

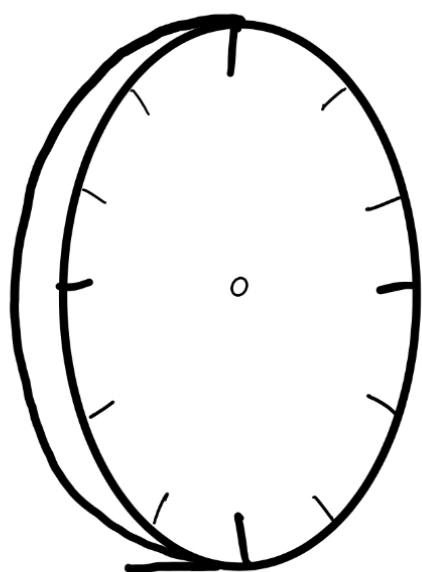
JOEL 3:16 MATT 5:16

SALT SHAKERS

Issue 70



JUN 2023



TIME IS RUNNING OUT

Laodicea



Sadness (2)

Depression

Jonah's Cry out of the
Belly of the Fish

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Time is Running Out



Cheryl Lim

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Eph. 5:16 Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

⚠️ ⚠️ ATTENTION! Please read on if you are prone to the following:

1. Spending a great part of your time in idleness, doing nothing that benefits your soul or body, or that of the neighbour's.
2. Spending time in wickedness, in pursuit of ill purposes to the hurt of yourself or the neighbour.
3. Spending all of your time in worldly pursuits, caring only about what you will eat or drink, how to lay up treasures on earth and live a pleasant earthly life.

Most of the content in this article is a summary of two works by Jonathan Edwards, the American theologian. This article aims to call us to set a high value on time and exercise wisdom in redeeming it so that it is not lost. While the June school holidays have ended, it is opportune for us to reflect on how well (or not so) these weeks have been spent.

Time is Precious

Consider why time is precious:

1. **Time is very short.** A scarce commodity is naturally awarded a high value, especially if it is a necessity. During the famine in Samaria when they were besieged by Syria, "an ass's head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of dove's dung for five pieces of silver" (2 Ki. 6:25b). And our time on earth is as such, as aptly described by James, "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." (Jam. 4:14b) In contrast, there is much work given by God to do while we yet live on earth. There is no time to spare.
2. **Time may discontinue at any time.** Time is short, but how short? Do you know how much remains? A day? A week? A year? Do we who are in health think nothing of prizing our time? Would you only treasure time if you knew you had one night left? A wise man, therefore, makes careful use of his time, to lose none of it, because he is uncertain of its continuance.

3. **Once passed, time may not be recovered.** With other earthly possessions, man may often, though at some pains or cost, recover them if they were parted with. You could recover money that was lost or an heirloom that you pawned. But this is not so with time. Once time is gone, it is gone forever. No pain or cost can ever recover it. Consider the time already past in your life – 20, 30, 60 years? If it was not improved, it cannot be helped and is eternally out of our reach. What remains, therefore, is to improve the use of the little time that is left in our lives.

Why Improve Our Use of Time?

Ponder some of these reasons:

1. We are accountable to God for the use of our time. As servants and stewards, we are called to use the time given to us for our appointed work. As each night approaches, are we ready to give an account to our Master of how we have spent the day? And if man must give an account of every idle word spoken (Matt. 12:36), what more every moment spent in idleness? Considering these, would we not conduct ourselves otherwise each day?
2. We have already lost a lot of time. Time, as it is, is already short. It is made even shorter by what we have wasted. Hence, there is an even greater need to improve the use of what is left. For all the time spent on worldly cares and vanities, neglecting the interests of our souls, we have that much time less to do our work. And for many of us, we may have lost the best of our years – the time of youth – in pleasure-seeking and mirth-making. So let us rouse up and apply ourselves to profitable work!
3. Time is so highly valued, especially by those who can speak from experience. Perhaps, such as one who is on his death bed, who is now sensible of the inestimable worth of time. What they would give, but for an inch of time. So, will we heed this exhortation to value time, or will we only learn through experience, by which time it may be too late?



Boast Not of Tomorrow

The preciousness of time implies that it is folly to procrastinate. Take heed to the inspired words of the wise man, King Solomon:

Prov. 27:1 Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.

1. Solomon here exhorts us not to boast of tomorrow. Boasting of tomorrow is to speak or act as if tomorrow were our possession, or that we might depend on it. It is like the rich man that spoke to himself, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19b).

2. It is like us when we set our affections on the enjoyment of this world such that our lives are consumed by a pursuit of them. For when we are addicted to carnal mirth, we act as if we have continued enjoyment of them for more days than the present. Rather, if we were sensible that our days could end at any time, we would not make these temporal pleasures the foundation of our comfort.

3. It is also like us when we manifest pride in our earthly circumstances or envy others. Though we may be rich or in positions of honour today, we will not be puffed up in pride unless we depend on having it tomorrow. Neither would we be envious of the titles and pleasures that others enjoy, unless we think we could depend on having these in the future.

Reasons for Not Boasting

We do not boast of tomorrow because we have no grasp of a future time. We do not know if we shall see tomorrow or indeed, what we shall see in it. We are completely dependent on the will of God; our lives are in his hands. Present health and youth, or the care taken to avoid danger and disease are no sure grounds of continuation for another day.

To those who say "To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:" (Jam. 4:13b), the apostle James reproves, "Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that." (Jam. 4:14-15)

...if we were sensible that our days could end at any time, we would not make these temporal pleasures the foundation of our comfort.

Practical Advice

Let us conclude with some practical advice to improve our use of time and how we ought to spend each day.

1. Improve your use of time without delay. Or else, more time will be lost. If we now recognise its preciousness, let us not put off improving it. Speak not of a more convenient time in future, but begin today.

2. Improve the use of time where it is most precious. While all time may be said to be precious, some parts are especially so. One example is the Sabbath day and the time spent in public worship. Let this time not be lost through sleep, carelessness or wandering thoughts. The years of youth are also to be treasured greatly; let them not slip away.

3. Improve your use of leisure time. During times when we are free from physical and earthly cares, these are opportunities to be used for the good of the soul. Beware of using such time unprofitably that we would be hard-pressed in giving an account to God. Relaxation and recreation are to be used in service of our work, so that our minds and bodies may be refreshed for the callings given to us.

4. Watch and be ready for the coming of Christ, as taught in Matt. 24:42-44, Mark 13:32-33. Live in eager anticipation of meeting our God, not wasting the precious time that he has given us, or boasting of tomorrow.

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Lessons from God's Letters to the Churches (8): Laodicea



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Laodicea was one of those churches a short distance from Ephesus, clustered around Ephesus which was organized by Paul and the evangelists working with him during Paul's second missionary journey. But these seven are, taken together, representative of Christ's church, with its strengths and weaknesses in the dispensation of the coming of our Lord.

These seven churches are providentially created by God to define the main purpose of God in what we call, "The New Dispensation." In the "Old Dispensation" the church was limited to the Jews who were under the law along with its types and shadows. They pointed ahead to the promised Seed, the Christ, the Reality of the types in the gathering of the elect church from all the nations of the earth.

The beginning of the New Dispensation was on Pentecost when the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit through whom Christ gathers his church, was poured out.

As the church of Christ manifests itself in its institutional form, this church has different weaknesses and strengths. Its general tendency is to grow weaker spirituality as five of the churches demonstrate. And, if they do not repent of their weaknesses, they continue the downward slope until they become Laodicea.

There is one striking thing about the church of Laodicea. In its letter that the church received from Christ, the Head of the church, it is evident that the church had fallen so far from the true church that it only one step away from becoming the false church.

The only good thing of Laodicea was that it still had a few people of God in it, and the Lord even warns this false church that these few would be called out of it if it did not repent.

Yet the history of the New Testament church tells us that there was still a faithful church in Laodicea in the third century. Its minister was a man by the name of Apollinaris. He was a young man at the time of the Council of Nicea (325) and served as minister of the church of Laodicea. However, he was a heretic when he taught that the divine LOGOS took the place of what we call the human spirit, thus denying that our Lord did not have a complete human nature. For the LOGOS was divine. We have a human body, soul and spirit. Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 12 that upon our death, "the spirit shall return to God who gave it."

Here we are not so interested in Laodicea of Apollinaris' day, but of the day the Lord wrote this letter.

That day was around 100 AD when the apostle John, who wrote this letter as dictated by Christ, was banished to the island of Patmos. Two things are possible. Either Laodicea repented at the Lord's command, or the few faithful whom the Lord called out, left their apostate church, which had become false and re-established the church. Christ himself is knocking at the door and calling out the faithful.

We will talk more of Laodicea in the next article, if the Lord wills that I am still able to write.



God's Saving Will in the New Testament (4)



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The Will of Christ

Having exegeted both Ephesians 1:1-14 and Romans 9:6-24, and set forth Scripture's teaching on the saving will of the Triune God, we now turn to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Even in the Old Testament, the Messiah proclaimed that His mission and His joy was to obey Jehovah's will:

Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart (Ps. 40:6-8).

The New Testament quotes and expounds these words, framing Christ's incarnation and crucifixion as the execution of His Father's saving will:

Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law; then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:5-10).

In three successive chapters in the Gospel According to John, our Saviour makes the same point:

My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work (4:34).

I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me (5:30).

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me (6:38).

The book of Acts explains that the terrible (yet wonderful) events that happened to Christ, including His arrest, crucifixion and death, were according to God's sovereign will of good pleasure: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (2:23). The opposition of both the people and the leaders of the Jews and the Gentiles was likewise included in Jehovah's eternal decree:

For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done (4:27-28).

The apostle Paul states the purpose and result of our Saviour's death as the realization of the will of the Triune God in the deliverance of His church: He "gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world [i.e., age], according to the will of God and our Father" (Gal. 1:4). As we have seen earlier, this is the will of God in the election of His church (Matt. 20:15-16; Rom. 9:6-24; Eph. 1:3-14).

The orthodox doctrine is that our Lord Jesus Christ, being both fully God and fully man, had two wills: a divine will and a human will. His sinless holy human will was always subservient to His divine will, the will of the Triune God. For proof, we cite the words of Christ Himself on a Sabbath at the temple, in Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee and in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives:

I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me (John 5:30).

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me (John 6:38).

O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt (Matt. 26:39b; cf. Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42).

Christ executes God's saving will not only in accom-

plishing our redemption 2,000 years ago but also in applying that redemption to us by His gracious election, which is accompanied by its necessary and scriptural corollary: unconditional reprobation. Thus we quote Christ's reflections on the results of His preaching and miracles:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him (Matt. 11:25-27; cf. Luke 10:21-22).

Here observe four important points. First, the sovereign God, the "Lord of heaven and earth," reveals the gospel to some and hides it from others (as the temporal outworking of eternal election and reprobation respectively; Rom. 9:18). Second, all this happens according to God's eternal good pleasure: "Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight." Third, Jesus expresses gratitude to His heavenly Father for all this, thereby displaying the perfect unity between the will of Jesus and the will of the Triune God: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." Fourth, Christ's word here is the repudiation of the well-meant offer, an ineffectual divine desire to save the reprobate: "neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will [or wants or wishes to] reveal him." To all those whom He desires to save, He certainly grants spiritual illumination!

Jesus also speaks of regeneration or the new birth in terms of His saving will: "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will [or wants or desires or wishes]" (John 5:21). Here again, Christ explicitly rejects the well-meant offer.

In the upper room on the night He was betrayed, the Lord warned Peter of the danger he and the other disciples faced: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you [plural], that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Then He spoke words of personal comfort and calling to Peter: "I [according to My will or desire] have prayed for thee [singular], that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (32). In our Saviour's utterance to one man, Peter, we have an example of Christ's prayer and promise to preserve all His saints (cf. John 17:9, 11, 15; I Cor. 1:8-9; Phil. 1:6; I Pet.

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

1:5).

The Lord Jesus desires the glorification of His people, as we see in His high priestly prayer: "Father, I will [or want or wish or desire] that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). As with other Scriptures we have cited recently on Christ's saving will (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 5:21), here again we see that He wishes or wants or wills or desires to save only and all the elect, those "whom thou hast given me."

Having considered texts which speak of individual elements in the ordo salutis or order of salvation (specifically regeneration, preservation and glorification), we now turn to a biblical passage that mentions several spiritual blessings in connection with Christ's saving will:

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:37-40).

Here we read of God's election of the church in eternity (perfect tense: "all which he hath given me") resulting in our being given to Jesus in time (present tense: "All that the Father giveth me"). All those given to Christ in eternity and time are granted the following blessings: faith ("come to me"), preservation ("I will in no wise cast out;" "I should lose nothing"), "everlasting life" and the glorious resurrection of the body ("I will raise him up at the last day"). All this is the outworking of God's saving will which is accomplished through Christ's will (embodied in actions) during His earthly ministry, throughout the church age, at His second



coming and forever!

The miracles that Jesus wrought during His public ministry were marvellous works of God that authenticated His Son and His message. Like salvation, they depended solely on Christ's will. On one occasion in Galilee, the Lord told the Twelve, "I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way" (Matt. 15:32b), so He performed a wonder in feeding 4,000 men, besides women and children (33-38). In connection with the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6, Jesus revealed Himself as the Bread of Life and the agent of God's saving will (37-40).

The wise leper understood and professed that his healing lay solely in the will or desire of Jesus:

And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed (Matt. 8:2-3; cf. Mark 1:40-42; Luke 5:12-13).

Repeatedly, we see that Jesus always performs His will or desire, as with His choice of the 12 disciples: "And he goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto him whom he would: and they came unto him" (Mark 3:13). During Passion Week, His disciples asked, "Where wilt thou that we go and prepare that thou mayest eat the passover?" (Mark 14:12b). The sovereign Lord explained that an upper room was already prepared for them, and He gave details to Peter and John as to how they would be led to it (Mark 14:13-16; Luke 22:8-13). Later that day, Jesus said to them, "With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15), and so He saw to it that His wish was fulfilled for His sovereign desire is always realized!

Sometimes even Christ's closest disciples, such as Peter, James and John, misunderstood or opposed His will:

Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias (Matt. 17:4).

And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did? (Luke 9:54).

Jesus did not allow such tabernacles to be built or such fire to descend, contrary to the wishes of His disciples. When there is a clash between His holy will or desire and that of even His most intimate friends, His will must

always prevail, as even Peter ("Lord ... if thou wilt") and Zebedee's sons recognized ("Lord, wilt thou ...?").

Matthew 23:37

Just as there are especially two New Testament texts on the saving will of the Triune God that are wrongly cited by many as support for the well-meant offer (I Tim. 2:4; II Pet. 3:9), so there is a verse that is often appealed to as if it taught that Christ desires to save everyone head for head, including the reprobate:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! (Matt. 23:37).

"There you are," they proclaim, "Jesus wanted to save people but they were not saved. Here we have proof that the Son of God has a universal saving desire that tries but fails to deliver many people. Thus Christ preached the well-meant offer!"

Notice, first, what Jesus did not say. He did not complain that He had willed or desired to gather Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was not willing (and had stopped Him). He did not protest that He had willed or desired to gather Jerusalem's children, but Jerusalem's children were not willing (and had stopped Him). Logically, if Christ had willed or desired to save X but X was not willing (and had stopped Him), that would teach that His saving will or desire is not irresistible, but this is not what Matthew 23:37 says.

Second, a key distinction is made in the text and must be observed by its readers. On the one hand, there is Jerusalem, the Jewish religious leaders, the people whom Jesus has been excoriating throughout this chapter, including in His repeated denunciation, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). On the other hand, there are Jerusalem's children (Gal. 4:26), the elect sons and daughters who belong to the spiritual Zion (Heb. 12:22-24), whom He wills or desires to gather together as His beloved people in the blessed fellowship of the covenant of grace.

The third point follows from the last and concerns Christ's tone. In Matthew 23:37, Jesus is not pleading like a beggar, beseeching the hypocritical Jerusalem religious establishment to allow Him to save them. Instead, He condemns them, asking rhetorically, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape

the damnation of hell?" (33), so why would He be trying to save them? Immediately after the controverted text, the Lord pronounces this judgment: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (38)!

A fourth issue concerns the application of Matthew 23:37. It is not a gospel appeal, as in the apologetics and preaching of the well-meant offer. The text is the climactic and heartfelt rebuke by Jesus Christ of the false Jewish religious leaders who, contrary to their office and profession, did not want the Messiah to gather the true children of God. The incarnate Son contrasts His holy saving will regarding His own seed with their unholy desire and efforts to stop Him: "how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"

By extension, Matthew 23:37 is a searing indictment of all leaders of the false churches in our day who try to stop people from learning the true biblical gospel and coming to Christ for salvation. Its application in the twenty-first century is the same as that of two other fearful utterances from the lips of our Lord:

But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in (Matt. 23:13).

Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered (Luke 11:52).

Nicodemus and the man born blind in John 9 would gladly attest, as would converts from Roman Catholicism, liberal Protestantism, the cults, etc., that despite the evil

will and cruel efforts of unbelieving church leaders, the saving will of the Triune God in Christ triumphs in all the elect. The word of Jesus Himself, quoted earlier, explains why:

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me ... For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day (John 6:37-39).

The true interpretation of Matthew 23:37, as outlined in the four points above, has an impressive historical pedigree, including Augustine (354-430), the doctor of grace, who battled against the Pelagians and semi-Pelagians in the early church:

Our Lord says plainly, however, in the Gospel, when upbraiding the impious city: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" [Matt. 23:37] as if the will of God had been overcome by the will of men, and when the weakest stood in the way with their want of will, the will of the strongest could not be carried out. And where is that omnipotence which hath done all that it pleased on earth and in heaven, if God willed to gather together the children of Jerusalem, and did not accomplish it? Or rather, Jerusalem was not willing that her children should be gathered together, but even though she was unwilling, He gathered together as many of her children as He wished: for He does not will some things and do them, and will others and do them not; but "Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth" [Ps. 135:6a] (The Enchiridion, xcvi).

Jonah's Cry out of the Belly of the Fish (Jonah 2)



Pastor Marcus Wee

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The event of Jonah in the fish's belly is both a historical reality and a miraculous sign. We believe that the physically impossible happened, a man living for three days in a fish's belly. We do so by faith, faith that takes God at His Word.

This event is also a miraculous sign, a sign of God's gracious salvation and righteous judgement (Luke 11:30-32). Of righteous judgement, in punishing wicked, unbelieving sinners

who reject the reality to which the sign of Jonah pointed, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. A sign also of gracious salvation, in saving hell-deserving sinners, such as the Ninevites, and such as we are.

Now, in Jonah 2, we witness Jonah's experience, his deep affliction, as he cries out to God out of the belly of the fish.



Uttered in Deep Affliction

Jonah's cry was uttered in deep physical affliction. He was thrown right into the raging sea. He was dragged under the waves, right into the heart of the sea, to a certain death. v. 3: "For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me."

At some point after being dragged under the waves, the great fish that God had prepared swallowed him (1:17). God's miraculous preservation of Jonah's life in the fish's belly continued his affliction. v. 6: "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever." Jonah felt that he had reached the lowest places of the earth, barred in such that he could not escape. Jonah was experiencing certain death. God was prolonging and intensifying Jonah's chastisement, in order to turn Jonah from his rebellious way.

Jonah's cry was uttered especially in deep spiritual affliction. His miserable experience of a certain death was compounded by his keen awareness that he was suffering under God's anger, and deserved no less than what he was going through.

The anger of God that Jonah experienced was the experience of hell itself, in Jonah's own soul. Jonah states in v. 2: "out of the belly of hell cried I." The Hebrew word translated "hell" is often translated as "grave". Jonah was not bodily in the grave or in hell, but experienced hell in his soul. Because of Jonah's rebellion, the floods of God's anger compassed Jonah about: "all Thy billows and Thy waves passed over me" (v. 3b); "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul" (v. 5a). God was far from Jonah: "Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight" (v. 4a).

Yes, God's people are ultimately spared from the suffering of hell. Thanks be to God, we do not suffer and die for our sins, because Christ suffered and died in our place. But when we live in rebellion against God, the fatherly displeasure of God is akin to the anguish of hell: experiencing God's anger, and feeling cut off from God in our sin. As we sing in Psalter 203: "To live apart from God is death".

God was chastening Jonah, causing him to experience hell in his soul. God was deepening the repentance of His rebellious prophet, causing him to cry out unto God in his deep affliction.

Uttered in Faith

Jonah's cry to God shows his faith. Even before this, Jonah had already shown evidence of his repentance, as he sub-

mitted to God's will. He fled from God no longer, but instructed the mariners to cast him into the sea (1:12).

But God in His prolonged chastisement of Jonah in the fish's belly was deepening Jonah's repentance, working in Jonah a greater sorrow for his sin. God was trying Jonah, purifying his faith.

Jonah's faith was evident in his turning from sin. v. 8: "They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy". Jonah was not speaking generally about the wicked; he was describing himself, as he had walked in rebellion. Jonah was confessing that there is only sorrow and misery in sin, and in that way, expressing his turning from such rebellion.

Jonah's faith was also evident in his turning to God. To Jonah, God is not an impersonal deity, but "the LORD his God" (v. 1). Jonah addresses God as such: "O LORD my God" (v. 6). When all else was bleak and hopeless about him, Jonah clung onto God by the hand of faith, v. 7a: "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD".

And Jonah resolved to live a life of thankfulness to God, v. 9: "But I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed". In contrast to the "lying vanities" (v. 8) that he had previously observed, walking in rebellion, Jonah was now resolved to obey God, going to Nineveh and preaching to the heathen there.

Jonah's faith is encapsulated in the confession "Salvation is of the LORD" (v. 9). He is here echoing Psalm 3:8: "Salvation belongeth unto the LORD: thy blessing is upon thy people. Selah." Jonah recognised that God alone saves, and that God saves whom He wilt. Jonah knew that his own repentance and faith were the sovereign work of God in his heart.

Answered by God

God answered Jonah's cry, already in the belly of the fish. As Jonah turned from his rebellion, He experienced God's Fatherly favour in the right way of serious repentance (Canons Head 5.5 Article 5). Even if God had not granted Jonah deliverance from the fish's belly, these words of Jonah would be true: "yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God" (v. 6). God had delivered Jonah from the hell of his soul.

In addition to that, God answered Jonah's cry, by granting him deliverance out of the belly of the fish. v. 10: "And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah



upon the dry land." How this must have strengthened Jonah's conviction that salvation is of the LORD! Jonah was in the fish's belly, the belly of hell (v. 2), and God had granted him deliverance. Just as God had delivered Jonah from the type of hell, much more so God would deliver Jonah from the reality of hell itself.

God's answer to Jonah's cry, delivering him from the belly of hell, was not based on Jonah himself, but on another, Jesus Christ. Jonah himself recognised that, by faith. He stated in v. 4: "Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple." Again, in v. 76: "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple." Jonah prayed towards God's temple.

Emblazoned in Jonah's mind, no doubt, was that most important piece of furniture in the temple: the brazen altar of burnt offering. Upon that altar, the sacrificial lamb was burnt as an atonement for the guilty sinner, signifying the wrath of God which consumed the sacrifice in place of God's people. When all else was hopeless around him, Jonah clung by faith to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, of which the temple sacrifices were but types.

Christ Himself descended into the awful reality of hell. Unlike Jonah who's rebellion and which deserved his entombment in the fish, and more, Christ descended into hell, willingly, in obedience to God. He did so on His cross, suffering the wrath of God for our rebellion. He faced wave after wave of God's wrath that crashed over His soul. He was forsaken by God. He descended into hell, for our sakes, so that we would be spared from such hell.

And it is only on the basis of Christ's willing obedience and death for us that God hears our prayers.

So let us pray to God, with the confidence that He hears us, even as we utter our prayers in deep affliction. God is using your affliction, child of God, for that very purpose: for you to turn to Him, to cry out to Him. Do so, with the confidence that He hears us, on the basis of Christ's death for you. Do so, with the confidence that salvation is of the LORD.

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Sadness (2)



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How Do We Properly Deal With Sadness?

God's Word teaches us how to handle our emotions, such as sadness, in healthy, God-glorifying ways. The Holy Spirit empowers us to do this. For, by the grace of God, we are new creatures in Christ. Old things are passed away. All things are become new, including our emotions (II Cor. 5:17). We cannot possibly say everything there is to be said in this article, nor can we address every form of sadness a child of God may go through. But we can lay out some important biblical principles to guide us in handling our sadness in a healthy, God-glorifying way.

1. Draw near to God.

Go back to the example of Hannah we considered earlier. In her sadness, she fled into the presence of God. She poured out her soul before the Lord. She lamented, expressing the honest cry of her sorrowful spirit. God's ears were open to Hannah's cries. God was her refuge and strength. God's ears

are open to you too. He will be your refuge too. When you are sad there is nothing better to do than to run to your God. Your Father says so! "Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee (Ps. 55:22). Jesus urges us "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

When you are sad, pray to your God. Make no mistake, when I say this, I am not giving you the cheap advice that is sometimes given: "if you just pray more and pray harder you will feel better and God will take away your sadness." The Bible doesn't promise that. The Bible promises that God will do what He judges to be best for us, according to His unsearchable wisdom. Though it does not always make sense to us, sometimes it is best for us to continue to go through an affliction. Paul prayed earnestly for the removal of his thorn. But God's answer was "My grace is sufficient for thee" (II Cor. 12:9). Prayer is simply faith talking to God and resting in God. Prayer is covenantal communication and communion with my



Father for Jesus sake. As we talk with our Father, we drink from the inexhaustible fountain of all good, and we are refreshed and encouraged. Our Father sustains us with His everlasting arms! He shelters us beneath His overshadowing wings. Our Father gives us an inner calm, even in the midst of sadness. As Paul says "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:6-7).

As you bring your sadness before the Lord in prayer, delve deeply into the Psalms. The Psalms are God's inspired songbook for the church; but also His inspired prayer book. In His goodness, God has inspired so many Psalms that give powerful expression to the whole range of human emotions. This is a gift! God has given us these Psalms for us to use to pour out our own hearts before Him. Read the Psalms. Meditate upon their words and emotions. Hide them in your heart (Ps. 119:11). Draw comfort from their unfathomable depths. Make them your own. Pray the Psalms. Pray God's own words back to Him! Use the Psalms as a pattern for composing your own prayers, your own lament, and your own petitions. And when you cannot find the words to pray, because your sadness is so deep and dark, that you can barely think or speak, then pray wordlessly, for "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). When you pray, remember that your prayers reach your Father through Christ. Jesus is your sympathetic High Priest, touched with the feeling of your infirmities. Yes, your prayers may have many imperfections clinging to them. But Christ is your Advocate with the Father, who ever liveth to make intercession for you (Heb. 7:25). Do not fear. Do not doubt. Come boldly before the throne of grace! You shall obtain mercy, and find grace to help in your time of sadness (Heb. 4:16).

2. Hold tightly the precious truths of God's sovereignty and God's goodness.

God's sovereignty and God's goodness are two glorious truths that help us handle sadness in a healthy, God-glorifying way. That God is sovereign means He rules over all things. There is nothing outside of His control. Therefore all things take place according to His will, including everything that happens to you. God is sovereign over your afflictions. To borrow the words of our Heidelberg Catechism, "all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand" (Q&A 27). Every sorrow we carry God has given us to bear.

In His goodness, God has inspired so many Psalms that give powerful expression to the whole range of human emotions.

But God is also good! Holy, righteous, loving, gracious, and merciful in everything He does to His people. Everything comes to us from His hand; and His hand is a fatherly hand! Behind the operation of His hand stands the fullness of His divine love in Jesus Christ! Therefore, "He will make whatever evils He sends upon me, in this valley of tears, turn out to my advantage" (Q&A 26). When we face suffering and sadness we must, by faith, hold these two truths together. God is good to me in everything He sovereignly sends me! God is working my supreme good through the evils He sends upon me. Even through my tears, I trust Him! When by faith you hold these two truths together, they, in turn, will hold you up in the midst of your sadness. Consider Job's words, uttered from the pit of sadness: "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him." (Job 13:15). Job believed: God is sovereign and God is good. He is both. Absolutely. Unchangeably. This is the bedrock of the Christian life.

This is not always easy. We do not always understand God's way with us. Yes, my life in all its perfect plan, was ordered ere my days began... but why this way? We cannot always see how God is doing good or bringing good out of our suffering and sadness. Often all we can see is the harm and all we feel is the pain. Gently, the Lord reminds us "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Not my thoughts, not my ways... higher thoughts, better ways! God is God! He is all-wise! How can I expect the ways of the infinite God to fit into the little box of my creaturely understanding? God is too great for that! He is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). He does exceeding abundantly above all that I ask or think when He turns my sadness to my advantage, brings joy out of tears, and beauty out of ashes. When you run up against the wall of God's incomprehensibility, don't try to knock it down. You cannot. You'll only end up hurting yourself. Instead, lean up against it, and rest in the immensity of your faithful God. "Be still, and know that I am God.... The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is

our refuge" (Ps. 46:10-11).

3. Look to Jesus and never take your eyes off Him.

When we are going through a season of sadness, we are very prone to look down, to focus our eyes on our hurt, our hardships, and all the things here below contributing to our distress. Instead, look up. Look to Jesus, and do not let anything take your eyes off Him. Consider the story of when Jesus' disciples were struggling on the stormy Sea of Galilee and Jesus came out to them walking on the water. Jesus bid Peter to come out of the boat, and for a few paces, Peter walked on water too, so long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. But when he let his eyes wander to boisterous waves and wind, he began to sink (Matt. 14:29-30). Sadness can often be like the stormy sea. While our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we are able to walk upon the sea. We can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us (Phil. 4:13). Easily we will start to sink when we take our eyes off Jesus and focus on the wind and waves of our affliction. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus! Never take your eyes off Him! We, like Peter, often do. Just as Jesus reached out His hand to catch Peter, so too He reaches out His hand to save you from sinking.

When we are struggling with suffering and sadness, there is nothing more uplifting than beholding Jesus. We behold Him in the gospel. Look upon Jesus as He gives His life for you on the cross. At the cross, you see the heart of God laid bare. You see what manner of love that Father hath bestowed upon us, that He would give His only begotten Son for our redemption, that we might be His sons and daughters. When you look at Jesus, then you see the supreme proof that God works all things for your good. The crucifixion of the Son of God was the greatest evil ever perpetrated by mankind. Yet out of this greatest evil God performed the greatest good: your eternal salvation. I belong to Jesus Christ. All things must be subservient to my salvation. Even in my sadness, I can say "it is well with my soul."

4. Seek the company of God's people and the loving support of Christian friends.

When we're sad we tend to withdraw into ourselves and pull back from other people. Sometimes we do this to protect ourselves. We feel emotionally fragile and feel we cannot handle interaction with others. Sometimes we do need a little bit of space. However, we should be careful not to isolate ourselves in our sadness. God is pleased to minister to us in our sadness by means of the body of believers. God calls the church to "weep with them that weep" (Rom.

God's Word teaches us how to handle our emotions, such as sadness, in healthy, God-glorifying ways.

12:15). God calls us to "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Part of loving your neighbour as yourself is lending them your shoulder to help carry the burdens they bear.

Be open and talk with other people you trust. A fellow believer at church. Your pastor or an elder. A good Christian friend. Come to church when you are sad. I know, it can be hard sometimes. It can be hard to get up and find the energy to go. Maybe you do not want to face people. But do not rob yourself of powerful means God has given to help us in your time of need. You need to hear God's Word! In the preaching, He leads you in the green pastures and beside the still waters. That's food your soul needs! Especially when you're downcast, now is not the time to remove yourself from the means of grace. You need the communion of the saints as well. Come to Bible study. Attend church functions. Immerse yourself in the community of faith. Not because these things are a magic pill that will automatically make your sadness go away. Rather, these things are the regular means God has given and is pleased to use to build up His people. Don't underestimate them!

There is a word here for those who want to help a friend going through a time of sadness. One way you can show true love to a brother or sister is by being there for them. You do not have to have perfect words to say. Your presence, support, listening ear, and acts of kindness go a long way. It is a reality that other people's afflictions can make you grow weary in well-doing. But when you stick it out with them, you are letting them know, in a powerful way, that you care.

Comfort for When You are Sad

God cares. He truly does. He cares for you when you are sad, downcast, and troubled. God tells you He cares, in His Word "Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Ps. 56:8). "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." (1 Pet. 5:7). God shows you He cares.

We find comfort in the knowledge that God has a good



purpose for your sadness. God draws near to you and draws you closer to Himself. How often is it not the case that believers say that it was in the valley, perhaps even a very dark part of the valley, that they felt most powerfully the presence of the Good Shepherd? God draws near to us in our suffering and sadness. He draws us closer to Himself and causes us to feel the embrace of His love and care.

Another of God's purposes with sadness is that He uses it to exert a sanctifying power in our lives. God uses affliction to refine and purify our faith (1 Pet. 1:7). Sadness leads us to yearn for heaven more and more. When we recognise that this world is only a vale of tears, we more earnestly seek the city which hath foundations. Sadness helps rip our affections off things below and set them on things above. Sadness helps us learn to hold loosely the transitory things of this world. In this light, the words of Ecclesiastes 7:3 make sense: "Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better" (Eccl. 7:3). Thus, as we live our Christian lives in this fallen world, the words of Paul are true of us "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (II Cor. 6:10).

Finally, when you experience sadness, you have this comfort: no sadness of this present life will last. Indeed, even our deepest sadness is but short-lived. All our sadness is light in comparison to the eternal weight of glory prepared for us. We have the comfort of the promise of eternal life with God, which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.

You are saved from sadness. Yes, we may say that! Believer, you are saved from sadness! Salvation in Jesus Christ is salvation from sadness. Not because salvation averts every sadness or suffering that comes our way in this life. We know that is not God's will. There are many sorrows we must go through on our pilgrimage toward heaven. There

is no way around it. Unto us it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Phil. 1:29). "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). But sadness does not have the last word!

Salvation in Christ is salvation from sadness because Christ came to be our Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). He took upon Himself the cause of our sorrow and misery, our sins, and the curse due to us for them. He has borne our griefs. He has carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. With his stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:4-5). Jesus is our Sin-Bearer, our Man of Sorrows! He was put to grief in our place, that we might be delivered from all our sorrows (Isa. 53:10). The work of the Man of Sorrows brings to us eternal joy. We have this joy now. True spiritual joy in Christ that cannot be taken away! We look forward to entering the fullness of this joy on the Day of Christ.

"Weeping may endure for a night," the psalmist says, "but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). This is true. The weeping of this life may endure for the night of this present age, but joy cometh in the morning, at the dawning of the new day, the everlasting day! At the return of Christ, the final sunrise of the Sun of righteousness, when He shall arise with healing in His wings. Then shall sorrow itself be swallowed up in victory! "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

This is your comfort! He is your hope! So, when you are sad, look to Christ, and sing with the Psalmist: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God." (Ps. 42:11).

Our Rejection of Conditions (3): Herman Hoeksema, late 1940s and early 1950s (Part 2)



Rev. Martyn McGeown

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Herman Hoeksema, as we noted in the last blog post, emphatically rejected the notion that faith is the condition of salvation. Instead, faith is part of the salvation that God graciously gives to his elect people. We quoted a good

number of statements from a series in the *Standard Bearer*, "As To Conditions." Let us return to that series. Again, the addition of italics for emphasis is mine:



"Our Confessions uniformly present faith not as a condition which we must fulfill, but as a God-given means or instrument empowering the soul to cling to Christ and to receive all His benefits, and that is a radically different conception from that of condition" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 2 [Oct 15, 1949] 29).

"If faith is an instrument which God uses and works in the heart of man, it certainly cannot be, at the same time, a condition which man must fulfill in order to obtain salvation, or to enter into the covenant of God" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 2 [Oct 15, 1949], 30).

"This is far from saying that faith is a condition unto justification. It only means that the believer is able to receive the grace of justification by faith as a means which is given the sinner by God" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 2 [Oct 15, 1949] 30).

"If, however, faith is a God-given instrument it is completely outside of the category of condition, for the simple reason that, in that case, it belongs to salvation itself. It is part of the work of God whereby He brings sinners to Christ and makes them partakers of all His benefits of righteousness, life, and glory. And part of salvation cannot, at the same time, be a condition unto salvation" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 3 [Nov 1, 1949], 52).

"Faith is not of man. It is a God-ordained and God-given instrument, for 'the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith.' The power or faculty of faith is wrought in the moment of regeneration, and active faith, which the article [Belgic Confession, Article 22—MMcG] has in mind especially, is wrought by the Spirit in our hearts through the preaching of the Word of God" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 3 [Nov 1, 1949], 53).

"But what demands our special attention in this connection is the fact that faith, and that, too, conscious faith, which is wrought through the hearing of the Word of God, is here presented as part of our salvation, given to us by the Holy Ghost. And again I maintain that part of our salvation cannot, at the same time, be a condition which we must fulfill, or with which we must comply, to obtain salvation" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 3 [Nov 1, 1949], 53).

"The grace of faith is a free gift from God. Can, at the same

time, faith be a condition with which we must comply to receive that free gift of God? We feel that this is absurd. Faith, moreover flows from God's decree, and is bestowed only on the elect" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 3 [Nov 1, 1949], 53).

"We are not chosen, and therefore, we are not saved on condition of faith, or [on condition] of the obedience of faith; but we are chosen 'to' faith, and 'to' the obedience of faith, and, therefore, we are saved through the instrument of faith, and in the way of obedience. That, and that only is Reformed language" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 4 [Nov 15, 1949], 77).

"Faith never appears as a condition, but uniformly as a means or instrument which God works in the heart by the Holy Spirit. And to be sure, faith cannot be a condition which somehow man must fulfill and a God-given instrument, which He unconditionally works in man's heart, at the same time" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 5 [Dec 1, 1949], 100).

"Faith, or believing the promise of the gospel, is either a condition the fulfillment of which God demands of man before He saves him, and in order that God may establish His covenant with Him; or the gift of faith, together with the act of believing, is the sovereign work of God, and then it is no condition. And only the latter is true" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 5 [Dec 1, 1949], 101).

"God bestows the justifying faith. It belongs, therefore, to salvation itself. How then can a gift of salvation be a condition unto that gift? This is, evidently, absurd. Moreover, by this gift of justifying faith, bestowed upon us unconditionally by God, He leads us infallibly unto salvation. It is, therefore, all determined by God, faith and salvation, and there can be no conditions" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 6 [Dec 15, 1949], 126).

"Faith is also instrument on the part of God in as far as He brings us through faith to the consciousness of our justification, and speaks to us of peace in foro conscientiae. And on our part faith becomes means in as far as we through the act of faith accept and appropriate unto ourselves the righteousness of God in Christ" (Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26,



issue 9 [Feb 1, 1950], 197).

“According to the confessions faith is always presented as an instrument of God, part of salvation itself. And faith as an instrument which God works in our hearts certainly cannot be a condition at the same time” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 11 [March 1, 1950], 246).

“In the Reformed confessions faith has clearly been circumscribed not as a condition, but as an instrument of God whereby He implants us and engrafts us into Christ” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 11 [March 1, 1950], 246).

“Scripture never presents salvation as following immediately upon faith. In this sense, as salvation in time, it does not follow upon faith as a condition, but it includes faith. Faith is part of salvation itself” (Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 11 [March 1, 1950], 247).

“The Holy Spirit, who first pricked them in their hearts [in Acts 2], regenerated and called them, now through the same preaching of the apostle Peter rouses them into conscious activity of repentance and baptism. Mark you, in all this there is absolutely no condition. The hearers do not take the initiative whatsoever. It is the Holy Spirit, that regenerated them and called them to faith, that now unconditionally rouses them to the activity of repentance. And when they thus repent, that repentance is not a condition unto salvation and unto the remission of sins, but is the active fruit in the hearers of the grace of God that wrought in them and that was first and unconditional” (Herman Hoeksema, “Faith a Condition According to Scripture?” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, issue 12 [March 15, 1950], 273).

In summary, then, Hoeksema, the theological father of the Protestant Reformed churches taught that God promises salvation with all its benefits only to the elect, and that God works faith only in the elect, and that by means of that faith, which is God’s gift to the elect sinner, he makes the elect sinner possess salvation in time. Therefore, faith, which is part of salvation, cannot be a condition unto salvation. Such the Protestant Reformed Churches and her sisters teach, have always taught, and by God’s grace we trust shall continue to teach. We have also always taught that in the application of that salvation in our experience God employs a certain order, so that he grants certain benefits (decreed in election, purchased at the cross, and applied in time by the Holy Spirit) after he works in us to perform certain activities. Our activity of believing (which comes after God’s activity of regenerating and calling us) precedes God’s justification of us by means of that faith: we believe; then we are justified, and without faith we are not justified. Our activity of repenting (which is God’s gift to us, and which also comes after God’s activity of regenerating and calling us) precedes God’s pardon of our sins: we repent; then God forgives. That is how God deals with us as rational, moral, time-bound creatures without ever making our salvation depend upon or be contingent upon what we do.

In the next blog post, DV, we will examine conditional grammar in the Bible. If God’s Word does, in fact, not teach conditions, why does God speak to us with conditional grammar? Why is the Bible full of statements such as “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9)?

Depression (1)



Matthias Wee

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Why am I unable to be happy? Or why is happiness so fleeting, like a mist that drifts by and vanishes? Why does life seem empty and meaningless, and it feels like God is so distant? Why do my tears and prayers seem to echo, like in a windowless room, reverberating in an endless chorus of

hopelessness? Why can’t I just “get better” or “think positively” as others tell me to? Why me – why does everyone else seem so alright?

The above may be familiar – some may have heard such

statements expressed by friends and loved ones; others may have had them as overly familiar and unwelcome companions in the past or present.

Depression is not simply a dip in mental and emotional well-being that one experiences from time to time, but a persistent, pervasive sadness or emptiness that seems to suck up all positivity. It is sometimes portrayed as the “Black Dog” - the symbol of a sullen dog that wraps around the shoulders of a person. Depression is prevalent in the world today. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 280 million people in the world have depression, and more than 700,000 people die due to suicide every year. Depression is more common in females, adolescents and young adults, and can affect up to 10% of pregnant and postpartum women.

According to the 2016 Singapore Mental Health Study, about 6.2% of the population, or 1 in 16, have experienced an episode of major depressive disorder (MDD) in their lifetime. Recent studies from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) suggest this number is much higher today - to the tune of 1 in 5 adults in Singapore experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety. Hence, it is evident that depression is no small problem in the world today.

Why write an article about depression? After all, there is no lack of resources available on depression and other mental health conditions, ranging from pathophysiology (physiological process leading to disease), to risk factors, diagnosis and treatment modalities, to prognosis and associations with other diseases. There has been much debate about the mind-body-soul connection, and whether depression is purely “in the mind” or if it has a physical manifestation (the short answer is yes, it does). There are also excellent resources for Christians written by pastors and Christian psychologists, giving solid Biblical advice and counsel. In the Covenant Keepers youth camp last year, our Pastors gave speeches on depression, anxiety and stress/burnout. There is too a fair amount of interest in the public space over recent years, leading to greater awareness among the general population.

However, there remains much misunderstanding about depression and mental health in general, and there are 2 main reasons for that. Firstly, depression is largely an “invisible” disease. It may be invisible both to the observer and to the sufferer, in the sense that it may not have an obvious physical manifestation, and there are no commonly done scans or tests to prove its existence. Secondly, the strong spiritual element that is involved in depression makes it

prone to being labelled purely as a spiritual problem, especially as a consequence of sin. These reasons may lead to hesitation to share and seek help, as sufferers may feel stigmatized - at best listened to with tongue-tied silence, at worst dismissed with impatience, snarky comments to “think positively” or well-meaning but vague advice to “have faith”. Those who wish to help, myself included, often find themselves not knowing what to say or do. Therefore, I believe there is a place for something to be written on this topic.

Notice that I use the term “depression” quite generally. In reality, depression can refer to a state of mood, a syndrome, or a specific clinical disorder. There is also a spectrum of severity, as well as various subtypes. Oftentimes, depression co-exists with anxiety, so much so that there is a distinct subtype of major depression “with anxious distress”, or simply as some clinicians may write, depression-anxiety. In this article, I use the term “depression” regarding those who are diagnosed with or who have symptoms in keeping with clinical depression. The diagnostic criteria are too lengthy to include here (and would make the long introduction even wordier!), but can be found in any online search. However, the scriptural principles and applications would also apply to those who suffer from depressive symptoms of any kind.

There is much to write about, and one has to focus. In this article, I hope to focus on a few areas:

1. What does the Bible say about depression?
2. How should a Christian view depression?
3. How should a Christian view treatment for depression?
4. How can I help a person who is depressed?

I do not write this article as an expert in mental health. I have some interest in and have managed patients with mental health conditions as a family physician and through running a community mental health clinic, but I am neither a psychiatrist nor a psychologist. Nevertheless, I hope and pray that this article will be profitable to readers. For a more in-depth look into this subject from a Christian perspective, books such as *Christians Get Depressed Too* by David Murray and *Blame It on the Brain?* by Edward T. Welch are excellent resources.

What does the Bible say about depression?

The Bible, while not specifically using the word “depression”, nevertheless depicts many of God’s people in states that would be in keeping with that. 1 Kings 19 de-



picts a despairing Elijah, who after fleeing for his life from Jezebel's vengeful hunt, says "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." He had to rest, and God provided him with food and water twice, before he was in any state to carry on.

After losing all that he possibly could, life excepted, Job cries in Job 6:2-3 "Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together! For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up." We think of Moses, Hannah, Jeremiah, David and other psalmists – many of whom displayed symptoms of depression or anxiety. Depression is not just a modern-day issue. There is much instruction we can take from the Word of God on this matter.

God created Man with a body and soul. Though there are varying theories, I find it easier to understand the mind as being part of, but uniquely separate from the body. The mind houses our thoughts and feelings. The heart and the mind are often used almost interchangeably in the Bible to refer to the inner man, albeit with different emphases. The mind, as part of the body, and together with the soul, suffers from the taint of sin. Jeremiah 17:9 speaks of the heart as "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked". Romans 12:2 speaks of the necessity to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind".

This means that the mind can be ill, just like how the body falls sick. It means our faculties can be diseased - to be stuck in negative thought patterns and feelings, to falsely generalize or only perceive extremes. Here I'm not referring to the general state of sinful Man as being in the "body of this death" (Romans 7:24) but as a unique sickness of the mind. The connection between mind, body and soul also means that one can affect the other. When we are physically sick, often our thoughts and feelings and even our spiritual life can be affected. When our spiritual life is poor, the mind, and sometimes even the body can be affected. Likewise, the depressed Christian may find it hard to read the Bible or pray as he is unable to concentrate. She may shun fellowship because she cannot find the energy to meet people. He may be filled with thoughts of hopelessness that God has abandoned him or guilt that his faith is not "strong enough".

How should a Christian view depression?

Depression, as a disease of the fallen mind, should be vi-

ewed the same way as a bodily affliction – as that which comes from the hand of the LORD. This is simple, yet profound. How does one, in the depths of despair, confess "Lord, this is for my good"? While the person who suffers from a bodily affliction may possess the clear faculties to confess this - albeit with no small struggle, the depressed Christian may struggle especially hard to do so. Proverbs 18:14 states "The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?" Yet, confess it he must. With confession comes submission to God's will, that He is pleased to give this affliction.

There are 3 main extremes when thinking about the causes of depression: 1) purely physical 2) purely spiritual 3) purely mental. Let us focus on what may be the most common misconception - purely spiritual. It is common because the instinct of a Christian is to think that the cause of depression is a consequence of his relationship with God or lack of it. "I have not been faithful enough in my callings, therefore..." "I must have committed sin, therefore..."

While an important approach towards any affliction (physical or mental) is to search one's own heart if one is chastised for a particular sin (i.e. a purely spiritual cause) and seek forgiveness from God if so, I would caution against assuming that sin is the default cause. Psalms 32 and 51 provide examples of David's anguish being directly related to his sins of adultery and murder, but numerous other psalms (including those written by David) describe similar depressive feelings without any mention of sin. Many are reactive to life events, such as fleeing from enemies, bodily sickness and so forth. The psalmists experience depressive symptoms and cry out to God in their distress, with words that are familiar to a person with depression: "Where are you LORD?" In a similar way, the spiritual low that many experiences when depressed is often a consequence of the disease of the mind, not a cause of their depression.

This is important because that means the approach taken is different. Just as we do not (for the most part) attribute sicknesses of the fallen body like cancer, stroke, a fractured hip, or pneumonia to sin, it is better to assume that the cause of depression is due to sickness of the fallen mind. If in the course of biblical counselling the contrary is revealed, that can be addressed.

(to be continued...)

COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES



All ready for tracting! A group of us visited the neighbourhood around church to invite residents to our last gospel meeting in April.



The young people with Rev and Mrs Stewart at the Covenant Keepers / Covenant Keepers Senior retreat



CERC Church Camp 2023: Come, Let Us Build!

We were blessed to spend four days hearing and discussing God's word, having meals together, playing games and enjoying sweet fellowship with one another. Special mention to our special guests from Northern Ireland, the USA and Malaysia who joined us!



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