

Mingling Groans of Pain and Songs of Hope

Charles Haddon Spurgeon on Depression

It's a good thing he wasn't born in the 20th century. Many believing brothers and sisters would label his tendency to melancholy sinful, or evidence of a lack of self-discipline, or even the result of shallow faith. A psychologist would probably send him away with a prescription and a self-help book with twelve easy steps to overcome depression. But



Charles Haddon Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest preacher of the 19th century, had a different attitude toward his affliction.

Spurgeon knew “by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between.” He warned his students, “Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we *must* at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.” Although he said, “Spiritual darkness of any sort is to be avoided, and not desired,” he never assumed that a Christian suffering depression must necessarily be in sin. Instead, he wrote, “I note that some whom I greatly love and esteem, who are, in my judgment, among the very choicest of God's people, nevertheless, travel most of the way to heaven by night.”

Spurgeon goes on in his book, *Lectures to my Students*, to give some of the reasons believers fall into sadness. He also provides hope for those so overtaken.

“Is it not first, that they are men?” Spurgeon acknowledged that being a Christian did not make a man or woman immune from suffering. In fact, he said, “Even under the economy of redemption it is most clear that we are to endure infirmities, otherwise there were no need of the promised Spirit to help us in them. It is of need be that we are sometimes in heaviness. Good men are promised tribulation in this world.” But he points out that through this suffering, we “may learn sympathy with the Lord's suffering people.” Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians 1:4; God “comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

“Most of us are in some way or another unsound physically.” Spurgeon suffered terribly with a joint disorder that was diagnosed as gout. He was forced to stay in bed, sometimes for weeks at a time in excruciating pain. “I have been brought very low,” he wrote to his congregation during one long bout, “My flesh has been tortured with pain and my spirit has been prostrate with depression. . . . With some difficulty I write these lines in my bed, mingling them with the groans of pain and the songs of hope.”

With characteristic balance, Spurgeon understood that physical pain and natural temperament contribute to depression, but did not allow his students to use them as an excuse for despair. “These infirmities may be no detriment to a man's career of special usefulness,” he said. “They may even have been imposed upon him by divine wisdom as necessary qualifications for his peculiar course of service. Some plants owe their medicinal qualities to the marsh in which they grow; others to the shades in which alone they flourish.”

“In the midst of a long stretch of unbroken labor, the same affliction may be looked for.” Spurgeon's schedule was exhausting. In a typical week, he preached ten times. He answered approximately 500 letters, taught in a ministerial college, administered an orphanage and dealt with dozens of individuals concerning their souls. He wrote for publications, entertained visitors at his home, taught his own family and encouraged his bedridden wife. It is no wonder that his health suffered under such a workload. Spurgeon's church finally insisted on regular vacations for him each year. Spurgeon told his students, “The bow cannot be always bent without fear of breaking. Repose is as needful to the mind as sleep to the body. . . . Rest time is not waste time. It is economy to gather fresh strength.”

“One crushing stroke has sometimes laid the minister very low.” On October 19, 1856, the 22 year old Spurgeon spoke for the first time in the Surrey Gardens Music Hall in London. The church was no longer big enough to contain the crowds of people who wanted to hear him preach. Thousands packed into the music hall, seating themselves in aisles and stairways after all the regular seating was full, and hundreds more waited outside, hoping to hear part of the sermon through the windows. Just after Spurgeon began to pray, someone in a balcony shouted “Fire!” People pushed and shoved to get out of the building, and a stair railing gave way under the pressure. Seven people were killed and 28 more were injured. The tender-hearted Spurgeon never completely recovered from the emotional impact of this incident. He wrote, “I was pressed beyond measure and out of bounds with an enormous weight of misery. The tumult, the panic, the deaths, were day and night before me, and made life a burden.”

Many have experienced a natural disaster, the death of a loved one, devastating financial loss or overwhelming disappointment when a child or a fellow believer has fallen into sin. Spurgeon offers hope from his own experience. “The fact that Jesus is still great, let his servants suffer as they may, piloted me back to calm reason and peace. Should so terrible a calamity overtake any of my brethren, let them both patiently hope and quietly wait for the salvation of God.”

“The lesson from wisdom is, be not dismayed by soul-trouble.” In the end, Spurgeon acknowledged that depression may come to some believers for no discernable reason. He did not consider it an illness, a sin, or surprising condition, but an inevitable season in the life of a Christian and an opportunity to demonstrate trust in the God who will one day wipe away every tear.

Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide.

—Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*

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