



joy



despair

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the necessity of despair

Some say it's as a child that we experience the most joy. Our days are filled with play and our nights with peaceful sleep. We win great victories as children. Young boys slay the dragon and rescue the princess. Girls play dress up as they prepare for their future wedding. Men are born ready to fight and women ready to love. We will carry the desire with us throughout our lifetime, but it doesn't take long to realize that the fight is more than we can bear, and love has gone awry. Our notions of life and love are ripped away from us at a painfully slow rate. Eventually we realize there is no dragon to slay, and no love like we imagined. As we age, we can be left feeling cheated and misinformed - all the while nostalgic about the ignorance of childhood.

Mostly likely, the first time we are met with the question of despair is when we experience the death of a family pet or relative. Though unable to fully grasp the concept or weight, the event weakens our human fabric. We are taught about death only as experience and intellect allow. It is in these moments we realize things are not as they should be. As a child, I couldn't tell you why. I only knew that death felt too final - and joy, for the moment, was replaced by fear. However, I would venture to say that it isn't joy we feel as children. Certainly, happiness is abundant, but to fully appreciate joy, one has to recognize the feeling of longing, and specifically, of loss.

Granted, I've painted a fairly bleak picture of life and love, but when I'm honest with myself, this has been my experience. I assume it has been the same for most of you as well. Certainly, a differing personality type can mask the symptoms and manifestations, but it cannot remove the condition - that we have a desire for life as it ought to be, not as it is. We live in a world where love and hate breathe the same air. They war around us and against us, and sometimes...even within. The problem is that we can feel the struggle. It seems as if every success is followed by failure, and every pure moment, will eventually show a blemish. Either through brevity or superficiality, love is followed by disappointment. And joy, however prominent, is short lived.

I've never been surprised to find hate, disappointment and loss, which seem to hide behind every corner. What has surprised me though, is joy. It comes in unexpected moments, and while brief, joy carries with it enormous weight. Why then, does joy seem to be so transient? Why, for

such a weighty thing, does joy seem to leave such an ephemeral footprint? Why is it that hopelessness echoes and settles deep down in our bones, while often, joy fleetingly ripples across our skin?

By definition, hope is something unfulfilled. For those of us in the Christian faith, this is where we place our trust; in the hope of glory. Still though, we are faced with the truth that our hope has not and will not be satisfied until we come to the end of our lives. With that understanding, we are asked to run in such a way as to obtain the prize – making it known that we are not immune to feelings of hopelessness, but that there is a greater hope to come. A hope which is impenetrable. I am becoming more and more convinced that our role as Christians is to mourn with those who mourn; to stand alongside the broken and oppressed, offering hope. And having the courage to admit when it's us who are broken.

One of my most debilitating struggles was that of pain and hopelessness. Through the course of my lifetime, as the things I thought would satisfy me, didn't, I wondered if my expectations were wrong and needed to be lowered, or if the things themselves were incapable of offering satisfaction. In time, though happy with my life, I became disappointed that I didn't feel the "joy" which we Christians speak of so flippantly. My understanding of joy was that it was a kind of immovable force which ruled our emotions, such that if any hint of sadness invaded our souls, this joy would scatter it immediately. Life experience disproves this idea; and while we cannot use joy as a means to remove despair, we can use hope to help us through it.

For Christians, our hope is impenetrable - sealed by the Holy Spirit of God upon salvation. It cannot be taken away or corrupted. Impenetrable though it may be, this hope is not a vaccine against moments of sadness and despair. Our hope does not prevent or mask negative circumstance. Rather, it gives us reassurance that the world we live in is a shadow of what was intended. In a way, acknowledging the pain makes the hope that much sweeter. Some Christians have conditioned themselves to believe despair has no place in the life of a Christian. I've dealt with this in my own life. I used to feel incredibly guilty when I wrestled with sadness and discontentment. My belief was that I shouldn't feel this way given what Christ went through to free us from sin and death. I'm convinced this

thought process still exists in much of the Christian population - even if only subconsciously. When dealing with despair, most Christians take one of two positions.

The first is to believe Christ will remove feelings of despair. The assumption is that He believes, like we do, that despair - while impossible to ignore - has no function in the lives of Christians, and therefore, it should be removed. The tendency is to treat despair like a human gallbladder. It's there, but not critical, so why not remove it when it causes you trouble . When he doesn't though, you have a decision to make. Most begin to believe they don't have enough faith. They need to pray more, read more, do more, etc. Once you've gone down that road, the "easy yoke" begins to dig into your shoulders, eventually breaking your back. The problem is, when you subscribe to that notion, you will never "do" enough. Despair is a consequence of the world we inhabit. So long as we live, we will be exposed to it. The only advantage of this thought is at least it involves acknowledging the pain, which is a better option than the next, which denies the pain altogether.

"I shouldn't feel hopeless because Christ died to give me hope, so I will emotionally invalidate the pain, essentially pretending the pain does not exist." However, pretending the pain does not exist actually means wearing a mask to hide the pain. I've met so many Christians who are seemingly happy all the time. When you ask them how they are doing, they respond with an answer reeking of insincerity. I wonder who they think they are fooling, and where they got the notion that being a Christian meant being continuously happy. Our desire, I'm sure, is to make the decision easier for folks considering the Christian faith, but what a burden to puts ourselves under! Not only does it trivialize our faith, it sets those up for failure who decide to trust Christ as their Savior. Soon after conversion, they realize they don't feel much different than they did before. Christ had done them no good, because we had sold them happiness when we should have sold them hope.

Perseverance, not denial, should be the attitude of Christians toward despair. Inevitably, we will feel hopeless at times. After all, we are humans before we are Christians, and humans feel pain. When the depth or consistency of pain leads to feelings of despair, understand that this does

not negatively impact what Christ did for us on the cross. Acknowledging the pain does not hurt our witness. In fact, it improves it. We have become so afraid of letting others see our pain that we put happiness on as a mask, which does infinitely more damage to our witness. I understand the fear which comes from being honest when our circumstances are less than ideal and we feel a sense of hopelessness. Someone might see us and wonder why they should consider Jesus as their Savior when He doesn't seem to have saved us from anything. The misunderstanding is that Christ saved us from negative circumstances - and Christians have fueled this fire. We believe that if we don't look different on the outside, we aren't different at all. But Christ did not die to make us caricatures of joy. He died so we could be witnesses of what was seen - that despite our momentary afflictions, there is a hope for the future which cannot be taken away.

So, why is joy so temporal? Because for now, it must be. This is our message. This is the beauty of the gospel - that one day, joy will not escape us. One day, joy will be the rule and not the exception.

“They shall neither hunger nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev 7:16-17)

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