

THE ABOUNDING JOY OF NEW TESTAMENT HOPE - Part seventeen

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HOW FAITH AND SIN ARE EACH GENERATED BY WHERE OUR HOPE IS PLACED (Pt. 7) - Discouragement

Psalm 42:5 - "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation"

Matthew 26:36-38 - "Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here, while I go over there and pray.' [37] And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. [38] Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.'"

Hebrews 5:7-8 - "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. [8] Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

Hebrews 11:1 - "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Hebrews 12:1-2 - "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

We're continuing our study on the power of Biblical hope. Specifically, we're studying the way the object of our hope affects our growth in either holiness or sinfulness. We've been looking in the last five weeks at the **tools** Satan uses to shift our hope from God to anything else. Today we'll consider the way Satan uses **discouragement** to shift our hope from God alone.

I want to start out by saying discouragement, unlike bitterness or covetousness, is a part of our frailty that isn't treated in the Scripture as sinful **in itself**. In some ways it has almost **become** sinful as a result of the boom in the 70's and 80's and 90's of the Word Faith movement. All sorts of evils were blamed on inward discouragement, especially when voiced out loud in what was dubbed a "**negative confession**." But this has always been a theological reach.

So life can "get us down" at times and I don't think the Bible treats this as a sin against God. But that doesn't mean discouragement isn't **dangerous** to the life of faith and holiness. Discouragement, while not necessarily sinful in and of itself, is another of the tools of the devil that can dislodge our hope in God. Discouragement **spawns** sin by robbing us of confidence in God's future grace in our lives. **And when hope in God dies, sin is just around the corner.** Discouragement is the soil in which false hopes germinate and thrive.

Discouragement destroys hope in God when the circumstances of life seem to **cut off my future**. That's the **hope killing work** of discouragement that the devil delights in. We're talking about seasons of heart where the weight of the day seems to block out the light of God's presence.

It seems to me that the Bible, both by clear **instruction** and by practical **example**, prepares us in advance for the arrival of those times in our lives.

One of the things David referred to in his shepherd-like description of his walk with God was the necessity of times when his soul was "**restored**" in God's renewing strength. What he means is he re-established his **hope** in God alone. He steeled his resolve against the pull of discouragement to distrust God or blame God or lose confidence in God for his future satisfaction or security or joy.

Again, the problem with despondency - like pride, anxiety, or materialism or bitterness - is the way it opens the life up to a host of other sins. Despondency can easily lead to anger with God. Very commonly it tends to make us separate ourselves from the Body of Christ. It can also lead us to attempt to stimulate joy in our hearts by artificial means - material goods, food, and recreational pursuits that turn addictive. We place our hope in anything that will chase the grayness of life away.

Despondency has to be brought to the Word. There is nothing else righteous to do with it. I'm not teaching about a positive mental outlook, or possibility thinking, or maintaining a buoyant self-image. I'm sure those things are fine as far as they can reach, but they aren't soul-reviving. So I'm not talking about merely keeping your chin up or pretending things are better than

they really are. Make-believe is miles from hope in God.

As simply and as practically as I know here is how to **restore** and **keep** your hope in God:

1) **HOPE FOR GOD'S FUTURE GRACE, LIKE FAITH, BEGINS BY ASSERTING TRUTHS THAT CAN'T FOR THE MOMENT BE EASILY SENSED**

Hebrews 11:1 - "Now faith is the assurance of things ***hoped for***, the ***conviction of things not seen***."

The battle you face with despondency is more than a battle with fatigue. That certainly may enter into it. We're not just detached spirits, unaffected by physical bodies.

But there is also a **spiritual component** to keeping your hope in God when discouragement lingers. In addition to whatever may be happening among the threads of the circumstances, there is an additional factor. The devil is a master opportunist. He loves, says Peter, to find those beaten down. People who have high hope in God are unbeatable. But discouraged Christians are like vulnerable new-borns when the lion stalks.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know when your life is getting tough. You can figure that out all by yourself. You and I can't live long without challenges and trials. That's common to all of us. But there are times when the devil comes strategically to **paint your future black**. He **sows doubt** in God's promise.

That's when the situation hits a shift point. Things will either get better spiritually or they will get much worse. Here is the moment **discernment** must be sharpened. All spiritual resources need to be on alert. The devil is now about to **paint your mind with a lie**. The nature of the battle changes. It shifts from your circumstances to your mind and heart. The real battle isn't just against bad health, or a difficult boss, or an overcrowded work schedule, or an unsaved spouse, or a lack of finances. None of those things is the devil's main interest in your life. And none of them is your biggest threat.

At a certain point the battle with discouragement shifts toward the **spiritual**. The devil always turns to your **hope in God**. That's what he's **always** after. The battle you begin to face in despondency is the battle against **unbelief** - unbelief in the promise of God's **future grace**. The temptation is to place your hope where you think it will **work more immediate benefits to your satisfaction and security**. God suddenly seems too slow or too absent.

Here's the point. **Discouragement** makes hope in God **hard won**. You have to fight your initial reflexes. You have to bank on grace you can't see yet. Paul gets the order right - **Romans 8:24-26** - "For in this hope we were saved. Now **hope that is seen is not hope**. For who hopes for what he sees? [25] But if **we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience**. [26] **Likewise** the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

I risk taking too much time on this digression, but the point of this text is too important to skim lightly. It speaks right to the heart of the issue of discouragement and the saving power of hope in God. "**In this hope we were saved....**"

Do you see it? My ongoing **salvation** is tied to banking on unseen hope. This is how the **Holy Spirit** bears down on discouragement. The saving work of the Spirit of God is tied to your unbreakable grip on a future unseen hope when everything else in your circumstances is filled, says Paul, with nothing but **groans**. This is where hope speaks up and says, "**My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever**" (Psalm 73:26).

Note that word, "**portion**." Your **portion** is what you feed on. It's where you find nourishment when discouragement leaves the rest of your life feeling empty and malnourished.

2) **THE POWER OF HOPE ISN'T SO MUCH FROM LISTENING TO YOUR HEART, AS IT IS FROM SPEAKING TO YOUR HEART**

Psalm 43:5 - "**Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.**"

It's true that Paul says that faith comes from **hearing**. But that text is frequently read incorrectly. Look at it quickly - **Romans 10:17** - "**So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**"

The text doesn't say what most people think it says. The text **doesn't** say faith comes from hearing the word of

Christ. It says **hearing** comes from the word of Christ. In other words, the capacity to hear and know truth comes from the word of Christ. The word of Christ is the truth that makes genuine hearing possible. The word of Christ grows faith because it is the only thing that expels the darkness that tries to surface in all our hearts.

So you and I will never overcome discouragement with hope in God by **listening** to our own hearts. We will overcome discouragement and despondency by making our hearts **hear** the word of Christ.

But that hearing is more than just **knowing** what the Bible says. It's making sure that the teaching of the Word is controlling the thoughts and attitudes and actions of my life. This is what sets the Psalmist to **speaking** to his fallen heart. He is mumbling (that's the root meaning of the Old Testament word "**mediate**") to himself the way you repeat something, almost out loud, when you don't want to forget an important phone number before you can write it down.

After 44 years of pastoring, I was trying to figure out what single book I have recommended to more people in their time of trial over the years. Without a doubt, the book that I have passed on to more people than any other is "**Spiritual Depression - It's Causes and Cure**" by **Martyn Lloyd-Jones**. It is simply priceless, in my estimation. In it, he comments on **Psalm 43:5** - "**Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.**"

Here's what he says: "**I say that we must talk to ourselves instead of allowing "ourselves" to talk to us. Do you realize what that means? I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual despondency in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self. I am not just being paradoxical. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you. They bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. *Somebody is talking!* Who is talking to your mind? It is the enemy. It is the old self. Now the Psalmist's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" he asks."**

"His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says, "Self, listen for a moment. I will speak to you. Why are you so cast down? What is disquieting you?" Then you must go on and remind yourself of the faithfulness and goodness of God - Who He is - What He has already done - what He has promised in His Word He will yet do! This is what you must say to yourself. You stand against the old self, you stand against the mocking crowd, you stand against the whole world if need be and proclaim with this Psalmist, "I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance!"

The world will tell you that happiness comes from **listening** to your heart - from listening to your own dreams - from loving your inner light - from entering the inner quiet and meditating on your inner self. People keep journals and diaries. That can be both good and bad. If you're not careful journals can frequently reinforce sinful thought patterns because they merely journal what they're already feeling.

Probably they think they're being "**honest**" with their inner selves. But what people need to do in their journals and diaries is not merely put down in words what their heart is **feeling**, but write down solidly on paper what they need to be **saying** to their heart. That way journals can be a powerful tool for spiritual life.

Your heart's feelings truly scream out for attention. But to **devoutly listen** to your heart is deadly. My Bible tells me that my heart is "**deceitful and desperately wicked.**" Don't just **listen** to your heart. **Talk** to your heart. Hope in God will grow as your capacity to **hear** God grows through the word of Christ.

3) **LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE WE NEED TO KNOW, OUR LORD ACTUALLY MODELED THIS IN HIS INCARNATE, COMPLETE HUMANITY IN HIS DARKEST HOUR OF LIFE**

Hebrews 5:7-8 - "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, **with loud cries and tears**, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. [8] Although he was a son, he **learned obedience through what he suffered.**"

Matthew 26:36-39 - "Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." [37] And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, **he began to be sorrowful and troubled.** [38] Then he said to them, "**My soul is very sorrowful, even to death;** remain here, and watch with me." [39] And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

Hebrews 12:2 - "...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

We almost don't know what to do with some of these verses. They take our minds to the very edge of the mystery of the incarnation.

We know we long for the presence of Jesus when **we** pray. But we don't usually consider that Jesus actually longed for His disciples' presence with Him as **He** prayed.

Then there's that idea of Jesus "**learning obedience**" by what He suffered. What are we going to do with that? Certainly He didn't learn obedience as though He were ever **disobedient**. He never sinned. He never disobeyed the Father in any way.

Then what was it that Jesus learned? And how does it all relate to the subject of **despondency and the soul's dark hour**? Let me just say humbly what I see in these verses for the church:

- a) **The trials Jesus faced were genuine, discouraging trials that reached right down into the bottom of His soul.** That is, He didn't face this situation the way Superman would leap over a tall building. Jesus wasn't just **imitating** a struggling man. He **became** one. He really was tempted in all points just as we are.

So He didn't just cruise through these situations on automatic pilot. Think about it. What can Matthew mean when he says Jesus' soul was so "**sorrowful**" ("**troubled**" in many translations) within Him that He thought he was going to die long before He even got to the cross?

Perhaps you can relate in some small way to that. Do you ever feel that the darkness is so real **it's going to suck the life right out of you**? That's what Jesus is talking about. He knows about these dark battles of soul.

- b) **In some way I can't fully understand, the Bible says Jesus "learned obedience" from His trials.** Not that He was ever **disobedient**. But certainly He had never experienced anything like this before. **The man** is, for the very first time, taking on the sin of the world and experiencing **distance** in His relationship with the Father. Jesus reaches the outer limits of what can be endured. He's reaching and praying for strength.

Can you imagine that? And then Jesus prays words that make the angels gasp - "**Father, if it's possible, may this cup be taken from me!**" Jesus is praying, at least momentarily, for something **different** from the Father's will.

And maybe here's where the learning part comes in - "**Yet not as I will, but as You will.**" Not that Jesus ever **disobeyed** the Father, but all through eternity past, in the fellowship of the Godhead, the Father's will was an **automatically shared will**. And there was never anything other than **joy** in the sharing of that will. Then, for the first time ever, there's **despondency and despair** in that same will. And, for the first time ever, the Son learns to **surrender** His will to the Father. The Son now must **place His hope in the future, still out of reach, grace of Father God** - "...for the joy that was set before Him..."

4) **THE LESSONS WE LEARN FROM JESUS IN OUR DARK HOUR**

- a) **He calls close friends to be with Him** - "He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee" - Even though He will go on alone as He prays, **it will help Jesus to have friends close by, united with Him in prayerful intercession.**

Learn with great care here. If all Jesus needed was to connect with Himself and find His own inner space and peace then being **alone** is the ticket. But **inner tranquility** and **spiritual strength** aren't the same thing. True, He prayed alone. But He didn't want to pray **all alone**.

The **greatest** mistake in finding hope in God in the face of discouragement is also the most **common**. The most common reflex reaction when your heart is troubled is to **withdraw**. You're wounded. You're so discouraged. No one understands. No one cares. And we need Jesus to teach us to **resist the temptation to withdraw from other believers.**

The process of spiritual discovery and renewed hope being a **corporate** experience rather than an **individual** one is outlined beautifully in **Psalm 73**. Consider this passage:

Psalm 73:12-17 - "Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. [13] All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. [14] For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. [15] If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have **betrayed the generation of your children.** [Others will benefit from the Psalmist's faithfulness. He thinks about that.][16] **But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, [17] until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end."**

Without probing the details, I think you can see the Psalmist was growing **weary of mind** and **discouraged in heart** over issues that made no sense to him. And he was about to give it all up - pack it in. Until there came a burst of enlightenment. And it came, not in his **prayer closet**, but in the **sanctuary**.

The sanctuary isn't just for **emotional relief**. It isn't just some positive atmosphere or mood. This troubled Psalmist says, **"I couldn't get the right picture of the truth. I couldn't figure out what was going on. I was a brute beast before you, Lord. Then I entered the sanctuary. And then I understood!"**

Back to what we learn from Jesus:

- b) **He opened His soul to them.** He tells them flat out, **"My soul is deeply troubled, to the point of death"** Should a good leader tell his followers that? Should the Son of God ever say that? Jesus didn't **bluff**. He faced His own heart honestly.
- c) **He asked for the disciples' prayer. "Stay here and keep watch with me"** And we know from **verse 41** that keeping watch meant interceding in prayer.

Ask people to pray with you. Not just **for** you. **With** you. Get them to agree with you in prayer. Don't just assume they will pray. Use and value the times you get with the church at prayer.

When we have prayer groups, **get people to unite around your need**. Why, O why, do we resist this? Don't pretend everything is fine. **Use the time to gather help and strength for your heart!** That's what Jesus did.

- d) **He poured out His heart to the Father** - **"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me!"** Now, being that Jesus was all alone when we prayed these words, how did Matthew know Jesus spoke those exact words as He prayed to the Father? How would the three disciples know?

There are really only **two possibilities**: Either, as the writer of Hebrews says, Jesus prayed with such **"loud cries"** that even at a distance, they could hear what Jesus was saying, **or**, more likely, Jesus **told** the disciples that He had actually made such a request to the Father.

Either way, the lesson is the same. Jesus wanted the disciples to remember that He didn't just **"say"** half-baked prayers in His time of despair. He wanted them to know that He **poured His whole heart out to Father God**. He invited us all to **pray with passion and honesty**. Be open. Be honest. Prayer had nothing to do with religious show.

- e) **He rested His soul in the sovereign wisdom and grace of the Father. "Yet, not as I will, but as You will."** I say again, we're following Jesus into places where we should take our shoes off. This is very mysterious, intimate ground. **But the prayer doesn't end with the request Jesus came with at the beginning.** There has been a dealing with the Father.

So what actually happens on the inside of Jesus? "Even here, Father, in spite of the burden I feel, in spite of the shame I bear, in spite of the silence of heaven, **my hope is in You. Father, Your will is always best, perhaps most so when it's not easy. Though I've never been here before, You are still to be trusted and followed. Your will is more important than this hour of darkness."**

- f) **He fixed His eyes on the glorious future grace that awaited him on the other side of the cross.** Our Hebrews text fills in this glorious detail. It tells us of the **power of hope in Jesus time of dark trial: Hebrews 12:2** - **"...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."**

The time of darkness is a **tunnel**, not a **cave**. The devil is lying to your heart. Weeping lasts for a night, but joy does come in the morning.