trouble us deeply. We find ourselves feeling *down*.

What does the Christian gospel say to us at such times? What resources does faith provide for “living through” our low periods? These studies are one struggler’s attempt at an answer.

You may have been led to believe that a living faith should lift us above such moods. A true Christian, on your view, should never feel “down.” I once shared that opinion, at least to some degree, but I hold it no longer, for reasons that will shortly appear.

Perhaps your outlook is quite different. You fail to see how the Christian faith can have any effect on a person’s low moods and painful emotions. We simply have to accept that fact that such experiences come, you reason, but can hardly expect God to do anything about them. But that, it seems to me, is to miss a great deal of what the gospel offers. Surely God with us, Christ for us, the Holy Spirit living in us can make a difference!

For many of the more helpful thoughts that follow, I am indebted to my pastor and friend, the Rev. Wesley Kiel. Out of a wealth of experience in assisting people through “low times,” he gave freely and often to me. To him, and to others like him who listen and care, I gratefully dedicate this book.

Chapter 1

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING DOWN

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Psalm 42:11, RSV

***F**eeling down and discouraged is something many of us have experienced. Let's hear what the Bible says to us when we're depressed.*

MOST OF US KNOW what it is to struggle with discouragement. We've found ourselves at times in that "slough of despond" which Bunyan talks about in *Pilgrim's Progress*. We've had to face that grim enemy, Giant Despair.

How does it feel to be discouraged? None of us, I suppose, can adequately describe it. But when we try, we almost always picture it as an emotional dip, as a psychic loss of altitude. You know—we're cast *down*. We're feeling *low*, maybe lower than this or lower than that. We're in the depths. Or in today's style, discouraged people are "in the pits."

Sometimes it's the collapse of a beautiful dream that gets us down, the fading of some bright hope. That position, that attainment we had long coveted is put beyond our reach. We see now that we'll never make it. That attractive person we had secretly admired for years has just closed a door by marrying someone else.

Maybe you've worked for a long time on a special project, poured a lot of yourself into it. Now you know that it simply won't fly. All that time and effort, toil and trouble—wasted!

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING DOWN

Maybe you've experienced the painful loss of a job, a pet, a good friend, a parent, a dear spouse. It's taken all the fight out of you. The old zest for living just isn't there. You're struggling. You're discouraged.

For you, the downer may come with a sense of personal failure or inadequacy. You've made rather a mess of things, and your self-respect is badly damaged. You feel like a nobody, and life doesn't seem significant any more.

Sometimes we can't put our finger on the exact cause, can't figure out what is making us sad. Maybe it's a physical condition, our age, the season, the weather. Who knows? There's no accounting for it; we're just *down*.

Does the Bible have anything to say to us at times like that? Does God have a word for the downcast? Yes, he does. Let me share with you something from the Scriptures that on bleak days has been genuinely helpful to me.

Sometimes the words people give us in our down times are not very helpful, are they? Someone tells us to "be happy," to "cheer up" when that's the very thing we find impossible. I know of a wealthy businessman who insists that when he asks his employees how they are each morning, they must always say, "Great!" no matter how they really feel. There's a father who makes his children parrot a bright little song when their eyes are brimming with tears. But God doesn't deal with us in that way. He seems to know how painful it can be when others try to force merriment upon us. Listen to this proverb from his book: "He who sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on a wound" (Prov. 25:20).

Sometimes people ask probing questions about why we're depressed, seeming to imply that we have no good reasons for feeling that way. They tell us that we shouldn't feel down, especially when we have so many blessings and when so many others are worse off than we are. We know they are right, but somehow these advice-givers don't make things better. Be sure of this: God's not one of them. Nowhere in his Word does he chide or blame people because they're downhearted.

What we sorely need at a time like that is not a cheerleader or a moralizer but someone who can understand, at least a little bit, what we're going through—someone who's "been there." That's what I find in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. Listen to these words from Psalm 42:

My tears have been my food day and night. . . . My soul is down-cast within me. . . . I say to God, my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" (vv. 3, 6, 9, NIV)

Here's a man saying, "I'm hurting all the time. I'm down in the dumps. I feel like I'm going under for the last time. Why, God? Why am I feeling so forsaken and depressed?" We can identify with that, can't we? But this same man later comes out with this:

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. (v. 11, RSV)

Here's a man inspired by God's Spirit who has something to share with me. He's not urging me to feel differently or burdening me with more guilt. He's opening up about his own struggle and how he found a way out of it. We can learn from someone like that, can't we?

Tell Out Your Woes

Here's one thing worth learning from him: *When you're feeling down, tell out your woes.* Put those vague feelings of depression into words. This psalm singer did that. Part of his low mood was a kind of grief over felt loss. Rich, fulfilling experiences in his past were now only haunting memories. He saw no way to recapture them.

These things I remember . . . how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God . . . My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? (vv. 4, 2, RSV)

Life had been so full and satisfying once for him, but now all was changed. He felt deprived of what once had been the joy of his heart.

And then there were the taunts and jeers of his enemies. "Men say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" In other words, he was a laughing-stock. Or, worse still, people looked on him as someone whom God had forgotten. For them, he was the fool who had thought he could count on the Lord but now found himself abandoned.

If you are feeling keenly the loss of something or someone precious, or if the ridicule of others has cut you to the heart, talk that out with someone you trust, someone who cares about you. Write it in a diary, put it in a letter, and whatever else you do, speak it into God's ear. Pour out your heart before him.

The man who wrote this psalm talked about a sea of troubles, "Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me." He's like a swimmer pounded by the surf. One towering wave after another crashes down on him, sweeps him off his feet, clogs his hair with sand. Just as he struggles up again, another billow sends him head over heels. Maybe you've felt like that. I can remember a time years ago when our house was robbed, our furnace exploded, and the plaster fell from our living room ceiling all within two weeks. The troubles were coming in waves!

Whatever may be wrong, whatever woes have overtaken you, don't hesitate to talk about them to your friends and to your Lord. We don't need to rehearse them all the time, but we all need to verbalize what gets us down. And oh, what a relief it is when we can spill it all and know that someone listens, someone understands!

Question Your Low Moods

Here's another thing I've learned. You can *question your low moods*. "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" This isn't someone else's inquisition now. It's a kind of inner conversation. "Look here, self," we say, "what's getting you down?" We're the ones that have a right to ask that. We can challenge our own depression. We can summon those sorrows of ours to give account of themselves.

Now that's very different from blaming yourself. We can quite easily do that. You know the cycle; we get discouraged and then annoyed with ourselves for being that way. We begin to feel guilty about our depression, which can end up making us even more despondent.

It's much more promising to ask myself the friendly question: *Why am I feeling down?* "But haven't I already answered that?" someone objects. "I've told about what I've lost, what people are saying about me, about the waves of trouble. What do you mean—why am I feeling down? Who wouldn't be if they had to face all that?" But let the question probe more deeply. Sometimes the problem lies not only in what's been happening in my life but in how I look at it, how I take it. I can't control my circumstances, but I do have something to say about how I'll think about them. And how we *feel*, remember, is linked in the closest way to what we *think*.

That fact is sometimes hard for us to face. We would like to tell ourselves that our losses, or our problems, or our enemies get us down, but actually they don't. No, it's the *thoughts* we entertain about those things that bring us low.

Let's say we are friends and you seem to ignore me when we meet in a public place. My feelings are hurt. Now it isn't your failure to speak to me that makes me upset, but what I tell myself about that. If I say to myself, *Oh, he was preoccupied*, or *He simply didn't recognize me in that setting*, then I can forget the whole thing with a light heart, right? But if I tell myself, *He deliberately snubbed me*, or *He thinks he's too big to notice me now*, then I'll really feel down on myself and angry at you.

So the question, "Why are you cast down and why are you disquieted within me?" is a good one to ask of your own heart. But ask it not as a critic or a prosecuting attorney but as a caring friend. That's always a wise way to deal with yourself. You know you ought to treat other people kindly. What about yourself? So you're a golfer and you've developed a bad slice. Everything you hit keeps veering off to the right. You could say to yourself, *You idiot! What's the matter with you? Why do you keep hitting the ball that way?* Or you could ask it in a more brotherly, supportive way, *Let's see, what do you think you're doing in your swing that puts that kind of spin on the ball?* That second inquiry might be

helpful, especially if you explored it with others. But the first can only lead to a worse slice!

Call Yourself to Hope in God

The third thing I've learned from this fellow-struggler in the psalm is most important. After you tell out your troubles and question your low moods, *call yourself to hope in God*. That's exactly what the psalmist did. "Hope in God," he tells himself, "for I shall again praise him, my help and my God." It's true that we can sometimes add to our misery by the way we look at life. Is there any way to change that perspective? This man thought there was. Suppose we get the Lord into the picture? Suppose we take him into account? Will things look different for us then?

This is a man who has known God for some time. He has trusted in him and delighted to go to his house for worship. He has experienced what it is to praise God with a glad heart. He's not there now. He can but dimly remember that happy state. Somehow he believes that it can come again.

This is *memory in the service of faith*. God's people are led to hope by remembering what God has done in the past. This psalmist had known other down times. He had groaned in sadness on other days when there seemed to be no way out. But mysteriously, wonderfully, things had changed markedly for the better. Quite unaccountably, everything had begun to look brighter. God had come through for him after all. And now he was remembering that.

That's what getting God in the picture will do for you, especially if you know him as he really is. The Creator of the universe, the true and living God, the Father made known in Jesus Christ, is the Lord who binds up the brokenhearted and lifts the fallen. He's the one who offers beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. He's the one who gave his own dear Son that we might have true life. To trust him, to commit ourselves to him for the first time is to be on the road to gladness. And, in every low mood, when we simply bring him to mind again, we sense our joy beginning to revive. The hymn writer put it beautifully: "But let me only think of Thee, and then new heart springs up in me."

Call yourself today to hope in this God, this Savior, Jesus Christ! Remember what he's done in the past and try to focus your attention expectantly on him. Then, gradually perhaps, but genuinely, you begin to anticipate a brighter future. You say, along with the psalmist, "I shall again praise him, my help and my God." I'm struggling with my feelings now. I'm not altogether out of this low mood, but I'm on the way. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." That night of weeping may seem very long for you. It may last for months, for years, but take heart. God's comfort, God's coming through for his people, is as certain as the dawn!

Study Questions

- 1. What are the usual causes for our "feeling down"? What especially makes you feel that way?*
- 2. Sometimes well-meaning people try to help us out of our discouragement. Which of their methods have you found helpful? Which unhelpful?*
- 3. When is talking about our sorrows therapeutic? When is it counter-productive?*
- 4. In what sense do our attitudes and reactions contribute to our "feeling down"?*
- 5. How can memory be an aid to hope?*

Chapter 2

WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

Ephesians 4:26-27, RSV

***H**ave you ever been angry? Really angry? I have. More often than I care to admit. But Scripture has some helpful things to teach us about dealing with our anger.*

“BE ANGRY BUT DO NOT SIN.” That’s a striking combination of thoughts, isn’t it? Five brief words about something to be and something to shun, both a command and a prohibition. Nothing unusual about that structure, of course, but the mix is surprising. Apparently it’s possible to do both: to be angry but not in any way to sin.

Be Angry

I say that’s surprising because of the widespread notion that anger is in itself sinful. I personally imbibed that idea early in my life. For a number of years, I was under the impression that to be angry represented moral failure, and to be free from it entirely was high virtue. As a result, when I got angry, I felt bad about myself. I felt diminished, lamentably lacking in self-control. As a result, I tried hard not to get angry. I really worked at it. And when I did anyway, when anger just came welling up in me, I often tried to hide it. When I first began to hear that anger was permissible, even healthy, I actually resisted the idea. It took me a long time to accept the fact that it’s okay to be angry.

Maybe that sounds strange, even funny to you because you’ve had a more sensible view about it, or maybe you’ve had something of the same struggle I’ve

had. You may find it liberating, as I did, to hear this charge from God's Word, "Be angry." It's not as though we're told to be constantly hot under the collar, but the apostle is saying that when circumstances arise that get you upset, that rouse your ire—feel free; let it happen; don't worry about it.

Now that's not merely a concession to our human infirmity and sinfulness. Anger is a legitimate element in normal, healthy, human life. For convincing proof of that, we need only look at Jesus Christ. Here is the only one who ever lived in total obedience to God, of whom the Father could say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I have been well pleased." Jesus was altogether without sin. But on more than one occasion, he was very angry. When he was about to heal a man's withered hand and critics watched him narrowly because it happened to be the Sabbath Day, Mark tells us that he "looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart." When he saw their cold legalism, heard their pitiless carping, he was furious. On another occasion, eyes blazing, he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove the profiteers out of the temple. That was certainly an evidence of what the book of Revelation calls "the wrath of the Lamb." He couldn't bear it when people made God's house of prayer into a den of thieves, exploiting the needy in the name of religion. Learn from Jesus that it's not only permissible to be angry at heartless cruelty; it's altogether right. No other reaction is appropriate for a caring person.

Now it's true that much of our anger is not of that sort. Righteous indignation doesn't come along for us as often as flare-ups when we personally are slighted, insulted, or taken advantage of. Sometimes anger can be touched off in us by a seeming trifle.

But even that "short fuse," that quickness of temper, is not to be looked on as a moral evil. It may be related more to our digestion, our lack of sleep, our overcrowded schedule than to some evil inclination. The point to remember is that anger in itself is something that *happens* to us, an emotional reaction to what's going on around us. In that sense, it's neither good nor bad. It doesn't call for credit or for blame. It's simply a part of life, an inescapable element in your humanness, and you don't need to be ashamed of it. Listen to the apostle again: "Be angry."

Do Not Sin

But the second charge follows hard upon that. “Do not sin.” Paul, of course, is not talking here about evil in general but about the particular form of sin to which anger can lead. And it surely can bring on things that are painful, ugly, even tragic. Perhaps that’s why anger frightens us so, why we shrink from facing it in ourselves. We’ve seen the suffering and destruction to which it can sometimes lead.

There are two dangers involved here. The first, the obvious one, is loss of control. We not only experience anger as a feeling; we’re carried away by it. We become so blinded by rage that we lash out destructively, heedless of the consequences of what we’re doing. Uncontrolled anger, anger that overrides all concern for other persons, all sense of responsibility, can be terribly hurtful.

But there’s an even greater evil of which we may be less aware—that of holding on to our anger. The apostle Paul, here in Ephesians, chapter 4, is especially concerned to warn us against that. After his counsel, “Be angry but do not sin,” he adds this, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” It’s one thing, apparently, to experience a flash of anger. It’s another thing to feed the flame, to nurse the grievance.

“Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath,” or as we might paraphrase it, “Don’t go to sleep mad.” What eminently wise advice that is! How much misery and alienation would be avoided in our lives if we listened to it! Everyone who has ever been a pastor or a counselor knows that well. When we deal with family members who are estranged, marriage partners that divorce, we meet again and again the sad fruits of sustained anger. People get angry with each other, perhaps over something that seems insignificant, but they don’t resolve the issue. There’s no communication about it, no clearing of the air, no forgiveness, no healing. They cling to the hurt. They bury it deep inside. It festers and spreads. Then another grievance is added, and another. The deadly game of saving up anger, hoarding hostility, goes on. One day, two people who once loved each other wake up miserably, and perhaps permanently, alienated.

No wonder Paul says in this connection, “Give no opportunity to the devil!” To cling to your resentment, to cherish a grudge, is to throw the doors of your life wide open to the evil one. He can move right in then to plant all kinds of bitter thoughts and vengeful plans. If you let anger turn to hate, if you let it chill and harden into malice, you’re playing the devil’s game. He’ll be right at home in your heart. And even if you don’t injure someone as a result, your own life will be shriveled, poisoned, and—unless something happens to change it—ruined.

A pastor told me of a husband and wife who are literally sick with buried anger. They are angry with doctors, angry with lawyers, angry with businessmen, with ministers, angry with God. They can’t seem to let go of their fury and resentment. Their children now are being deeply affected by it. The whole family seems to be backing into a corner away from the rest of the world, bristling with hostility and mistrust. Somewhere buried resentment gave entrance to the powers of evil. What a chilling instance of the devil’s work!

If that were the whole story, the outlook for many of us would be gloomy indeed. We’re aware, perhaps, that we don’t handle anger very well, that we’re in danger of either flying off the handle or holding on to anger in an unhealthy way. What are we to do? Is there any light for people like us? Any hope for those who struggle with anger?

Dealing with Anger

Let me offer two suggestions, two approaches to anger that have been helpful and healing for me. The first is this: Let it be expressed. We need to come to terms with the fact that anger is a real part of our experience. We need to recognize when we’re angry that that’s what’s going on, to admit it to ourselves. And in the light of what we’ve said today, we need to accept those angry feelings as legitimate, as okay. Then we need to let that anger find appropriate expression.

Sometimes we labor under the impression that the only way to express anger is by flying off the handle, throwing things, launching into a temper tantrum. Well, if nobody’s around to get hurt and if what we throw isn’t too valuable, all that carrying on may not be too bad. But it’s not the only way. You don’t have to

get vociferous or violent to express your anger. But you do need to express it somehow.

I didn't always believe that. I used to think that if I sat on my anger, if I held it in, if I didn't let it show, it would somehow go away. But do you know what I discovered? It didn't cease to exist. My anger went underground, as it were. Then, when I least expected it, it would surface again, not perhaps in overt attack on someone but in more sneaky, nasty ways: a cold critical attitude, perhaps, a cutting remark, or maybe dull apathy. I think that camouflaging my anger was an attempt on my part to project an image of all-loving perfection, but it sadly flopped. Sometimes it almost killed what warm, positive feelings I had. There had to be a better way!

Well, there is. It's a good thing, friends, when you're angry, to say so. It's probably best if you can tell the person involved. Of course, there are various ways to do that. You can announce your anger as an assault on someone else's character. "You make me angry! You are one miserable pain in the neck! I'm fed up with your obnoxiousness!" That will get your anger out, but it will probably build it into your victim! What I'm talking about mainly is making a statement about *you*, not about them, saying, "This is the way I feel." So you say to your friend, "As we talk about these things, I can feel myself getting hot under the collar." Or, "when that happens, my stomach starts churning and I get angry inside." When put that way, it's not an attack on another person, but important feedback for them about what's going on inside of you. If you're a parent and you tell your unruly children, "I'm beginning to feel angry," you give them valuable information that may save the whole family pain and trouble.

It may not always be feasible or possible to express your anger directly to the person most concerned. It may be directed at someone who refuses to see you or who has moved away or has even died. But that doesn't mean that you have to hold all that feeling in. If you do, you'll probably get depressed as well as bitter. Talk it out with someone. Tell them just how you feel. Tell God you're angry with this person. That will be no shocking revelation to him; he knows you altogether. But it will ease the inner pressure for you. And if some of your anger is directed against God, as may well be the case, dare to tell him that. Believe me,

he won't condemn you for it, and he can probably handle whatever you have to say to him!

Expressing your anger to someone is always risky. When you do that, you're testing the relationship. You may be afraid that it will break into little pieces if you reveal how upset you really are. But when you try it, when you take the venture, you discover that that doesn't usually happen. You tell out your anger. Maybe the other person gets defensive. You argue; your struggle to communicate gets tough. But on the other side of that, there may be real closeness. Burying anger, on the other hand, makes for distance; expressing it frankly as *your* feeling can clear the air and open the way for love.

But there's one more thing I want to say. This is the best. Let your anger be expressed, yes, but in the whole process, look to Jesus Christ. Paul is talking in this whole passage of Scripture about what it is to "learn Christ." That means, of course, listening to his Word and noting his example. But it means most of all, learning *him*, entering into relationship with him, putting our whole trust in him. To deal with anger constructively, to keep it within bounds, and to prevent its burrowing into us, we need more than advice, more than a perfect pattern. We need God's power to forgive us, to release us, to make us new. We need Jesus Christ, the living Savior, present by his Spirit, in our hearts. Look to him!

Learning of him can give you the right outlook on anger. Living in him can help you to deal with it. As one alive in Christ, you can begin to discover the invigorating freedom to "be angry" and yet "not sin"!

Study Questions

1. *Evaluate this statement: "It's O.K. to be angry."*
2. *When does anger become an evil?*
3. *What are the perils of sustained anger?*
4. *What resources do we find in the Christian faith for dealing with anger?*

Chapter 3

WHEN YOU'RE BURDENED WITH CARE

Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.

1 Peter 5:7, RSV

You know what it's like to lie awake at night with your mind filled with worry, and so do I. Listen now for some good advice from God's Word about how to get rid of anxiety.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY is your basic reaction to life? When that question was posed in a student poll, sixty percent of those responding said, "Anxiety." Imagine that! I wonder if the percentage in the non-student world would be much lower. Maybe it would be higher! Whatever the exact statistics, it's certain that many, many people are troubled by anxiety, burdened with a weight of care. Maybe you're one of them. If not a chronic worrier, at least you're anxious a good deal of the time.

What Is Anxiety?

What's going on in us when we feel anxiety? What happens when we worry? Someone has said that anxiety results when we see little probability of attaining important goals. All of us have goals, desires, dreams, for ourselves and others. If we have good hopes of reaching them, of fulfilling our aims, we feel good, happy, at peace. But if we see little possibility of realizing these goals, we tend to fret and grow anxious. And the more important a goal is to us, the more troubled we feel at the thought of not reaching it.

Sometimes the anxiety has to do with issues of bare survival. "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?" Here speaks our common human yearning for something to fill our stomachs and clothe our nakedness. Sometimes we don't know where that next meal is coming from. Sometimes the prospects even for adequate clothing seem dim. We're anxious; we're afraid that our elemental needs won't be provided for.

But those are only typical of a thousand other questions we ask ourselves. What am I going to do to make a living when jobs are scarce? Will I ever marry? And if I do, can I find real happiness? Perhaps you're married now and wonder if your marriage can survive. What kind of security is there for my children in a world like this? What will become of them when I'm gone?

Maybe your questions have to do with health. Will I recover from what I'm struggling with now? Will it plague me for the rest of my life? Or how will my child, my spouse, my friend be able to cope with a serious illness?

The list goes on. Can I succeed in this new business venture? Can I find anyone to publish my material? Will I get along with people in my new neighborhood or at my new job? Will anyone take care of me when I'm old and helpless? Can I hope for anything beyond death?

Simply asking those questions is not necessarily a sign of anxiety. It's the answers we propose to ourselves that make the difference. It's when we believe the worst-case possibilities that we find ourselves in trouble. It's when we say to ourselves about that important objective, "I'll never make it," or about that hoped-for possibility, "Slim chance!" that we are burdened with care. When you ask yourself, "What will become of me and of those I love?" what kind of answer do you give? That will pretty much determine your state of mind. Where expectations are high, hearts are glad. But where hope diminishes, anxiety grows.

What's Wrong With It

I don't need to tell you that feeling anxious is unpleasant. I don't need to remind you of how it can be damaging to your health. You know that ulcers, colitis, high blood pressure, heart trouble can all be aggravated by it. But I hope you see that anxiety is at root a spiritual problem. It reveals something amiss in

our value-system. It betrays a lack of basic trust. As a matter of fact, it's a form of idolatry.

Does that sound too strong? "You mean to say that my everyday worries are like the worship of a false god?"

Well, Jesus said something very much like that. Do you remember those words of his on the Sermon on the Mount, "You cannot serve God and mammon [money]"? He had been talking about the peril of laying up treasures for ourselves on the earth. Your god, he argues, is what you look to for security and fulfillment. "Where your treasure is, your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). But hoarding what we have is only one expression of allegiance to mammon. Worrying about what we don't have is another. It's immediately after those words, "You cannot serve God and mammon [money]," that Jesus says, "therefore I tell you, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat . . .'" (Matt. 6:24,25). In other words, the worrier has basically the same problem as the miser. Both believe that money and things represent security. Neither has taken seriously this word of Jesus, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses" (Luke 12:15).

When I worry about what I don't have or may not get, I'm concentrating on what seems to be the sole means of getting rid of my worry. Worry is nothing else than dependence on, trust in these *means*: money, food, or its earthly owners and managers. When I fix on those, I worship the creature instead of the Creator, help rather than the helper, bread instead of the one who provides it.

What We Can Do about It

But the big question is, "What can I do?" Hearing about the miseries and evils of anxiety may only make me more anxious. I need an alternative, a way out. When I'm menaced by anxiety, how do I handle it? First, admit it. Acknowledge the fact that you are anxious. Some of us don't like to do that. "Others worry," we tell ourselves, "I'm only concerned. Others are anxious; I'm just being responsible and realistic!" Hey, why not just face it?

It's humbling for any of us to confess that, but helpful too. Listen to this word from 1 Peter 5, verse 6:

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.

Go ahead, call a spade a spade. Call anxiety by its right name. Humble yourself under God's hand. Then, gather up all those anxieties and cast them on him.

My sons and I often rake leaves together during late autumn. In Michigan, leaves can accumulate to quite a depth. We wonder each year how in the world we can get rid of them. Our technique is usually to make a clearing with a rake and then put down a large sheet of cloth or plastic. Then we rake those huge piles of leaves onto that sheet to be carried away. I can envision those leaves as so many worries, and that raking operation as heaving them all on God. In one long swoop, I get thousands of them off the yard and onto something else.

In one way, leaves are not the most apt image for our worries, since they're fairly light. Our anxieties, on the other hand, usually seem heavy. They're like a bulky, crushing burden. Suppose now that you've been carrying a hundred-pound pack for miles. You're exhausted and your legs will hardly support you any longer. Every muscle groans and you're staggering under the load. Then a friend stoops down beside you and says, "Here, let me carry it for a while." You've never heard any offer as welcome as that one! Before he has time to change his mind, you roll that pack off on him. What a relief! You feel free as a bird. That is what it's like to cast your anxieties, to roll your inner burdens onto God's shoulders.

Anxiety, as the Bible sees it, is related to pride. We act proudly when we think we can manage on our own, that we are completely sufficient in ourselves. We say, "I'll handle it," even when we're about to collapse under the load! "If I don't concern myself about it," we seem to imply, "who will?" Humility, on the other hand, is simply acknowledging, "I can't carry it all. I'd like some relief. I need help."

I remember reading a remarkable passage about the difference between the living God and the idols we make for ourselves. Here it is, from Isaiah 46, verse 1:

WHEN YOU'RE BURDENED WITH CARE

Bel bows down, Nebo stoops. Their idols are on beasts and cattle;
these things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary beasts.

“Do you see that statue?” the prophet is saying, “that image of wood or stone? Don’t expect that to help you when you’ve got to move fast. If you want your idol with you, you’ll have to carry it on your back or load it on a beast of burden.”

But the Lord of heaven and earth is different. He’s the one who *carries you*. Listen to his Word,

Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth.

Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

Isaiah 46:3,4, NIV

You don’t have to go around with that monstrous burden of care. Put it on him. He’ll not only take it off your hands; he’ll carry you. Imagine him standing at your side right now, looking at those worries that are weighing you down. “Look here,” he says, “You aren’t meant to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. I’m the chief Burden-bearer around here.”

Someone says, “That sounds great. But now, how do I unload my anxiety?” The apostle Paul says, “Let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). Tell him about what’s making you anxious. Ask him for his help and grace. Do that, he goes on, “with thanksgiving.” Say to him, “Thanks, Lord, I’m trusting you to carry the whole business.”

Now that doesn’t mean that you won’t do anything. God’s not going to do things for you that you can do for yourself. He’ll carry all your anxieties, but he’ll

let you carry your share of the responsibility. And it's when the anxiety goes, when the burden rolls away, that you can really get moving.

You know how it is when you've got eighty-eight things to do. You don't see how you're possibly going to get them all done, and the prospect of all that seems to paralyze you. But if you can get rid of the worry about it, you can make at least a start on task number one. I talked to a counselor once who urged a woman with that kind of problem to make a very modest beginning. She was overwhelmed by her undone housework. He said, "Try cleaning four tiles on your kitchen floor." Just make a start, and you're on your way. You'll be surprised how easy it is to make progress, to do something about problems when you relinquish that mountain of care.

Do you know why you can unload like that? Peter gives the answer, the beautiful open secret, "Cast all your care on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). That's it. He's concerned about you. You matter to him. The Lord is on your side. Psychologists tell us that the mere presence of other people, especially friendly others, helps to keep anxiety low. Everything isn't bad, life isn't hopeless, as long as I've got a friend. As long as someone is around who cares, maybe I'll make it after all. Well, take this in, friends. There's someone walking right beside you who cares more deeply than the best friend you've ever had. His name is Jesus Christ, God with us.

He's the one who carried his people in the wilderness, like a shepherd shouldering a lamb, like a father teaching a toddler to walk. He's the one who came to carry our most dreadful burden. "Surely," sings the prophet, "he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6). Jesus "bore our sins in his own body on the cross." He lifted the weight of our guilt and carried it away. Friends, if he carried that for us, if he let himself be crushed by our sin and rose victorious, mighty to save, you know that he'll take on your burdens of care today. He said so: "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." In other words, "Come, I'll get under that burden with you."

It's when you know that you're loved like that that you're willing and able to let go. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you've placed your trust in him for

forgiveness and eternal life, you've pinned all your hopes on Jesus, what a shame to keep on carrying worries that he's willing to shoulder! Whoever you are, take him at his word today. Try casting your burden his way and see how he will sustain you. You've nothing to lose but your anxiety. Cast it all on him; he cares about you.

Study Questions

1. *What makes our questions about the future to be "anxious" questions?*
2. *In what sense is anxiety a form of idol-worship?*
3. *How is thanksgiving an antidote to anxiety?*
4. *What is the most powerful incentive for us to "cast our cares" upon the Lord?*

Chapter 4

WHEN YOU'RE CONDEMNING YOURSELF

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1, RSV

*N*obody likes to feel guilty, least of all when you're the one condemning yourself. You can try to stifle your conscience or you can use the gospel way to deal with feelings of condemnation.

"I CAN'T FORGIVE myself after what I've done . . . I hate myself for the way I've acted . . . I'm a total failure—there's no hope left for me."

Those who counsel with troubled people often hear such anguished outbursts. Maybe you've said or thought something like that yourself. Most of us, at one time or another, have felt seriously down on ourselves, self-condemned.

Here is a word of good news for all of us, a message so startling we can hardly take it in. It's from the New Testament letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verse 1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Did you hear that? God says, "no condemnation."

So Much Condemnation

That's hard to believe, isn't it? *In the world around us, there is so much condemnation.* We all seem to be self-styled experts at passing judgment. Everywhere we meet charge and countercharge, accusations flying in all directions, everyone assigning blame somewhere. The French writer Albert Camus was so impressed with that that he scoffed at the idea of a final judgment day. For him it

was already here. "Allow me to laugh respectfully," he wrote. "I shall wait for it resolutely, for I have known what is worse, the judgment of men. . . . I'll tell you a big secret, *mon cher*, don't wait for the last judgment. It takes place every day."

Feelings of guilt are universal. Whatever moral standards they may accept, people in every culture are painfully conscious of having fallen short of them. Perhaps that's why judgment, censure, and blame are so common. Our guilt feelings seem intolerable, and so we project them onto others. We need to find some scapegoat, some victim so that we can unload the crushing sense of responsibility. We feel a surge of great relief when we can pin it on someone and say, "There, *he's* the one!" or "It's all their fault."

Why do we take such secret pleasure in gossip? Why do we listen with avid interest to the slightest hint of scandal? Because it makes us feel less isolated, less alone with our own buried feelings of guilt and shame.

We quickly become critical of others, pointing out their faults even when they have not asked us for that favor. We do it sometimes with relish or with undisguised annoyance, assuring ourselves that it's only because we have their good in mind. Even the advice we give can contain a veiled criticism. "If I were in your place, I would do such and such," we say, implying, of course, that their decision in the matter is likely to be less wise and virtuous than ours. In how many ways, blatant and subtle, we keep piling judgment and blame on one another!

Even the comparisons we draw can contribute to the problem. "Too bad you're not as smart as your sister . . . You're not quite the man your father was . . . Why can't you be like so-and-so?" Any message that we are inferior to others is always experienced by us as a kind of guilt. "We're not what we should be; we don't measure up. Shame on us!"

We Do It to Ourselves

That's partly why we *condemn ourselves*, because of the criticisms, the putdowns, the negative estimates imposed on us by others. You were frequently scolded as a child and in all of it the message came through, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself to behave like that?" You certainly *were* ashamed. Maybe you got angry at times, defensive, lashing out against your accusers, but the sting was still

there. And even now in similar situations, the old tapes begin to play again, and you feel self-condemned.

But that isn't the only reason. We can become so fearful of criticism that we'll do anything to avoid it. We'll compromise our deepest convictions. We'll be false to ourselves and fail to assert how we really feel. Then, afterwards, we may be tormented by even worse guilt. "How could I grovel and demean myself like that? What a miserable coward I am!"

Many of us, on the other hand, defend ourselves fairly well against frontal attacks. Let someone accuse us of a fault and we marshal impressive evidence to disprove the charge. If they call us stingy, we point out a score of times when we acted generously. "Say I'm proud and I'll bowl you over with proofs of my humility." When someone is directly blaming us, we lose our objectivity and conscience gets benumbed. The last thing in the world we are ready to do is admit that that particular accusation is true.

But even as we defend ourselves with such gusto, we often feel sick inside about other failings. What no one will ever extract from us by force as a confession, we still know and inwardly deplore. So even as we defend ourselves vigorously on the ramparts or at the front lines, self-judgment eats away at us within.

Perhaps we feel badly about ourselves because we failed in something important to us. We can't face that in ourselves. Maybe we have an exaggerated, even grandiose, sense of responsibility. We feel guilty about being healthy when many are sick, ashamed of having money to spend when millions are poor, almost soiled and wretched for being happy in a world full of so many miseries.

But we have to do with more, all of us, than unwarranted criticisms from others or neurotic guilt feelings about ourselves. Many times we feel guilt because we are guilty. Here it's not a set of taboos or social conventions that we have violated but God's will. We have assumed control of our own lives, gone our own way, forgotten our Maker. We have ignored the need of our fellow human beings and trampled on their rights. We have hurt the very persons we should have loved best. We've been disobedient and ungrateful, selfish and sometimes heartless. In those rare moments of honesty, when we get a glimpse of what lies within us, we can begin to feel what the apostle Paul felt when he cried

out, "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24).

No Condemnation . . . in Christ Jesus

Then there comes to us that unspeakably cheering word, "There is therefore now no condemnation. . . ." Can such a thing be possible? If our fellow men put us down and our own feeble consciences indict us, can it be that God will do less? He is the holy One, of too pure eyes even to look upon evil. He knows the secrets of every heart. He is the just judge who cannot be bribed or intimidated, who always does right. He knows our sin and wrong far better than anyone else and he alone has the authority to pass judgment. How can his verdict be *no condemnation*?

We humans beings feel almost instinctively that everything has to be paid for. It seems impossible to us that our guilt could be removed without a heavy price. That conviction finds dim expression in all kinds of sacrifices, offerings for sin. And how many physiological or psychological sufferings are linked to a vague sense of guilt? In one way or another, we fear punishment for our wrongs or even try to punish ourselves.

There's something sound in that elemental instinct of ours. Human evil does lead to judgment. The wage of sin is death. Justice will be served. But our great and gloomy error lies in imagining that we can pay. Perhaps by observing the correct ritual, by offering a proper sacrifice, or even by giving up in death something dear to me, I can cancel the debt. Maybe by strenuous moral effort, by self-discipline or prolonged suffering, I can make things right again. But along that road we find no peace. We are never sure: "Will God accept this? Have I done it right? Have I endured enough?" All the austerities that people have ever inflicted on themselves and all the animal sacrifices heaped on a thousand altars have never finally quieted one guilty conscience.

The good news is that though all must be paid for, God himself has paid in full. God has counted down the price. He has carried the weight of our sin in Jesus Christ his Son. It was as though the Judge of all the earth, having passed

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sentence on us, stepped down from his judgment seat and bore the penalty himself. This was the mystery of which the ancient prophet sang,

He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes [his wounds] we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:5-6

On Golgotha, that Good Friday, the last judgment entered into time; our sin was fully judged. But the stroke fell not on us, but on our sinless Savior. There God took upon his own heart the full consequences of our sin. Hear the apostle Paul exult in that here in Romans 8, verse 3: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.” God has condemned sin once and for all in the cross of his Son. Now the storm is over. The sentence has been served. The judgment has passed. There is therefore now *no condemnation*.

But Paul’s thought doesn’t end there. “No condemnation,” he writes, “for those who are in Christ Jesus.” This is a gospel for everyone who acknowledges their sin and believes in Jesus. He, the crucified One, is the living Lord. He rose from the dead on the third day and appeared to his followers. Now he has been exalted to God’s right hand as the Ruler of history, the King of glory, Lord over all. All who trust in him as Savior, who commit themselves to his lordship, receive the gift of his own Spirit. They are united in a living bond to the risen Christ himself. All that he has done in his life, death, and resurrection now avails for them. They are “in Christ Jesus” and for them there is no condemnation. In the mystery of God’s grace, their sin was laid upon him, and his perfect righteousness is accounted theirs. By faith they are totally justified, freely forgiven, accepted unconditionally.

I hope you realize today that no sin of yours, however heinous, no mountain of guilt, can block God's saving work in your life. "Though your sins be like scarlet," he assures you, "they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Though your iniquities be more than the stars in number, they can all be forgiven. The only obstacle that can stand in your way is self-righteousness—the repression of your guilt, the unwillingness to acknowledge your need of mercy. That's what makes for hardness of heart, for smug complacency. That's what bars the door to the Savior who comes and knocks.

There he stands, friends. Jesus comes not to charge you with all your sins and failures but to hold out to you in the gospel his pierced hands. "This I bore, these wounds I suffered, for you. Trust me and be at peace."

It may be that today you are struggling with feelings of guilt and self-blame, perhaps imposed by others, perhaps false scruples you inflict on yourself. The Lord wants to pierce through it all and bring perhaps to your awareness a genuine, deeper guilt. We all share that. And that can be taken away! Let his light shine now into your life. Let his love draw you to confess your sins and commit yourself to him. Then, though you may feel surrounded with accusers, hear him say to you as he said to a guilt-plagued woman long ago, "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11). Now that Jesus has died for us, we will never, never, never be condemned. Celebrate it! There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Study Questions

1. *What are some of the indirect ways in which we communicate judgment and disapproval?*
2. *What factors lead us to condemn ourselves?*
3. *How can a just God acquit guilty people and promise them "no condemnation"?*
4. *Can we be sure that we will never be condemned? If so, how?*

Chapter 5

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING BITTER

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant, I was like a beast toward thee.

Psalm 73:21,22, RSV

***H**ave you ever felt the bitter taste of envy? Do you know how life is so often? The bad get rich and the good get trouble. It just doesn't seem fair.*

DO YOU EVER feel bitter, sour inside about the way life has treated you? Does the downright unfairness of things sometimes gall you? I received a letter some time ago from a woman in a great city who made no effort to conceal her bitterness. "I find these days how little living a good and decent life has meant." She points to "unanswered prayer, prolonged denial and frustration, selfishness and human waste" as proving ridiculous the idea that God is just. Many of us have known at times something of that dark, biting inner pain. One of my favorite Scripture passages, Psalm 73, is an honest expression of the same struggle.

"Truly God is good to the upright," begins the psalmist, "to those who are pure in heart" (v. 1). That sounds orthodox and reasonable, doesn't it? Many of us grew up believing it. God is on the side of right. The good guys will win out in the end. Live an upright life and God will surely reward you. All the best-loved stories end up that way, don't they? And don't we hear that version of the gospel often today? "Believe in God and do your best; then all you try will bring success!"

Struggling With Bitterness

The only problem is that that rosy view of life is not confirmed by the experience of most people. That woman who wrote to me, crushed and embittered by disappointments, speaks for many. Along with hers came a letter from a man whose childhood confidence about happy endings, about the moral order of the

universe, has been blasted apart by tragic experience. He writes also out of deep anguish, "I have tried to do what is right and my life is a complete failure. I am totally miserable." One setback after another has shattered his dreams.

The man who wrote Psalm 73, though he wanted to believe, was also going through a desperate struggle. He was offended, first of all, by the evident flourishing of many godless, unprincipled people. "I was envious of the arrogant," he writes, "when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (v. 3). They have good health; they seem to be free of major problems. They can buy themselves out of any difficulty. They have it made! They strut about pompously, run roughshod over other people, sneer at anyone who challenges them and even scoff at the idea of God. Watching them made this man bitter. It ground away at his insides.

It further upset him that others fawned over the godless rich. That exasperates me, too. Let a man be greedy, deceitful, heartless, unfaithful, but if he is worth millions of dollars, then whatever he does is treated as newsworthy. Everywhere he goes, he is viewed with awe and greeted with applause: "This is the famous so-and-so who owns such-and-such." People like that seem to be a standing challenge to any religious or moral view of the universe. They make the question sharp for many of us, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

But even that is not the most maddening part. It's bad enough to see arrogant evil rewarded, but it's even worse when those who try to live a decent life have so much trouble. That's the psalmist's problem, and ours. We're ready to throw up our hands and say, "What's the use?" "All in vain," he writes, "have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence, for all the day long I have been stricken and chastened every morning" (vv. 13,14). He, the man who's trying to keep straight, to live for God, he's the one who has sickness in his family, financial problems, miseries of all kinds. On many days, it seems that if anything can possibly go wrong for him, it does. That's painfully hard to understand. No wonder so many get bitter.

Well, why doesn't he dump the whole business? Why not deny God and stop looking for any moral sense in this scheme of things? At least that would ease the unbearable pain of disappointment. But this man can't bring himself to do that. His sense of responsibility for other strugglers stands in the way. Listen: "If I had

said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have been untrue to the generation of thy children" (v. 15). In other words, "if I spoke out my doubts and bitterness, I'd be betraying a number of other embattled believers. Think of the stumbling block I'd put in the way of other people. I don't want to see children growing up hard and cynical. I don't want to see them throw over all standards and settle for raw selfishness, dog-eat-dog ethics."

"I can't do that," he says. But on the other hand, trying to figure it all out was too much for him. "When I thought how to understand this," he said, "it seemed to me a wearisome task" (v. 16). So there he was, trying to believe but grappling with ugly doubts, bitter, frustrated, hurting. He couldn't make any sense out of life. But he was still too much of a believer, too much of a friend, to leave the ranks of the faithful.

A Great Breakthrough

One day something remarkable happened in his life. It changed his outlook radically. Everything appeared now in a different light. What about those wealthy scoundrels that had so scandalized his sense of justice? Somehow the envy and irritation toward them had drained away. He says, "I perceived their end" (v. 17). He saw what their life was really like and, most significantly, where it was headed.

Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!
They are like a dream when one awakes.

(vv. 18-20)

He was looking at them now from a new vantage point. He saw not only their pride and pretensions, but their great peril. How fragile was their imagined well-being! At any moment, death could sweep them away, and then their vaunted success would appear as only a dream. What had seemed solid and secure about these people was only, after all, a mirage. Once you see that, can you envy, fret

over such people? Can you long to change places with them? Can you covet their future? Hardly. It's a vision to excite pity more than bitterness. They aren't really living at all, and the vanity of it will soon become clear.

This life-changing experience led the psalmist to look at himself differently, too. His old thinking seemed shallow now, his former attitudes shabby. "When my soul was embittered," he confesses, "when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant, I was like a beast toward you" (vv. 21-22). "How could I have felt that way?" he wonders. "How could I have acted like such a fool?" What had seemed like righteous indignation looked more like stuffiness now. There had been the whine of self-pity about it. Worst of all, he saw his old outlook now as the blindness of unbelief.

But the biggest change of all came in the way he viewed his relationship to God. Before, he had been venting the complaint: "God isn't coming through for me. He's short-changing me. In spite of all my efforts, I'm getting a raw deal!" But now listen to him:

Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive
me to glory. (vv. 23-24)

Now he sees that God has been holding on to him through all of life. In spite of his difficulties and disappointments, he has known the incomparable blessing of God's presence. The sense of the Lord's guiding hand upon him now fills him with confidence about the future. "You will receive me to glory" (v. 24). And here he's thinking not about a coming prosperity in this life but of a divine welcome beyond the boundary of death. He's persuaded that even that last great enemy can't sever the ties that bind him to God.

His hope is not a wistful longing for something he has missed out on in this life. It's rather the assurance that what he now experiences will never come to an end. Not God's gifts, but God himself has become his treasure. "Whom have I in heaven but you?" he cries, "And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you" (v. 25). Or, as Luther beautifully translated it, "As long as I have you, I wish for nothing else in heaven or on earth."

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How radically different this is from what he felt before! Then he was complaining about what he didn't have, fretting over the burdens he had to bear. Now he says that whatever else he has or doesn't have, the Lord is his portion. God is enough for him. No matter what comes, he can rejoice in that.

My flesh and my heart may fail [the most complete collapse imaginable], but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever! (v. 26)

I'm wondering if anything like this has happened to you. You've had your share of confusion about the apparent injustice of life, I'm sure. And like me, you may have felt twinges of bitterness. Maybe you doubt that it makes any sense to say, "Truly God is good to the upright." You've questioned more than once whether he was being very good to you. You can go along with the psalmist up to that point. But has the great change come yet? Do you look on yourself and those around you with new eyes because the living God has become your joy?

You say, "How does a thing like that happen? It hardly seems possible." Well, for the man who wrote this psalm, everything changed when he "went into the sanctuary of God." He entered the place of worship, came into the fellowship of God's people, and there he met the Lord. It wasn't that all his circumstances were suddenly altered, that everything started going right for him. He didn't have a great success story to tell. But God had become freshly real to him. And that made all the difference.

For Us Today

Do you know where this living, life-changing God meets people now? It may be in a church or in a chapel or right by your radio. God has come very near to us in his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus says to all the world,

I am the way . . . He that has seen me has seen the Father . . . No one comes to the Father except by me . . . I am the door . . . By me, if anyone enters in, he shall be saved. (John 14:6,9; 10:7-9)

If you will respond to his call, if you will put your trust in Jesus Christ as the Savior who died for you and rose again from the dead, you will find forgiveness and eternal life. And in Christ, together with others who believe, you will meet the living God. Oh, take that step today! Call on Christ now from your heart!

The place of revelation, the point of meeting, is his cross. That's the clue for me to life's mystery, the key that somehow unlocks its meaning. When I look at the world around me with its natural disasters, its heartless oppression, its terrible conflicts and tragic inequities, I'm utterly at a loss to understand it. I feel overwhelmed. Where is the God of love and justice in the midst of all this? But when I look at the suffering Savior, light dawns in my darkness. There on Golgotha, the worst crime of all was perpetrated, the most terrible injustice was done. But out of that, God somehow brought the very best—salvation for all who believe. There God took the sin and evil of the whole world upon his own heart and bore it away. That's how far his love was willing to go.

And when we trust in this crucified, risen One as our Lord and Savior, we find that he is enough for us. He never promised his followers wealth, ease or a trouble-free path. But he does say, "My grace is enough for you" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Do Christians sometimes forget and lapse back into their bitterness and grouching? Yes, they do, just as that man of faith did who wrote Psalm 73. But they can learn as he did to go back to the sanctuary, back to the place of prayer, back to the Word of the gospel, back to the hill called Calvary, to renew their

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING BITTER

vision of life and to meet again the Lord who is enough. Whatever comes, they learn to sing this:

Your gifts alone cannot suffice,
unless yourself be given.
Your presence makes my paradise,
and where you are is heaven.
—Charles Wesley

And that, friends, can take all the bitterness away.

Study Questions

- 1. What is there about life in this world that tends to make some of us feel bitter?*
- 2. What harmful effects can our bitterness have upon others? Upon us?*
- 3. How did going into God's sanctuary change the psalmist's feelings about godless people?*
- 4. What profound realization made him content with his lot?*

Chapter 6

WHEN YOU'RE SORELY TEMPTED

But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Genesis 39:8,9, RSV

A *wit once said that the only way to get rid of temptation is to give in to it. He was wrong. There is another way.*

THIS IS A STORY about someone who was tempted—tempted, in fact, to bed another man's wife. There's nothing unusual about that, I suppose. People are subjected to such pressures every day. What is out of the ordinary, perhaps, is the question this young man raised in response: "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (v. 9).

A Great Wickedness?

Does that sound old fashioned? In other ages, people were accustomed to that kind of language about adultery. Whatever the prevailing moral practice, it was agreed, in principle at least, that to cheat on one's marriage partner or to take the spouse of another was indeed a "great wickedness" and a "sin against God." At some times in some cultures, it has been viewed as the very worst of wrongs, the most scarlet, the most damnable of sins. Thus a certain mystique has built up around it, a certain forbidden intrigue. The guilty ones are roundly condemned but

perhaps secretly envied. The not-guilty or the undetected congratulate themselves that they are in the clear. And often, this verdict against adultery is pronounced by society without express reasons. It's just *wrong*, that's all. But we won't talk about *why*.

In reaction to that social taboo, it is argued by some in our time that extramarital liaisons are not really so bad. In a survey conducted among influential leaders in the mass media, it was found recently that 54 percent of those polled did not regard adultery as morally wrong. On a television talk show recently, the genial host and his featured guests discussed the fact that more and more married people are having sexual affairs with other partners. They viewed this trend with considerable humor and concluded that more people than ever these days were "having a good time." Their cheeriness seemed hardly affected by the calls that began to come in from viewers who related some of the suffering and unhappiness that had come from such adventures. For these media molders of opinion, apparently, the old negative rules are out. Maybe an occasional affair is a good thing for married folk, they suggest. It might even liven up and improve things with the spouse back home. Surely, they imply, no one takes "running around" very seriously any more. It's becoming almost an accepted part of life.

Where does the truth lie? Are there any abiding standards about sexual conduct? Are there reasons, in these days of "sexual liberation," for resisting the pressures all around us? Is there a case for marital fidelity?

The young man in the story I referred to was Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, the patriarch. You may remember how his brothers, filled with envy, had sold him into slavery. He found himself in Egypt as a household servant of Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph's gifts, his sense of responsibility and his evident strength of character rapidly won for him his master's full confidence. Before many months had passed, Potiphar had made him administrator of the entire household. And as Joseph was strikingly handsome, his attractiveness did not escape the notice of Potiphar's wife. At length, she tried to seduce him and he refused her. She would not be denied, however, and made repeated advances. Finally a crisis came. Her latest proposal spurned, she twisted the facts to make it appear that Joseph had tried to attack her. Potiphar, enraged, had him thrown in prison.

Surely the most significant feature of the whole narrative is this interchange between the woman and Joseph. When she cast her eyes upon him and said, "Lie with me," this was his answer: "Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:8,9)

Let's reflect on that. In our culture, sexual indulgence is rarely seen as "great wickedness," perhaps because sex itself is not viewed as a great mystery. Those who claim most loudly to exalt sex, to glamorize and glorify it, have actually done something quite different. They have trivialized it, robbed it of deep significance. Sex according to *Playboy* is merely a form of entertainment. It belongs in the category of recreation. "Don't let it get mixed up," we are warned, "with things like emotional involvement and long-term commitment. Don't take it too seriously. Just let it be casual fun."

But suppose that human life can't be compartmentalized in that way. Suppose that sexuality has to do with the center of our personal being. That's the view of the Bible. Sex is a mysterious, awesome gift. Our sexual nature makes possible the most intimate of human relationships, and the way we use it expresses the essence of our attitude toward other people. Whatever we do in this area has profound effects on our personhood and that of others. What you do with your sexuality is never a trifle.

For Joseph, to take his master's wife would have been a "great wickedness" because of the element of trust involved. "Lo," he says, "having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand," that is, "*He has put complete confidence in me. He has made me, a household slave, his equal in authority. How can I betray that kind of trust?*"

Marriage itself is a remarkable expression of trust, of commitment. That impresses me afresh every time I conduct a wedding ceremony or witness one. Here are two people, face to face, promising in the presence of God and of "significant others" in their lives to be true to one another. "I take you to be my wedded wife . . . my wedded husband . . . and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be your loving and faithful husband . . . your loving

and faithful wife . . . in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow as long as we both shall live.” And when you say words like those, someone else believes you, takes you at your word, and commits his or her life and happiness, possessions and person, to you. Is there any other situation in life where someone trusts you that profoundly? It’s well to ask when any temptation threatens the exclusiveness of that bond, “How can I do this great wickedness?” *Someone has placed in me the most complete trust. How can I betray that?*

Again, there are those to whom commitments seem insignificant. “Promises, like rules,” they say, “are meant to be broken.” They act as though no one should take their infidelity seriously, as though they can act unfaithfully and remain themselves unchanged. But that isn’t so. To betray a trust is not only a grievous injury to another. It is also a deadly blow to one’s own sense of self-worth. We human beings are the only creatures on this planet who make promises; we can pledge ourselves; we can commit ourselves. We become genuine persons in that kind of decision and covenant-making. Part of our unique glory and dignity as human beings lies in this faithfulness to those promises. We compromise something at the depths of our being when we break a significant pledge. It’s hard then to feel good about ourselves.

To cheat in a marriage is to choose failure in what was meant to be life’s closest, richest human relationship. It hastens and complicates that very failure. And the more we go back on our word, the harder and harder it becomes to maintain self-respect. Searching questions threaten us: “Is there any integrity about my life? Is there any point at which I can be depended on? Can anyone safely trust me?” The question of Joseph springs from a healthy self-esteem. “How can I do this great wickedness?”

But for Joseph, there is a deeper issue. “How can I do this great wickedness,” he asks, “and sin against God?” To be false to another person is to break faith with God. To be untrue to yourself is to dishonor him. In every part of our lives, we have to do ultimately with God. It’s his command that stands unchanged amid all the ups and downs of human opinion: “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). And there’s nothing arbitrary about such a law. It doesn’t represent a groundless whim on God’s part. That commandment, like all the others, is for our good always. Cheating in marriage is destructive to persons. If I engage in it, it

damages me. It hurts others, possibly many others. It threatens to destroy a relationship. That's why God hates it. God is on the side of love, on the side of people. Whatever damages love and devastates people, God hates.

Great Faithfulness

The God of the Bible, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, is the God of promise. Covenant is his idea. Faithfulness is what he pledges supremely to his people and what he asks of them in response. Fidelity may not be a high value in our society, but it is indescribably dear to God. Listen to his Word:

Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them about your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. (Proverbs 3:3)

Here's something, in other words, to be held onto, to be cherished, to be internalized.

God speaks in another of the Proverbs (20:6), "Most men will proclaim everyone his own goodness, but a faithful man who can find?" There's almost a wistfulness in that—the yearning search of God for trustworthiness in his people. Those who believe in him are called to be a people for his praise, to be those in whom his revealed character comes to expression. And nowhere is that likeness more fully shown than in covenant faithfulness, in loyal love.

Now it may be that you, listening to me right now, have come into the power of this temptation. You've been caught up in the spirit of this age and you've misused God's best gifts. Perhaps you have betrayed a trust and brought on the agony of a broken marriage. What does the Christian gospel say to you? It says—oh believe this!—that you can be forgiven. However grievously you have failed, God is ready and willing to receive you through his Son. Jesus Christ has died for all our sins. He can pardon; he can cleanse us. He can even restore our damaged personhood.

But more than that, where relationships have broken down, where coldness and distance have developed, he can bring warmth and closeness again. I heard a man say not long ago that all the marriages he knew of were sick and falling

apart. I listened to a young person who said much the same thing, adding that she never wanted to be married. But I know this: there is a transforming power in the gospel of Jesus Christ that can make marriages healthy.

That doesn't mean that all our marriages need is a little religion, as people say, and a few Bible verses. There may be deep and complex problems. There are often painful adjustments needed, help and insight to be gained, struggles and setbacks aplenty. But I know this: marriages can be built in which adultery doesn't occur, in which two persons make each other truly happy, in which they learn covenant faithfulness. Here's the key: Trust Jesus Christ with your whole life. Then, friends, in the face of every temptation, you can remember who you are and whose you are. You can ask Joseph's great question, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And you can join with it a heartfelt prayer, "Lord, teach me instead what it really means to love."

Study Questions

- 1. How has popular opinion about adultery undergone a change in recent years?*
- 2. Why is sexual indulgence taken lightly by many in our culture?*
- 3. Why did Joseph consider the proposed adultery on his part to be "great wickedness"?*
- 4. How can we find strength to resist temptation of all kinds?*

Chapter 7

WHEN YOU'RE ASHAMED

The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

Romans 10:11, RSV

*W*e've all felt ashamed at some time or other, sometimes by our own actions, sometimes by the actions of others, but we'd like you to know the joy and relief of being unashamed.

HERE IS A WORD of invigorating hope, a truth from God to live by: "All who trust in him shall be unashamed." Doesn't that lift your spirits, quicken courage? I get new strength from those words every time I come across them.

The apostle Paul has just been explaining the good news of Christ: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Then to drive home the point, to anchor the promise, he cites this mighty Old Testament assurance: "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." Or as I like to render it, "All who trust in him shall be unashamed."

That's what I'd like to be: unashamed. No one enjoys feelings of shame. Most of us try to avoid them at all costs. We don't relish embarrassment. We shrink from disgrace. To have a life free of shame—that sounds good, right?

Ashamed of What You've Done

Maybe you're struggling now with a sense of inner shame over something you've done. You've hurt someone you love—hurt them deeply. Now the damage is done and you can't reverse it. You're having a hard time living with yourself. You feel ashamed.

Or maybe you've betrayed a trust. An important person in your life had counted on you, believed in you, and you've let them down. Perhaps they don't even realize it yet, but it's eating away at you. How could I do such a thing? How could I be so false to him, to her, and to myself?

Sometimes we feel ashamed over what we haven't done. Someone in the family needed our help, wanted our support, but we were too preoccupied. We couldn't be bothered then. Now it's too late; we'll never get that chance again. We don't like to think about it. Every memory of our failure brings fresh shame. When a friend's reputation was at stake and you could have spoken in his defense, you were silent. When a sordid injustice was done and your influence might have prevented it, you feared the important people involved and you looked the other way. Now when the thought of that comes back to you, you feel the blood rushing to your face. Sometimes you're almost sick with the shame of it.

Now I'm not going to tell you that you shouldn't be ashamed. If we've sinned, if we've broken God's law, if we've turned our backs on him, if we've hurt people or failed them badly, shame is an appropriate response. In a strange way, it can be a message from God, a gift of grace. When we can sin brazenly, when we can share in ugly evils and feel no shame, something altogether tragic has happened to us. The most withering indictments that God delivered to his people through the prophets addressed that very hardness: they had forgotten how to blush. So calloused were they, so dull in conscience, so insensitive to the pain they had caused that they felt no shame at all. It is more painful, but more hopeful, too, to have an awakened conscience, to taste the bitterness of shame.

But remember, you're not meant to live with that, to carry it around all your days like a brand in the flesh. God doesn't want you to wallow in it indefinitely. Shame, like pain in our physical bodies, is a warning signal. It tells us that something has gone wrong; it alerts us to danger. It's the sign of an illness which cries out for attention and treatment.

Listen, friends, all who trust in him will be unashamed. The gospel of Jesus Christ has the remedy for what you're going through. Jesus Christ, God's own Son, died long ago for your sins. You wrestle with unresolved guilt, but his forgiveness can take it away. You feel soiled, but his poured-out life can cleanse all the stains. You're haunted by remorse, pursued by shame, but his mercy sets

you free and gives you a new beginning. No matter what you've done or failed to do, confess it all to him. Trust Christ as your redeemer and be at peace. Forgiven by him, you can forgive yourself now and leave the guilty past behind. It's a new day for you. All who trust in him shall be unashamed.

Ashamed of Yourself

But it may be today that you are ashamed about something that isn't sinful at all. You're ashamed of your appearance because you're overweight or have blemishes on your face. You're embarrassed about your height or afraid to smile because your teeth need straightening. None of this, of course, is your fault, but you still feel miserable about it, almost apologetic for being alive.

Some people are ashamed of their homes. They'd rather not have anyone come and visit them because their house is small, scantily furnished, or in a deteriorating neighborhood. If you drop in on them, they're immediately, painfully defensive. Where they live, what they have, seems to them so shabby and worthless.

We can be ashamed of the people close to us, our own family members. A husband doesn't take his wife out socially because he fears that his friends will find her unattractive or be amused at her talkativeness. Or a wife may never want the office staff to meet the plain-looking man she married. You've seen children who were ashamed of their parents, didn't want a visit from them during college years, resented being identified with them in any way. And perhaps you know parents who are always trying to keep their handicapped or troubled children out of sight lest they spoil the family's image in the community.

Some people feel overcome with shame if they fail an exam, if they lose a crucial ball game, if they're rejected by a lover. We may tell them that they shouldn't be ashamed, that it's not their fault, but the painful feelings linger. They feel marked by their circumstances and surroundings as inferior. They feel as though the whole world scorns them, so they reproach themselves. They can scarcely lift up their heads.

All of that, friends, is false shame, groundless self-despising, though it still can make us miserable. But here's the good news again: "All who trust in him

shall be unashamed.” That’s the way out. The Christian faith announces that God has created us and has said about his handiwork, “That’s good.” He has made me in his image, a creature of worth and dignity. He has given me his very best, his beloved Son, and welcomed me as one of his own children. I’m chosen; I’m loved; I’m his; my life matters.

How marvelously that kind of faith can buttress self-respect! I’m accepted just as I am. I’d like others to admire my appearance, appreciate my surroundings, respect my family and friends, but I’m not dependent on their approval for my right to exist. I am who I am, a person in my own right, and I don’t have to apologize for being me. If I trust in a Lord like Jesus, for whom every human life is precious, I can stand tall. I can live unashamed.

Put to Shame

But we still haven’t gotten to the main thrust of this remarkable promise. Up to now, we’ve been speaking about our *feelings* of shame, what goes on inside us because we’ve acted rottenly or because we don’t like something about ourselves. But shame is sometimes an objective thing, brought on us by others. Someone else puts you in an embarrassing position, exposes you to scorn and disgrace. Enemies hold you up to ridicule. However *you* may feel about it, they *put* you to shame.

Do you remember what happened to some of King David’s men when he sent them on a friendly mission to the Ammonites? Because the motives for this embassy were misunderstood, the Ammonite king “took David’s servants, shaved off half the beard of each, and cut off their garments in the middle, at their hips, and sent them away.” What a humiliation! They were put to an open shame. Sometimes when a king is defeated in battle, he’s forced to walk in chains behind the chariot of his conqueror or to eat scraps beneath his table. The once-proud monarch was shamed by the victors. That sort of thing happens today in political feuds. A newspaper editorial appears charging some respected public official with gross indecency. Whatever the man may have done or not done, that broadside attack “puts him to shame.”

The servants of God are by no means immune to such injury. In fact, they seem to get more than their share. I remember reading recently from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. Here was a prophet dedicated to God, intent on doing his will. He was bringing to his people an authentic message, with deep concern for their welfare. But for his effort, he got nothing but abuse. They called him a liar and a traitor. He was publicly scorned by the authorities and lowered into a well to wallow helplessly in the mire. His enemies did everything they could to discredit and disgrace him.

But even that treatment seems mild compared to what Christ received. He was preeminently the servant of the Lord. He was the beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased. He spoke nothing but truth, did nothing but good, trusted in God throughout his whole life. But who was ever put to more shame than he? He was accused and falsely convicted of lying and blasphemy. He was reviled, slapped, spit upon by those who professed to uphold justice. They put a purple robe on him, crowned him with a circlet of briars, and gave him mock worship. He was publicly executed by one of the most humiliating, horrible means ever devised. Not content with that, his enemies made fun of him while he suffered, wagging their heads in scorn.

Unashamed

How then can we understand this promise: “No one who believes in him will be put to shame”? Doesn’t that very thing happen to believers every day? Aren’t they put to shame? Didn’t it happen supremely to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith? Maybe you are tasting the bitterness of it right now, even though you’ve trusted in God and tried to do what’s right.

But this promise of God takes the long view. God doesn’t assure us that we will never meet with mockery and disgrace, that we will never be put to shame in the eyes of men. What he does pledge to us is that we will not *finally* be put to shame, not be disappointed in our hope. That’s what this word *put to shame* really means here: “disappointed.” Remember how the apostle Paul says in Romans, chapter 5: “Hope does not disappoint us”? It’s that same word: “Hope won’t put

us to shame.” If your trust is in God, he’ll see you through. He’ll not abandon you; he’ll not let you down.

Here’s the decisive question: Is the God made known in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus really Lord? Is his Word true, his salvation sure? Believers are always being badgered about that. When they pass through suffering, when their cause is unpopular, when the world jeers, the taunt comes, “Where is your God?” When a terrible thing happened once in the life of a young man in my first congregation, some of my people were asked the next day at work, “What do you think of your Jesus now?” And in the worst sufferings of our Lord, the question was raised whether God would stand by him. His murderers said, “He trusts in God. Let him deliver him now—if he wants him.”

But Jesus was not finally put to shame, was he? He wasn’t disappointed in his hope. As the writer to the Hebrews put it, Jesus “endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” God vindicated him. God raised him from the dead. God turned that cross, emblem of shame, into a throne of glory for his Son.

And that gives you a glimpse of what he will do for you. If you trust in God through Christ and commit your life unreservedly to him, you may be laughed at, you may be falsely accused, you may be publicly disgraced, but at the last, for having believed, you won’t be disappointed. When the dust settles, when the truth comes to light, when the books are opened at last, all who trust in him will be “unashamed.”

Study Questions

- 1. In what circumstances are feelings of shame appropriate?*
- 2. What kinds of things which aren’t really shameful sometimes make us feel ashamed?*
- 3. What does it mean to be “put to shame”?*
- 4. How does God’s promise in Romans 10:11 apply in all three cases?*

Chapter 8

WHEN YOU'RE TROUBLED BY ENVY

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

1 Corinthians 13:4, NIV

In the tragedy of Othello, Shakespeare referred to jealousy or envy as a “green-eyed monster.” Let’s think today about what God’s grace can do to tame that monster.

The Murderous Monster

LOTS OF US ARE BOTHERED by that ugly green-eyed monster. You know his name: E-N-V-Y — Envy.

Envy comes from a French word which means “to inspect or look on.” You might call it a certain way of looking at things, or especially at people. Webster defines it like this: “Painful or resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another, joined with a desire to possess the same advantage.” Notice the elements here: you become aware of someone else’s advantage, you want that gift, that goodie, for yourself, and then you feel pain and resentment. In other words, when you are envious, you notice things in others and you don’t like what you see. It seems to you that the other person’s advantage, quality, or benefit ought to be yours instead.

Now why do you suppose we call envy a “green-eyed monster”? The “green” part may come from something physiological. You’ve heard about someone turning “green with envy.” That actually happens—or almost. When people are filled with feelings of envy, it can affect the circulation of the blood. I’m told that it causes “peripheral contraction of the capillary arteries.” What about that? And

when those tubes contract, you get pale. And of course, when you get pale, you actually do begin to look a little green—green around the gills, as we say.

And why is envy a “monster”? Because of all the evils in life, there are few things as damaging to happiness, destructive to persons, and damning to the soul, as envy. For the person who experiences it, the envious one, it brings nothing but misery—absolutely nothing else. Other forms of sin may be equally “bad news” in the end but they at least bring a kind of temporary pleasure and satisfaction. The promiscuous must find some enjoyment in their affairs. The covetous get “kicks” from their wealth, I suppose, and the proudly ambitious feel elation when they become famous. But envy makes you feel miserable from the start and worse and worse as you go along. If it really gets a grip on you, it can squeeze the joy right out of your life.

But that’s not the whole story. Envy goes to work on the other person, too, and its effects are not pretty. At heart, envy is a killer. It goes right for the jugular vein in other people. Think, for example, about the first murder in history. What was behind it?

Two brothers, Cain and Abel, both bring an offering to the Lord. Abel’s offering is accepted; Cain’s is not. Cain sees this—both how Abel seems to be favored and he slighted. “He was angry,” we read, “and his countenance fell.” Maybe he had the first green complexion in history! God warned him to watch out for that attitude. But it wasn’t long before he took his brother out in the field and murdered him. That’s what envy did.

Remember King Saul, when young David began to win his victories on the battlefield? Saul became very uncomfortable. Then the young girls in Israel began to sing their hero songs. One popular number went like this: “Saul has made havoc of thousands, but David of ten thousands.” That was too much for the king. It kept eating away at his insides until one day he picked up a spear and tried to nail David to the wall. He missed, but Saul kept on trying to get rid of David for the rest of his own unhappy life. That’s what envy did to him.

Or what about King Herod, when he heard the news from the Magi that an infant king was to be born? “What?” he thought, “someone to be king, to take my place, to be considered greater than I? There’s no time to lose. I’ll kill off all possibilities of replacement, even if I have to butcher hundreds to get the right

one!” Well, his plan failed. But when others finally did murder that young king some years later, do you know how it happened?

The New Testament records that the religious leaders of the day delivered up Jesus to die—you guessed it—“out of *envy*.” Why?

Shakespeare’s worst villain, Iago, expressed it perfectly when he said this about a man he wanted to destroy, “He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.”

Who, Me?

Well, that’s the monster we’re talking about when we speak of envy. But what does that have to do with decent people like us, who surely wouldn’t do anyone harm? We don’t have any problem with this kind of thing, do we?

We’d like to think that we don’t. Envy is such an ugly, wretched thing, and is so universally despised, that no one wants to appear guilty of it. So when it crops up in us, we try hard to hide it from public view. We may even try to convince ourselves that it isn’t there.

After all, if I’m envious, it must mean that other people are somehow better off than I am. I’m obviously inferior. Then, on top of that, if people find out that I’m envious, I will seem to them a louse, a contemptible person. And if I have to face the fact that I’m envious, I’ll be so ashamed of myself that I’ll feel like so much garbage. So if there’s any envy in me, I’m likely to decide that no one is going to know about it.

We need help, then, to uncover this thing in ourselves, to see where it’s working on us. Actually, no one of us is immune to envy. And probably most of us have real struggles with it somewhere along the way.

To start the ball rolling in self-discovery, let me tell you how envy gets hold of my life. I discovered early that envy cropped up in me toward other people who were doing the same thing that I was doing, those with whom I was in some sense competing. The more important the activity was to me, the greater the problem I seemed to have. When I was going through high school, athletics were a big part of my life. I wanted to play first string in basketball, to be a starter, but it often seemed that I wasn’t quite making it. I was the first substitute. There was

one man ahead of me. I noticed that when he was in the game I sometimes found myself less than happy if he scored, if he played well. Now that's really bad, isn't it? After all, this is *our* team. Any loyal player ought to be pulling for our team, happy when anyone helps out, but I wasn't, at least not always. Of course, I didn't let anyone know that. I cheered. I said like the other guys, "Nice game, Joe." But I knew how I felt inside. And it sometimes bothered me.

Someone chuckles, "That's just an immature, childish trait." Maybe so, but I find it hard to shake even in my later years. When my sons participated in team sports, I sometimes felt the same pressures working on me. It's the day of the big game and some other boy is playing ahead of my son. Somehow I can't be as glad when he excels as I should. I'm envious. I seem to want that position, that opportunity for my son. And most coaches know what a problem such fathers can be!

But I have to fight this at a deeper level too. Now the thing I want to do most in my life is serve Christ, build up his church, make known his gospel. You would think that such an aim would free a person from unworthy, envious feelings. But I still struggle with them sometimes. Here's a servant of the Lord who's doing a far better job than I am. Maybe he's reaching more people, maybe his labors are more recognized than mine. Maybe he writes best-selling books that I wish I had written. Sometimes I envy that man. I can tell that, because when others praise him or point out his successes, I find myself feeling suddenly uncomfortable. Somehow I don't like it, and I don't like myself for not liking it. There I am, in the grip of the monster, in the envy trap.

Maybe you've been there, too. Whenever you're uneasy, unhappy at the gifts, success and prominence of others, you're in that battle. You may react in any of several ways. You may withdraw from that person, from mention of him, from reminders of him or her. You may come on very aggressively toward that person in attack or criticism. Or you may seek to undermine them in oblique, devious ways. But none of those things gets you out of the bind.

But if you can recognize that you're in it, that's a major gain. If you're willing to label it, you can confess it, and that's the first big step toward deliverance. When you've faced it, confessed it, you can begin to look at it honestly. Why do I feel that way? What's going on in me when I envy someone? Here's the truth

about it: envy is a dead giveaway that I have sold myself short. It shows a lack of appreciation for my own uniqueness and worth. When you envy, you don't even see yourself. The other person becomes all-important—his or her gifts, successes, achievements. You spend your energy watching him or her, being threatened by that person, not wanting them to succeed. So you don't develop your own potential. You feel more and more alone, humiliated, worthless, inclined to reject yourself.

Freed by Grace

Now bring the Lord and his grace into that picture. What difference can that make? As you come to Jesus Christ, trusting in him, he accepts you even though you may be full of envious feelings. He forgives you freely. But there's much more. His welcoming love helps you to see yourself as special. By his Spirit, he has given you unique gifts. You have something important to contribute. When you know that and when you're becoming able to use your gift, you won't be threatened by what others may have to give.

And suppose you can see the successes, the accomplishments, the victories of others as his gifts, too? That puts them in a different light. What an outlook John the Baptist had! When his followers were going over to Jesus and reports came of his friend's prominence and popularity, John gave this profound response: "A man can receive nothing unless it be given him from heaven." Pondering that led me into a rich experience a while ago. I tried to think of all the people I've been tempted to envy and began instead to thank the Lord for their gifts. It's difficult then to keep on envying them!

We Christians need to face this reality as we live in the fellowship of believers. Envy will always spring up where the gifts of some are not recognized, not seen as significant, not welcomed. One of our chief responsibilities is to call forth the gifts of others. We need to express our own gladly, of course, but to remember that our brothers and sisters have much to give, too.

"Love doesn't envy," writes Paul. No, when you know you're loved by God and you're becoming free to love yourself, you can begin to rejoice in God's gifts

to others. You can even do a very beautiful thing: you can *admire*. The church should be, in the best sense, a “mutual admiration society.”

Paul says in another of his letters that we aren't to envy each other or to provoke each other. We can fall into both sides of that trap. We can be eaten up with envy toward others, or we can so parade and publicize our own gifts and achievements that we tend to stir up the same evil in them. Both are “works of the flesh.” Both are injurious to the body of Christ.

Finally, then, what do we do about the green-eyed monster, envy? Number 1: recognize it, label it, confess it to God. Number 2: trust in the grace of God that accepts you in Jesus Christ and then express your unique gifts. And number 3: thank God for the gifts of others and do all you can to call them forth.

In other words, live out of Christ's love for you. Keep your eyes on the giving God and make it your aim to affirm other people. As you do, the green-eyed monster may still climb up on your shoulder at times and whisper in your ear. But you won't be feeding him much any more and pretty soon he may just shrivel up and blow away!

Study Questions

1. *What is it about envy that makes those who indulge in it so miserable?*
2. *Why is it so dangerous in human relationships?*
3. *Why are we so unwilling to recognize and confess it?*
4. *What does envy reveal about our attitudes toward ourselves?*
5. *What are some practical helps in dealing with it?*

Chapter 9

WHEN YOU FEEL FORSAKEN

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

Matthew 27:46, RSV

When Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he was all alone, but because he was abandoned by God, you never have to be.

The Worst Case

HAVE YOU EVER been forsaken? If there is a word more chilling than that, an experience more dismal, I don't know what it is. Forsaken. To be forsaken is to be deserted by others, abandoned, left completely alone. When people forsake you, they withdraw from you entirely. They have nothing more to do with you; they act as though you don't exist.

Feeling forsaken is worse than loneliness. There's the added pain of being deprived by another, almost betrayed. Someone has heartlessly let you down. Let's say you are in need or distress. You're counting on someone to be there, to stand by you, but he or she is nowhere to be found. Or someone promises to meet you in a strange place, amid pressing dangers, but doesn't appear. You feel doubly desolate for having been duped.

The closer the tie, the fuller the trust, the more crushing is the blow when we are forsaken. A soldier is utterly dismayed when a group of buddies in his platoon pull back to safety from their positions around him, leaving him all by himself, helplessly exposed to enemy fire. A husband can't get over it because his wife of 29 years suddenly leaves him when he's ill and out of a job. She goes to another city, another man, with scarcely a look backward. Or here's a mother with four

children whose husband leaves the country with a young woman half his age. Never a note, never a check, never even a goodbye; he simply forsakes his family. What a trauma for them!

In some cases, we can see the break coming for a long time. Relations are becoming strained, distance is developing. It's no great surprise when the colleague or partner finally moves away. It's when we have no warning that being forsaken perhaps hurts the worst.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony calls the wound inflicted on Caesar by Brutus "the unkindest cut of all." Caesar might have expected betrayal from some in his retinue, but never from this trusted friend. That came as a total shock. "Et tu, Brute?" — "You also, Brutus? You want to be rid of me just like all the rest?" That must have caused more pain than the dagger thrust. Life hardly seems worth living any more when the one you love best and rely on most suddenly proves false and forsakes you.

Have you ever felt that God was doing that to you? That's the ultimate forsakenness, isn't it? The Lord has become your refuge and your strength, your light and your salvation. You've put your whole trust in him; you've experienced his delivering power. You've found him adequate for all your needs. But it may be that now, in what you're going through at this moment, he seems to have abandoned you. You've had prayers answered in the past, but now nothing changes when you pray. It's as though God has turned a deaf ear to all your cries for help. Some loss, some tragedy, has devastated your life and shaken the very foundations of your faith. All sense of God's presence and comfort has left you. "Where were you, God, when this terrible thing happened to me? Why didn't you do something?" And the suffering goes on and on. "Where are you now, God? I'm your servant; I've put my life on the line for you. What's happened? Why are you suddenly so far away?"

Let me say to you as your friend and brother that many, many devout believers have felt as you do. I studied through the Scriptures some time ago, noting especially the anguished questions which God's people sometimes ask. Here are some of them:

Why do you stand afar off, O Lord? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? . . . How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? . . . You are the God in whom I take refuge. Why have you cast me off? . . . My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

You can identify with those feelings, can't you? You've been in that place. Maybe you are there today. Though you wouldn't come right out and say it to others, you desperately fear that it may be so: God has left you.

Jesus Was There

There is no part of our human experience into which Jesus Christ has more deeply entered than this one. He knew, just as we do, and more than any of us, what it is to be forsaken. Reflect on his career for a moment. Think about the townspeople with whom he grew up in Nazareth. They all loved him when he was a boy. He grew "in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man." He was one of their own. When his ministry had begun and he first visited their synagogue in Nazareth, "they all spoke well of him." But when he went on to tell of God's mercy to Gentiles, how God passed by the chosen people to show kindness to a widow from Sidon and a soldier from Syria, their attitudes changed. They were furious, ran him out of town, even tried to push him over a cliff. He was forsaken by his boyhood friends, by the villagers he had known for years.

At an early period in his travels, he was extremely popular. Great crowds flocked to hear him; many were eager to become his followers. But there came a time when large numbers of those would-be disciples "drew back and no longer went about with him." The Scriptures tell us that his own brothers did not believe in Jesus during those days. They not only declined to follow him; they sometimes impugned his motives and even suggested that he was out of his mind.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem at the climax of his ministry, great multitudes welcomed him there. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they cried. "Blessed is he

who comes in the name of the Lord!” Nothing was too much to do for him then. They scattered palm fronds in his path. They even laid down their garments to prepare the way for his royal entry. But only a few days later, some of those same people, when they could have spoken up in his favor, went along with the mob that screamed madly for his blood. When it came to a choice between Jesus and a rebel guilty of murder, they said, “Give us Barabbas!”

But then, of course, there were his twelve disciples, the inner circle of his followers. Surely he could count on them! They had promised to follow him even to death. But one of them sold him away to his enemies for a few silver coins. The most outspoken of them all, Simon Peter, denied with a volley of profanity that he had ever known Jesus. And all of them, when he was finally arrested, forsook him and ran away. So much for the disciples, his best friends! Was anyone ever more wretchedly abandoned than was Jesus?

But he had to endure something worse, immeasurably worse. It came upon him palpably, terribly in the Garden of Gethsemane. The disciples saw how troubled he was, how overwhelmed with a kind of anguish. “My soul is exceeding sorrowful,” he said, “even unto death” (Matt. 26:38, KJV). With his sweat like great drops of blood, he fell on the ground and prayed that some mysterious “cup” might pass away from him, that he might not have to drink it.

What was it that so convulsed him, that filled him with such horror? Was he afraid to die? No, he had known since early in his ministry that an untimely death awaited him. Was the coming ordeal of crucifixion too much to face? No, he had been ready for a long time to face shame, rejection, and agony. He marched toward it, face set like a flint. He strode out to meet his captors when they came to arrest him. He refused to call on the hosts of heaven for help or deliverance. He never showed the slightest trace of fear about what any man or men could do to him.

No, the cup must have been something else, something more, something no one else had ever confronted. It was Jesus’ portion to bear our sins, to suffer what was due to us, to be, as the Scriptures startlingly relate, “made sin for us.” In that cup was the judgment of a holy God against moral evil. To drink it was to taste of hell, of banishment from God’s presence. That dreadful reality brought forth Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There

on Golgotha, while the skies grew black, a deeper darkness came over Jesus. As he bore our sins in his own body on the cross, it was as though a shadow passed between him and his Father's face.

Never had Jesus felt that before. The joy of his entire life had been this: "The Father is with me; he has not left me alone." But now, abandoned by fickle crowds, scorned by his nation, betrayed and denied by close friends, Jesus, identified with sinners, felt himself forsaken by God.

Hope for Us

Do you know what that can mean for your faith, for your life? Let me tell you what it means for me. When I hear Jesus cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I know that he is a brother to us all. He has shared our human lot. He has been where we have been, felt what we have felt. He, the risen, living one, is not remote from our struggles, our agonizing questions. He can sympathize with us. He understands.

But more, when I hear that cry of dereliction, I remember that he stood in my place, carried my burden, paid my debt. "Surely," sings the prophet, "he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; . . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:4-6). Jesus is my sin-bearer, the one who was condemned for me.

But last and best of all, his forsakenness means that I, with all who believe in him, will never be abandoned by God. That is the great exchange, friends. He is condemned so that I can be forgiven. He dies that I may live. He drinks to its dregs the bitter cup so that I may take from his pierced hands a cup of salvation. As an old communion liturgy puts it, "He cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' so that we might be accepted by God and never be forsaken of him."

That doesn't mean that we will never *feel* abandoned any more, that it will never *seem* to us that God is absent. Experiences like that have come to God's choicest saints and still come today. We may still cry out in our darkest hours,

“Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” But because of Good Friday, because of Christ forsaken for us, even our “whys” are addressed to the one we still call, “My God, my God.” Through Jesus, he is *our* God, *our* Father, now and always. That’s his pledge. Hear the promise again in these words of a great hymn:

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to His foes.
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!*

Study Questions

1. *How is the feeling of being forsaken worse than loneliness?*
2. *Discuss the various ways in which people come to feel forsaken.*
3. *In what sense did Jesus suffer forsakenness more than any of us?*
4. *What great comfort can believers draw from that?*

Chapter 10

WHEN YOU'VE LOST HOPE

But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened.

Luke 24:21, RSV

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

1 Peter 1:3, RSV

When hope dies in a person's life, it takes a miracle to revive it, but the good news is our God is good at miracles.

When Hope Dies

I SPEAK TO YOU who may have lost hope or who are struggling to hold onto it. How many people are suffering in that way! We get their letters here at *Words of Hope* almost every day. A man and his wife have both been out of a job for a year and see no prospects of finding one. A young woman yearns to be married but finds nothing but disappointment in her relationships with men. Someone in a nursing home fears that there is no future for him, for her, and has all but given up.

Multitudes have that kind of outlook about the wider world in which we all live. Can we hope for peace on a planet torn by ethnic strife? Is there any way out of the economic woes besetting many nations? Will there be enough to go around on this planet with a growing population and dwindling resources? Many take a

gloomy view of all that. Even Americans, long known as an optimistic people, are not so cheerful now about what's ahead. For some years, most U.S. citizens have no longer believed, as once they did, that the future will be better or brighter than the past. It's no exaggeration to say that hope, on a world-wide scale, is in decline.

Something we had hoped for, longed for, hasn't materialized. Some cherished dream hasn't come true. Someone we had put confidence in hasn't come through for us. The years are passing and hope is fast ebbing away.

Perhaps for you there has been a succession of failures and disillusionments. In some part of your life that's deeply important to you, you simply aren't making it. The closest relationships you've had, the ties that gave stability and meaning to your life, seem to be coming apart. That project over which you planned and toiled for so long isn't going anywhere. You're finding how true the old proverb is that "Hope deferred makes the heart sick."

And what a sickness that is! When hope fails, we become vulnerable to a thousand ills that wouldn't otherwise hurt us. I was talking to a surgeon friend of mine not long ago about his work. It is his policy not to operate on any patient who doesn't think he will survive the surgery. Even if the operation is minor, a relatively safe procedure, this doctor will cancel it or at least postpone it until some degree of confidence is evident. Hopelessness, he believes, takes more toll on life than most of us will ever know.

And not only that. While we are alive, think how it incapacitates us. My wife has worked for many years with disadvantaged young people: the physically handicapped, the mentally retarded or impaired, and the culturally deprived. Most of these young people have had numerous difficulties and setbacks in school. Repeated frustrations have fixed in many the notion that they just can't learn. When a new problem is set before them or a new skill to be mastered, they won't even try. If they have a spark of hope, they'll put forth the effort that makes success possible. But as long as they think it's no use, they'll just sit there, heads down, and do nothing.

All of us are like them in that. When we face problems that seem too massive, too complex, we throw up our hands. Take world hunger, for example. Everyone agrees that food surpluses are alarmingly low. Provisions are scarce in many parts

of the world. Hunger, malnutrition, starvation are monstrous realities in our time. Some analysts have said that the situation is hopeless. We'll have to write off vast areas of the world, multiplied millions of people. That is a tragic, crippling attitude. A conviction that the plight of the needy can't be changed cuts the nerve of all effort to help them.

Further, hopelessness as a disease of the human spirit, is terribly hard to cure. You may have discovered that if you have cared for or worked with those who lose heart. The sickness hangs on tenaciously. Its victims almost seem to resist hope. They repel any effort at encouragement with a barrage of reasons why nothing can possibly work out well. It almost seems that they don't *want* to look at things more optimistically, that they are determined to despair. It's probably more accurate, however, to say that they are *afraid* to hope. They've been disappointed so many times that they can't cope with another letdown. Their defenses against hopefulness are strong and high. So they live behind those walls, permanently trapped, it seems, in their own misery.

When I think of people who have lost hope, for whom all the brightest days seem past, I think especially of Jesus' followers after he had been crucified. Two of them, walking together toward a town called Emmaus, spoke eloquently for all the rest, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." That was their story, "We *had* hoped"—past tense. "We don't expect it *now*, but once we did. We had it, this thing called hope, but now it's gone."

Try to put yourself in their place for a moment. On Palm Sunday, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph. Multitudes had greeted him with joy, strewing palm branches before him, spreading their cloaks on the ground to prepare his way. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" they cried, "Hosanna in the highest!" It seemed now that Israel's long-awaited king, Savior of his people, had come. During the week that followed, those hopes were tested and assailed. On Good Friday, they were crushed. Jesus, having been arrested, tried, and subjected to the worst torments, gave up his life on a Roman cross. The one in whom these disciples had invested their lives, in whom they had set their hopes, was dead.

And they, all of them, were heartsick, dying of hopelessness. They feared for their safety. They huddled behind locked doors. They seemed numb, helpless to do anything. And talk about resisting encouragement—they did. It took a great

deal for those men to believe that anything could turn out happily again. Who was ever more stubborn in refusing to hope than the man we call “doubting Thomas”?

But one of them, Simon Peter, actually lived to write these words: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope.” “May God be praised,” he sings. “He has given us a brand new start. He has filled our hearts with undying hope.” How, Peter? “Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

How it Comes to Life

Let’s trace this amazing change in these first Christians. How did they pass from despair to joyous confidence? From dead dreams to a living hope? There may be some clues here for us in our struggles today.

What happened to these two men on the road to Emmaus? What stages did they go through in recovering their hope? First, they got around to doing something, even if it was just taking a walk, getting some fresh air, heading back home. We need that when we’re hurting and our dreams have been smashed. When the first shock subsides, it helps to look at our options. When a cherished loved one is gone, there are still some places we can go, some people to whom we can relate, something to spend our time on. Healing can sometimes begin if we can get ourselves moving even a little bit. No matter what it is, just starting it can help. Get yourself up and start walking.

Second, people can help a lot. Those disciples, most of them at least, had the good sense to stay together when the blow fell. They didn’t wander off, each man on his own. Yes, they locked themselves in a room, fearful and dejected, but they stayed together. When these two men headed for Emmaus, they went side by side. They didn’t have happy things to celebrate, but at least they could talk. They could share their confusion and pain.

If you are battling discouragement, struggling to hold onto hope, don’t isolate yourself. You may not feel like being with people. It may look better to you to wander off, to suffer through it alone, but it isn’t. You need people. You need their companionship. You need their support. You need their listening ear. Sometimes you need them to believe for you when you can’t trust anymore, to

hope for you when your hopes have died. You need them most of all just to be with you through it.

And if you're trying to help someone who has lost hope, remember that that's what they need. Don't make the mistake I've often made of trying to cheer people up quickly, to make them be hopeful. If they are deeply troubled, if their hopes have really been shattered, that's not going to help. It can make their burden even heavier. When we pressure the disconsolate, when we push them to be hopeful, as though they could just "snap out of it" right away, they are put off. It seems to them that we aren't taking seriously their dismal prospects, that we're making light of what to them is terribly serious. Our well-meant efforts at encouragement may come across as heavy expectation, as our insisting that they be different.

Instead, let's just be there with them. Let's love them by listening, by accepting what it is that they feel. There'll be time later to reassure, to express our confidence that things can get better. But our best gift to the acutely despairing is not words, but simply presence.

Then there is the role of Scripture, the resource of the Bible. When Jesus, unrecognized, met these Emmaus travelers, he first listened to them, drew them out, then "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things about himself." As they later recalled the experience, they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" These Scriptures have more than once lighted a fire of hope in the hearts of discouraged people. You may not have much appetite for the Bible. You may doubt that there's anything there that can be of help to you, but you could be wrong on that. Let yourself be exposed to the Bible. Your faith may seem dead as you read, but that Word has power to make it live again.

But the heart of what we need when our hopes are dashed is to meet the living Lord himself. That's what made the difference for those two on the Emmaus road. Activity, companionship, the Scriptures, those were all a part of it. But it was when their eyes were opened to recognize Jesus, alive and present with them, that hope flamed up again.

What does it mean that Christ is risen from the dead? It means surely that he is all he claimed to be, the Son of God, the world's one Savior, King of kings and

Lord of lords. It means that forgiveness is real and death is robbed of all its terrors. But it means also that you can be raised again *now* to a life full of hope! The resurrection is the sign, friends, that God's purpose of love is going to win in this world. His kingdom of truth will yet prevail in spite of everything. When Christ came forth from the tomb at daybreak on Easter, hope for the whole world came with him. God has the last word. He takes the worst evil people do, transforms it, and makes it serve his loving purpose. And he does that not just on a world scale but for one weary struggler, for another sick with hopelessness, for ordinary people like you and me.

I pray that you will meet this risen Lord and see him with eyes of faith anew, or for the first time, today. We his people can try to provide a supportive fellowship. We can share with you the Scriptures. But it takes the Lord's own power to revive your heart and your withered hopes. Look to him, the living Jesus. Call on him now, commit yourself to him, live in communion with him. Then this can be your song, too: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Study Questions

1. *What are the tragic results of our losing hope?*
2. *What hopes of Jesus' followers seemed to die with their Master?*
3. *What role can other people play in the restoration of our hopes?*
4. *How does God impart to us what Peter calls "a living hope"?*

Chapter 11

WHEN YOU'RE BORED WITH LIFE

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:17, RSV

This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24, RSV

When you're bored with life, everything seems like a drag. But boredom can be a blessing if it gets us looking in the right direction.

I AM SPEAKING TODAY to you who at times, or perhaps right now, are just plain bored with life. You know the symptoms of that. You hardly feel like getting out of bed in the morning. Time hangs heavy on your hands. You have no zest; you can't think of a single prospect that excites your interest or even sounds pleasurable. The color has gone out of your days; everything seems a dull gray.

Why We're Bored

Why are people bored? Some of the reasons are obvious. You've been ill, beset by infirmities or perhaps confined in a prison. Your activities are limited, to say the least. And there doesn't seem to be much that you *can* do even if you wanted to. In a nursing home or a jail, it's not surprising that you begin to feel restless, that apathy grows.

Maybe your job seems stifling. You go through the same petty routines every day, and you feel like you're dying inside. Your potential isn't being realized; your gifts aren't being used. You still go through the motions, you put in your time, but you hate what you're doing. You feel that your spirit is stagnating right there on the job.

Some of you, oddly enough, are wishing you had a chance at that very rat-race again. You've found that if work is a drag, it's even more boring to be out of a job. You thought your days were long then; they seem endless now. You're sick of sitting around, fed up with television, cross with everybody, restless and miserable.

Those aren't the only causes of boredom, are they? You don't have to go to dreary institutions, to assembly lines, or the homes of the jobless to find it. It can haunt you at banquets and board meetings, in a palace or an executive suite. In fact, the man who has written most searchingly about life's weariness and staleness was a wealthy king in ancient Jerusalem. Listen to his complaint: "So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind." Think of it: he had riches, many sources of stimulation, limitless opportunities to be creative, but it all came to taste like sawdust in his mouth. The man who seemed to have everything moans, "I hated life." He was searching, as much as anyone ever did, for what dispels boredom. He wanted desperately to find meaning in his life, adventure, fulfillment. And he had, more than most of us, the time, energy, and means to pursue all that. But every promising avenue he explored led at last to disappointment.

Maybe knowledge is what I'm after, he thought. Maybe wisdom is the road to the good life. Listen:

"I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." But afterwards, he said to himself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind."

Eccl. 1:13

Those who look for the meaning of life in increased knowledge sooner or later make an unsettling discovery. Did you ever dig out an old jigsaw puzzle and apply yourself to assembling it again? At first, you're caught up in the project, fascinated by it. But when you're about the half-way mark, you notice something that cuts the nerve of effort. A number of the pieces are missing! You aren't going to be able to finish the job after all. Somewhere, somehow, vital parts of the picture have been lost. After all your effort, you still can't put everything together. Just so, the final answers to our deep questions seem to elude us, the keys to life's mystery. However much we learn in books and classrooms and laboratories, something to tie it all together is always missing.

Now the king took a different tack. "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure. Enjoy yourself.' But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, 'It is mad' and of pleasure, 'What use is it?'" This is a boredom, a drooping of spirits, which many have experienced. After the revels, after the merriment, then the letdown. The more we seek to serve the appetites, the more satisfaction seems to recede. It's a kind of law of diminishing returns. "Pleasures are like the poppies spread. You seize the flower; its bloom is shed." To make diversion the goal of life, to try to escape boredom that way, seems to be self-defeating. The pleasure addict can't escape the "morning after," the backwash of excess, the jadedness of overstimulation.

Again, he thought, maybe if I can be creative, I can find what I'm searching for; if I can give myself to the arts, if I can shape the culture around me. Listen again:

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I got singers, both men and women. (2:4-8)

But even that didn't do it. Gazing out over his impressive handiwork didn't satisfy his heart.

I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (2:11)

So you may have established a business. You've built an enterprise. You've made your mark. No one doubts that you are an important, influential person. The fruit of your labor, the output of your life, is there for all to see. But comes the quiet hour of reflection and self-questioning. "In this, have I reached life's goal? Have I won its true prize? Is what I have done worth the toil and trouble of it? What keeps all of this from being at the last 'vanity and a striving after wind'?"

For all of us, whatever our circumstances, whenever boredom troubles us, the anxious question surfaces, "Is this all there is? Is there nothing more to life? Is this the best it has to offer?" Do you remember that plaintive song from back in the sixties, "If that's all there is"? "If that's all there is, my friends, let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is." Boredom comes to all of us, emptiness, when we try to find it *all* here and now and discover that we can't. Nothing in this world does it. There has to be, we tell ourselves, something more.

What We're Missing

Can it be that boredom is a blessing in disguise? Is it a whisper from beyond that we're on the wrong track? Is it a pointer to that "something more"?

This king in Jerusalem, the one who gave us the book called *Ecclesiastes*, was not really as cynical as he sounds. He wrote this because he had actually found what gives life meaning and wanted to share it. But first, he had to shoot down our false expectations. He had to show us that whatever we do and wherever we search, we won't escape meaninglessness, we won't be freed from boredom, without the living God.

The pursuit of knowledge, of wisdom, is a noble quest. It answers to a yearning placed within us by God himself. It turns to ashes only when we leave him out of it. True wisdom begins with "the fear of the Lord," with taking him into account, knowing that we have to do with him. Knowledge starts with listening to what he has revealed, building on the foundation of his truth.

We humans could establish a valid, systematic world-view only if we occupied the center of things, from which we could survey the whole and see it in its true proportions. But that is the place of the Creator, not the creatures. From our position under the sun we see only the outskirts of his ways, the reverse side of the tapestry he's weaving. When we try to interpret it from our standpoint, we never see it all. We may even miss the main design and fail to understand what it all means. For our search, we need his perspective, or as John Calvin once put it, "the spectacles of the Scriptures." "In thy light," says the psalmist, "we see light."

What about this quest for pleasure, for satisfaction, the craving in our hearts for laughter? Nothing wrong with that. God made us seekers for happiness. This so-called cynic in Ecclesiastes saw that. "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also I saw as from the hand of God. But apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" That's the question without an answer. "Apart from him," who can? He made all the pleasures there are. He gave to them whatever power to satisfy they may have. They pall on us only when we expect from them more than they can give, when we make of them substitute "gods." For lasting pleasure, abiding joy, we need above all *thankfulness*, a recognition of the Giver in the gift.

What about the urge to be creative? Again, that's one of God's best gifts, one of the signs that we are made in his image. It's only when we glory in our handiwork as though it were a tribute to our own greatness, only when we forget that we are co-creators with him, that our work loses meaning. Fulfillment comes not only when we make use of all our powers but when we direct them toward something higher than our own security and advantage.

The way out of boredom, friends, is to accept all of life as a gift from God and to live it in fellowship with him. Here's one of the most marvelous challenges I know to that boredom-free life. Listen: it's from Psalm 118, verse 24: "This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Life comes from God, not just as a large general gift, but in day-sized packages. Wherever you are right now and whatever may be your situation, this day of experience comes to you fresh and unique from God's hand. Whether you're behind prison bars or in a wheelchair, in an office or on a throne, what can redeem the day from emptiness is for you to lift your heart in it to God the Giver, to welcome it as from him and

to walk through it in his fellowship. And because he makes our day, it's possible for us even in the most limited circumstances, amid the most humdrum routines, to live it with zest.

I suppose the deepest cause of emptiness in our lives and the final threat to meaning is the prospect of death. The king in Ecclesiastes saw that clearly. "The wise man has eyes in his head but the fool walks in darkness, and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them . . . For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten . . . The wise man dies just like the fool." It was after remembering that that he said, "So I hated life." But before his book was done, there was given him a glimpse of a great hope. "I know that it will be well with those who fear God."

In that, he saw a glint of resurrection. That's what the psalmist saw too. "The stone which the builders rejected" would become "the head of the corner." God's purpose of love in this world would triumph. The coming One, the Messiah, would conquer death. The last great enemy, the power that seemed to rob life of joy and meaning, would be completely overcome.

That has happened, friends, in Jesus Christ. In him, crucified for us and risen from the dead, God has ushered in a new age; he has created a new day. Those who trust in Jesus, who make him their treasure, partake now of eternal life. They taste already the coming gladness. And that makes the present moment, however tedious, bearable—even lights it up with adventure. He is *for* us. He is *with* us, now and forever. What a great message! "This is the day which the Lord had made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

Study Questions

1. *What, in your experience, most easily leads to boredom?*
2. *Why does the quest for knowledge sometimes prove unsatisfying?*
3. *In what sense can boredom be a "blessing in disguise"?*
4. *What did the psalmist find as "the way out," the antidote to listlessness?*

Chapter 12

WHEN YOU'RE WORN OUT

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30, RSV

A n old Christian hymn asks the question, “Are you weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?” What really makes you weary and what brings you rest is what we want to consider today.

WHAT A WORD we have for you today! “Come to me,” Jesus said, “all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Or again, “Come to me, all you toiling and burdened ones, and I will refresh you.” Those may be the most familiar words that Jesus ever spoke—and the most astonishing. Here’s a young man, just past 30, with little experience of life. He has no academic credentials; he has never even attended a school of the rabbis. And as far as political clout is concerned, he’s a nobody of the nobodies, a peasant from the back-woods of a little nation enslaved to Rome. But he says to every weary struggler who will listen, “I’ll take your tiredness away; I’ll restore your soul.”

To me there’s something awesome about that. If anyone else had made such a claim, we’d be inclined to scoff or smile indulgently, “Come on now, who do you think you are, anyway?” But from Jesus, it somehow seems believable, appropriate. Even the mockers of the world hesitate to make fun of this invitation. All of us are somehow enchanted by it, haunted by its music. It has come to me with awakening freshness just now.

Who Are the Weary Ones?

To whom was Jesus speaking? Who are the “toiling, burdened ones”? Are they the hard workers who labor through the heat of the day and can barely drag themselves home at nightfall? Hardly. No one needs a prophet, a Savior, a religious experience to relieve that kind of tiredness. No, a hot meal and a good night’s rest will make them as fit as ever for a new day.

And though he is the Great Physician, Jesus is not principally calling here those who have been debilitated by some bodily illness. Many who are so wearied and weakened that they can scarcely move simply need for restoration medical care or extended bed rest.

The weariness to which Jesus speaks is something deep-seated, something chronic. You don’t get over it by taking a pill or a stroll or even a vacation. Most of the fatigue we feel, friends, comes not from overexertion or disease but from distress in the depths of our life.

We’ve all had the experience of feeling tired when there seems to be no reason for it. You’ve gotten enough sleep lately; your recent medical checkup shows no serious problems. But you feel oppressed in spirit, as though you were laboring under a great burden. Life seems to you a weary business. Sometimes it’s not so much our work that makes us tired as the people we have to deal with on the job. The interpersonal tensions, the petty disagreements, the gossiping and cutting remarks wear us down.

Maybe part of the picture is that you are bottling up your feelings inside. You’re angry enough to scream or throw things, but you don’t dare to do either. You go on taking the abuse, enduring the circumstances every day, but you never let people know how you feel. And you wonder why you’re so tired all the time. You’re spending most of your energy trying to keep the lid on those feelings of yours.

Or think how weary you get when you have nothing to do. Have you ever thought about what a heavy burden enforced idleness is? Unemployment, inactivity, staring vacantly at a television set, can be more exhausting than digging ditches.

Some people are weary of the same old round of things, burdened with a sense of monotony and emptiness. Some are tired even in the midst of their gadgets and pleasures, feeling a strange heaviness. I know friends who are weary of struggling to live up to someone else's expectations. They feel oppressed with a sense of failure and worthlessness. Others are struggling to break free from the oppressive power of some evil they may have toyed with in the past. They feel crushed by shame and guilt. And how many frustrated, anxious ones seem, Atlas-like, to be carrying the whole world on their shoulders? The causes for soul weariness seem to be legion, but they all are warning signals that something may be profoundly wrong, something out of order within us.

Jesus was addressing people to whom, of all things, *religion* had become a burden. The scholars of his day had identified and classified some 613 commandments from the sacred writings; 246 positive and 367 negative. Not only that, but their scribes and teachers had hedged each of these about with numerous others. There were elaborate dietary laws, complicated washing routines, minute prescriptions for Sabbath observance, as well as various sacrifices to be offered, and fasts to be kept. People were taught that if they wanted to be truly religious and to enjoy the favor of God, their hope lay in obedience to all of these. But what a formidable task that was! One had to be a scholar even to know what the requirements were. Trying to keep them all was bewildering and burdensome.

These people were struggling to resolve a serious problem. Something *has* gone wrong between all of us and God. We've alienated ourselves from the one who made us and gave us all we have. And because we've shut him out, life somehow doesn't work right for us. Even in our times of health and affluence, we find ourselves restless. In the best of circumstances, we grope vainly for peace of mind.

Now a religious system that is almost all demand, all expectation, makes things worse. When we try to set matters right from our side, to remove this basic disharmony by our efforts, we meet with no end of frustration.

Imagine how you would feel if you really believed this—to be accepted with God and have peace with him you must perfectly keep 613 commandments! You know that you've broken scores of them already. Some of the rest seem to you impossible to live by. And you may be violating some of them right now without

even knowing it! You feel like saying, “What’s the use? I’ll never make it. I’m not even going to try.”

What Is this “Rest”?

It was to such weary ones that Jesus offered rest. Or, as we could better translate the word, “refreshment.” Though he ministered to all kinds of people, there was one group that he especially sought: the religious dropouts of his day. He became known as the “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19). He announced that he had not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He went to the homes of the most despised, and ate at their tables. And to those who knew they weren’t making it, who were weighted down with guilt and shame, he promised this relief.

Do you know what was involved in that? Jesus’ coming to such people, befriending them, dining at their banquets, seeking them to do them good, communicated God’s unconditional love. Society had frowned on them; the so-called religious had viewed them with contempt, but here was someone who went out of his way to seek them and save them. In Jesus, they encountered a love that valued and wanted them in spite of everything. What is so refreshing as to find that you’re loved by the God you thought had written you off!

And then there was forgiveness. They heard it from Jesus’ lips over and over again. “My son, your sins are forgiven . . . Neither do I condemn you . . . Go and do not sin again” (Mark 2:9, John 8:11). He seemed to be saying, “It doesn’t matter how far you have strayed or how many of the commandments you’ve broken. The miracle of forgiveness is now available.” Anyone who turns to God and calls on him for mercy can be freely justified, completely accepted. What can cheer the spirit and renew the heart like that—all the old debts canceled, the burden lifted forever? There is indescribable rest in knowing that your acceptance with God doesn’t depend on your performance but on his forgiving mercy. Jesus promised that gift to people while he lived and then died to make it theirs.

But along with forgiveness, he promised life. Not only were all the debts paid, all the barriers removed. They could taste something of heaven now. What Jesus offered was like an oasis in the desert for weary travelers. It was in his own

words, “a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Jesus promised a refreshment now that would never end.

To receive it all, they needed only to come to him. He himself was what people needed. His gift was not primarily a teaching, a religious ritual or an experience, but his own person. If people wanted to be warmed by God’s love, forgiven freely, and given a new start, they needed simply to hear the call of Jesus and put their trust in him.

It’s so absurdly simple, isn’t it? Just rely on what he says. Just turn toward him, move in his direction. Invite him into your life. Just receive his gift. “Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus I come to Thee.”

But wait, he goes on to describe more fully what will be involved. “Take my yoke upon you” (Matt. 11:28). “Wait a minute,” you say. “Isn’t that what I just got rid of? I came to Christ to get my burdens lifted. You mean I have to bear a *yoke*? That sounds like responsibility. That sounds like work.” You’re right. But there’s all the difference in the world between working to win God’s favor and working because it’s already yours. One is a grim service of guilt. The other is gladness because it’s gratitude. Jesus said it, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (v. 30). To believe in him—make no mistake about that—is to take on ourselves the yoke of his lordship. We don’t belong to ourselves any longer, but to him. But it is no dreary burden, friends, to serve a Master who loves you and gave himself for you.

Learning from Jesus

Jesus says finally, “Learn from me.” It’s the verb-root from which we get our word *disciple*. When Jesus calls us to himself, it’s not for one saving encounter but for an ongoing relationship. We experience the liberation and refreshment he promised in a life of fellowship with him. The yoke we bear he describes as *his* yoke, the one he is carrying. We walk under it side by side with him. And now all of life is to be one long process in which we learn from Jesus.

How does that happen? Basic to the whole enterprise is his Word, “If you continue in my Word,” he says, “then you are my disciples indeed and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). He wants us to

continue in his Word. That's what it means to be a learner. We aren't merely to hear at the outset but to keep listening to what he has to say to us, keep thinking about, dwelling upon, his Word. There's no substitute for regular exposure to the word he gives us in Holy Scripture. We listen also to what he may be saying to us through other persons, our family members, our fellow workers and friends. We listen for his message in what's happening in our world—in the turmoil of the evening news or the agonies of a daily newspaper. We listen as we daily spread our lives out before him, open to his direction, to whatever change he wants to bring about.

There's a certain irony in being a preacher. You're always telling other people what *you* really need to hear. How many times, as I try to prepare a message, I feel weary and burdened. I have things I want to get done—for God, I think. But often I don't make much headway. I set a schedule for myself, a timetable, and I'm not meeting it. I feel self-condemned, unaccountably tired.

Then I come back to this text, and it seems as if I'm the one Jesus had in mind, "Lord, I'm the one, trying to make it on my own, and frustrated. I'm the one, thinking I have to earn my way by performance. I come afresh to you and trust you to take my self-imposed burdens away. I come to put myself under your yoke, to listen, to learn. And I trust you for rest." Suddenly, for me, the old text becomes fresh and wonderful again. So I pass it on to you, this matchless word of Jesus: "Come to me, all you toiling, burdened ones, and I will refresh you."

Study Questions

1. *What kind of weariness does Jesus offer to relieve?*
2. *In what sense can "religion" become an oppressive burden?*
3. *What benefits does Jesus offer to the heavy laden?*
4. *Discuss what seems to be involved in "coming" to him.*

Chapter 13

WHEN YOU'RE GRIEVING

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

1 Thessalonians 4:13, RSV

TODAY I WANT TO TALK about grieving and the difference it makes in our grief when we have hope. I speak of this as a preacher of the gospel, as a friend of many who grieve, and as one who has sometimes walked through that valley myself. The biblical word comes from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 4, verse 13:

We would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

We All Grieve

Grief, if we live for very long, visits all of us. It knocks at our door whenever we experience a loss. Your dog, tail-wagging companion of countless happy hours, wanders off one day and never returns. One of your best friends moves to a distant city and you lose contact. You've had a good job, but now you've been let go. You sorely miss what you've lost, and by whatever name you call it, you're grieving.

Maybe you've been deprived of your sight. Maybe your family ties have been broken by separation or divorce. Maybe you've had a limb amputated or suffered a disabling injury. You've had to give up some activities that gave you great pleasure. Someone you trusted has turned against you, has almost become your

enemy. Or maybe you've been required to move away from familiar surroundings and supportive friends. You're going through what we call *grief*.

Its most acute form, of course, comes to us at the death of a loved one. That's what we usually associate with the word *grief*, isn't it? The grief-stricken are those who mourn the dying of someone dear to them. I believe that everyone in a situation like that grieves. Some may be more conscious of it than others, some may express it more, some obviously talk about it more openly, but all go through it in one way or another. If someone close to you has died recently, you can be sure, whatever your present feelings, that you are in the midst of grief.

In your case, it may lead to weeping. Now and then the tears start, and seem as though they won't stop. Or, you may never cry at all. You may feel that you want to be by yourself, that you can't handle being around people much. Or you may feel so lonely, so desolate, that you can't stand to be alone. You'll probably tend to idealize those who have died, to remember them in an unrealistic way, magnifying their virtues, forgetting their common human frailties. And, along with that, you may experience feelings of guilt about the way you treated them. "If only I'd been more thoughtful . . . if only I had expressed appreciation . . . I wish I had done this or that." You may find yourself questioning God's wisdom and love, crying out, "Why? Why did this have to happen?"

Little things may unexpectedly remind you of the one you've lost and bring fresh twinges of pain. Birthdays and holidays may be the worst times of all because they remind you of special joys you can't recover. When you're with others who still have their families about them, you may feel a rush of sadness, or even bitterness, that you have been deprived of what they have.

Or maybe, friends, you scarcely have any feeling. You're almost numb. You go on about your business doing the things you have to do, trying to keep up a brave front. But the zest seems to have gone out of life for you. Nothing looks like fun any more. Maybe all you want to do is sleep.

Or, it's possible that nothing may seem to change for you at all. You feel no differently than you did before your loved one was taken. You've gone through the funeral arrangements, the memorial services, the subsequent adjustments, with amazing ease. Friends marvel at the composed, cheerful way in which you've managed everything. Now you're right back in the midst of your busy life, going

on as if nothing had happened. But it has. You've been grieving, whether you know that or not. And you may grieve a good deal more. In fact, the process may go on for months, even years. The grief process may affect you profoundly for the rest of your life.

We Need to Grieve Freely

What does the Christian faith have to say to people who suffer these major losses, who go through grief? For one thing, it says: "Grieve freely." We haven't always understood that, have we? We've sometimes had the impression that to be deeply religious, to have strong faith, was to maintain control over one's emotions and not let them be expressed. When losses come, we were told, the mature Christian should praise God and comfort others, not giving way to feelings of sadness, surely never presuming to question the ways of God. Whereas the Bible tells us not to grieve in the wrong way, we've sometimes told ourselves not to grieve at all! But that message was not from God, not from the one who made us, who knows us altogether, and who reveals himself in Jesus Christ.

The Scripture passage that has most helped me in dealing with grief is the shortest verse in the Bible, only two words long, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). That speaks volumes. The Lord had come to visit a family in the village of Bethany. Lazarus, a man he had loved very much, had just died. Jesus saw the sisters of the dead man and many around them crying. He was so moved that he wept too.

Think of what that means for us. We can be sure that expressing our grief in tears is right and good. Sometimes we've been given the impression that it isn't manly to weep. In many cultures, young boys are taught from infancy that "real men don't cry." Maybe that's one reason we "strong" men often prove to be so weak. We, with our vaunted self-control, end up having more ulcers and heart attacks than those "frail" females who give way to tears. We've got things all wrong. Here was a man, *the* man, God's idea of a man, and he wept unashamedly.

Some people feel that if we "break down," if we dissolve in tears of grief, we are displaying weakness of faith. But you can never accept that if you know that Jesus wept. "Weak faith," you say? In one whose whole life breathed trust, who leaned hard upon his Father every day? No, the Christian faith is not stoic

resignation, not a denial of human feeling. Some may greet the worst of woes with a shrug, with a stiff upper lip, but that doesn't necessarily testify to strong belief. Faith and apathy are by no means the same. The Christian gospel was never meant to stifle emotion, to quench the springs of deep feeling.

I have known people who were uncomfortable at expressions of grief because they feared that such outbursts might lead to mental illness. These distraught persons, they feared, might lose control, "go to pieces." But that is a serious error. The real danger usually lies in the opposite direction. Did you know that a remarkably high percentage of those admitted to mental hospitals are suffering from difficulties directly related to grief? Their problem is not that they have been overcome by tears but rather that they've been unable to recognize and express their grief adequately. Sometimes weeping, weeping freely, can be a blessed release, and can open the way for our spirits to be healed. So let's forget those well-meant myths about tears. Jesus grieved. The Lord of glory wept. Never let anyone persuade you that it isn't manly or healthy or Christian to cry.

It helps to talk out what you're feeling too. Never mind if you've spoken about it before, if you've told the story of your loss a number of times. That's what grief is like. You go over the same ground again and again. But as long as you feel an inner need to share, to unburden yourself, don't hesitate to do it. The time may come when that inner pressure will begin to diminish, but it will come sooner, and in a far healthier way, if you don't try to hold in what's clamoring inside you to be said.

And by the way, if you know someone who's been grieving, will you try to remember that? One of the most kindly services you can render to such people is to help them feel free to keep talking, to give them a listening ear even though you've heard it all before. Their wounds are deep and need not to be covered over but to heal gradually from within.

We Can Grieve with Hope

In many ways, grief is universal, the same for all peoples. But in at least one vital respect, it's different for those who believe the gospel of Christ. They do not

grieve *despairingly*. Christ and his followers say: Grieve freely, yes, but do not sorrow as those who have no hope.

Many people do grieve hopelessly. A woman who had just discovered that her child had leukemia said this to a noted Christian writer: "When he dies, I'll just have to cover him up with dirt and forget that I ever had him." Then, tormented, she went on, "You look like a rational person. How can you possibly believe that the death of a man or a little boy is any different from the death of an animal?"

There, that's the heart of the issue. She believed that death ended everything. It meant the obliteration of personality. It meant final separation. The one we loved has ceased to be; the relationship has ended forever. That living person so precious to us moments before, so intertwined with the longings and affections of our hearts, has now been swallowed up by nothingness.

Who wouldn't despair at that? How can life seem anything but meaningless if it's going nowhere? What value can there be in growing bonds of closeness that are doomed to be torn apart forever?

But have we any solid reasons for believing differently? Doesn't that woman's anguished question have weight? What assurance is there that we and our loved ones can survive death, can have existence and identity beyond it? Nothing in ourselves can support that hope. Not our fondest wishes, our most grandiose dreams, not even the intriguing reports of those who have been near death. Our hope lies not in a theory but in an event, not in some capacity of ours to sustain life but in God's renewing power. Our hope is in Jesus Christ himself, crucified for us, risen from the dead.

According to the Bible, physical death is the outward sign of a deeper dying. We have lost our true life because we have turned away from the one who made us. We have thrown off his authority, forfeited his fellowship, and gone our own way. But God in Jesus Christ has come to make things right. He has shared our humanity, stooped under the load of our sin, and tasted death for us all. Now he lives and reigns, conqueror of sin and death, the Savior of all who believe. Trusting in him, we have eternal life now and rejoice that nothing can separate us from God's love. Those who follow Jesus have been born anew to a life full of hope. They look forward to his return, to the full coming of his kingdom, to resurrection and yes, reunion. If you have never taken that most important step,

let me urge you this day to commit yourself to Jesus Christ, to invite him by faith into your life to be your Lord and Savior. He calls you through his gospel to trust in him and then face the future with radiant confidence.

So grieve freely, friends, but not despairingly. Tears are right and good, but one day God is going to wipe them away forever. C. S. Lewis, the late English literary critic and lay-theologian, was a man who knew first-hand what grief could be. Married late in life, he found undreamed-of happiness with his beloved, only to see her taken away three years later by a lingering, painful illness. He wrote about it honestly and poignantly in a little book called *A Grief Observed*. Two thoughts come shining through it. One is that God can sometimes seem to be a terrible antagonist, letting us be hurt more than we had thought possible. But the other is a refrain of hope: "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." We grieve now, but that sorrow—even that—can be swallowed up in the joy of a Resurrection Morning!

Study Questions

1. *What, besides bereavement, are "grief" experiences?*
2. *In what ways are people usually affected by the loss of a loved one?*
3. *What myths about the expression of grief have been common in our culture?*
4. *How does our Lord's weeping at the grave of Lazarus help to dispel them?*
5. *What is distinctive about the grieving of a Christian?*

Chapter 14

WHEN YOU'RE BATTLING WITH FEARS

I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

Psalm 34:4-7, RSV

When you stop and think about all the problems and troubles in life, it's easy to be afraid. But here's some help in how to battle your fears.

"I SOUGHT THE LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears." What a stirring witness that is! What a happy situation it describes! Think of being set free from all your fears!

The Fears We Face

Here was a human struggler who admitted that he had many fears. Honest man! We all have them, don't we? All of us have both our times of fortitude and our moments of panic. As Thomas Carlyle once put it, "Every man has a coward and a hero in his soul." And I think it was Emerson who carried that idea a bit further. "A hero," he wrote, "is no braver than anyone else; he is only brave five minutes longer." The fears are there for him, too. No human being lives long in this world without the chilling experience of being afraid.

But not all of us admit to that. We men, especially, like to keep up a brave front, to give the impression that we are dauntless. So we mask our fears, push them down inside, pretend they aren't there. All of us know something about that.

We call it “whistling in the dark.” Unfortunately, that habit of repression may eventually make us stubborn, insensitive, deeply angry, or even sick. But it won’t make the fear go away.

This man, this jubilant psalm-singer, was ready to acknowledge that he had been full of fears. That’s a step in the right direction. It’s a good thing for you, for me, to face our fears, to acknowledge to ourselves that we are afraid, to get in touch with just what it is that we fear. Sometimes putting that into words, bringing it out into the light, can make it seem a bit less fearful. Pause right now and ask yourself: “What am I most afraid of?” Say it. Admit it. Now suppose that those worst fears will come true. Picture to yourself the most dire scenario imaginable. All right, there it is, out in the open. You’ve looked squarely at the darkest future you have ever feared.

Now remember, there are different types of fear. Some is altogether healthy, an essential ingredient in our lives. This kind usually has to do with real, immediate threats to our safety or to that of others. Fear of this kind can release enormous energies. It galvanizes us into action. It enables us to escape from or ward off dangers. Thank God for the fear that leads you to leap from the path of a speeding car or to throw yourself between some danger and the child you love!

Sometimes the threat to our lives, our well-being, may be real but not immediate. It looms on the horizon or hangs over us like a dark cloud. We can have a healthy fear of that, too, which leads us to prepare ourselves, to take precautions, to marshal all the defenses we can. Thank God for the kind of fear that equips us in advance for genuine crises!

But it’s probably true to say that most of our fears, our especially troubling ones, are not like that. We’re afraid about many future misfortunes that may never happen. We’re often afraid of things that have no power to harm us, or shrink from perils that are merely imaginary. It would take several dictionary pages to list all the “phobias” to which we human creatures are vulnerable. We can be afraid of heights, of crowds, of small rooms or wide spaces, of silence or loud noises, of elephants or insects. It’s hard for us to understand why, but all of these things can make some of us deathly afraid.

Past experiences may have conditioned us for fearfulness. We’re afraid of rejection or of being abandoned, of failure or bereavement because these traumas

have touched our lives before. We fear the disapproval of important persons in our lives, the loss of someone's love. Some of us fear poverty or disgrace. The more powerful or prominent we become in this world, the more insecure we can feel, the more fearful of some disastrous fall. We fear illness and disability, death and what may lie beyond it. And what we fear for ourselves, we sometimes fear even more for loved ones and friends.

Fears of this kind, especially prolonged ones, about matters over which we have no control, are decidedly unhealthy. They cause us acute discomfort—not only anguish of mind but even distressing physical symptoms. Instead of energizing us, these fears sometimes paralyze, render us utterly helpless. They attract, they almost create, the very things we fear. Dread of war may provoke a nation to measures which actually bring on conflict! Fear of losing someone's love may undermine the openness and candor on which genuine love depends! And the skier, as soon as he focuses on his fear of falling, becomes much more likely to fall!

We tell people, in vain however, that they “shouldn't be afraid” of this or that. They know that very well already, but it does not ease the controlling grip of their fear. When you fight against unhealthy fears or try to repress them, you are not helped. They can become even more severe. On the other hand, it's a sad thing to see people giving way to their fears, renouncing all effort or adventure in their lives, withdrawing into safe routines or an inner world of fantasy. There must be a better way. This psalmist has found it. He declares that the Lord has “delivered him from all his fears!”

The Freedom We Find

Sometimes that deliverance may come by God's *providence*. The psalmist writes: “This poor man cried and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles” (Ps. 34:6). In this case, the man was delivered when God rescued him from frightening circumstances. He was sinking in the mire and God lifted him out and set his feet upon a rock. He was surrounded by menacing foes but they were alarmed by evil tidings and withdrew. The man's fields were parched and barren but God sent upon them life-giving rain.

WHEN YOU'RE BATTLING WITH FEARS

It sometimes happens that way, right before our eyes. God comes to our rescue. He works in our circumstances to bring about a change. He lifts the threat that hangs over our heads. He routs our enemies or snatches us from the jaws of death. By so doing, he scatters our fears to the winds.

Sometimes by his providence he leads us to see that our fears are groundless. Remember Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*? At one point in his journey, he saw a ravenous lion standing by the path he had to take. He was filled with fear. But as he came closer, Christian noticed that the lion was securely chained. Though threatening in appearance, he had no power to do a traveler harm. How many seeming dangers in our path turn out like that! As God brings us along our way, as he furthers his work in our lives, he helps us to see that what we had dreaded is not so formidable after all.

God may deliver us from our fears through his *promise*. Almost every “fear not” in the Bible is followed by some divine reassurance. God pledges his deliverance long before it comes. We can live at peace because he has promised us “grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

Many of us can testify to the way in which some word of Scripture has again and again relieved our anxieties. Sometimes when I begin to fear as a minister that I won't have anything to say, that I won't be able to communicate God's message, or reach the people I long to reach, I remember God's word to his prophet:

. . . to all to whom I send you, you shall go and whatever I command you, you shall speak . . . behold I have put my words in your mouth. (Jer. 1:7,9)

Or I take up this rich promise of God through his servant James,

If any of you lacks wisdom [and I surely qualify there!], let him ask God, who gives to all generously and without reproaching, and it will be given. . . . (James 1:5)

WHEN YOU'RE BATTLING WITH FEARS

When I can listen to those promises of God and lean upon them, fear recedes and confidence returns.

I've known people who were fearful that they had sinned too grievously or wandered too far ever to be restored. But I've also seen them lifted from despair and restored to hope by a promise like this:

Come now and let us reason together, says the LORD, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. (Isa. 1:18)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Parents sometimes fear for their children that they will not share the family's values or embrace their parent's faith. It brings relief beyond measure to know that God has promised to be the God not only of believers but of their children. I have been cheered and restored to peace innumerable times by reading verses like these, "and the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 30:6). Or, "I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring" (Isa. 44:3).

To say "Amen" to God's Word, to echo his promise, is a powerful antidote to fear. Our granddaughter Rachel, when she was only two and a half, seemed to have learned that lesson well. When frightened by a loud noise or a dark room or a crowd of strange people, Rachel had often heard her mother say, "It's all right." Now, when anything threatening begins to occur, she quotes with a brave smile that same reassurance. First a look of fear, perhaps a trembling lower lip, but then, "It's all right!" That's a promise she can rest on.

But what frees us most from our fears is God's *presence*. This is his kindest providence and the sum of all his promises: "Fear not, for I am with you" (Isa. 41:10). A little child wakes from a bad dream and cries out in fear. In a matter of seconds, his father appears. There may be words of comfort and assurance. The father may show him that the menacing shadow in the corner is not a boogeyman

but a bathrobe. But the father best relieves fears simply by *being there*. A little boy needs in his moments of panic someone with him. That's what we need too, a Father's presence. Then we can say,

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I
will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. (Ps. 23:4)

How it Happens

What does it take for that to happen in our lives? How does it come about? The psalmist says simply, "I sought the LORD and he answered me" (Ps. 34:4). "Seeking the LORD" here is another term for "fearing" him. To "fear God" means to hold him in awe, to recognize that he is Lord, to know that we are completely in his hands. It means to remember that we have to do with him in all things and to trust him reverently. In the full biblical sense, it means to believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and surrender our lives to his lordship. When that "fear of the Lord" is in our hearts, that worshipful trust, our other fears begin to seem puny by comparison.

Seeking God also means listening to his Word. There is no discipleship without that. We need to be learning what he wants for our lives and relying on what he promises. Faith, the faith that conquers fear, "comes by hearing," writes Paul, "and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

Finally, seeking the Lord means calling upon him freely in all our troubles. When we cry to the Father through Jesus Christ, amid the most terrifying dreams of the night, he is always there. Sometimes he takes the fears away. Or, he may give us courage to go on in spite of them. But he, whatever happens, will never fail us nor forsake us. Call on him now, from your heart. "Lord, help me! Jesus, Savior, set me free!" Then, however dark and long the night, you will surely say when the morning comes: "I sought the LORD and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears!"

Study Questions

WHEN YOU'RE BATTLING WITH FEARS

- 1. How would you distinguish between "healthy" and "unhealthy" fear?*
- 2. Why doesn't it help when people urge us not to be afraid?*
- 3. In what ways has God by his providence delivered you from your fears?*
- 4. Can you think of specific instances in which the Scriptures and prayer have helped you to go on in spite of your fears?*

Chapter 15

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING GUILTY

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Micah 7:18,19, RSV

Guilt can be a funny thing. Sometimes we don't feel guilty when we should. Other times we do feel guilty when we needn't. Let's think about that.

Feeling Guilty

IT'S PAINFUL, isn't it, to feel guilty? A sense of blame, of personal responsibility, can be a crushing load. It's so distressing, in fact, that we'll do almost anything to avoid it or get rid of it.

The children in a home are fighting and Father comes to break up the quarrel. Each one insists almost frantically, "It's not my fault, Daddy! I didn't start it!" We adults are no different. When something has gone wrong and a culprit is being sought, how quick we are to say, "Don't look at me; I'm not responsible!" We fear blame; we shrink from guilt. We can hardly bear to have it assigned to us.

Think of the last time you were accused of something. How did you react? If you're like I am, you probably got all your defenses together—fast. You started by denying that the accusation was true, maybe with some heat and indignation. If it was a question of motives, you maintained that yours were pure. Perhaps you launched a counteroffensive, bringing up some accusations of your own. "You've got a nerve to charge me with that, especially after what you've done. You haven't been such a shining light yourself."

In some ways, those vigorous reactions are signs of strength. If a person simply collapses under criticism, swiftly admits the worst that can be said about him, he may have very little self-respect, very little sense of personhood. It's no sign of health or of piety to be a kind of doormat, simply to absorb accusation.

But the problem with our defensive reactions, our protests and counter-charges, is that they tend to distort our thinking and to deaden our moral conscience. I may know very well that I have failed badly in some area, that I have acted shamefully. But let me be charged with that or with something else and immediately I become insensitive to anything wrong about me. All I can think about, it seems, is clearing myself, proving my accuser to be out of line. And when I do that, any real feelings of guilt I may have get repressed. I push them down and refuse to acknowledge them.

You can see that happening in other people, can't you? Every now and then you read about someone who has committed a brutal, sordid crime but who shows no evidence of guilt feelings or remorse. We can't believe it. "The man's not human," we say. "He must be some kind of monster." But think of how he is feeling the weight of society's blame. Policemen have arrested him. Detectives may have cross-examined him. The newspapers advertise his misdeeds. He's almost universally despised for what he's done. And all of that may confirm in a devastating way what his own heart tells him. Who can bear that? Who can sustain that kind of a burden? He has to repress it somehow, to push it from consciousness, and so he does. So now he appears to us heartless, unfeeling.

The very thing we have witnessed in him may be going on every day in you and me. I'm not talking about lurid crimes—what we are charged with may seem trifling. But we try to get rid of our guilt feelings in some of the same ways. We'll plead extenuating circumstances. We'll find someone else to blame. We'll insist we're innocent. Or, failing in all that, we'll banish the whole thing from mind and refuse to look at it. Anything to get off the hook, to ease the stabbing pain of guilt. But it takes powerful measures to quiet such pain. We may drug our consciences in the process. And, as a trade-off for those banished feelings of guilt, we may experience apathy, fear or strong anger.

Facing Our Responsibility

So sometimes, even though guilt feelings are painful, it's a good thing to listen to them, to face our responsibility. I'm not talking now about the petty guilt feelings that are imposed on us by others, by parental scolding or by social constraints. We may be pressured to feel guilty about many trifling things. And there's little benefit in that kind of discomfort.

But I'm talking about violations of our deeply held values, about those wrongs in our lives over which our own hearts reproach us. It's striking to see how in every culture, among every people, *some* kind of moral standard is taken with great seriousness. And without exception, people in all of those groups are conscious that they have fallen short of their own accepted norms. Hence all the systems of sacrifice, all the efforts at appeasement. All of us fail to be true to some kind of law that is written on our hearts. That's why feelings of guilt are universal and point to a pervasive need in all of us.

Some, as we have seen, are quite successful in repressing their guilt feelings. Perhaps they project them onto others. Perhaps they redirect them from serious evils to minor flaws that are more manageable. Maybe they try to calm them by acts of self-denial, by submitting to strenuous disciplines. They succeed in keeping at bay those deep feelings of guilt.

But that success, strangely, can be a serious handicap. It may even be a blessing in disguise when we are disturbed by feelings of guilt. They may be harbingers of hope. Only those who mourn can finally be comforted, only the guilty can find pardon.

To appreciate the dynamics of that, listen to these words of the prophet Micah, written many years ago:

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Micah 7:18-19

What's your reaction to thoughts like those? Suppose now that you have succeeded in repressing your guilt feelings. You've put that load of personal responsibility somewhere else. The thought that you have sinned, that you have rebelled against God's will, is offensive to you. You don't take it seriously. That may be true of murderers and child molesters, you reason, but it hardly describes you. You consider yourself reasonably upright, perhaps even favorably inclined toward religion. But you feel no need of forgiveness. You have no sense of *guilt* weighing you down. What will the announcement of a pardoning God mean to you? Very little. Something within you may respond, "Big deal! Who needs that?"

Wasn't that the situation of many whom Jesus encountered during his ministry? He came offering God's forgiveness and calling sinners to repentance. But to many, that message was not exciting in the least. As far as they were concerned, he was speaking to someone else, not to them. They were managing their lives quite well, thank you. They were doing everything that could be expected of them. What use had such fine, moral, religious people as they for forgiveness? What need had they to repent? They found it downright annoying to be classed with sinners. They greeted Jesus' message with scorn, even hostility.

Have you ever reflected on this, that the gospel is good news only to those who know they need it? The people who get the most joy from reports of a newly discovered cure are those who have the disease. It's great to hear about amnesty if you're one of the deserters, or about a pardon from the governor if you are on Death Row. But if you are not in those categories, you may not be at all happy to hear such news. In fact, it may bother you that society is being so easy on such offenders. As for you, you don't need kindness of that sort because you haven't gone wrong. You haven't let your country down or broken its laws. You don't need any favors from the government. You're okay.

But suppose this now: you know that things are not right between you and God. You realize that you have gone your own way and largely left him out of

your life. You know his commands—we are to love him with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. You're aware that you fall far short of that. In your honest moments, you have to acknowledge that the main concern of your life has been “looking out for Number 1.” Maybe you're thinking right now of people you have hurt, of promises you may have broken, of times when you were indifferent to another's need or pain. You wish you could blot out those scenes from the past, that you could forget the way you've lived. But somehow you can't. You have a hard time liking yourself, respecting yourself, living with yourself, because you feel so guilty.

Finding Mercy

What will it do for you to be told that God “pardons iniquity” and “passes over transgressions” (Micah 7:18)? Won't it be music to your ears to learn that he will “tread our iniquities under foot” and “cast all our sins in the depths of the sea” (v. 19)? A pardoning God is great good news to you, because you feel a need to be forgiven.

Suppose you were one of those Jewish tax collectors in first-century Palestine, despised by all your countrymen. You've sold yourself to the Roman overlords. You're making big profits at the expense of your own people. You put up a good front, you hold your head high. You'll give anybody who criticizes you “as good as you get.” But in your quiet moments, you're sometimes deeply troubled, secretly ashamed of what you're doing.

You've heard about this Jesus and how he has a reputation for seeking out people like you, coming to their houses, eating at their tables. They call him the “friend of sinners” (Matt. 11:19). One day he's to pass through your town, Jericho. As he walks down Main Street, you climb a tree to get a good look at him. When he passes by, he sees you and says, “Zacchaeus, come down. I have to stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). You don't know what to make of that. Here's a teacher come from God! And he calls *you* by name! You scramble down out of that tree, overcome with joy. You lead him to your house. On that day, you find forgiveness. You become a new man. In gratitude, you decide to change yours ways and right the wrongs you've done. Jesus was good news to you

because you felt the need of a Savior. A sense of guilt can be a precious thing if it opens our lives to God's grace.

What if the differences among us are not as significant as we like to think? What if all of us stand on the same ground before God? What if, regardless of our reputation or our moral record, each of us shares the same fallenness? What if we're all sinners, all guilty, all lost? That's the way the Bible puts it. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "There is none righteous, no not one" (Rom. 3:10). Then, friends, this promise of a pardoning God would be glad tidings for all of us, wouldn't it?

Yes, what if you and I and others are among the sinful ones whom Jesus came to call, the lost sheep he wanted to seek? What if God can "pass over" our sins, can extend us forgiveness and eternal life because Christ died for *all*, because he bore the sins of the whole world when he offered up his life? Why then, the message of Christ crucified and risen would be the most glorious good news any of us has ever heard. And all can sing to the God made known in Jesus, "Who is a pardoning God like Thee, and who has grace so rich and free?"

You see, I deeply believe that what we've just supposed is the real truth about all of us. We are fellow-sinners. We stand together under judgment. And though we may repress it, hide it from view, we can't by our own effort banish guilt. But God through the sacrifice of his Son has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. He has buried them, as the prophet says, "in the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19). The free gift of forgiveness is now offered in the gospel. It can be yours if you will confess your sin, acknowledge your guilt and receive Jesus with a believing heart. You may live to thank God for those feelings of guilt you've struggled with, for there is unimaginable release and joy in being forgiven.

If you say, "I have no guilt, I need no forgiveness," it's not for me to contradict you. I'll not be your accuser. But if ever in the quietness of recollection you begin to feel the twinge of guilt or hear the whisper of a troubled conscience, don't ignore it. Don't push it away. It could be the voice of God to your heart. It could be an invitation to remember Jesus Christ, crucified for you.

Study Questions

WHEN YOU'RE FEELING GUILTY

1. *What is positive about defending ourselves from accusation? What are the negative side-effects?*
2. *What are legitimate guilt-feelings? What constitutes, in your opinion, "false guilt"?*
3. *Why did many of the religious leaders in Israel show so little interest in, and appreciation for, Jesus' message?*
4. *To what kind of person does the gospel appear as "good tidings of great joy"?*

Chapter 16

WHEN YOU'RE ALL MIXED UP

And Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12, RSV

In a world full of noise and confusion and conflicting ideas, it's easy to get mixed up in your thinking. But here's the way to see the truth clearly.

HAVE YOU EVER GOTTEN all mixed up, totally disoriented? Was there a time when you lost your bearings, so that you didn't know exactly where you were headed?

My wife Helen sometimes has difficulties like that. When she's walking about in unfamiliar surroundings, she has trouble retracing her steps. We spent a few days one winter at a convention in our nation's capital. Almost every time we came out of our hotel room, she would start in the wrong direction. We needed to go *left* to get to the elevators, but she kept turning *right*.

I teased her about that, but not much, because I had an experience like it once which was really embarrassing. I've never been able to swim very well except under water. I keep going only as long as I can hold my breath. During one vacation time, I was with a group of friends at a lake in upstate New York. Everyone was going down this long, steep slide out into the lake. As I surveyed the scene, I was confident that I could manage the distance back to shore under water. So I went down, head first and on my back. That was almost my undoing. When I hit the lake, I began to swim, toward shore, I thought. Actually I had gotten disoriented on my wild ride and I was swimming for all I was worth out toward the middle of the lake! When my breath was almost gone, I was sure I was

in shallow water so I let down my feet. Nothing solid! I swallowed enough water to lower the lake level and had to be rescued. I, who saw myself as a daring athlete, had to be towed to shore by a girl lifeguard who weighed all of 103 pounds. So I can't laugh too much about Helen's sense of direction. She was there when I swam the wrong way!

Lost in the Dark

Sometimes we have problems like that with the course our whole life is taking. We're not sure we're on the right road, going the best way. We may even be uncertain about where we want to end up! We have lots of company in the way we're traveling, but that's not always reassuring. All those others may be mixed up too. I saw a bumper sticker once that issued this warning to cars coming up behind: *Don't follow me. I'm lost.* Maybe you feel that way today, somehow out of it, somehow adrift, just a bit lost.

According to the Bible, that's how things are, not only for some but for all of us. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one," says the prophet, "to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). We've rebelled against God's directions for our lives and refused to follow his road map. We've gotten ourselves lost. Now it's as though we were groping in the darkness. We can't be sure where we're headed or whether we're making progress. As far as we know, we may be going around in circles. We can't spot any dangers that may be along the road—any pitfalls or lurking enemies. We're wandering about aimlessly, and it's making us anxious.

We may seek comfort in the knowledge that many other people are in the same condition. "After all," as people used to say, "forty million Frenchmen [or 270 million Americans] can't be wrong." But they can. According to Jesus, many, many people are on a highway that leads nowhere, "a broad road," he says, "that leads to destruction" (Matt. 7:13).

We may assure ourselves that we're all right. We don't need any help. We'll find the way for ourselves. That's how most of us men drivers think, isn't it? Even though we're hopelessly lost, we won't stop to get directions. We'll go a hundred miles out of our way first. "We know how to get there," we say, even

when we don't. It's that way in the journey of life too. The old proverb says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12).

So sometimes it's a good thing to know we're disoriented, to be mixed up, to admit that we've lost our way. It's all right to make that bumper sticker confession: "I'm lost." Then, you're ready to seek help. Then you may be found. Then this word from Jesus Christ can be great news for you, a welcome relief. Listen: This is from the Gospel according to John, chapter 8, verse 12:

I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

A Promise of Light

What a claim for anyone to make! It's not just, "I can give you directions. I can help to enlighten you. I can clear up a few things." Jesus says, "I *am* light." Yes, and not simply one luminary among many, one lamp post along the road. I am the source of brightness. I am the light of the world. Jesus maintains that what the sun is to Planet Earth, with the moon and the stars thrown in, he is to the human race. In the personal domain, in the realm of mind and spirit, he is the world's one light. He assumes that apart from him, everything is darkness; without him, no one can find the way.

Now pause to ponder this. Is that usually the way in which religious teachers talk? Isn't it their habit to hide themselves behind their message? Don't they ordinarily come forth with modesty, as mere spokesmen for a truth more important than they are? Giving prominence to one's own role, making enormous claims for one's self—that sounds quite different. We customarily associate that style with people who are absurdly self-important. They make grandiose claims, but no one takes them seriously.

But in Jesus, these lordly claims are combined with extraordinary lowliness and self-giving. He comes, he says, not to be served but to serve. He is "meek and

lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Somehow, in him, the combination seems appropriate. People don’t scoff when Jesus claims for himself meekness and majesty. They sense somehow that our usual stereotypes don’t fit him. He can say things that on the lips of anyone else would seem like bombast. But coming from him, they have the ring of truth. Either he was a monstrous fraud, the most shameless charlatan of all time, or else he was what he claimed to be. Which would you say seems more likely?

We can appreciate fully Jesus’ word, “I am the light of the world” only against the background of his nation’s history. According to John, he said this at one of Israel’s annual celebrations. On the first evening of the Feast of Tabernacles, two huge golden lamps were lit just as night was falling. They poured their brilliance down the slopes of the city while groups of worshipers clustered around them, rejoicing in dance and song. These lamps were a glowing memorial of Israel’s past. They called to mind her long years of wilderness wandering and how God had led them by his light.

Perhaps you remember that Old Testament account: “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night; the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people” (Ex. 13:21-22). The fire and the cloud were striking symbols of God’s presence. Again and again, we read statements like these: “The LORD came down in the cloud . . . The LORD went before them in the pillar. . . .” Here was a visible sign that God was with this ragged multitude he had saved from bondage. They could look on that awesome sight and be sure that they were not alone.

It’s in that setting, friends, amid those memories, that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” He had been Israel’s guiding light. The God who had inhabited the cloud was present now in his body. Jesus is Immanuel, which means *God with us*. And like that towering beacon in the wilderness, he never leaves his people. “Lo,” he says, “I am with you all the days” (Matt. 28:20).

But the light in the wilderness was not only a reassuring sign that God was near. It gave also constant, practical guidance. Listen:

Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle the people of Israel would go onward; if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not go onward till the day that it was taken up.

Exodus 40:36-37

For those wanderers, the pillar of fire and cloud controlled absolutely all halts and marches. It determined when the people started, where they headed, and when they stopped. The place in which they found themselves might be desolate and forbidding, but no one in the camp could stir while the pillar remained stationary. And when they reached some lovely, pleasant oasis, footsore and weary, longing for days of rest, they could not tarry if the pillar of cloud and fire called them to move on. That kind of guide, imagine it, Jesus Christ is claiming and offering to be, for you and me!

When he, the crucified and risen Lord, comes into our lives, we no longer stumble aimlessly along. We have in him a living light, the light of life. But it's never a beam of our own, independent of him. Light shines on our way, says Jesus, as we walk behind him. "I am the light of the world. He that *follows* me will not walk in darkness."

Led by the Savior

What does it mean to follow him? That seemed much more plain when he was walking about in Galilee, didn't it? For disciples, there and then, it meant leaving their familiar surroundings, their ordinary livelihood, throwing in their lot with him, traveling about in his company. But what can it be for us today when he is in heaven and we on earth?

Following means commitment to Jesus as Lord. Remember how the fiery prophet Elijah challenged his countrymen on Mount Carmel? "If Baal is God, follow him; but if the Lord is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). "Following" means here the utmost in religious loyalty. It's taking on the yoke of someone's authority. It's submitting to serve. It's acknowledging that we are "not our own but belong to our faithful Savior" (Heidelberg Catechism, #1).

How vital that commitment is if we're going to be guided by Christ! So much depends on the will, the choice, to obey. We sometimes act as though discovering God's will were a mysterious, complicated process. We give the impression that though we want very much to do it, he has made his will obscure and hard to find. Usually, it's quite the other way around. God is far more willing to lead us than we are to be led. How many difficulties and perplexities disappear like mist before the sun when we set our hearts to obey Christ!

But following also includes trust. It begins there. Jesus says in another passage, "I am come a light into the world, so that he who *believes* in me should not walk in darkness" (John 12:46). Suppose that you are lost in a jungle, surrounded by perils. Poisonous snakes, hungry predators, even murderous human foes may be near at hand. The jungle is thick, almost impenetrable, dark and gloomy. Suddenly a stranger appears beside you. He promises to lead you to safety if you will stay with him and follow in his steps.

Everything depends now on whether or not you trust his integrity and good will. And friends, this living Lord Jesus Christ, who calls you to follow, is no heartless stranger. He has given strong proof of his kindly concern. He loved you and gave himself up for you, dying the cruel death of the cross for your sins and mine. You can safely entrust your life to his care and direction.

He doesn't promise that you'll never be confused or perplexed again. But if you're willing to trust him and commit yourself to him, if you make it the top priority of your life to stay with him, you won't walk in the darkness. You'll never really lose your way again because you'll have in him the light of life.

All mixed up? Call on Christ. Say with millions of others:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th' encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home;
Lead Thou me on;*

*Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene—one step enough for me.*

Study Questions

1. *In what sense does the Bible describe all of us as “lost”?*
2. *What is astonishing about Jesus’ claim to be “the light of the world”?*
3. *How is the “pillar of fire and cloud” a revealing symbol of God’s leading today?*
4. *What is involved in “following” Jesus?*

Chapter 17

WHEN YOU'RE LONELY

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.

John 14:18, RSV

*S*urely there's no pain quite like the pain of loneliness. To feel that you're all alone with no one to turn to—that's a terrible feeling. But you're not really ... alone, that is.

What it Is to Be Lonely

ALL OF US HAVE FELT the chill of loneliness.

I'm not speaking now of solitude, of merely being by ourselves. Often our times apart from others bring no lonely feelings with them. We enjoy opportunities to slow down, to reflect, to gather our scattered energies in quietness, when no one else is around. Many of us can be comfortably alone. On the other hand, crowds are no buffer against the pangs of real loneliness. Some of my loneliest moments have come when I was surrounded by people. I can remember times on a New York subway or while walking a busy street in Mexico City or shopping in a crowded Moscow department store when I had distinct feelings of loneliness. It isn't always the physical absence of other human beings that makes us feel alone. As population booms and cities sprawl, we may develop more of a sense of companionship with each other, or we may become increasingly "the lonely crowd."

Loneliness comes when it seems that we "don't belong." That's what I felt in Mexico City and in Moscow. That's what you may have felt in other strange places where peoples' languages or customs may have been different from yours, where no one knew you, where you weren't really involved in what was going on. A young boy goes to a new school and no one notices him. No one speaks to him. No one seems the least bit interested in knowing him. He feels lonely. A teenage

girl arrives at a party where little groups of special friends have already gathered. They're all facing inward, laughing, joking, enjoying one another's company. No one reaches out toward her. No one wants to include her. She feels left out. You've known something like that, haven't you? Sometimes you're in groups where you feel very uncomfortable because you don't seem to fit in. That's loneliness.

Maybe you are committed to an unpopular cause. You cherish a vision which few others share. You believe a truth which has not yet found wide acceptance. And when you speak on that issue, when you stand for that principle, when you defend that friend, others disapprove. They don't understand. They move away from you. They look on you coldly, with suspicion or disdain. That brings lonely feelings, doesn't it?

But we can bear it to be outsiders, to be misunderstood or rejected by "in-groups" if we have a few real friends or even one special person who is accessible to us. "Whatever the world may think about me," we say, "I've got my buddy . . . my sweetheart . . . my spouse . . . my child, perhaps . . . my father . . . my friend." It's when we don't have persons like that or when we lose them or can't reach them that loneliness becomes acute.

Here's a three-year-old boy. He's the first child, but now Mommy's time seems all taken up with a new baby girl. He can't seem to get his mother's attention or enough of her affection. Just when he needs her, just when he wants to show her something, just when he'd like to run up to her for comfort, she's feeding that new little one, taking care of *her*. It begins to seem to him that he doesn't have his mommy any more, and he feels lonely.

There are people around us who crave a special friend, who want intensely to be married, who long for real intimacy, but who haven't found what they are seeking. And there are also those who have known the warmth and security of a close relationship, but have lost it all through some betrayal, divorce, or bereavement.

There are lonely adolescents who are convinced there's not a human being on earth who really understands them. We meet elderly folk in nursing homes who fear that no one really cares. Many men and women behind bars are persuaded that everyone who ever knew them has long since forgotten that they exist. Life is

moving on like a great train pulling out of a station, but it's leaving them behind. No one, no one seems to notice.

It's a bitter thing to be lonely, really lonely. Some of you know that. The sparkle, the zest goes right out of life. You find yourself wanting to withdraw, to sleep, to escape perhaps by drinking or by drugs. But that doesn't work. An AA leader said recently that "Alcoholics are the loneliest people in the world." Sometimes we flee into mental illness because the world of fantasy, frightful though it may be, seems easier to live in than our lonely surroundings. Yes, and the most lonely of us are most likely to give up entirely and take our own lives.

Are people lonelier now than ever before? It almost seems so, doesn't it? Whatever else the growth of technology, the world's "coming of age" has brought, it hasn't lessened loneliness. If anything, it has made the problem worse. In our mobile, rapidly changing society, many of the structures that used to provide togetherness and belonging are breaking down. In a culture that places so much emphasis on acquiring possessions and status, people seem to devote less time and energy now to building relationships. Think of this: almost one-fourth of our population here in the United States lives alone, and one out of every two marriages fails. Every time you walk down a busy street, you scan the faces of a succession of lonely people. You may have looked in a mirror today at one of the very loneliest.

What Can Help

What's the cure, if there is one? People who have been really lonely know that solutions don't come easily. They cringe at those who act as though this is a minor problem, as though all they need to do is "snap out of it" and "get out with people." The bustle of more activity may not help at all. A frenzied round of socializing and joining may only make the pain more intense.

People need to exist *for* something, and even more, for someone. They need to have the achievement and contribution of their lives accepted and acknowledged. They need their place defined by their work, their gift. "Oh, so-and-so, he works at the Buick place . . . he sells insurance . . . she's a nurse at the hospital." But more than that, all of us need to be a someone that someone else cares about. That

secures for us a place in the world. To have a work to do, a cause to serve, certainly helps. But nothing really overcomes loneliness except close ties, warm, strong relationships with other persons. We all need a companion in whom we can confide. We need a sweetheart, a spouse, a relative, a friend who understands us, to whom we are important. We need to know, if such persons are far away, of their continuing interest and sympathy, their thoughts and prayers.

“But that’s just the problem,” says someone. “How do lonely people find ties like that?” Some feel that they’ve never known anything of the kind. They fear that warm human bonds are not for them. They’ve been hurt too often; they see no way out of their prison of loneliness. They’re waiting for others to reach out to them, others to show them love, but it doesn’t seem to happen. They know they need other people, but where is anyone who genuinely cares?

And even those who have once warmed their hands at a fireside of caring hearts don’t finally escape loneliness. Our deep relationships, just because they are temporary, can make us vulnerable to devastating grief. The more we have loved and been loved, the more poignantly we feel the loss of a dear one.

There *is* something that we can do when we’re lonely. We can realize how common the problem is, what a world of yearning hearts we live in. And whoever we are, wherever we are, we can probably reach out and touch at least one other lonely life. Maybe it’s a letter or a long distance phone call. We can ease our own struggle in that way but we can’t take the loneliness away. Sometimes lonely people make their discomfort worse by blaming themselves for the problem, hating themselves because they can’t alter their feelings by sheer will power. But we can’t banish loneliness entirely by anything we do, nor will time necessarily heal it. The fact is, friends, that something of loneliness will still be there, even if you’re happily married, even if you have good friends, even if there are those who deeply care about you. Let’s face it—there’s a sense in which we are incurably lonely people.

The Deepest Answer

But that sad observation has some good news hidden away in it. The fact that our best human relationships don't finally dispel loneliness can point us beyond ourselves. There is a relationship with God, friends, in which our deepest needs are met. In knowing him, we truly *belong*. In his love, we are understood and valued—fully and forever. George MacDonald's little poem makes good sense,

When with all the loved around thee,
Still thy heart says, "I am lonely."
It is well: the truth has found thee,
Rest is with the Father only.

Listen to this word of Jesus Christ from the Gospel according to John, chapter 14, verse 18: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you." Remember how it was with Jesus' disciples? They were together in their familiar group. They had each other. And yet they were dismayed at the loneliness that seemed to lie ahead. Jesus told them that he was going away. The best friend they'd ever had was about to leave them. They were facing what seemed like orphanhood, bereavement, heartbreaking loss.

But here on the last night before he was crucified, he said, "I will not leave you comfortless, orphaned, desolate." There are depths of loneliness in us which only he can reach. We have struggles which none but he can fully understand. And more, there are some crises which each of us must face alone, in which no human companions can be there for support. Supreme among those is death. But wonder of wonders, this Jesus, now risen from the dead, offers to be with us unfailingly. "Let not your heart be troubled . . . Lo, I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). He is *there* even in the valley of the shadow.

Yet he will not force himself upon us. We can shut the door of our loneliness against him. We can refuse his proffered friendship. We can say in one poet's bitter words, "I want no Jesus Christ to think he ever died for me." We can put

him off as we sometimes do others, saying, "I don't need you. I can make it alone."

Sadly, we don't always want to relinquish our loneliness. A recent writer on the subject comments that, "Too many are ambivalent about the spaces between us. We want independence *and* a faithful lover. We want the *support* of a family but not its *demands*; we want a *community* but we don't want to conform to its *codes*." We want companionship, we want comfort, all of us. But we don't want to give up our right to ourselves.

How does the presence of Jesus become real for us? Listen:

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

John 14:21, NRSV

The cure for loneliness is in commitment to him. It's when we cherish his word and will that we know his nearness.

His gracious companionship is held out to you today in the gospel. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20, RSV). It's a marvelous offer, friends. He will banish our loneliness if we deeply want him to. Will you welcome him today? He's standing at the threshold of your life, offering the joy of his presence, inviting you to a transforming friendship. The question is: Do we really want him with us? Are we willing to open the gates to this Lord of all life and let him make us loving, caring, happy persons? Will we follow him in the fellowship of his forgiven people? Wherever we are right now, if we will respond to his call, he will meet us. And then, whatever we may face, we have his sure promise to lean on: "I will not leave you desolate." Alleluia!

Study Questions

1. *How is loneliness different from solitude?*
2. *Why is loneliness an acute problem for so many in our time?*

WHEN YOU'RE LONELY

3. *How do our work and our close relationships help to ward off loneliness?*
4. *Discuss the idea that we are all “incurably lonely” people.*
5. *How does faith in Christ affect our loneliness as nothing else can?*

Chapter 18

WHEN YOU'RE UNSATISFIED

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

John 7:37-39, RSV

One of the wonderful invitations in the Bible is, "Whoever is thirsty, come to the living water." Let's think today about that deeper thirst we all feel, how it can be quenched and what that can mean for those around us.

THIS IS A WORD for any of you who feel that something is missing in your life, who search for something more, who long for a fulfillment you haven't yet found. Listen:

"If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

According to Jesus, there's a great thirst in every human heart which he promises to satisfy. And the satisfaction he offers is not an end in itself—it always *overflows*.

Thirst, as we all know, is a powerful drive, a life-and-death yearning, the call of the body for what we must have to survive. We can go without food for days, even weeks, but we may die in a matter of hours for lack of water.

A Deeper Thirst

For Jesus, this bodily thirst is a kind of parable. Our craving for H₂O is the sign of a deeper need, an inward thirst. He was saying that human hearts crave some inner refreshment as eagerly as parched throats and cracking lips cry out for water. That strikes a responsive chord in all of us, doesn't it? For what are we but quivering bundles of need? And what is our life—the struggle for fulfillment, the quest for happiness—but one long burning thirst?

But here's the sad thing. We often misread this thirst of the heart. We try to satisfy it in the wrong way. That came home to me with special power and vividness some years ago in the city of New Orleans. It was Mardi Gras time and a number of us were sharing in a Christian outreach ministry. We were trying to communicate the message of Christ to the many visitors, especially to those thousands of young people who had flocked to the city for the festival.

Mardi Gras offers much that is festive and colorful but much also that is hollow and sad. To walk down Bourbon Street at the height of the celebration is an experience not easily forgotten. Amid the surging crowds, you see face after face that seems mindless and bleak. Thousands of empty wine bottles in the gutters speak a somber message. Here are crowds of people trying to satisfy something deep inside them with cheap wine, drugs and bawdy entertainment. Someone has told them that New Orleans is “the city that care forgot” and that at the Mardi Gras you can be “king for a day.” Here's where anyone is supposed to find real living, great joy. But how many seem to go away empty!

A thousand voices from the mass media besiege us with the same kind of message each day, trying to make us believe that fulfillment and satisfaction can be had in what they're selling. The promises are grandiose. But “what you can depend on” turns out to be a detergent, “the real thing” a soft drink and “something to believe in” a new car.

And so the inner thirst, unsatisfied, keeps driving us on. Maybe we think that a new home, a better job, or a different lover will quench it. For others, the answer may be plunging headlong into work or into a busy round of parties and

socials, bridge and golf. Maybe that can make us forget the ache of longing deep inside us.

If anything pains the heart of God, it's that mistaken searching of ours. Hear him speak through his ancient prophet:

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:2)

Yes, why turn away from the fountain of living water to search in desert sands and barren gullies? Why push away the cup of life and try to store up refreshment in containers that leak? What could be more sad than that?

This thirst of the heart, whether we realize it or not, is a yearning for God. The psalmist knew that,

As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Where can I go and meet with God? (Psalm 42:1-2, NIV)

Augustine, that libertine turned saint, had made the same discovery. “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.” Nothing else in the wide world can really answer the cry of the human spirit. There's a vast space within all of us that only God can fill.

The Thirst-quencher

But imagine this: Jesus Christ says that he can satisfy that heart-need. It was the crowning day of the feast in Jerusalem and the colorful procession had already begun. Ranks of white-robed priests were winding their way down from the temple courts to Siloam's pool. As they marched, they were chanting Isaiah's ancient word, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation!” (Isa. 12:3). Once the priests had filled their pitchers at the pool, they returned, panting and perspiring, up the steep ascent to the temple area. At the height of the celebra-

tion, each would pour out his vessel of water before the Lord. It was Israel's way of recalling and celebrating how God had been with them in the wilderness, how he had fed them with manna from heaven and refreshed them with water from the rock. Suddenly in a hushed moment, Jesus stood forth from the crowd and called for everyone's attention, "If anyone thirst," he cried, "let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37).

What an astonishing invitation! There at the high feast, where God's provision for his people was being remembered, Jesus claimed to be the living Provider. All that they had remembered, hoped for and needed, he was. It was as though he was saying, "I'll do for you what only God can do."

When anyone really meets God, truly finds him in a personal way, he or she is deeply satisfied, even though their immediate needs may not be met. Remember Job's experience? In a whirlwind of tragedy, he lost family, possessions and health. He cried out to God with anguished questions. He found no answers from his friends or would-be comforters but was finally encountered by God himself. Job said, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5,6). His questions weren't answered, his problems weren't solved, but his heart was strangely at rest. He had met his Lord.

What the God of Israel had done for Job, Paul found that the living Christ did for him. The apostle had a thorn in the flesh—that's what he called it—something embarrassing, painful, humiliating. Three times he prayed that it might be taken away, but the only answer he received from the risen Lord was this: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9, NIV). And it was. That was enough for Paul. He could say then, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

You know too of people hurled about and hurt by life, sufferers who battle against crushing odds, who yet find Jesus Christ enough for their need. I have friends like that who are struggling now with terrible illness yet finding in the Lord sufficient grace. Some of us have known the heartbreak of children with affliction. Others live with the never-ending ache of bereavement. Yet we find in the midst of our pain that Christ sustains us.

Jesus satisfies, in a way that no one can fully describe, the deepest longings of our heart. He gives a sense of forgiveness, of acceptance and belonging to the restless. He gives security and hope to those who are anxious. His “fear not” comforts us with the knowledge that our lives are in his hands. All our searching for purpose in life finds fulfillment in him. And with it all he gives a vital companionship, a transforming friendship, a love that can warm and heal.

Oh, friends, it is good to know this living Lord Jesus! I rejoice to speak about him, not only as a Redeemer, a Savior from death, but also as the Satisfier, as the one who is himself enough for us. A familiar hymn celebrates that.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Behold I freely give
the living water, thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live.”
I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.

Many of us have found it so. If you call upon him, trust in him, come to him, he will fill your cup. He will refresh you with the living water of his Spirit.

Satisfied and Overflowing

But the quenching of our thirst is not the end of it, either. Listen to his further word:

He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.” (John 7:38)

When you come to Jesus Christ with your thirst, surrendering to his lordship, something more will happen. Rivers of living water will begin to pour forth from your life.

What can that mean? Jesus cites this word as a promise of Scripture. Biblical scholars are not completely clear as to which Old Testament text Jesus had in mind. But there is one remarkable passage from the visions of Ezekiel which is surely involved. Ezekiel sees waters issuing forth from the renewed temple,

getting deeper and deeper as they flow, bringing life and refreshment to a desert wasteland as the waters go down toward the Dead Sea. God's temple has become a source of life-giving streams (Ezek. 47:1-12).

Now think of the remarkable thing that Jesus once said about the temple. He spoke, John tells us, about "the temple of his body" (John 2:21), the body which was to be pierced on a cross. It is from Jesus Christ, in whom God personally dwells with us, that the living water flows. Now this crucified Lord is risen, has ascended, and has sent forth his Spirit to his people. Now it can be said that the church of Jesus Christ—even the body of each believer—is a temple of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit fills our lives, Christ's own life pours forth from within our inmost selves. Here is the secret of joyful witness, and of fruitful service. We go to Christ in our thirst, with commitment and prayer. He fills us. Then, sometimes without our being aware of it, his life is poured out through us to others.

I remember visiting a Reformed church in Michigan once where a friend of mine was serving as pastor. The congregation there was having great difficulty in growing trees and shrubbery on the church property. Everything planted, however well watered, however richly fertilized, seemed to wither and die. It was discouraging. If only some life-giving power could have gone forth from that church building to make the land around it blossom and produce! That didn't seem to happen.

But something more remarkable was happening. Christians were finding their hearts satisfied in Christ and were experiencing the fullness of his Spirit in their lives. From them, a far more wonderful life-giving power was streaming forth. Weary, care-worn people were being refreshed. Barren homes and hearts around them were beginning to blossom; the spiritually dead were coming alive.

Is it that way with your life? Are there rivers of refreshing going forth from you? Or perhaps barely a trickle? The deeper question is: "Has your inner thirst been really satisfied?" Let me urge you to come with it all to Jesus Christ. Open your life today, completely and gladly to the fullness of his Spirit. Then see what a difference the overflow can make!

Study Questions

1. *What does Jesus mean in this passage by “thirst”?*
2. *How do we commonly try to satisfy this thirst?*
3. *In what sense is it true to say that Christ “satisfies us completely”? In what sense is it misleading?*
4. *What seems to result when people are deeply satisfied?*

Chapter 19

WHEN YOU'RE HEARTBROKEN

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalm 147:3, RSV

*Y*ou know, there are many wonderful things said about God in the Bible, but here's one of the most beautiful. He's the one who "heals the brokenhearted."

WAS THERE EVER A MORE cheering word about God than this: "He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds"? That comes from Psalm 147, a song of praise to the Almighty. "Great is our Lord and abundant in power," exults the psalmist. "His understanding is beyond measure, he determines the number of the stars. He gives to all of them their names." Yes, and this sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, this Galaxy-Maker and Star-Namer, is also the compassionate one who mends broken hearts and heals the wounded spirit.

When Life Crushes us

Many of you listening today know what it is to have a broken heart. I'm sure of that because of the letters many of you write. Perhaps you are feeling now the heartbreak of desertion. Your partner of many years has left you for someone else. The one who had professed so much love has gone away now, heedless of your feelings, trampling on your heart. How can you ever get over that?

Maybe it's a long-cherished friendship that has been wrenched apart. It seems that your heart was knit together with that friend of yours and now the break between you has all but torn you in two. You've lost what seemed the best part of yourself. How could it have happened? How could the one you had trusted most turn away from you like that? No one knows the pain you feel.

Some of you are suffering today from grief. There's a loved face you see no longer, a familiar voice you won't hear again. Memory is bittersweet, hinting at joys but stabbing you with present loss. Someone wrote, quite matter of factly: "My family is gone . . . my husband died eight years ago. Dad died two years ago and Mom died last Mother's Day. The home is sold and gone too." Can you hear the pain and pathos there? All the dear ones who made life full and bright, even the home place, all gone now. What heartbreak!

Some of you write about your disappointments, your vanished dreams, your strangled hopes. You're out of a job with no prospects of employment. You feel ashamed, unwanted, worthless, and how that hurts! The project to which you gave the best years of your life is about to collapse and all the hope you have left is about to go down with it. You're facing the hard fact now that what you most wanted in life can never be yours, and you're sick of soul about it, heartbroken.

What can I say to you who are so broken in spirit? Glib answers, easy formulas would be a cruel affront. There are no quick remedies, no ready assurances for people crushed by life. But I can echo the witness of other shattered ones—this psalmist, people I know. I can even make it my own testimony to you because I've been there. "He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds."

How does he do it? Sometimes through caring people, by sending someone to our lives who's like an angel in disguise. I know a young man who's been addicted to drugs for 12 years, five times hospitalized, teetering on the brink of total despair and ruin. But he's found a place of help, a support-base, and most marvelously, a friend. You can almost see his brokenness coming together before your eyes and a whole new life beginning. Sometimes when your world is smashed, God brings along someone to listen, someone to share a little of the pain, someone to "be there." Strangely, beautifully, you feel yourself healing.

Often when you're facing a blank wall of despair, he opens a new door. An unexpected opportunity comes your way. Your pain makes possible a service of love, a ministry to someone else, that never would have happened otherwise.

It may be, as time goes on, that it's a sense of God's presence which sustains you. You somehow know that he's bearing you up, that he's on your side, that he's in this with you. And that begins to make life liveable. That's what a cancer

sufferer told me not long ago: “He’s with me. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

Sometimes his healing comes on the wings of hope. We are comforted by his promise. Things won’t ever be the same here—we know that. We’ll struggle with our pain, our disappointment, our loss, as long as we live. But better things are ahead. An undreamed of healing is waiting over there. “God himself will be with them,” is the promise. “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3,4). Yes, sometimes God’s Word is a great hope.

Another Kind of Heartbreak

But there’s another way in which your heart can be broken. We’ve been thinking of how that can come about through your circumstances, through what happens to you. But heartbreak also visits us when we become conscious of our sins. In fact, it’s to this kind of inner suffering that the promise of God especially applies, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

There’s a great prophecy in the book of Isaiah about the anointed servant of the Lord, the Messiah, binding up the brokenhearted. But here these shattered people are identified with the humble, the penitent, the contrite in spirit. Job was one of those. In the presence of God, he said, “I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). Isaiah was one, “Woe is me for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, and mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). Peter was one. He fell on his knees before Jesus and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk. 5:8). The apostle Paul was still another. After he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he could call himself the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15) and cry, “O, wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24). Now this brokenness arises not from injury, loss, or disappointment but from encountering the living God. In his presence, people become acutely, painfully aware of their sinfulness.

King David’s experience is a vivid illustration of this. Months after the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, David was confronted by God’s

prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 11:1–12:25). He told David a story through which the king unwittingly condemned himself. Nathan drove the point home: “You are the man!” (12:7). He brought David face to face with his sin and into the presence of God. Then the king’s heart was broken.

Psalms 51 is a poignant expression of that brokenness. We overhear the cry of a wounded spirit. David’s sorrow over sin is expressed first in confession: “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done that which is evil in your sight” (Ps. 51:3,4). He acknowledges his wrong and sees it to be ultimately against God. Further, he acknowledges that sin is a deep, pervasive reality in his life, that he has always had a bent toward it. “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (v. 5).

Then there is an appeal for God’s forgiveness. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (vv. 1,2).

But there is more here than a desire to be cleansed and acquitted. David now hates the evil within his life and longs to be delivered from it entirely.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. (vv. 10,12)

Do you see what’s happening here? A man, upon meeting God, feels keen distress over his sins and sinfulness. He despairs of any help or healing within himself and looks toward God alone for pardon, cleansing and renewal. That is the cry of a broken heart.

Healing for such soul hurts is swift and sure. To a broken Isaiah, God says through his messenger, “Your guilt is taken away and your sins forgiven” (Isa. 6:7). Jesus restores a Peter, pardons a Paul, and makes them both witnesses to his redeeming grace. And David can sing with gratitude,

I acknowledged my sin to thee and I did not hide my iniquity.
Then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

Costly Healing

This latter healing is difficult and costly. The God who speaks all things into being and names the stars can easily comfort those who are crushed by their circumstances. He can send forth his angels as ministering friends. He can open new doors of opportunity for the sorrowing and give them a sense of his own presence. He can speak the Word that cheers their hearts with hope. But to heal hearts broken for sin takes far more. For that, the heart of God must be broken too. For that, he must come to share our lot and suffer on our behalf. In the person of his dear Son, he must be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement that belongs to our peace must be laid on him. For it is only by his stripes, his wounds, that we are healed. (See Isa. 53:5). In his sorrows, we find our salvation.

What a gospel this is, friends! What a caring physician is the Lord for wounded spirits! God is no far-off observer, ministering to our needs at a safe distance. He comes down into our plague-ridden world and takes upon himself the worst consequences of our evil way. In Christ, he dies for our sins so that we may have forgiveness and become whole. That's why there's a balm for stricken hearts and healing for wounded spirits. The servant of the Lord binds up the brokenhearted by giving himself on our behalf.

Where does this gospel find you today? There are some for whom a broken heart, a contrite spirit, sounds anything but attractive. That's the last thing in the world they want! I read recently in a news magazine about one of our celebrated authors. As he looked forward to the future, the one thing he was sure about was that he'd "never be pious." A sense of indebtedness to God, a brokenness of spirit before him, was no part of this man's plans.

Maybe you are somewhat like him, reasonably well satisfied with how you're doing, confident that you can take care of yourself. You feel no need of God's mercy, no yearning to be forgiven and cleansed. There is nothing in you that cries out to be transformed within, to receive a new beginning. And so this word about a God who "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" has little interest for you.

If that be the case, then my prayer for you today is that your heart will be wounded. I'm not wishing for you any calamity. God forbid that you should be deserted, bereaved, or crushed by disappointment! But I do pray that you will so become aware of God's holiness and mercy, that you will so see your life in the light of Christ's cross, that you will know yourself to be a sinful man or woman and call upon God for mercy. I pray that you will despair of all efforts to excuse yourself, to make yourself right with God, and will trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. It's only the lost ones, friends, who can be found, only the wounded who can experience healing, only those who feel the pain of repentance who can know the great joy of God's salvation.

So if you feel your need today, look to Jesus Christ dying in your place. Confess to him your sins. Call on him to be your Savior. Abandon your life to him and his lordship, and you will know this very day that he heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Blessed be his name!

Study Questions

- 1. There seems to be so many ways in which our hearts can be broken! What, in your experience and observation, are the most common ways in which that happens?*
- 2. How does healing for the brokenhearted usually come?*
- 3. How do people come to have what David calls "a broken spirit"?*
- 4. How is it costly for God to heal our spiritual brokenness?*
- 5. The Old Testament proverb says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." In what sense is God's wounding of our hearts the work of a Friend?*

Chapter 20

WHEN YOUR PAIN GOES ON AND ON

Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?

Jeremiah 15:18, RSV

What would you say to a friend who was suffering from pain that had no foreseeable end? Or perhaps you're someone in that very predicament. Is there any hope for you?

“WHY IS MY PAIN UNCEASING?” That’s what the prophet Jeremiah wanted to know. That’s what he asked God. “Why,” he went on, “is my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” He was a man feeling acutely an anguish that went on and on. “Why, Lord,” he cried out, “why won’t the agony stop?”

Why Pain?

C. S. Lewis once wrote a book entitled *The Problem of Pain*. He calls it “God’s megaphone,” his way of getting our attention. It shatters our illusions that all is well with us and that we can know lasting happiness apart from him. Lewis points out how pain can sometimes have blessed effects on people. He has seen great beauty of spirit in some who were great sufferers. If the world with all its pain is “a vale of soul-making,” Lewis concludes that “it seems on the whole to be doing its work.”

That was Lewis the philosopher, the lay theologian. Much later in his life, he wrote about pain quite differently—now as a suffering human being. Married comparatively late in life, he found an undreamed-of happiness with his beloved,

but then had to stand by helplessly while she died a lingering, painful death with cancer. He called that book *A Grief Observed*. It raised a question like Jeremiah's, "Why is the pain unceasing? Why won't the wound heal?"

Dr. Paul Brand has written extensively in our generation about the "why" of pain. He is a surgeon whose specialty is reconstructing damaged human hands. Most of his professional life has been dedicated to working with sufferers from leprosy, or what is today called Hansen's Disease. It numbs the capacity of a sufferer's feet and hands and face to feel pain. As a result, patients often damage their limbs and facial features without even realizing it.

If a normal person twists an ankle, the shooting pain will keep him from putting weight on it for a while. But if he has Hansen's Disease, he will probably go on using that injured ankle until it is permanently damaged. Or he may apply such pressure in trying to turn the key in a rusty lock that he cuts his finger to the bone. He may rinse his face with water so hot it will eventually blind him. In each case, he is without the priceless warning signals of pain.

Dr. Brand, after watching hundreds of such casualties, extols the gift of pain. God has built into our lives a marvelous warning system that can alert us to a host of dangers. It makes possible for us a whole range of activities that would be almost certainly destructive to us if we couldn't feel discomfort. And the fact that pain really "hurts," in a way that we can't turn off at will, makes the warning system reliable. What's more, a nervous system sensitive to pain makes possible for us and protects for us a host of experiences that are pleasurable.

The Gift Nobody Wants

But pain remains what someone has called "the gift nobody wants," at least in large doses, or over long periods of time. Jeremiah and a host of other suffering people like him are not questioning the value of pain, nor doubting that it has some good effects, not even wishing that there were no such thing. They simply protest that excruciating pain, especially when it rages incessantly, makes all such considerations seem worthless. "Yeah, tell me about it," they fume; "tell me how good it is for me when it hurts so bad I can't stand it!"

All of us can see reasons for pain, and theoretically imagine positive results. But when pain has done its warning work, when we've had more than enough lessons and legacies from it, why must it keep up, run on out of control? What possible value can there be in a torment that consumes us and drives us mad? That's the question we're looking at now: why won't it cease?

Some of you have endured extreme, prolonged physical suffering. You know what it does to people. One of my close friends bore that to a degree that seemed to me incredible. For a dozen years, he lived the majority of his hours, both day and night struggling with a pain which, as Brian Sternberg once put it, "oscillates from ridiculously high to excruciating." It's miraculous to me that my friend kept his sanity and his faith.

Some of you know continuing pain of another kind. It's something about your appearance that never fails to humiliate you around others. It's a personality quirk you wish you didn't have or a limitation that galls you. It's the alienation you have from someone, which try as you will, you can't overcome. Or perhaps it is the suffering of a loved one—an anguish you can't seem to relieve. The ache of it never completely leaves you. You can hardly imagine what life would be like if you didn't have to bear that pain.

For Jeremiah, it had to do with his prophetic calling. He had been summoned by God to bring a message to the people of Jerusalem, a frightful word of approaching doom. That was difficult enough, but when people refused to hear him out and laughed him to scorn, the pain became more intense. When the so-called religious leaders of his time called him a false prophet and even a traitor, it twisted the knife in his soul even more. And when for all his trouble he was exposed to constant abuse and had to live in terror of a violent death, it was just too much for a man to endure.

The agony was that God wouldn't let him stop. He had to keep on sounding forth a message that brought upon him more waves of vicious hatred. He was heartbroken at the way Jerusalem seemed to be going on heedlessly to its doom, bent on destroying him in the process. What good could there possibly be in all this misery and frustration? Why must the anguish of it drag on interminably? "Lord, why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?"

He complains, “I did what you told me to do, and you’ve seen the hellishness of what has happened. Isn’t that enough? Why is the torture stretched out?”

No Answer

How did God answer Jeremiah’s question? If you read on in Jeremiah 15, beginning at verse 19, you’ll come upon a “thus says the LORD.” God speaks in response to the prophet’s cry. But when you read what the Lord says, you wonder if he heard the question. At least he didn’t answer it. Jeremiah didn’t learn why he had to go on suffering. He didn’t learn who was responsible for the pain, who was to blame. He didn’t find out what God was trying to say to him through it all or what it was intended to accomplish in his life. There wasn’t a word about why.

The patriarch Job had much the same experience. He asked a barrage of questions of God as to why a series of heartbreaking calamities had come upon him. But he never found out why. God met him. God spoke to him. Job found out how pretentious he had been to ask those questions and how great the Creator is. But God never said, “This is why your suffering had to go on and on.” He never addressed that question at all.

And I dare say that if you have been asking God, “Why is my pain unceasing?” you haven’t gotten any explanation from him either.

I surely haven’t. In our family, we have had a deep, persistent sorrow that has gone on now in one way or another for 40 years. We’ve wondered about it, searched our hearts, and lain awake many nights struggling with the question why it had to be this way. But we’ve never gotten an answer to that. God has spoken to us deeply, wonderfully, but he’s never let us in on why the pain continues. We’re as much in the dark about that as we were 40 years ago.

Do you know what I’ve concluded from that? We don’t know why in particular instances pain goes on unabated. And God is apparently not of a mind to tell us. So even though that question keeps bubbling up almost irresistibly for us, I decided long ago to stop pursuing it. I remember that God didn’t tell Job or Jeremiah why. He didn’t even tell his own Son why when Jesus was in the midst of awful suffering. He’s probably not going to tell me. And if he won’t, I’m not

going to try to figure out why on my own, nor am I going to take seriously someone else's theories about that.

I cringe whenever I meet with amateur interpreters of providence, people who claim to know just why disasters have overtaken other people. These interpreters imply, as Job's "comforters" did, that if the suffering ones will just do a little self-searching and a little honest confession, they can figure out why. I don't believe it.

We know that suffering exists in the world because we're a flawed race. We're survivors from the wreck of a golden ship that went down at the dawn of history. There is suffering because of sin, that's true—the Bible teaches it. But that a particular sorrow which goes on and on is the result of a particular sin—the Lord never taught us that.

On numerous occasions, he emphatically denied such a teaching. The man born blind wasn't that way because his parents had sinned or because he had rebelled in some pre-existent state. The tower in Siloam didn't fall on a group of bystanders because they were the most flagrantly wicked people around. So don't torment yourself looking for explanations when tragedies fall on you and keep you pinned down. And please don't push other people into that weary, fruitless search, either.

The Promise

Here was God's answer to Jeremiah: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me" (Jer. 15:19). How about that? "If you return to me, Jeremiah, if you seek me with all your heart, you can know my restoring power and you can live in my presence." What is more, God goes on, "If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth." In other words, "If you will proclaim the message I give you, it will be just as though I were speaking. You will be genuinely identified with me."

Further, God told him he didn't need to worry about his enemies: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you" (Jer. 15:20). Then comes the best word of all: "for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD."

Did you hear that, friends? No matter what you have to go through as the Lord's servant, he'll be there. He hasn't forgotten you. He won't abandon you. You'll never really be alone. That's what the risen Jesus said to his disciples when they had all kinds of unanswered questions: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Because of Jesus Christ, friends, that word of promise takes on new depth and power. This is not a Creator shouting distantly from the heavens. This is Immanuel, "God with us." This is the one who came to share our humanity, to bear our sins and carry our sorrows. This is the one who knows what it is to be human. This is the one who can struggle and be tempted, who can feel hunger and pain, who can bleed and die, and who can weep at the grave of a friend. He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities because he has been there. When he says, "I am with you," it means that he's involved, that he's sharing the pain that goes on and on. That does for us what no explanations or painkillers could ever do. "In all our afflictions, he is afflicted."

But not forever! Though your pain may seem to be unceasing, it really isn't. It will be ended, perhaps very soon. "I am with you to save you and deliver you." God will one day wipe away all the tears. There will be no more sorrow or crying or pain. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous;" says the Psalmist, "but the Lord delivers him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19).

Let God's word to Jeremiah be a message to you. In the midst of the pain and questioning, turn to the Lord with all your heart. Commit your life to Jesus Christ if you've never done that. Concentrate on doing what he calls you to do in spite of the consequences, and lean hard on his word, the answer that's better than a thousand reasons: "I am with you."

Study Questions

1. In what sense is pain a priceless gift?
2. How does continuing pain seem to nullify all its blessings?
3. What kind of answer does God usually give to this question?
4. How is a promise better than an answer?