

WHEN YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM YOUR MOST TROUBLING THOUGHTS - Part Six

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket

DOUBTS CAUSED BY EMOTIONS OUT OF CONTROL

Some of you would remember a couple in this church who used to travel a great deal to Florida. Reni and I used to visit a fair bit with them in their home and almost every time Ken and I would get into the same argument about how foolish it was for them to drive all the way every time.

You see, Ken didn't like to fly. He was openly scared to death of flying. You couldn't get him into a plane if it was the last way to travel on earth. He used to tell me that over and over again.

Then I would get impatient. I would try to change his mind. I don't know *why* I did that. I just did. I would sit down with him and argue all the right statistics. I would tell him that more people die in car accidents than plane accidents. I would tell him that your chances of dying in an airplane are calculated (and this is the truth) to be exactly the same as dying from a lightning strike. I would go over these arguments with him until both our wives fell asleep on the couch. Nothing I said made any difference to him.

It took me a long time to realize why I couldn't change his mind. Ken had serious *doubts* (that's what this series is all about) about flying. But the doubts had nothing to do with any of the statistics I was so brilliantly offering. His doubts didn't come from *sound reason*. If they did, my arguments would have won the day.

Ken's doubts came from a much more powerful place than his *head*. These doubts came from his *emotions*. *Fear* was producing Ken's doubts. All the statistics in the world don't cancel out the power of an irrational but intense fear. Arguments are for the *head*. They don't always carry the same clout with the *emotions*.

Now, whether or not you like airplanes isn't really of crucial importance. It's just a matter of personal convenience rather than great eternal significance. But these same doubts - *doubts caused by emotions out of control* - also come in our Christian walk to rob the soul of confidence in God. They can suck the life out of an otherwise sound and living faith.

1) **THE POWER OF UNRULY EMOTIONS OVER THE LOGIC OF FAITH**

There are people who lose *faith in God* without ever being *reasoned out of their beliefs*. Frequently their emotions simply take their reason hostage. And with the mind held at bay faith is hijacked and emptied of its power.

In other words, it is dangerously silly to assume that once faith is embraced with the mind, the mind will continue to embrace the faith automatically until some stronger *reason* comes along to dislodge it. The human heart is ruled by *emotions* as powerfully as it is ruled by *reason*. And frequently the emotional factor out-guns the power of logic and understanding.

There are many examples of this in the Scriptures. Here's one that is classic and well known:

1 Kings 19:1-8 - "Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. [2] Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." [3] Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. [4] But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." [5] And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him,

“Arise and eat.” [6] And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. [7] And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, ***“Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.”*** [8] And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.”

This is almost too incredible to believe. Elijah has just come through some of the most glorious times of his life. He has just dueled it out with the false prophets on Mount Carmel. And he won. Then he knelt down and prayed rain down from the sky when all anyone could even hope for was drought. In modern terms, Elijah is at the top of his game. Then, suddenly, we see him begging to die. Why? Because an enemy has threatened him.

I know enemies can be a problem. But this goes against all logic. A God who can send fire down from heaven and feed Elijah with miracle cake from heaven can easily take care of Elijah. He has solid ***proof*** of that. So this fear almost defies explanation.

But it's not really that strange at all. Elijah is worn out. He's depressed, hungry, and vulnerable. He's overstretched and under-rested. And it's clear from the passage that God thinks he's under-nourished too. That's why God ***feeds him twice before He instructs him even once***. Then God lets Elijah sleep. They will talk later. God is good.

So here we see Elijah worn out and exhausted. And this kind of physical taxation is creeping up on him without his awareness of its damaging force. He has come to the point of actually doubting God's care and goodness and provision. All of the conquests of yesterday are of no use for this moment. It's not that God has deserted Elijah. No one has come along to disprove God's existence. But Elijah is ready to throw in the towel. The mighty prophet is thinking suicide.

But ***despair*** is not the only cause of these non-theological doubts. ***Loneliness*** can have the same effect. **C.S. Lewis** once wrote that the time he wrestled most vigorously with doubt was when he was traveling and staying alone in a strange hotel room.

And there are other causes as well. Sometimes a small, aggravating pin-prick to our pride is the most effective tool for deflating a living faith. ***Anger*** has dethroned more faith than all the arguments atheists can marshal. The opinion of a fellow-Christian that you find insulting - the remark against you that seems loveless and harsh - the program you were decidedly against that got implemented - the other person who got the recognition for your efforts - ***these are the things that fuel unruly emotions and suck the power out of the most intelligent Christian minds***.

2) **WHY OUR EMOTIONS HAVE SO MUCH POWER**

If you've been following this whole series you'll know we've made the distinction between ***start-up doubts*** and ***maintenance doubts***. Start-up doubts are the result of an ***improper beginning*** to the Christian life. Many doubts raise their heads later on in the Christian life only because some things were never done thoroughly enough at conversion. We looked at some of these doubts in the first three studies.

Maintenance doubts are doubts that arise farther on in the life of discipleship. We've looked at several of these kinds of doubts in the last two studies.

Here's what I'd like to emphasize in this teaching. The main cause of a living, reasonable, solidly understood faith coming off the rails at some later moment in the Christian life is the explosive power of some unguarded, uncontrolled emotional response to an external situation. It could be anything from a passionate sexual desire, a heated confrontation with a fellow-Christian, a deep-seated bitterness allowed to grow like a tumor, envy of someone else's success - or any other of a million possibilities. But the common factor is a ***passion*** pulverizing

sound **judgement and reason**.

Perhaps more than anything else, this is what the Bible means when it cautions against the **lusts of the flesh**. Lusts are not just sexual things. Lusts are **desires that dominate sound judgement - desires that over-ride reason and self-control**. These lusts don't attack the **truth content** of your faith. They don't disprove God. They don't invalidate the content of God's Word. They don't have to. They simply put a knife to the throat of sound Bible knowledge and take charge of the control panel of the believer's faith.

Where do our emotions and desires get such devastating power?

- a) **Our emotions are so powerful because of the Fall** - If it weren't for the effects of sin, our minds, wills and emotions would all function in divinely intended balance. But such is not the case.

It's not that our emotions are **more fallen** than any other part of our beings. And it's not that our emotions are, of themselves, **more wicked or sinful** than any other part of our beings. It's just that our emotions are **more susceptible to variation and influence** than any other part of our nature.

And this makes them a particularly favorite target of the Devil. He knows it is much easier to change the way we **feel** than the way we **think**. He knows that people who would never dream of **denying their Lord** can easily **nurse anger against a brother**. So he aims of his efforts at our emotions because our emotions are the part of us that is most **vulnerable to outside influence**.

- b) **Our emotions are so powerful because they are more vivid than our reasoned thoughts** - You reason in black and white. Your emotions are in color with big screen/big sound impact. You have to **think through** your reasons for faith. Your emotions simply **sweep over you** like a tidal wave over the side of a ship.

Your emotions hit you like a Hollywood movie. The only power they have over you is the **reality they create**. There is no more actual substance in those emotions than the bomb on the movie screen is a real explosion. The power of unruly emotions is the **subliminal picture** they create in your imagination. But the **feeling** they generate creates its own reality. The temptation **isn't** irresistible, but it **feels** irresistible. The anger **isn't** justified, but it **feels** justified. The despair isn't totally black, but it **feels** totally black.

Such is the power of emotions gone wild. They have the power to sweep the most reasoned mind into wild extremes so quickly. What was nothing yesterday is earth-shaking today. What was so certain and solid yesterday is meaningless today. Emotions are vivid creatures indeed.

So these are the **two primary problems** with unruly emotions. There is nothing sinful in emotions themselves. They are given by God and enrich life in their proper place (Would you like to hang around with a person who absolutely never laughed?). But emotions have the potential to become great enemies of faith for these two reasons: First, **they are too easily influenced**. And second, **they are too influential**. Those are the two danger points in the battle with strong faith.

3) WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THIS PROBLEM?

Given our present make-up, this is a battle plan every one of us must have in place at all times. I think there are three very basic steps to take against doubts caused by emotions out of control:

- a) **Recognize the central place of the mind in the Christian life.** That statement needs to be explained so it won't be misunderstood. I **don't** mean that the mind is the **only** important part of the Christian life. I know that faith is so much more than merely understanding and agreeing with doctrinal truths in the head. There is a cold academic approach to Christian living that is miles from the life of the Holy Spirit.

But, having said all that, the mind still gets a bum rap in current Christian lingo. You have probably come across someone saying something like this: "God, how we need our lives revived! Take all the truths we have in our heads and move them all a foot lower - down into our hearts!"

If the person means that truth in the head is useless until it's applied to the life I heartily agree. But there is something else that needs saying as well. The plain fact is that if you want to talk about the **heart** you need to understand that the vast majority of the times the word "**heart**" is used in the Scriptures it's used to refer to the **mind**. In only a very small percentage of cases does it refer to the emotions.

And the reason is basic and obvious: The mind, while not the **only** part of the Christian life, is the **controlling** part of the Christian life. It is what governs and steers and regulates the God given emotions and responses that lie within us.

C.S. Lewis, in typically fresh fashion, may have given one of the best definitions of the life of faith when he wrote the following in **Mere Christianity**:

"Supposing a person's reason once decides that the weight of evidence is for faith. I can tell that person what is going to happen to him in the next few weeks. There will come a moment when there is very bad news, or he is in some trouble, or is living among a lot of other people who do not believe as he believes, and all at once his emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his belief. Now faith, in the sense of which I understand the word, is the art of holding onto things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your change of mood."

That's it exactly. The mind is the **regulator** of the will and the emotions. That's why, most of the time, the mind is called the **heart** in the Scriptures. **Heart** fittingly describes the **central place and role the mind has**. This is the same way we call the core issue on any subject the **"heart of the matter."**

And it's important to consider all of this **right at the start** of the process of discipleship. If the **emotions** were given the key place in **coming** to Christ, in other words, if they were in the **driver's seat** right from the beginning, it's very hard to bring them under the control of the mind at some later point in time.

- b) **Know your emotional triggers.** It's very important **you** know them because the **Devil** knows them very well. This is the kind of strategy I think of when I hear the words **spiritual warfare**. The **lusts of the flesh** - those unruly emotional currents and responses right in your fallen nature - are the **primary tools** of the Enemy of your soul. This is **how** he comes and robs and kills and destroys.

Check your patterns of failure. See what makes you blow up in rage, what incites lust, what generates materialistic impulses, what causes you to hate others:

Psalm 19:12-13 - "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. [13] Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be **blameless, and **innocent of great transgression.**"**

This is the Psalmist dealing with emotional doubts **before** they gain momentum. He knows there's more going on under the surface of his person than just the rational processes - **"Who can discern his errors?"**

You have probably asked the same question in different words. ***“Why in the world did I say that?” “How could I have been so stubborn?” “How could I not have seen this coming?”*** This problem runs deep. And this inward prayer and discernment is necessary if ***“presumptuous sins”*** are to be avoided. ***“Blameless”*** isn’t quite the same as ***sinless***. But the goal here is to be ***“innocent of great transgression.”*** The Psalmist doesn’t want inner inclinations and dispositions to create sins with ***momentum***.

- c) ***“Talk to yourself more than you listen to yourself.”*** This is not a one-time action but a life-long habit. Your emotions are not going to go away, nor should they. But they must never be given the pulpit in your heart. They must be constantly instructed. If they do most of the talking your faith will never stand. Like my friend in the opening illustration, you will never get on that airplane as long as your fears do all the talking. Speak to your emotions rather than allowing them to speak to you.

Years ago, in a rather surprising fashion, the great devotional writer **Oswald Chambers** wrote, ***“There are certain things we must never pray about*** (this from the man who wrote ***“My Utmost For His Highest”***). ***Moods, for instance. Moods never go out by praying. Moods only go out by kicking....Many of our problems in the Christian life come not initially because of some committed sin, but because we are ignorant of our own nature.”***

So a good portion of developing a strong faith is keeping the emotional, responsive side of our nature under the governance of the informed mind. Emotions are like the kids in the back seat of the car on holidays. They’re wonderful to have, as long as they’re in the back seat. But it’s disastrous for everyone if you allow them behind the wheel.