

## PUTTING YOUR LIFE BACK TOGETHER AFTER ITS BEEN BLOWN TO CRAP

### Part II: A Dark Night of the Soul

We won't be looking at a particular text this time, but this message has two passages as it's backdrop. Again, Psalm 88. And the book of Job.

Sometimes we're afraid to show that we're sad, that we don't have it all together. We behave like those women from the show *Desperate Housewives*. We do the "I'm fine" dance-- "how are you?" "I'm fine"--because I don't want to show any cracks in my walk and I'm not sure that you really want to hear about it if I do. And you know what? Christians are supposed to be happy. Why not? We're supposed to have all the answers. When tragedy pops up, we can have a moment of grief, but we're supposed to move on fairly quickly. After all, we have the gratitude of salvation and the joy of being forgiven. So somehow prolonged sadness has come to be seen as a lack of faith.

You may not have gone through any real hard times, but guaranteed, the longer you live, the more likely it is that at some point, you're life will feel blown to crap. We've tossed around [the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross'] phrase "dark night of the soul". Not every painful experience falls into that specific category. It refers to something more than simple misfortune, but we can learn much about getting through stormy times by learning about getting through those dark nights. Sometimes the dark circumstances are the exact times that God uses to transform us. Let's look at Psalm 88 as a dark night of the soul.

Overall, the process looks something like this:

- we feel that God is absent and inactive; He's gone and we're alone.
- we've come to the end of our ability to be in control.
- the familiar spiritual practices that we had come to depend on, that usually comforted us, instead seem hollow and ineffective
- BOOM! We hit a wall.

But it is the feeling that God is not at work, that He has abandoned us, and all of our cries are going unanswered that causes us the greatest pain. And all we can truly offer is encouragement to endure. But let's look at some responses.

We, and by "we" I mean us the church and us as friends, like to talk people out of pain when we can't offer answers. And believe me, we get pre-occupied with wanting to provide an answer. Too often, that's to make us feel better - justify our theology. Our pat answers have become reflex, like we have to or are supposed to say something ... Christian. We repeat the expected vocabulary, the Christian cliches, those over-used verses and phrases that convey little meaning after hearing them so often. To the point where they don't have any power left, despite their inherent truth.

What are some of these Christian cliches?

"All things work for good" or some other rough rendering of Romans 8:28. Look, when I'm in pain, don't throw verses at me. I'll take the nearest Bible and beat you with it.

Don't worry (Matthew 6:33-34). I recently heard this sermon titled "Don't Worry. Be Biblical." I thought great, tell me how to do this. This brother went through his list of what we shouldn't worry about, all the time I'm thinking okay, but what should we do? I mean, this is easy to say, but how does it manifest in our lives? Maybe I was guilty of wanting an answer. What I didn't need was him repeating the phrase "Don't Worry. Be Biblical." He was so in love with his phrase that he kept repeating it as his application point. I guess that I get his point, but I really wasn't feeling it.

God won't give you anything you can't handle. And interesting Christianized version of "that which doesn't break you makes you stronger", the only problem is that neither phrase is actually in the Bible.

God's grace is sufficient

God always provides/God will make a way.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Sometimes we're blamed or made to feel guilty as if it's our fault that what ever trouble has hit us entered our lives. We're made to feel

- that we don't believe true enough
- that we need to focus on others
- that we aren't reading the Bible enough
- that we aren't praying hard enough, sincerely enough, or with the right motives. I think this is partly because we're still dealing with this image of God as this cosmic Santa Claus. We learn to pray in magic phrases, as if if we get the wording right He'll answer our prayers. "If it be your will ...[petition, beg, and plead] ... in Jesus name."

This points to a fear here that is real and even valid. That if we confront our pain, our sorrow, struggle with the questions of "why?" and "what did I do to deserve this?", that our faith may prove itself empty. Many people have a pretend faith for easy times, a fair weather faith; the kind of faith that Satan accused Job of having. We're afraid to not know. It's like answers have become our idols. We throw out these Christian cliches because we think we have to have an answer for everything, forgetting one very important thing: if we have all the answers, what do we need God for?

This starts when you preach a gospel or sell the Bible as something that will have all the answers for everything. Our faith isn't validated because it solves all of life's problems. Our testimonies start to sound a lot like what we hear on Oprah. Think about it. She presents life changing systems, people adopt them, and their lives are changed. They tell stories of how their problems are solved and the only difference between their story and "ours" is that they don't cloak their stories in Christian-ese. We're afraid to face the fact that sometimes we learn more looking for an answer and NOT finding it than we do from learning the answer.

And that's a scary place to be.

This can lead to a crisis of faith that blows apart all of our systematized ideas. Look at Job's friends. At the heart of the book of Job is a theodicy, a justification of God. This is the whole "the problem with evil" argument. It goes something like this: God is good. God is all powerful. But evil exists and bad things happen to good people. Therefore either God isn't good, He isn't all-powerful, or He doesn't exist. Job's friends had their systematic theology and it solved the problem by blaming man: if bad things happened, you must have done something to earn His wrath. And we still hold to this kind of thinking today. To many times I talk to people who blame the things that happen in their lives on God punishing them for something. Like He hides in the bushes waiting for us to screw up so he can zap us.

We end up second guessing ourselves, questioning our sincerity, questioning our belief, and what it means to believe. That's why my favorite prayer is "Lord I believe, help me with my unbelief."

After a while, the Christian vocabulary no longer connects, the Christian cliches that comforted us in sermons during easy or happy times sound empty. And what's more troubling, our lives don't seem different from non-Christians. We have the same crap happening to us and

we're just as miserable, but we're supposed to have all the answers. We have these theological models, our explanations of God, life, the universe and everything, that times of crisis and pain and real sorrow don't fit into our theology box.

Don't get me wrong. They're cliches for a reason. These are promises made to us. And they're true. But they sometimes sound weak because of overuse. Real wondering, real doubt, demands more. It's a delicate balancing act: balancing what we don't know vs. what we do.

There is an honesty to doubt, to saying "I don't know" and then coming back to those promises.

- all things work together for good, but that seems like false comfort to a grieving parent
- He may not give us more than we can bear, but that doesn't mean that what we've got doesn't hurt for real
- God doesn't always provide when we think He should and sometimes what He provides isn't what we think we need
- He may prepare a way, but what if the way He has prepared for escape is a path of grief, darkness, pain, sorrow, and betrayal?
- and nothing can separate us from the love of God, but sometimes our unanswered prayers make us feel unloved and very separated.

And we have to be sure what we're using the cliches for. Are we spouting them because we think that's what the person is struggling with and needs to hear? Or are we spouting them because that's what we've been conditioned to say? Are we saying that because we don't know what else to say and we don't want to confront the reality of us not knowing, our own doubts, or our insecurities. That seems to be the problem of Job's friends. They had a lot of right answers, but they were for the wrong problems. Instead of giving advice to make someone feel better, or even shutting up and just be with them, it's like our first thought is "what's the Christian thing to say?"

The best things we have to offer is love and acceptance.

- we have to allow them to feel. It's okay to feel sad.
- we have to be God's arms of comfort
- we have to realize that there's a time for reassuring promises and a time to shut up, be human, and weep with them.

Then there is the crappee's, the one going through the problems, response. I am going to pillage without apology from an article written by a friend of mine, Rich Vincent, called "A Dark Night of the Soul" ([www.theocentric.com](http://www.theocentric.com)).

There are two movements of the dark night. The first is called "The Dark Night of the Senses". The Psalmist says it best "Darkness is my only friend." This is a dangerous time because there's nothing worse than being alone with your thoughts. Your mind becomes your worst enemy:

- you feel lost
- you feel abandoned by God
- you feel alone
- no one understands what you're going through
- you try all of those familiar spiritual practices which had worked so well for you in the past, but now they only leave you exhausted. You're prayer life seems impotent, you get no pleasure or answers.
- the harder you try, the worse it seems

-and because of this, you may feel like you're backsliding

And it sucks. If we're being honest, the only thing we can do is encourage one another to persevere, in whatever form that takes. Renee Alston, in her book Stumbling Toward Faith, expresses her frustration this way:

"In my journey toward God, one of the greatest things I have learned is that there is much I do not know. Sometimes that really ticks me off. Why is it that I don't know what's going on here? Why isn't there some kind of answer for me? What kind of God lives in these "I don't know's"? What kind of God keeps such secrets?"

"If there's anything I've learned about not knowing, it's that it reveals the depth of my trust. Can I trust a God who will not explain himself? Can I trust a God who leaves me not knowing his purpose, his will? Can I trust something beyond the pat answers, the snatched promises, the ways we quiet ourselves when the questioning grows too strong?"

Your life feels stripped of everything. Even if it hasn't been, depression will do it. Depression is a natural and necessary expression of grief and we normally experience depression during these times. This is not the time to get lost in your thoughts. I'm not saying that asking "why?" is bad, I'm just saying that it will only further exhaust you. It's an easy trap to fall into, but ultimately a waste of time since there are no answers to be found.

We can ask them but we aren't willing to live with questions. Questions leave us vulnerable, like there's something missing in our walk. There are 288 question marks in the book of Job. Most of them are from Job and his friends. How does God deal with their questions? Questions were His answer. 78 of the 288 are His. The net result? His questions leave us humbled, awed, and speechless. St. John of the Cross puts it this way:

The way in which they are to conduct themselves in this night of sense is to devote themselves not at all to reasoning and meditation, since this is not the time for it, but to allow the soul to remain in peace and quietness, although it may seem clear to them that they are doing nothing and are wasting their time, and although it may appear to them that it is because of their weakness that they have no desire in that state to think of anything. The truth is that they will be doing quite sufficient if they have patience and persevere in prayer without making any effort. What they must do is merely to leave the soul free and disencumbered and at rest from all knowledge and thought, troubling not themselves, in that state, about what they shall think or meditate upon, but contenting themselves with merely a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God, and in being without anxiety, without the ability and without desired to have experience of Him or to perceive Him.

In other words, be quiet and hold on. It's hard to see any blessings going on during this phase. But during this time, hopefully a few things will be happening: you'll be learning a greater fear of God and learning a deep spiritual humility. And your patience will be increased. None of this is an easy process and these are lessons rarely appreciated in the learning. Another way to put this is that you gain a new sense of perspective, the problem is that this perspective is usually from the ground since you've been knocked out.

Next comes “The Dark Night of the Spirit.” Here’s the suck part: in a lot of ways, you are on your own. It is your soul being purified. But, **God is at work**. Behind the scenes of your soul, knitting you back together without you even realizing it. The question becomes “why would God choose to purify the soul in a way so painful and frustrating?” It seems almost sadistic. Well, I don’t know. It is here that we often find the limits of our systematic theology. Unless we’ve left room for the mysteries of God, times of crisis can become faith-shattering. We have to know “why” and when the answers are not there, our faith either crumbles or is re-evaluated. St. John of the Cross puts it this way.

Why is the Divine light (which as we say, illumines and purges the soul from its ignorances) here called by the soul a dark night? To this the answer is that for two reasons this Divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but is likewise affliction and torment. The first is because of the height of Divine Wisdom, which transcends the talent of the soul, and in this way is darkness to it; the second, because of its vileness and impurity, in which respect it is painful and afflictive to it, and is also dark.

In other words, God’s light can prove so overwhelming that it leaves us blinded, in darkness. God works where we are and sometimes we have to be stripped of a few things to allow Him to work. You learn the measure of your faith and what faith truly is. Yes, in this darkness feels like God has forsaken you. You become aware of your own failings. And things seem so desperate, you feel that there’s no remedy.

During this time, there are three things we need to be careful of:

1) Satan can use this time to further throw you for a loop. I’m not a big “Satan” guy. I don’t blame him for a lot. I don’t stub my toe then start shouting Satan I rebuke you. This is mostly a reaction to people who blame him for everything. At the same time, though, he’s very real and a very real threat. The name “Satan” means “the accuser” and during these times we are very vulnerable to being accused.

Let’s face it, during this time, nothing seems to gratify you anymore. Not work, not relationships, nothing. In an attempt to feel better, to fill that void, you may be tempted to fill it with whatever temporary gratification (be it whatever vice or even a good thing, but still the wrong thing) that may come your way.

2) Be careful of blasphemy.

READ Job 9:28-35. Job chides God for acting unjustly. He questions Him. This differs from the approach his wife wanted him to take (curse God and die, from Job 2:9). Again, Renee Alston puts it like this:

“Give me yourself,” he says, “trust me without these protections, trust me with your pure vulnerabilities.” And I laugh. “And what will you do with them?” I wonder, knowing all too well what this means. The rage wells up within me, like fire.

“And what have you done? What have you saved me from? I have spent a lifetime yearning for you, aching, longing, desiring to be whole more than any other thing. I have brought as much as I could to your feet—passed them over, surrendered my will, and all I have received is silence. This much I have given, and would give more, but for a word, an acknowledgment, a sense of comfort. And yet there is still nothing.

“You ask me to be vulnerable, and I have been. You ask me to surrender, and I stand before you already empty-handed. You ask for my trust, and yet you have never earned it. How can I dare to believe you are good if my life has been filled with so much bad done in your name, if you cannot even respond to all that I have already sought to answer that which I have already asked? I cannot trust what is untrustworthy.”

You might get angry with Him - because things it won't make sense. This is a fine line to walk, after all, what kind of friendship would we have if we weren't allowed to be real with each other? On the other hand, He's God. That settles many arguments for me. I can argue with my wife, there are the rare occasions when I think that she's lost her mind. But even in the most heated conversation, I'm careful because I can't unsay things.

### 3) **Spiritus Virtiginis** - a “dizzy spirit” that errs in everything

I won't say much, for the sake of time, but basically, we spin all over the place trying to find a solution because we are still in service to our idol of answers. We are trapped in the tyranny of having to do something for the sake of doing something. Gerald May, a psychiatrist, puts it this way:

It seems specifically designed for people like me, people who refuse to relinquish the idea that *if only I could understand things, I could make them right.....* we desperately try to figure out where we have gone astray. “What”'s happening here? Where have I gone wrong? Maybe my problem is this..... No, maybe it''s that..... Perhaps I should try this..... Or that..... I simply must be more diligent! Perhaps if I tried.....” We make countless resolutions to be more discipline in our lives; we read self-help books, go to workshops, anything we can think of.

Look, true faith is not without hardships, nor is it all that pragmatic. So when problems arise, there are no pat answers. There are no steps. It sucks. Endure it. Hold on. These times of crisis will either break s and cause us to abandon God or break us down and draw us nearer to Him. We, as a community of believers, need to be there for each other. Those cliches are true, but sometimes people are rarely in a place to hear them. Jesus isn't going to hold you. But Jesus through us can. We need to be Jesus to those going through times of darkness. Honor their unbelief, their struggles, their questions, their doubts. Show them mercy, grace, and acceptance. Love them while they are broken.

Those going through those times need to be faithful. This won't always look pretty.

I know that you hear all these stories about overcoming faith, and God bless the people who have all these great stories, who said and did the right things. But I know for me, getting through my dark times has never looked pretty. Usually, it involved a lot of being curled up in bed screaming. It might just be you crying out to him until things hurt less. I know it sounds like I've tried to have it both ways: questions are good, but don't get lost, or trapped, in your search for answers, especially for answers that ultimately you won't find. Chapter 28 talks about the limit of man's wisdom. [READ 28:28] Since we can't understand God's ways, fear Him and love Him. When the times get bleak, all you can do is reach out for your first tether, your life preserver, your walk, your relationship with Christ

A lot of times we place our love and faith in the wrong things, or good things that aren't the best things. Confusing our spiritual ideas with some distorted ideas of God. Somewhere along the line forgetting what being spiritual truly means. Sometimes it takes a loss of control to

remind us, to re-shape us. Hopefully you will figure out what's really important about your faith and walk, leading to greater faith.

Go before God without pretending. Be broken, empty, terrified. Be honest with your pain, rather than put it behind you. Relief comes through honest dialogue. The more doubt expresses itself, the more it is allowed to be exposed, the easier it can be dealt with. Rather than keeping it inside, eating away at you like cancer. Be vulnerable, but still believe in your darkest moments of unbelief.

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Renee Alston, Stumbling Toward Faith: My longing to heal from the evil that God allowed (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004)

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