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The Road to Sorrow

*The Road to sorrow has been well trodden,
it is the regular sheep track to heaven,
and all the flock of God have had to pass along it.¹*



How do we get through them? The times that knock the breath out; when even our strongest and bravest must confess with desolate eyes, “I do not know what to pray” (to paraphrase what Paul expresses in Rom. 8:26). How do we get through such times, when silences trump sentences? It is as if our words have no life jackets. They must stay, tread water in the shallows, and watch us from a distance. Words have no strength to venture with us into the heaving deeps that swallow us.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “The Fainting Hero,” *MTP*, Vol. 55.





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And many of us who believe in Jesus don't like to admit it, but we find no immunity here either. Many of us know what it is to lose hair, weight, appetite and the semblance of ourselves. Painful circumstances or a disposition of gloom within our chemistry can put on their muddy boots and stand thick, full weighted and heavy upon our tired chests. It is almost like anxiety tying rope around the ankles and hands of our breath. Tied to a chair, with the lights out, we sit swallowing in panic the dark air.

These kinds of circumstances and bodily chemistry can steal the gifts of divine love too, as if all of God's love letters and picture albums are burning up in a fire just outside the door, a fire which we are helpless to stop. We sit there, helpless in the dark of divine absence, tied to this chair, present only to ash and wheeze, while all we hold dear seems lost forever. We even wonder if we've brought this all on ourselves. It's our fault. God is against us. We've forfeited God's help.

Mentally, all of this, and its only Tuesday!
How do we get through?

Our Sense of Helplessness

One November morning, a preacher named Charles Spurgeon used his sermon to describe harmful helpers who like to tell the depressed, "Oh! You should not feel like this!" Or "Oh! You should not speak such words, nor think such thoughts."² Then, he offered a strong word of advocacy for sufferers of depression. "It is not easy to tell how another ought to feel and how another ought to act," he said.

² Charles Spurgeon, "The Exaltation of Christ," Sermon 101, *NPSP* (November 2, 1856). <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0101.htm>, accessed April 3, 2013.



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We are different, each one of us; but I am sure there is one thing in which we are all brought to unite in times of deep sorrow, namely, in a sense of helplessness.³

We sense helplessness, yes, and also shame. Like other issues of mental health, we don't talk about depression. If we do, we either whisper as if the subject is scandalous or rebuke it as if it's a sin. No wonder many of us don't seek help; for when we do, those who try to help only add to the shame of it all.

How is it then that this preacher could stand up publicly in a congregation and talk so openly about depression? He was a megachurch pastor, one of the first ever. It was the 1800s. He was British, Victorian and Baptist. How was a guy like that talking so openly about a subject like this?

The answer is partially discovered in a catastrophic grief. Only two weeks prior to this early November sermon, when he talked about helplessness and he defended the depressed, he had preached to several thousand people in that exact spot. But as he did, a prankster yelled, "Fire!" The resulting panic left seven dead and twenty-eight seriously injured.

Charles (may I call him that?) was only twenty-two years old, embracing the tenth month of his young marriage. He and his wife were wading diaper deep into the first month of parenting their twin boys in a new house full of unpacked boxes. Now, with so many people dead, newspapers across London cruelly and mercilessly blamed him. The senseless tragedy and the public accusation nearly broke Charles' mind, not only in those early moments but also with lasting effects.

³ Charles Spurgeon, "The Exaltation of Christ," Sermon 101, *NPSP* (November 2, 1856). <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0101.htm>, accessed April 3, 2013.



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I start our conversation about depression with this November sermon, amid the public honesty of a pastor and a congregation. I do so because this sermon reveals what the pained man said the first time he returned to a pulpit following the hoax that killed. He begins – and I hope that you too might see how helpful this is – by publicly confessing his humanity.

I almost regret this morning that I have ventured to occupy this pulpit, because I feel utterly unable to preach to you for your profit. I had thought that the quiet and repose of the last fortnight had removed the effects of that terrible catastrophe; but on coming back to the same spot again, and more especially, standing here to address you, I feel somewhat of those same painful emotions which well-nigh prostrated me before. You will therefore excuse me this morning ... I have been utterly unable to study ... Oh, Spirit of God, magnify thy strength in thy servant's weakness, and enable him to honour his Lord, even when his soul is cast down within him.⁴

The fact that such a prominent Christian pastor struggled with depression and talked so openly about it invites us to friendship with a fellow sufferer. As this pastor and preacher grappled with faith and doubt, suffering and hope, we gained a companion on the journey. In his story we can begin to find our own. What he found of Jesus in the darkness can serve as a light for our own darkness.

My Beloved's Anguish

There comes a time in most of our lives in which we no longer have the strength to lift ourselves out or to pretend

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, "The Exaltation of Christ," Sermon 101, *NPS*



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ourselves strong. Sometimes our minds want to break because life stomped on us and God didn't stop it. Like a family who watches their loved one slip and fall onto the rocks on a mountainside vacation when all was supposed to be beautiful and fun; or like a parent whose child was mistreated or shot while at school. Charles and those who lost their loved ones that terrible day had to come to terms with suffering in a house of God while the word was preached and a prankster cackled.

Questions fill our lungs. We mentally wheeze. We go numb. When on vacation or at school or at church, *that* kind of thing is not supposed to happen *there*.

Even the knees of a Jesus-follower will buckle. Charles' wife, Susannah, said of Charles at that time, "My beloved's anguish was so deep and violent, that reason seemed to totter in her throne, and we sometimes feared that he would never preach again."⁵

Though it cannot be said for all of us or for every person that we have loved, it remains true that, in this cherished case, Charles Spurgeon did preach again. But sorrows of many kinds haunted and hounded him for the rest of his life. His depression came, not only from circumstances, or from questions about whether or not he was consecrated to God, but also from the chemistry of his body. God gave to us a preacher who knew firsthand what it felt like for his reason to totter, not just once, but many times during his life and ministry. And somehow this fellow sufferer named Charles and his dear wife Susannah (who also

5 Charles Ray, *The Life of Susannah Spurgeon*, in *Morning Devotions by Susannah Spurgeon: Free Grace and Dying Love* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), p. 166.



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suffered physically most of her adult life) still made a go of it, insisting to each other and to their generation that the sorrowing have a Savior.

On that November morning, in weakness, Charles did what some of us are not yet able to do in our sorrows; he read the Bible. Perhaps it will comfort you to learn that for a while “the very sight of the Bible” made Charles cry.⁶ Many of us know what this feels like. But this Scripture passage, Philippians 2:9-11, “had such a power of comfort upon [his] distressed spirit.”

And being found in human form, he [Jesus] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:8-9).



From this Scripture, Charles set the larger story of his hope before us. The same Heavenly Father who picked up His son out of the muck, misery and mistreatment can do the same for us.

Finding Strength

You may or may not know what you think about that right now. But we know for sure, you and I, that more frequently than we want, our roads are often dirt and heat, all ants and flies. Sometimes our feet can't tap when the music plays.

We also know, don't we, that some of our friends exude impatience with us who must walk these roads of sorrow. Their ways are all jokes and pub, backslaps and slogans.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, “Honey in the Mouth,” *MTP*, Vol. 37 (Ages Digital Library, 1998), p. 485.



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I don't pretend that a little book like this can mend such double-wounds or that the story of one person, like Charles Spurgeon, can bring comfort into your life.

Yet, I do know this. When our noses are rubbed red by tissue and our head hair falls out, have you noticed that we can still sometimes muster ourselves to welcome the child's drawing or the well-wisher's handwritten note? We can't take the philosopher's treatise or the theologian's lectures. The friend who motors on with sentences, too impatient for silences, must also wait to visit us on a later day. Sick inside, we simply cannot stomach a full meal. But a bit of cracker can help. A fragment of ice, a few syllables of a word timely chosen in friendship, can go a long way, sometimes, can't they?



And no one should think that life-giving nutrients are absent with such a seemingly sparse diet in the barren time. On the contrary, the sad-ridden and gracious-held in Jesus often testify to us regarding the surprising nourishment given with a few bits of daily bread. Day by day the strength finds them and carries them, though they know not how or when the carrying came.

I write this book with prayerful hope that its few bits will likewise nourish you in His carrying. I want to help you get through. So, rather than an exhaustive word or prosaic treatise on depression, I rather hope that you can receive it as it is intended; the handwritten note of one who wishes you well. Such notes of grace I too have sorely needed.