

Fight the Good Fight: Despondency

Clint Sheehan

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Through our study of the Exodus story we learned that God has a specific call for us as His people and that He has equipped us to fulfill this calling. There is nothing that God has ever called anybody to do that He has not also equipped them to do, and that is true here. This call is to a life of genuine faith. We find this call repeated throughout Scripture, for example;

^{NAS} **1 Timothy 6:12** Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

We know we have been equipped by God to successfully carry out this calling because of promises such as;

^{Own} **Philippians 2:13** for it is God is the working one in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

Last week, as we began to explore this theme of fighting the good fight of faith, we saw two central reasons Christians struggle to victoriously fulfill this calling; lack of knowledge of God's word, and our inherent double mindedness as we fluctuate back and forth between faith and unbelief. This led us to a twofold strategy for success. Step one was to increase our knowledge of God's word, both in general, but also specifically as it relates to our particular personal struggles. Step two was to identify the source of our unbelief and to turn to God to help us eradicate it at its roots. In the coming weeks we will apply this strategy to help us overcome the specific things Christians struggle with, today we start with despondency.

Despondency can be defined as living in a state of feeling hopeless or dejected. It is a depression of spirits from loss of hope, confidence, or courage. It is not the same as clinical depression which is a medical condition but it is much more severe and prolonged than just feeling down. The U.S. Center for Disease Control reports that 9% of Americans report feelings of hopelessness or despondency. Another government survey found that 10% of respondents report sadness all or some of the time. Statistically this suggests that 3-4 people in our congregation suffer from despondency on an ongoing basis and most likely almost all of us do, or have suffered from it from time to time.

If you are now, or ever have suffered from a deep despondency then you are in good Biblical company. After his spectacular victory over the prophets of Baal in the showdown at Mount Carmel the prophet Elijah was on a spiritual high. That joy however quickly turned to deep despondency following the threats from Jezebel;

^{NIV} **1 Kings 19:4** ... [Elijah] himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. ...

Consider Moses during the exodus and his despondency resulting from the burden of leading a group of people whose faith and obedience rose and set more often than the sun and moon;

^{ESV} **Numbers 11:14** I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness."

There is the prophet Jeremiah, sent by God to preach a message of repentance to a people who had no desire to listen and obey, and who never did repent in response to his preaching;

^{NIV} **Jeremiah 20:7** O LORD, you deceived; me, and I was deceived you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. . ¹⁴ Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!... ¹⁷ For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.

Then there is the prophet Jonah, sent to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness to the Assyrians, a fierce people who had brutalized his nation. A message, which ironically resulted in the repentance of the Assyrians;

^{NAS} **Jonah 4:8** And it came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."

Last but not least we have the example of Jesus Himself, in His last days, as he contemplated the cross that lay before him;

^{NIV} **Matthew 26:36** Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Note that all five of these individuals were driven by the troubles of life into despondencies so deep that they all felt like dying. Note also however that none of them became actively suicidal. This shows the severity of despondency, even in the life of a true believer. It can be an emotional wasteland in which the person no longer wants to live and yet they are not willing to attempt to take their own life. The first thing we need to realize is that despondency in and of itself is not a sin. On the other hand, just giving into it without attempting to fight back is sin. To escape despondency we must fight back. We see that Jesus immediately fought back against His despondency;

^{NAS} **Matthew 26:39** And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt." ... ⁴² He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done."

Just as Jesus fought back against despondency, He encouraged us to do likewise;

^{NAS} **John 14:1** "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

^{NAS} **John 14:27** "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

We can begin to develop a strategy to deal with despondency by looking more closely at how Jesus overcame His despondency. So, how did Jesus deal with despondency? First we notice that He chose His closest friends to be with him;

^{NAS} **Matthew 26:37** And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

The spiritual and emotional support of those closest to us is vitally important because despondency is too dangerous of an enemy to be met alone. Jesus was open and honest with His friends and He asked for their help;

^{NAS} **Matthew 26:38** Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

We need to set aside pride and fear, as Jesus did, and make ourselves vulnerable by being open and honest about our condition. This difficult yet simple act can result in a massively oppressing weight being lifted from our shoulders. From there Jesus prayed fervently;

^{NAS} **Matthew 26:39** And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt." ... ⁴² He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done."

God already knows what's in our heart, not praying about it does not hide it from God, so we might as well pour our heart out to God seeking His help. While these strategies all helped turn the tide, we learn elsewhere that Jesus ultimately overcame the despondency of the present through His confidence in the joy of the hope of a better future;

^{NIV} **Hebrews 12:2** ... Jesus, ..., who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is set before us as our example to follow;

^{NIV} **Hebrews 12:2** Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, ...

This is a perfect example of living now by faith in future grace, a theme as we saw which repeated itself throughout the Exodus story. We can endure the trials of today because we are confident God has a better tomorrow ultimately in store for us.

John Piper notes the great importance of looking to these Biblical examples of the battles of the faithful against despondency. He writes;

"God has put these testimonies in the Bible so that we might use them to fight the unbelief of despondency. Wherever despondency might come from, Satan paints it with a lie. The lie says, "This is it. You will never be happy again. You will never be strong again. You will never have vigor and determination again. Your life will never again be purposeful. There is no morning after this night. No joy after weeping. All is gathering gloom, darker and

darker. This is not a tunnel, it is a cave, an endless cave."

That is the colour that Satan paints on our despondency. And God has woven his Word with strands of truth directly opposed to that lie. The law of God *does* revive (Psalm 19:7). God *does* lead to springs of water (Psalm 23:3). God *does* show us the path of life (Psalm 16:11). Joy *does* come with the morning (Psalm 30:5). So the psalms illustrate for us the truth that unbelief is the root of yielding to despondency; but faith in future grace takes the promises of God and throws them against despondency."

Scripture is full of many examples of the godly fighting back against present despondency by faith in future grace;

^{NAS} **Romans 8:18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

^{NAS} **Psalm 73:26** My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

This gives us a good start, now we need to tie things together so that we can answer the question: How do we fight the good fight of faith against despondency? Recall that faith-struggles in general are rooted in a combination of a lack of knowledge and in doublemindedness so we fight back against despondency by knowing God's promises and believing them and this process starts by turning to the word of God;

^{NAS} **Romans 10:17** So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

Although faith is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, God has arranged things such that this fruit comes through the hearing or reading of Scripture. As we hear or read the Bible, the Holy Spirit works through the words we hear or read producing, strengthening, and growing faith in us. We don't need to understand how this process works, we just need to believe it. Daniel Whittle wrote of this very thing in his great hymn;

I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.

I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing us of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.

But I know whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day.

Knowing and believing God's word equips us to begin to fight the fight of faith against despondency but alone it is not sufficient. The problem is that our doublemindedness, the lingering unbelief of our flesh, can be a powerfully destructive force. Consider for example;

^{NAS} **Romans 8:28** And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

In any trial knowing and believing this promise can give us the strength and direction we need to persevere, that is until unbelief rears its ugly head. Unbelief whispers to us, "true, but do you *really* love God" or "true, but did God *really* call you?" Thus in one fell swoop unbelief can undercut the very help and strength that can be ours from the knowledge of God's promises.

Although our victorious fight of faith hinges on our knowing and believing God's word we need an additional weapon in our battle against unbelief. This weapon which allows us to combat our doublemindedness by fighting back at the roots of unbelief is taking God's word and preaching it to ourselves. This is exactly the strategy employed by the psalmist in Psalm 42;

^{NAS} **Psalm 42:3** My tears have been my food day and night, While *they* say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ... ⁵ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And *why* have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him *For* the help of His presence.

Notice that in verse 3 he openly confesses his despondency and then in verse 4 he turns on himself and preaches to himself a message of faith in future grace. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains this concept very well in his commentary on Psalm 42 where he writes;

"The main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Am I just trying to be deliberately paradoxical? Far from it. This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. 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 problem of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself, 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been repressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you'. Do you know what I mean? If you do not, you have but little experience.

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down'—what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God'—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God'."

To conclude, in our struggles against despondency we need to read God's word, we need to seize God's promises of future grace, and we need to believe them. Then, rather than sitting back and letting our mind run away on us we need to take charge of our mind and take those promises and preach them to ourselves, emphatically and repeatedly. Scripture is full of many promises of future grace which can help in times of despondency but perhaps none is better than;

^{NAS} **Romans 8:18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Knowing God's word, believing it, and preaching it to ourselves must be the core of our battle against unbelief in our fight against despondency but we should also bring in the supports we saw modelled by Jesus in Matthew 26; choosing close friends to be with us, being open and honest and asking for their help, and praying fervently for help. In this way we can fight the good fight of faith against despondency.