

FEELINGS

*Taken from book, **Spiritual Depression**, ch. 7, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

THIS is a great statement, but our primary interest in it is this exhortation which the Apostle here addresses to Timothy, to the effect that he should 'stir up' the gift that is in him. And I call your attention to it as part of our general consideration of the subject which we have described as 'spiritual depression'. We are trying to diagnose and treat the case of the so-called miserable Christian. We have been at pains to indicate that the very term, in and of itself, directs our attention to that which is so essentially wrong about the condition. These words are really incompatible and yet we must put them together because they are an accurate description of certain people—miserable Christians. It should be impossible, but actually it is a fact. There should not be such a thing, but there is such a thing, and it is our business, as we understand the teaching of the Scriptures, both the Old Testament and the New, to deal with this condition.

There are those, I know, who will not recognize the condition at all but will brush it aside impatiently, and say that a Christian is one who sings all the day long, and that that, ever since they were converted, has been their story—never a ripple on the surface of the soul, and all has been well. Since they will not recognize the condition at all, they have grave doubts about those who are given to depression and even doubt whether such people are Christians at all. We have shown repeatedly that the Scriptures are much kinder to such friends, and do grant clearly by their teaching that it is possible for a Christian to be depressed. Not that they justify this, but they do recognize the fact, and it is the business of anyone who is concerned about the nurture and care of the soul to understand such cases and to apply to them the remedy that God has provided so freely in the words of Scripture.

We have considered already many causes of this condition and still we go on. They are almost endless, for we are confronted, as I have reminded you, by a very subtle and powerful adversary who knows us so well, so much better than we know ourselves, and his one great object and endeavour is to detract from the glory of God and from the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now there is no more effective way in which he can do that than to make Christian people miserable and depressed, because, whether we like it or not, the fact is that the world still judges God and Lord Jesus Christ by what it sees in us, and we cannot blame them for that. We make certain claims; the very designation of Christian which we apply to ourselves is a claim and a challenge, and the world is entitled to look at us. 'You are making a great claim,' says the world, and then looking at us, it says, 'Is that Christianity? Is that the thing to which you are inviting us?' There can be no question at all, and let us be clear about this that the thing above everything else that accounts for the fact that the masses of the people are outside the Christian Church today, is the condition of those of us who are inside the Church. Read the story of any revival that has ever taken place and you will find that the beginning of it is always the same. One man, or sometimes a number of people, suddenly become alive to the true Christian life, and others begin to pay attention to them. The world outside is stirred and begins to pay attention. Revival always begins in the Church, and the world outside seeing it, begins to pay attention. That is why our condition as believers is so important.

We have considered the way in which the devil gets us to concentrate on the past—some sin we have committed, the time we have wasted—how we bemoan it all and are miserable in the present because we are worrying about the past. And we have seen how if that does not work, he changes his tactics completely, and tries to depress us in the present by filling us with fears and forebodings about the future.

Now we move on to another theme, very closely connected of course, and very closely associated with these fears and apprehensions with respect to the future. This theme is indicated in this sixth verse and it concerns the whole problem of feelings - feelings in the

Christian life. Perhaps there is nothing so frequently encountered as a cause of spiritual depression and unhappiness in the Christian life as this very problem of feelings. Where do they come in, and what should they be? People are constantly troubled about the matter, and I am sure that all who have ever been engaged in pastoral work will agree that there is no particular subject that brings people so often to the pastor as this very problem of feelings. Now that is very natural because, after all, we all desire to be happy. That is something that is innate in human nature; nobody wants to be miserable, though I am aware of the fact that there are people who seem to enjoy being miserable and some who seem to find their happiness in being unhappy!

I regard it as a great part of my calling in the ministry to emphasize the priority of the mind and the intellect in connection with the faith; but though I maintain that, I am equally ready to assert that the feelings, the emotions, the sensibilities obviously are of very vital importance. We have been made in such a way that they play a dominant part in our make-up. Indeed, I suppose that one of the greatest problems in our life in this world, not only for Christians, but for all people, is the right handling of our feelings and emotions. Oh, the havoc that is wrought and the tragedy, the misery and the wretchedness that are to be found in the world simply because people do not know how to handle their own feelings! Man is so constituted that the feelings are in this very prominent position, and indeed, there is a very good case for saying that perhaps the final thing which regeneration and the new birth do for us is just to put the mind and the emotions and the will in their right positions. We shall proceed to consider that as we analyse this subject. It is obviously a very great subject, which no one can deal with briefly, but it is important that we should take a comprehensive view of the subject.

There is a preliminary point here which to me, at any rate, is of interest. It is, as I suggested at the beginning, that there is a curious relationship between this particular problem and that other problem of being nervous and frightened of the future. These things tend to go together, so it is not surprising that the two things are found in this one chapter. Timothy, obviously, was a naturally nervous person, but equally he was a person given to depression; and the two things are often to be found in the same kind of person. Once more, therefore, we must indicate that there are certain people who are more prone to depression in a natural sense than others. Let me also underline again and re-emphasize this vital statement in connection with this whole consideration, that though we are converted and regenerated, our fundamental personality is not changed. The result is that the person who is more given to depression than another person before conversion, will still have to fight that after conversion. We all have certain common problems in the Christian life, but we all have special problems also. We vary in our gifts—we not all the same talents: and it is exactly the same in the matter of our difficulties, 'The heart knoweth its own sorrow' and every man has his own burden to carry. We all have something which is peculiarly difficult for us, and it is generally something that belongs to the realm of our temperament or natural make-up. So the person who is naturally given to introspection and morbidity and depression, will still have to bear that in mind in the Christian life. The danger for such a person will be to become depressed, and particularly in connection with this question of the feelings.

It seems to me, therefore, that the most profitable thing to do is to look at this subject in a general way, and perhaps return to the particular later. Therefore, let us make a number of general statements about feelings and about their place in the Christian life. One of the first questions facing us is this: Where do feelings come in, what is their place, what should be their position in the Christian experience? I would put to you a number of general statements in this connection. First and foremost, obviously, in a truly Christian experience, the feelings must be engaged. They are meant to be involved. We saw that when we

considered that great statement which Paul made to the Romans in the sixth chapter and the seventeenth verse. The whole emphasis there is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is so great and glorious that it takes up the whole man and not merely a part of man. All I want to indicate now, therefore, is that our feelings as well as our minds and our will should be actively engaged. If you and I have never been moved by our feelings, well, we had better examine the foundations again. If a poet like Wordsworth, thinking of nature could say: 'For I have felt a Presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts'—if a mystical poet could say a thing like that—how much more should you and I be able to say it with such a gospel, such a message, such a Saviour, such a God, with such a power and influence as the Holy Spirit of God. You cannot read through your New Testament without seeing at a glance that joy is meant to be an essential part of the Christian experience. One of the most striking things that conversion does is to take us out of some horrible pit, some miry clay and establish our feet upon a rock, and establish our goings and to put a new song in our mouth. Feelings are meant to be engaged, and when the gospel comes to us it does involve the whole man. It moves his mind as he sees its glorious truths, it moves his heart in the same way, and it moves his will.

The second statement which I want to make is this—and these are very simple and elementary points, but we are often in trouble because we forget them. The second is, that we cannot create feelings, we cannot command them at will. Let me put this quite plainly. You cannot generate feelings within yourself. You can, perhaps, make yourself weep and bring tears to your own eyes, but that does not of necessity mean real feelings. There is a false sentimentality very different from true emotion. That is something beyond our control; we cannot create it. However much you try you will not succeed. Indeed, in a sense, the more you try to produce feelings within yourself, the more you are increasing your own misery. Looked at psychologically it is one of the most remarkable things about man that in this respect he is not master of himself. He cannot generate or produce feelings, he cannot bring them into being, and to attempt to do so directly is always to exacerbate the trouble.

That leads us to my next statement, which is that, clearly, there is nothing that is quite so variable about us as our feelings. We are very variable creatures, and our feelings are, of everything that belongs to us, the most variable of all. That is because they are dependent upon so many factors; there are so many things that influence the feelings, not only temperament, but physical conditions also. The ancient people, as you know, used to believe that feelings were located in the different organs of the body. In a sense they were right, the phlegm of which they spoke, the atrabiliar mood—'all seems yellow to the jaundiced eye, etc.' There is an element of truth here. Physical conditions affect us profoundly. And again let us be careful to observe that the fact that you have become a Christian does not mean that you immediately lose all these constitutional tendencies. They are still there, and, therefore, with all these factors our moods tend to vary. We must have been amazed at ourselves many times that, on waking up in the morning, we find ourselves in a mood or condition quite different from the day before. Nothing you know of accounts for it. Yesterday you may have been perfectly happy and you went to sleep anticipating another great and glorious day, but you find yourself in the morning waking up depressed and in a wrong mood. Suddenly, without any explanation, you just find yourself like that. Now that is the essence of the problem. In other words, our feelings are variable, and I would emphasize the danger of being controlled by them. We have already seen that the same is true of our temperament, whatever it may be. We are all given our temperament by God. He has made no two of us the same, and we must remain different. Yes, we have our temperament, but there is nothing that is so wrong and un-Christian as to allow our temperament to rule us. Of course there are people who glory in doing that. We all know the person who says: 'I always speak my mind. I always say what I

think'. Think of the damage done by such people as they trample self-righteously over the susceptibilities of other people! What if everybody did it? They say: 'I am that sort of person'. The answer to them is that they should not be! That does not mean that they can change their temperament, but it does mean that they should control it. In other words, temperament is a gift from God, but as the result of the Fall, and of sin, temperament is to be kept in its place. It is a wonderful gift, but to be controlled. Now it is exactly the same with feelings. Our feelings are always seeking to control us, and unless we realize this, they will undoubtedly do so. That is what we mean when we talk about moods and moodiness. The mood seems to descend upon us. We do not want it, but there it is. Now the danger is to allow it to control and grip us. We wake up in a bad mood in the morning, and the tendency is to go on like that throughout the day and to remain like that until something happens to put us right. There is a great instance of that in the Old Testament in the case of Saul, King of Israel. Our danger is to submit ourselves to our feelings and to allow them to dictate to us, to govern and to master us and to control the whole of our lives.

Finally under this heading I would draw attention to the danger of thinking that we are not Christians at all because we have not had some particular type of feeling or experience. This from a spiritual standpoint is one of the commonest manifestations of this condition. I am thinking of people who hear others while talking or giving their testimony, testifying to some wonderful feeling, and they say to themselves: 'I have never had that'. And they begin to wonder whether they are Christians at all. Let me repeat what I have already said; feelings must be engaged in true Christianity, but the mere fact that we have not had certain particular feelings does not of necessity mean that we are not Christian. Feelings are essential, but if we postulate certain particular feelings as being essential we may very well become victims of the devil and spend the whole of our life in unhappiness and 'bound in shallows and in miseries', though the whole time we are truly Christian.

This to me is a fascinating theme, but I must avoid the temptation of allowing myself to be drawn into a digression. There is no doubt, however, but that this particular point raises not only the question of temperament, but also of nationality. There is no doubt but that there are certain national types that are more given to particular views of life. There are certainly people in the Christian faith, and they generally belong to the Celtic races, some of whom would go so far as to say that it is wrong for a Christian to be too happy. They are so afraid of feelings that they are almost ready to say that feelings of happiness and joy are almost certainly due to that which is false. That kind of thing is not confined to races only, it is characteristic of certain denominations also. There was a sermon preached by J.C. Philpot, one of the founders of the Strict Baptists, bearing this title: 'The child of Light walking in darkness and the child of darkness walking in the Light', based upon the last two verses of the fiftieth chapter of the Prophet Isaiah. In the sermon, he held that you can kindle false feelings, that you can work up a wonderful kind of fire and experience but that it will not last. 'The true child of God,' he says, 'because he realizes the plague of his own heart and his own sinfulness, walks through this world heavily and laboriously, conscious of his sin and of the greatness and the majesty of God'. Now I have great sympathy with his main emphasis but I suggest that in that sermon that great and godly preacher went too far, because the final impression he leaves with us is that if you are happy there is probably something wrong with you and you are not a Christian at all. Now that is going too far. There are undoubtedly people who think that they are Christians, whose experience is certainly psychological rather than spiritual. Frothy and lighthearted happiness is not Christian joy, but that must not lead us to say that joy is never Christian.

Well, what do the Scriptures tell us about all this? How are we to deal with this problem of feelings? I shall put forward a number of suggestions. The first is a very practical one—it is

just this. If you are at all depressed at this moment you should make certain that there is no obvious cause for the absence of joyous feelings. For instance, if you are guilty of sin, you are going to be miserable. 'The way of the transgressor is hard.' If you break God's laws and violate His rules you will not be happy. If you think that you can be a Christian and exert your own will and follow your own likes and dislikes, your Christian life is to be a miserable one. There is no need to argue about it, it follows as the night the day, that if you are harbouring some favourite sin, if you are holding on to something that the Holy Spirit is condemning through your conscience, you will not be happy. And there is only one thing to do, confess it, acknowledge it, repent, go to God at once and confess your sin, open your heart, bare your soul, tell Him all about it, hold nothing back and then believe that because you have done so, He forgives you. 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. If unconfessed sin is the cause of your unhappiness I should be wasting my time and yours by going on with my list of other causes. How many are trapped at this point. Let us be perfectly clear about it; let your conscience speak to you; listen to the voice of God as He speaks through the Spirit that is within you, and if He is placing His finger upon something, get rid of it. You cannot hope to solve this problem while you are harbouring some sin.

But taking that for granted, and assuming that that is not the cause, the next thing I would say is this. Avoid the mistake of concentrating overmuch upon your feelings. Above all, avoid the terrible error of making them central. Now I am never tired of repeating this because I find so frequently that this is a cause of stumbling. Feelings are never meant to take the first place, they are never meant to be central. If you put them there you are of necessity doomed to be unhappy, because you are not following the order that God himself has ordained. Feelings are always the result of something else, and how anyone who has ever read the Bible can fall into that particular error passes my comprehension. The Psalmist has put it in the 34th Psalm. He says: 'Taste and see that the Lord is good'. You will never see until you have tasted; you will not know it, you will not feel it until you have tried it. 'Taste and see', it follows as the night the day. Seeing before tasting is impossible. That is something that is constantly emphasized everywhere in the Scriptures. After all, what we have in the Bible is Truth; it is not an emotional stimulus, it is not something primarily concerned to give us a joyful experience. It is primarily Truth, and Truth is addressed to the mind, God's supreme gift to man; and it is as we apprehend and submit ourselves to the truth that the feelings follow. I must never ask myself in the first instance: What do I feel about this? The first question is, Do I believe it? Do I accept it, has it gripped me? Very well, that is what I regard as perhaps the most important rule of all, that we must not concentrate overmuch upon our feelings. Do not spend too much time feeling your own pulse taking your own spiritual temperature, do not spend too much time analyzing your feelings. That is the high road to morbidity.

This whole matter is very subtle and the subtlety often comes in in this way. You read the lives of the great saints of all the centuries and you will find that every one has emphasized the importance of self-examination. Irrespective of what particular view of theology they may have held, they are all one at this point. They urge that we must examine ourselves, that we must search our own hearts. Now the very fact that they have done so has meant that naturally and inevitably we, too, have to look at our feelings. They want us to make sure that we are not mere intellectualists who are interested in arguing about theology. They want to make sure that we are not moralists who are just interested in a code of morals. But the tendency always is that in following them we make too much of the feelings. The saintly Henry Martyn was surely an instance of this. But perhaps the classic instance was a man who lived in America in the seventeenth century, whose name was Thomas Sheppard. He

is a perfect example of a man making himself wretched. He went from the heart of England to America and was one of the greatest saints who ever trod the face of this earth and the author of such great books as 'The Parable of the Ten Virgins'. That poor man was constantly depressed because of his great concern about his feelings and the danger of false feelings. He made himself wretched.

So the next point I would make is this, that we must recognize that there is all the difference in the world between rejoicing and feeling happy. The Scripture tells us that we should always rejoice. Take the lyrical Epistle of Paul to the Philippians where he says: 'Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice'. He goes on saying it. To rejoice is a command, yes, but there is all the difference in the world between rejoicing and being happy. You cannot make yourself happy, but you can make yourself rejoice, in the sense that you will always rejoice in the Lord. Happiness is something within ourselves, rejoicing is 'in the Lord'. How important it is then, to draw the distinction between rejoicing in the Lord and feeling happy. Take the fourth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. There you will find that the great Apostle puts it all very plainly and clearly in that series of extraordinary contrasts which he makes: 'We are troubled on every side (I don't think he felt very happy at the moment) yet not distressed', 'we are perplexed (he wasn't feeling happy at all at that point) but not in despair', 'persecuted but not forsaken', 'cast down, but not destroyed'—and so on. In other words the Apostle does not suggest a kind of happy person in a carnal sense, but he was still rejoicing. That is the difference between the two conditions.

That brings me to the practical point which is that the great thing in this respect is to know how to stir ourselves up. That is the whole essence of this matter. As I have been reminding you, the whole danger is that when the mood comes upon us, we allow it to dominate us and we are defeated and depressed. We say that we would like to be delivered, and yet we do nothing about it. The Apostle says to Timothy: 'Stir up the gift'—we must away with 'dull sloth and melancholy'.

You have to speak to yourself. I have said this many times before and I shall go on saying it, for there is a sense in which what the Scriptures do is to teach us how to speak to ourselves. I have reminded you that you must speak to yourself, this horrible self. Speak to it and then 'stir up the gift'. Remind yourself of certain things. Remind yourself of who you are and what you are. You must talk to yourself and say: 'I am not going to be dominated by you, these moods shall not control me. I am going out, I am breaking through'. So get up and walk, and do something. 'Stir up the gift'. This is the constant exhortation of the Scriptures. If you allow these moods to control you, you will remain miserable, but you must not allow it. Shake them off. Do not recognize them. Say again, 'Away dull sloth'.

But how do you do that? In this way—your business and mine is not to stir up our feelings, it is to believe. We are never told anywhere in Scripture that we are saved by our feelings; we are told that we are saved by believing. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' Never once are feelings put into the primary position. Now this is something we can do. I cannot make myself happy, but I can remind myself of my belief. I can exhort myself to believe, I can address my soul as the Psalmist did in Psalm 42: 'Why art thou cast down O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou' . . . believe thou, trust thou. That is the way. And then our feelings will look after themselves. Do not worry about them. Talk to yourself, and though the devil will suggest that because you do not feel, you are not a Christian, say: 'No, I do not feel anything, but whether I feel or not, I believe the Scriptures. I believe God's Word is true and I will stay my soul on it, I will believe in it come what may'. Put belief in the first place, hold on to it. Yes, J. C. Philpot was right at that point, the child of the light is sometimes found walking in darkness but he goes on walking. He does not sit down and commiserate with himself—that is the thing—the child of light walking in

darkness. He does not see the face of the Lord at this point, but he knows that He is there; so he goes on.

Better still, let me put it like this. If you want to be truly happy and blessed, if you would like to know true joy as a Christian, here is the prescription—'Blessed (truly happy) are they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness'—not after happiness. Do not go on seeking thrills; seek righteousness. Turn to yourself, turn to your feelings and say: 'I have no time to worry about feelings, I am interested in something else. I want to be happy but still more I want to be righteous, I want to be holy. I want to be like my Lord, I want to live in this world as He lived, I want to walk through it as He walked through it'. You are in this world, says John in his First Epistle, even as He was. Set your whole aim upon righteousness and holiness and as certainly as you do so you will be blessed, you will be filled, you will get the happiness you long for. Seek for happiness and you will never find it, seek righteousness and you will discover you are happy—it will be there without your knowing it, without your seeking it.

Finally, let me put it in this way: 'Do you want to know supreme joy, do you want to experience a happiness that eludes description? There is only one thing to do, really seek Him, seek Him Himself, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If you find that your feelings are depressed do not sit down and commiserate with yourself, do not try to work something up but—this is the simple essence of it—go directly to Him and seek His face, as the little child who is miserable and unhappy because somebody else has taken or broken his toy, runs to its father or its mother. So if you and I find ourselves afflicted by this condition, there is only one thing to do, it is to go to Him. If you seek the Lord Jesus Christ and find Him there is no need to worry about your happiness and your joy. He is our joy and our happiness, even as He is our peace. He is life, He is everything. So avoid the incitements and the temptations of Satan to give feelings this great prominence at the centre. Put at the centre the only One who has a right to be there, the Lord of Glory, Who so loved you that He went to the Cross and bore the punishment and the shame of your sins and died for you. Seek Him, seek His face, and all other things shall be added unto you.