

It's OK to Be Honest When You're Down

Of all the Christian books I've read and re-read, Charles Spurgeon's 1875 classic *Lectures to My Students* is the most worn out. In fact, the cover fell off two years ago, and I just taped the book together and read it again. I love it not only because of Spurgeon's biblical revelation but also because of his honesty about his frequent battles with discouragement.

Spurgeon was a giant of the faith and a much stronger man than I am. Yet he was honest with his students about his weakness. He scaled the heights of glory and led thousands of people to Christ, but he also knew the depths of depression.

He warned his students: "Good men are promised tribulation in this world, and ministers may expect a larger share than others, that they may learn sympathy with the Lord's suffering people, and so may be fitting shepherds of an ailing flock."

When I was young, celebrity faith preachers never admitted to having bad days. They lived in an unobtainable realm of victorious faith, overflowing prosperity and instant answers to prayer. They were always "up," and always ready to heal a sick person or miraculously cancel debts.

They never talked about their failures. They even taught that it was wrong for a Christian to admit to feelings of fear, grief, despair, loneliness or discouragement. They told us to never make a "negative confession." So I kept my mouth shut and pretended. But because my negative emotions were real, I felt like a spiritual misfit.

Imagine my surprise a few years later when I discovered Spurgeon's book and read this quote: "Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at

intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.”

My eyes were opened to see Bible characters in a different light. They didn’t walk around wearing plastic smiles and superhero capes, snapping their fingers to magically remove obstacles. No. They struggled. They felt the anguish of delay and disappointment. They wept as they endured intense spiritual battles. They wrestled with fear, temptation, anxiety and despair. And yet God responded to their prayers and obedience, in His time, and He worked miracles through them—in spite of their obvious human frailty.

When we stepped into this New Year, I was tempted to buy a T-shirt that said, “I SURVIVED 2020,” but I wasn’t sure if I had. It was a tough year. I felt disappointed, overwhelmed, shell-shocked and discouraged. And the heaviness didn’t lift in January 2021. At times, it feels like I’m trudging through mud at midnight.

If you are experiencing a similar test of faith, here are three simple words of advice, offered with love from a brother who has been in the same fight:

1. **Don’t isolate.** When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he hid in a lonely cave. Traumatized by the intensity of spiritual warfare, he told God: “I alone am left” (1 Kings 19:14). But the Lord reminded Elijah that there were 7,000 other prophets who had not bowed their knees to Baal. When you feel discouraged, get out of your cave, cancel your pity party and spend time with other Christians so they can encourage you.
2. **Tune in to hear God’s promises.** On David’s worst day, after the enemy had burned the entire camp, David called for the priest and “inquired at the Lord.” God then spoke clearly and said: “Pursue them, for you will

surely overtake them and will surely recover all" (1 Sam. 30:8). When you are in the heat of battle, soak your mind with Scripture, pray for direction and expect to hear. One promise from God will turn your situation around.

You will not get stuck where you are. There is a way through, and you will eventually get to the other side of this trial. Charles Spurgeon wrote: "The wilderness is the way to Canaan. The low valley leads to the towering mountain. Defeat prepares for victory. The raven is sent forth before the dove. The darkest hour of the night precedes the day-dawn."

3. Push the "rejoice" button. We love to quote Nehemiah 8:10: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." But let's remember what Nehemiah had experienced before he said those words to the people of Jerusalem. He had seen the charred ruins of his city. He had endured constant harassment from his enemies. He was weary from building with one hand and fighting with the other. Yet somehow he found the grace to rejoice when he faced impossible odds.

Rejoicing is not pretending that you don't have problems. When you praise God, you are refocusing. You aren't denying the reality of your circumstances, but you are acknowledging that God is bigger than every challenge. When you sing, shout, clap your hands or dance in your prayer closet—no matter how you feel—you gain new strength to press forward because you see that God is more powerful than what is weighing you down.

There is no such thing as Christianity without praise. Just as the Psalms are in the center of your Bible, praise must be at the core of your faith. Christians sing when they are down. William Murphy's song "Praise Is What I Do" says:

*I vow to praise You
Through the good and the bad*

*I'll praise You
Whether happy or sad
I'll praise You
In all that I go through
Because praise is what I do*

If you feel overwhelmed by the spirit of heaviness, you don't have to act like the oppression isn't real. Every hero in the Bible faced similar dark emotions—but eventually they overcame them through faith, patience and the power of praise. I'll see you on the other side of 2021, and we will rejoice together.
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