

C. H. Spurgeon and the “Minister’s Fainting Fits”

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Charles Spurgeon pastored the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London in the mid to late 1800’s. Known as the “Prince of Preachers,” he established multiple ministries through his church, one of which, was his Pastor’s college in 1856, which sent out about 350 Baptist Ministers into church ministry. They would accept men into ministry who had “earned their spurs” as Spurgeon would say, having been in ministry at least two years. Their main additional requirements were piety, zeal, and the indwelling spirit. Spurgeon aimed at training preachers more than scholars.

His 11th lecture to his pastoral students is titled “The Minister’s Fainting Fits.” Much of this is also published in a little work by Crossway titled *Encouragement for the Depressed*, with Randy Alcorn. Of course, the word “faint” had a larger meaning back then, carrying the idea of weariness, apathy and hopelessness, and depression.

Spurgeon begins “*As it is recorded that David, in the heat of battle, waxed faint, so may it be written of all the servants of the Lord. Fits of depression come over the most of us . . . usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down*” (159) [emphasis on must mine].

In essence, he sets out from the beginning to encourage ministers with the somewhat discouraging news that they will face times of depression. But, as we will see, he is encouraging in the end as these experiences are ultimately for our good and the glory of God.

Spurgeon Himself is a biographical study in depression. He faced depression arising from insecurity and fear, coming to a prominent pastoral position—could you imagine being a late teenager and stepping into the pulpit of the New Park Street Church, that of a prominent theologian like John Gill and preeminent pastor like John Rippon? He faced depression arising from the trauma of seeing seven people trampled to death before his very eyes, while someone yelled “fire” in the middle of a service at the Surrey Gardens Musical Hall. He dealt with great despondency connected to excruciatingly painful bouts of gout—whether caused by the inflammation brought on by the disease itself, or a result of its pain, it was cause and effect nonetheless. He faced the desertion of friends and the defamation of enemies alike in his ministry against the “Downgrade” in Baptist theology and in opposition to the growing ecumenical spirit and liberal theology. So, in modern phrasing, his depression was

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circumstantial, physical, trauma-induced, and relational. Nonetheless, he teaches us what it means both to soar to heights of glory on wings as eagles and to seek shelter, shivering with fear under the shadowy wings of the almighty.

He personally states, *“Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between, I thought it might be consolatory to some of my brethren if I gave my thoughts thereon, that younger men might not fancy that some strange thing had happened to them when they became for a season possessed by melancholy”* (159).

He sets out to give the reasons why ministers are so prone to depression or, in his way of saying things: “why the heralds of daybreak find themselves at times in tenfold night” (159).

REASONS WHY MINISTERS ARE SO PRONE TO DEPRESSION WITH SOME RESOLUTIONS:

1. WE ARE MEN

- a. It is part of the human experience to face depression: “from the biographies of eminent ministers . . . seasons of fearful prostration have fallen to the lot of most, if not all of them.” (159)
 - i. “The life of Luther might suffice to give a thousand instances, and he was by no means of the weaker sort. His great spirit was often in the seventh heaven of exultation, and as frequently on the borders of despair.” (159)
- b. It is part of the Christian expectation: “We are subject to infirmities and sorrows, though the ungodly are even moreso.” Even in the age of redemption we need “to endure infirmities, otherwise there were no need of the promised Spirit to help us in them” (160; Romans 8:26- “with groanings that cannot be uttered”).
- c. Thankfully, we don’t bear suffering’s full effects: Lest we fear, Spurgeon reminds his young preachers that “Grace guards us from much of this experience” (160) lest they ultimately lose hope.
 - i. App- my experience as a counselor—that young people should expect and experience that things are not right in this world... yet.
- d. Resolution- We need to have a theological understanding of life in a sin-cursed world, but also of grace, God’s wisdom, goodness, and sovereignty, and the Spirit’s help and redemption now and final redemption to come.
- e. App- We must be very careful to not center our ministries on what we can do and so when something goes wrong in us, it goes wrong with our ministry.

2. MANY OF US ARE UNSOUND PHYSICALLY

- a. There is a certain connection between the spirit and body: “Certain bodily maladies, especially those connected with the digestive organs, the liver and the spleen, are the fruitful fountains of despondency; and, let a man strive as he may against their influence, there will be hours . . . in which they will for a while overcome him.” (160).

- i. It was known that Spurgeon suffered with Gout, rheumatism, and kidney disease with weight gain, so he knew closely whereof he spoke.
- b. As to mental maladies, there is great variety to individuals: “is any man altogether sane? Are we not all a little off balance? Some minds appear to have a gloomy tinge essential to their very individuality. . . who forget the silver lining and see only the cloud.” (160-161).
- c. Resolution- instead of this being a detriment, again, our struggles can be benefit to ministry. “Pain has, probably, in some cases developed genius; hunting out the soul which otherwise might have slept like a lion in its den.” (161) Ill- boats need ballast/sail; carriages need a drag when going downhill; -
 - i. “The ministries of Jeremiahs are as acceptable as Isaiahs” (161)
- d. App- let us treasure the ministry that arises from our weaknesses. “Blessed are they who mourn” said the Man of sorrows, and let none account them otherwise **when their tears are salted with grace**” (161)

3. WE ARE DEVELOPED AS MINISTERS GREATLY THROUGH OUR DEPRESSIONS

- a. We are promised tribulation as a means of ministerial development- “Good men are promised tribulation in this world, and ministers may expect a larger share than others so they may learn sympathy with the Lord’s suffering people, and so be fitting shepherds of an ailing flock.” (160)
 - i. “The wilderness was the Oxford and Cambridge for God’s students. There they went to the University, and he taught and trained them, and they took their degree before they entered into the promised land. There is no University for a Christian like that of sorrow and trial.” [“Marah Better Than Elim” (MTP 39, Sermon 2301, p.151)].²
 - ii. As Dr. Rolland McCune, my theology professor at Detroit Baptist Theological Smeinary would say- “We all earn credits in the School of Hard Knocks, whose colors are black and blue.”
- b. We need to develop sympathy and empathy- “You must go through the fire,” he said, “if you would have sympathy with others who tread the glowing coals” (MTP 32:590)³
- c. We need the humility depression brings as much as we need happiness- “Men will never become great in divinity until they become great in suffering. ‘Ah!’ said Luther, ‘affliction is the best book in my library;’ and let me add, the best leaf in the book of affliction is that blackest of all the leaves, the leaf called heaviness, when the spirit sinks within us, and we cannot endure as we could wish.” (“The Christian’s Heaviness and Rejoicing” (NPSP 4, Sermon 222, p. 461)⁴

² [The Spurgeon Library | 10 Spurgeon Quotes for Wounded Christians](#)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

- d. We need to value both health and sickness for our own character and sanctification: “Health is set before us as if it were the great thing to be desired above all other things. It is so? I would venture to say that the greatest blessing that God can give to any of us is health, *with the exception of sickness*. Sickness has frequently been of more use to the saints of God than health has. If some men, that I know of, could only be favoured with a month of rheumatism, it would, by God’s grace, mellow them marvelously.” C. H. Spurgeon, “The Minister in These Times” in *An All-Round Ministry* (Banner of Truth, 2000), p. 384, italics in the original.⁵
 - i. This correlates with Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 1:3- *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God.”*
- e. Resolution- God chose men, subject to infirmities and tears to minister to others made of the same stuff. So, in essence, our weakness is a ministry tool that God uses in us and through us for others’ good and His glory.
- f. Application- Don’t waste the difficulties a good God in His wisdom sovereignly allows. These experiences are the tumbler of life which polish his ministers.

4. OUR WORK LAYS US OPEN TO ATTACKS IN THE DIRECTION OF DEPRESSION

- a. Ours is eternal “soul-work.” “Who can bear the weight of souls without sometimes sinking to the dust? Passionate longings after men’s conversions, if not fully satisfied, consume the soul with anxiety and disappointment.” (161)
- b. We specially bear the burdens of our ministry charge: “To see the hopeful turn aside, the godly grow cold, professors abusing their privileges, and sinners waxing more bold in sin—are . . . enough to crush us to the earth.” (161)
- c. Resolution: “It is our duty and our privilege to exhaust our lives for Jesus. We are not to be living *specimens* of men in fine preservation but living *sacrifices*. Such soul travail as that of a faithful minister will bring on occasional seasons of exhaustion.” (162)
- d. App- We do experience God’s sufficient grace in special measure, as Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 12:9- “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

5. OUR POSITION IN THE CHURCH IS CONDUCIVE TO DEPRESSION

- a. The leaders in the church are often solitary men. “A minister fully equipped for his work will usually be a spirit by himself, above, beyond, and apart from others.

⁵ Ibid.

The most loving of his people cannot enter into his peculiar thoughts, cares, and temptations.”)162)

- b. We lay ourselves vulnerable when ministering regularly: “Reproaches from those who have been intimate with us, and trusted by us, cut us to the quick; and they are usually so well acquainted with our peculiar weaknesses that they know how to touch us where we are most sensitive, and to speak so as to do us most damage” (Treasury of David 3:19)⁶
- c. We can receive unique attacks from ungodly people: “Let me be on my guard when the world puts on a loving face, for it will, if possible, betray me as it did my Master, with a kiss. Whenever a man is about to stab religion, he usually professes very great reverence for it” (Morning and Evening, March 25, Morning). However, ““In all trouble send a message to Jesus, and do not keep your misery to yourself. In his case there is no need of reserve, there is no fear of his treating you with cold pride, or heartless indifference, or cruel treachery. **He is a confidant who never can betray us, a friend who never will refuse us**” (MTP 26:74).⁷
- d. We sometimes cannot defend ourselves without harming the ministry: “There will be a resurrection of characters as well as of persons. Every reputation that has been obscured by the clouds of reproach, for Christ’s sake, shall be rendered glorious when the righteous shall ‘shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father’” (Autobiography 4:253)⁸
- e. Resolution: Enjoy the fellowship with fellow-ministers. “our ministers fraternal meetings, and the cultivation of holy intercourse with kindred minds will, with God’s blessing, help us greatly to escape the snare.” (163)
- f. Application: Also recognize that God has fitted the body together by members with varying giftedness (Ephesians 4:16). The “mouth” should receive ministry from the rest of the body, so be careful not to always be ministering but never receiving ministry. And, the church is responsible for discipline, not the pastor alone.

6. WE OFTEN CULTIVATE SEDENTARY HABITS

- a. We do mostly mental work- Mental work “tends to weary and to depress, for much study is a weariness of the flesh. . . ours is heart work, the labor of the inmost soul.” (162) III- Moses arms wearied, Paul said “who is sufficient for these things”?
- b. Our lack of activity tends toward depression: “have a tendency to create despondency in some constitutions. Other men look to their tools. . . only

⁶ [The Spurgeon Library | 10 Spurgeon Quotes for Dealing with Betrayal](#)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

scholars neglect that instrument (their brain and spirits) which they daily use.” (163)

- i. “To sit long in one posture, poring over a book, or driving a quill is in itself a taxing of nature; but add to this a badly ventilated chamber, a body which has long been without muscular exercise; and a heart burdened with many cares, and we have all the elements for preparing a seething cauldron of despair.” (p 163) [also “a suicidal process”]
- c. Resolution: We need to join measured physical activity to our mental/spiritual activity: “Nature lies outside [your] window calling [us] to health and beckoning for joy. He who forgets the humming of the bees among the heather, the cooing of the wood pigeons in the forest, the song of birds in the woods, the rippling of rills among the rushes, and the sighing of the wind among the pines, needs not wonder if his heart forgets to sing and his soul grows heavy. *A day’s breathing of fresh air among the hills . . . would sweep the cobwebs out of the brains of scores of our toiling ministers who are now but half alive.*” (163).

TIMES MINISTERS MAY BE MOST GIVEN TO DEPRESSION

1. Hours of Great Success

- a. “Whirled from off our feet by a revival, carried aloft by popularity, exalted by success in soul winning . . . the gracious discipline of mercy breaks the ships of our vainglory with a strong east wind, and casts us shipwrecked, naked and forlorn, upon the Rock of Ages.” (164).
- b. **In essence**, our humility in the midst of success is a mercy of God to keep us dependent on Him.

2. Before Any Great Achievement

- a. “Surveying the difficulties before us, our hearts sink within us.” (164).
- b. “Such was my experience when I first became a pastor in London. My success appalled me. . . I would betake me to my village obscurity, or emigrate to America, and find a solitary nest in the backwoods, where I might be sufficient for the things which would be demanded of me.”
- c. “Depression has now become to me as a prophet in rough clothing . . . whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry; the cloud is black before it breaks, and overshadows before it yields a deluge of mercy.” (165)
- d. **For Spurgeon**, it seemed the difficult spiritual and emotional experiences he had were a preparation of expectation. (p 165)
 - i. Fasting—Appetite for a banquet
 - ii. The Lord is revealed in the backside of the desert
 - iii. The wilderness is the way to Canaan
 - iv. The low valley leads to the towering mountain

- v. The raven is sent forth before the dove
- vi. The darkest hour of night precedes the day dawn

3. In the Midst of Long Stretches of Unbroken Labor

- a. “The bow cannot always be bent without fear of breaking. . . Our sabbaths are our days of toil, and if we do not rest on some other day, we shall break down.” (165)
- b. “Men when exalted to be God’s ambassador, must rest or faint; must trim his lamp or let it burn low—must recruit his vigor or grow prematurely old.” (166)
- c. “In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less. . . we must cry ‘halt’ and serve the Lord by holy inaction and consecrated leisure.” (166)

4. In the Experience of a Crushing Stroke

- a. When a brother denies or departs from the faith. “Ten years of toil do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel the traitor or Demas the apostate.” (166)
- b. When believers cause strife, division or slander with hard words: “Many of the best of ministers from the very spirituality of their character, are exceedingly sensitive—too sensitive for such a world as this.” (167)
 - i. “By experience the soul is hardened to the rough blows which are inevitable in our warfare; but at first these things. . . send us to our homes wrapped in a horror of great darkness.” (167)
- c. When involved in tragic circumstances- Spurgeon was preaching at Surrey Music Hall when someone yelled “fire” and the crowd surged and trampled many and seven lost their lives. He says “a horror of great darkness . . . fell upon me . . . I was pressed beyond measure and out of bounds with an enormous weight of misery. The tumult, the panic, the deaths, were day and night before me and made life a burden” (PTSD? P 167)
- d. Recourse- He meditated on the truth “Him hath God the Father exalted” and of the tragic death of Christ and His exaltation. The fact Jesus was still great was a comfort.

5. When Troubles Multiply in Long Succession

- a. “Constant dropping wears away stones and the bravest minds feel the fret of repeated afflictions. . . [while] accumulated distresses increase each others’ weight” (168)

6. The Evil Will Also Come Upon Us, We Know Not Why

- a. “Causeless depressions is not to be reasoned with, nor can David’s harp charm it away by sweet discourings.” “As well fight with the mist as with this shapeless, indefinable, yet all-beclouding hopelessness.” (168)

- b. "It seems so unreasonable, and even sinful to be troubled without manifest [evident] cause." (168) "The physician and the divine might unite their skill in such cases, and both find their hands full, and more than full."
 - c. People's response: "If those who laugh at such melancholy did but feel the grief of it for one hour, their laughter would be sobered into compassion."
 - d. Resolution: [one of my favorite quotes]- ***"The iron bolt which so mysteriously fastens the door of hope, and holds our spirits in gloomy prison, needs a heavenly hand to push it back; and when that hand is seen we cry with the Apostle "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort" It is this God who can:***
 - i. ***With sweet oblivious antidote, cleanse our poor bosoms of that perilous stuff, which weighs upon the heart... (168)***
 - e. ***Why would God allow this?***
 - i. *It is the way God works- "Instruments shall be used, but their intrinsic weakness shall be clearly manifested; there shall be no division of the glory, no diminishing the honor due the Great Worker." (169)*
 - ii. *It helps us in our dependence- "The man shall be emptied of self and then filled with the Holy Ghost." "Such humbling but salutary messages our depressions whisper in our ears; they tell us in a manner not to be mistaken that we are but men, frail, feeble, apt to faint." (169)*
 - iii. *It yields special praise to God- "By all the castings down of his servants God is glorified, for they are led to magnify Him when again he sets them on their feet, and even while prostrate in the dust their faith yields him praise." "Glory be to God for the furnace, the hammer and the file." (169)*
 - iv. *It yields heaven all the sweeter: "Heaven shall be all the fuller of bliss because we have been filled with anguish here below." (169)*
 - v. *It yields our work all the better- "Earth shall be better tilled because of our training in the school of adversity" (169)*
7. *He concludes with some final lessons of wisdom regarding the minister's "fainting fits":*
- a. *Be not dismayed by soul trouble. Count it no strange thing, but part of the ordinary ministerial experience. Should depression be more than ordinary, think not that all is over with your usefulness. Cast not away your confidence, for it has great recompense of reward. (169)*
 - b. *"Cast the burden of the present, along with the sin of the past and the fear of the future upon the Lord, who forsaketh not his saints."(169-170)*
 - c. *Care more for a grain of faith than for a ton of excitement. Trust in God alone." (170)*
 - d. *Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are. When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed*

of being full, except in the Lord. Set small store by present rewards; be grateful for earnest by the way, but look for the recompense hereafter.” (170)

- e. *Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light; faith’s rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy since she places her hand in that of her great Guide.” (170)*
- f. *“Come fair or come foul, the pulpit is our watchtower , and the ministry our warfare; be it ours, when we cannot see the face of our God to trust under the shadow of his wings.” (170)*