

American Decency Association

PO Box 202, Fremont, MI 49412 231-924-4050 www.americandecency.org

Encouraging Christians to guard their hearts

May 2016

When I Feel Stuck

By: Neil Stewart



When I was growing up in Ireland, we had more than our fair share of wet Wednesday afternoons. Trapped well between weekends, and with an evening full of homework ahead, I remember trudging back from school through a soaking drizzle. Weighed down with books, their pages wavy with dampness, and socks sodden with water that flowed in at the ankles and out at the toes, I was as happy as a cat in a bath (though not nearly so ferocious).

The soul knows its own wet Wednesday afternoons. All prodigals, we walk home through a world blighted by Adam's choice. Fallenness dampens every joy. Burdens heavy with guilt, shame,

and regret bite into our shoulders. Fears within and troubles without loom black like thunder. We yearn to hear more of the running footsteps of a welcoming father, his strong arms wrapped around, his tears warm and salty on our cheeks. But disappointed longings follow us as constant companions. Our best moments are always interrupted, and like the weekend for the midweek schoolboy, heaven can feel far enough away to seem forever away.

The worst of these times go unexplained. No particular sin, failure, or mistake stands out as the culprit. We feel "blah" and don't know why (Ps. 42:5). In this far place, we fall easy prey to a dark theology built upon feelings. A depressing inevitability follows: We don't feel God speaking, so we stop reading our Bibles. We don't sense God listening, so we stop saying our prayers. Inertia dampens everything; we go nowhere. What to do?

First, remember: you are not alone. All God's chil-

dren have trodden these paths before. How often the psalmists felt abandoned, yet they still reached for God in song. David cried out: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1). The Sons of Korah asked, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" (42:1). These saints were coming before the Lord and asking how long God would hide His face from them. There is a lesson here: good men often feel worse than they are. These men begin in a moment of dark despair, but they do not end there. As the psalmists agonize, their hearts leak Scripture. In the darkness, back beneath the sense of dereliction, God is still there, giving them words, helping them Godward, inspiring the Bible. Yahweh is always nearer to us than we feel.

Second, ask God to search for any "grievous" way blocking your communion with Him (Ps. 139:24). The roots of "grief" reach back to Adam's bitter choice

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“grief,” “toil,” and “pain” are all related Hebrew words; Gen. 3:16–17). In the garden, our first father started a family tradition of reaching for a better life beyond God. A world full of graveyards tells the story of his success. But don’t despair: the Good Physician died to cut the “willing” and the “doing” of such godless choices from you (Phil. 2:12–13).

Beyond sin, we should also look for weeds in our hearts, toxic desires that choke life from the soul. Jesus identifies three in the parable of the sower: the busyness of life, the lies money tells, and the desire for other things (Mark 4:19). With weeds on the increase, we will never feel well. To kill them, the Spirit stands ready with the heavenly herbicide of richer thoughts of a better life (Rom. 8:5; Phil.

4:8; Col. 3:1–4). United to Christ, we walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:1–14).

Third, examine yourself: Are you at peace with providence? It is hard to draw near to a God with whom you are secretly angry. Unwanted burdens can be the friend of prayer, exciting our desire and drawing us close (Ps. 55:22). But if we prefer to hold on to them, they crowd the prayer closet like unspoken elephants, dulling our desire to draw near. Be honest with God; He can carry every burden you have to give.

Acknowledging God as the first cause of every pang brings great peace. The breaking waves that drown us all belong to Him (Ps. 42:7). He is the principal actor in every difficulty (Ps. 66:10–12). Yet, even then, God is for us. Denial of self and submission to God’s will are the first and last lessons to be learned in the life of faith. But John Newton was right—few are willing to learn these lessons “without being trained awhile in the school of disappointment.”

What if the darkness does

not lift? Often, the best path upward is simply to trust and obey. Consider the patience of Job (Job 23:8–12). In the teeth of a hostile darkness, watch him move from confusion (vv. 8–9) through conviction (v. 10) to consecration (vv. 11–12). In a fallen world, Job realizes he will always know more theology than he can feel. Faith bridges the gulf, taking him to a realm the hand of feelings cannot always touch (Heb. 11:1).

“He knows the way that I take, and when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). Faith has a warrant for this journey that is truer than our worst fears, and so we keep clinging to Him, for He clings to us (vv. 11–12). Like a terrier with a toy, Job grips this truth for all it is worth. He can’t feel himself holding on to God, but faith sees a stronger hand holding on to him—a hand that will never let him go.

In the end, the best question for wet Wednesday afternoons is not “What do I feel?” but “What do I know?”

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