

## **WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH—DARK BLESSINGS**

### **HANDLING DISCOURAGEMENT, DEPRESSION, OR APPARENT FAILURE**

The curtains are often drawn in God's waiting room. It's exciting to gaze ahead, but faith grows best in the dark. Life in the sunshine is so exhilarating that we seldom notice our faith beginning to droop. It's when things are dim, that spiritual life mushrooms.

God's saints accomplish great things while staggering around in dazed bewilderment. 'By faith,' says Scripture, 'Abraham, ... went out, *not knowing* whither he went.' (Hebrews 11:8—emphasis mine) 'I go bound in the Spirit to Jerusalem,' said Paul, '*not knowing* the things that shall befall me there.' (Acts 20:22—emphasis mine) The disciples were frequently stunned or mystified by Christ's words and behavior. The psalmists were forever asking, 'Why?' (E.g. Psalm 10:1; 22:1; 42:9; 43:2; 44:23; 74:1; 88:14) And in the midst of his suffering, Job didn't have a clue what was going on.

Dark mysteries bring great blessings. At the close of the year Hudson Taylor saw the death of his newborn son and then the death of his wife and then assaults on his own health, he wrote, 'This was the most sorrowful and most blessed year of my life.' When it's sunny we want to run off and play. It's when it's darkest that we hold Father's hand the tightest.

In the gloom, qualities like faith, grit, and dedication, are stretched to limits we have never before reached. Yet life seems so oppressive we are oblivious to our triumphs. In pristine conditions eyes of faith can see forever. When storms close in, it is a mammoth task for those same eyes to even slightly pierce the swirling murk. It is the conditions, not you, that have deteriorated. Contrary to every feeling, you are not regressing.

Though offered with the best intentions, much sentimental waffle is sometimes uttered about returning to one's 'first love', as if the starry-eyed euphoria of new Christians is greater than the mature depths of your average older Christian. Poppycock! Most spiritual honeymooners are radiant primarily because they think they have entered a blissful world of near-perfect Christians, instant answers to selfish prayers and a life forever free from pain, heartache and trials. Theirs is most likely mere puppy love, relative to the ardor moving you to tough it out.

Never confuse devotion with emotion. By way of illustration, consider the dangers inherent in the most intimate human relationship. Though in a romance, love and physical desire can be intertwined, heartache and tragedy looms for anyone who fails to recognize them as separate entities. What if a person's marriage plans are swayed by an inability to distinguish between love and sexual appetite? What if in marriage a loss of sexual function is viewed as a decline in love? Such a misconception could threaten the whole relationship. Similarly, in the spiritual realm a failure to distinguish between feelings and love for God has serious implications.

Though I'm all for emotional exuberance, the Bible measures love, not in tingles per second, but in putting one's life on the line. (1 John 3:16-18) It's pain endured in the valley, not gooey feelings in the afterglow of mountaintop ecstasy, that validates love. By all means, passionately

seek the face of God, but don't assume that emotional deadness – a normal phase of anyone's spiritual life – implies spiritual deadness. We march by faith, not by warm fuzzies.

An athlete, in the midst of a record-breaking run, has never in his life been so fit and strong. Yet his pain-racked body may have never felt so weak. Likewise, in the midst of a spiritual trial, it is not uncommon to be stronger and yet feel weaker than ever before. And to fellow Christians you might seem hopeless. An ultra-marathon champion staggering up the final hill looks pathetic. A child could do better. Anyone not understanding what this man has gone through would shrink from him in disgust. Only someone with all the facts would be awed by his stamina as he stumbles on.

Life seems hopeless. Every day it feels you've slumped another notch. To maintain even a glimmer of faith in such darkness is a spectacular victory. It may take everything you've got just to hold on. But do it. You are pumping spiritual iron.

If your blossom is dying, it's so that the fruit can grow. Remember the cripple at the temple gate: he hoped for alms and got legs. (Acts 3:1-3) Creator God loves surprises. And he loves you.

Earth sees us flattened on the wrestling ring canvas in faith's fight. Heaven sees us forming on the canvas of the Great Artist.

Half-completed works of art look ugly. All that matters, however, is the finished masterpiece. Forget appearances. Yield to the Artist. The result will be breath-taking.

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