

Hope for the Downtrodden

Otis Q. Sellers
(1901-1992)

Fainting Fits

*A*s it is recorded that David, in the heat of battle, waxed faint, so may it be written of all the servants of the Lord. Fits of depression come over 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. The Lord knows, and makes known to us, that we are but dust. Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between, I thought it might be consolatory to some of my brethren if I gave my thoughts thereon, that younger men might not fancy that some strange thing had happened to them when they became, for a season, possessed by melancholy; and that sadder men might know that one upon whom the sun has shone right joyously did not always walk in the light.

It is not necessary, by quotations from the biographies of eminent ministers, to prove that seasons of fearful prostration have fallen to the lot of most, if not all of them. The life of Luther might suffice to give a thousand instances, and he was by no means of the weaker sort. His great spirit was often in exultation, and as frequently on the borders of despair. His death-bed was not free from tempests, and he sobbed himself into his last sleep like a wearied child. Instead of multiplying cases, let us dwell upon the reasons why these things are permitted; why it is that the children of light sometimes walk in the thick of darkness; why the heralds of the daybreak find themselves at times in tenfold night.

Because They Are Men

Is it not first because they are men? Being men, they are compassed with infirmity, and heirs of sorrow. Even under the economy of redemption, it is most clear that we are to endure infirmities; otherwise there were no need of the promised Spirit to help us in them.¹ It is of

1.. Romans 8:22-26.

need that we are sometimes in heaviness. 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. Spirits might have been sent to proclaim the word, but they could not have entered into the feelings of those who, being in this body, do groan, being burdened; angels might have been ordained evangelists, but their celestial attributes would have disqualified them from having compassion on the ignorant; men of marble might have been fashioned, but their impassive natures would have been a sarcasm upon our feebleness, passions, and a mockery of our needs. Men, and men subject to human passions, the all-wise God has chosen to be His vessels of grace; hence these tears, hence these perplexities and castings down.

Because We Are Unsound Physically

Moreover, most of us are in some way or other unsound physically. The great mass of us labor under some form or other of infirmity, either in body or mind. Certain body maladies, especially those connected with the digestive organs, the liver, and the spleen, are the fruitful fountains of despondency; and, let a man strive as he may against their influence, there will be hours and circumstances in which they will, for awhile, *overcome him*.

As to mental maladies, is any man altogether sane? Are we not all a little off the balance? Some minds appear to have a gloomy tinge essential to their very individuality; fine minds withal, and ruled by noblest principles, but yet most prone to forget the silver lining, and remember only the cloud.

These infirmities may be no detriment to a man's career of special usefulness. Some plants owe their medicinal qualities to the marsh in which they grow; others to the shades in which alone they flourish. There are precious fruits put forth by the moon as well as by the sun. Boats need ballast as well as sail; a drag on the carriage-wheel is no hindrance when the road runs downhill. Pain has probably in some cases developed genius; hunting out the soul which otherwise might have slept like a lion in its den.

Where in body and mind there are predisposing causes to lowness of spirit, it is no marvel if in dark moments the heart succumbs to them; the wonder in many cases is – and if inner lives could be written, men would see it so – how some ministers keep at their work at all, and still wear a smile upon their countenances. The ministries of the Jeremiahs are as acceptable as those of Isaiahs, and even the dismal Jonah was a true prophet of the Lord.

Our Work Lays Us Open

Our work, when earnestly undertaken, lays us open to attacks in the direction of depression. Who can bear the weight of souls without sometimes sinking to the dust? To see the hopeful turn aside, the godly grow cold, saints abusing their liberty, and sinners waxing more bold in sin – are not these sights enough to crush us to the earth? The ministry comes not as we would, the reverend name is not hallowed as we desire, and for this we must weep. How can we be otherwise than sorrowful, while men believe not our report?

All mental work tends to weary and to depress, for “much study is a weariness of the flesh.”² How often do we feel as if life were completely washed out of us! After pouring out our souls over the saints, we feel like empty earthen pitchers which a child might break. Probably, if we were more like Paul, and watched for souls at a nobler rate, we should know more of what it is to be eaten up by the zeal of the Lord. It is our duty and privilege to exhaust our lives for Jesus. We are to spend and be spent, not to lay ourselves up in lavender, and nurse our flesh. Moses’ hands grew heavy in intercession, and Paul cried out, “*Who is sufficient for these things?*” Even John the Baptist is thought to have had his fainting fits,³ and the apostles were once amazed,⁴ and were sore afraid.

Special Note Concerning Leaders

No one knows, but he who has endured it, the solitude of a soul which has outstripped its fellows in zeal for the Lord of hosts: it dare not reveal itself, lest men count it mad; it cannot conceal itself, for a fire burns within the bones: only before the Lord does it find rest. Our Lord sending out His disciples by two and two manifested that He knew what was in men.

Sedentary Habits

There can be little doubt that sedentary habits have a tendency to create despondency in some conditions. Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, has a chapter upon this cause of sadness; and quoting from one of the myriad authors whom he lays under contribution, he says – “Students are negligent for their bodies. Other men look to their tools; a painter will wash his brushes; a smith will look to his hammer, anvil, forge; a husbandman will mend his plough-iron, and grind his hatchet if it be dull; a falconer or huntsman will have an especial care for his hawks, hounds, horses, dogs, etc.; a musician will string and unstring his lute; only scholars neglect that instrument (their brain and spirits I mean) which they daily use. Well saith Lucan, “See thou twist not the rope so hard that it break.” To sit long in one posture, pouring over a book, or driving a quill, is in itself a taxing of nature; but add to this a badly ventilated chamber, a body which has long been without muscular exercise, and a heart burdened with many cares, and we have all the elements for preparing a seething cauldron of despair.

Let a man be as naturally as blithe as a bird, he will hardly be able to bear up year after year against such a suicidal process; he will make his study a prison and his books the wardens of a jail, while nature lies outside his window calling him to health and beckoning him to joy. He who forgets the humming of the bees, the song of the birds in the woods, the rippling of rills among the rushes, and the sighing of the wind in among the pines, needs not wonder if his heart forgets to sing and his soul grows heavy. A day’s breathing of fresh air upon the hills, or a few hours’ ramble in the beech woods’ umbrageous calm, would sweep the cobwebs out of the brain of scores of our toiling ministers who are now but half alive. A mouthful of sea air, or a stiff walk in the wind’s face, would not give grace to the soul, but it would yield oxygen to the body, which is next best.

2.. Ecclesiastes 12:12b.

3.. Matthew 11:3

4.. Matthew 17:6; Mark 6:51; 14:33.

“Heaviest the heart is in a heavy air,
Every wind that rises blows away despair.”

The ferns and the rabbits, the streams and the trouts, the fir trees and the squirrels, the primroses and the violets, the farm-yard, the new-mown hay, and the fragrant hops – these are the best medicine for hypochondriacs, the surest tonic for the declining, the best refreshments for the weary. For lack of opportunity, or inclination, these great remedies are neglected, and the student becomes a self-sacrificed victim.

The Times of Fainting Fits

The times most favorable to fits of depression, so far as I have experienced, may be summed up in a brief catalog.

First among them I must mention *The Hour of Great Success*. When at last a long cherished desire is fulfilled, when God has been glorified greatly by our means, and a great triumph achieved, then we are apt to faint. It might be imagined that amid special times our soul would soar to heights of ecstasy, and rejoice with joy unspeakable, but it is generally the reverse. See Elias after the fire has fallen from heaven, after Baal’s priests have been slaughtered and the rain has deluged the barren land! For him no notes of self-complacent music, no strutting like a conqueror in robes of triumph; he flees from Jezebel, and feeling the revulsion of his intense excitement, he prays that he may die. Poor human nature cannot bear such strains as heavenly triumphs bring to it; there must come a reaction. Excess of joy or excitement must be paid for by subsequent depressions. While the trials last, the strength is equal to the emergency; but when it is over, natural weakness claims the right to show itself. Jacob can wrestle all night, but he must limp in the morning when the contest is over, lest he boast himself beyond measure. Paul may be caught up into the third heaven, and hear unspeakable things, but a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him, must be the inevitable sequel. The gracious discipline of mercy allows the ships of our vain glory to break with a strong east wind, and casts us shipwrecked, naked and forlorn, upon the Rock of Ages.

Before Any Great Achievement, some measure of the same depression is very usual. Surveying the difficulties before us, our hearts sink within us. The sons of Anak stalk before us, and we are as grasshoppers in our own sight in their presence. The cloud is black before it breaks. Depression has now become to me as a prophet in rough clothing. So have better men found it. The scouring of the vessel has fitted it for the Master’s use. The Lord is revealed on the backside of the desert, while His servant keepeth the sheep and waits in solitary awe. 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 night precedes the day-dawn. The mariners go down to the depths, but the next wave makes them mount to the heaven.

In the Midst of a Long Stretch of Unbroken Labor, the same affliction may be looked for. The bow cannot always be bent without fear of breaking. Repose is as needful to the mind as sleep to the body. Even the earth must lie fallow and have her Sabbaths, and so must we. Hence the wisdom and compassion of our Lord, when He said to His disciples, “*Let us go*

into the desert and rest awhile.” What! when the people are fainting? When the multitudes are like sheep upon the mountains without a shepherd? Does Jesus talk of rest? When Scribes and Pharisees, like grievous wolves, are rending the flock, does He take His followers on an excursion into a quiet resting place? Does some red-hot zealot denounce such atrocious forgetfulness of present and pressing demands? Let him rave in his folly. The Master knows better than to exhaust His servants and quench the light of Israel.

Rest time is not waste time. It is economy to gather fresh strength. Look at the mower in the summer’s day, with so much to cut down ere the sun sets. He pauses in his labor – is he a sluggard? He looks for his stone, and begins to draw it up and down his scythe, with “rink-a-tink” “rink-a-tink” “rink-a-tink.” Is that idle music – is he wasting precious moments? How much he might have mown while he has been ringing out those notes on his scythe! But he is sharpening his tool, and he will do far more when once again he gives his strength to those long sweeps which lay the grass prostrate in rows before him. Even thus a little prepares the mind for greater service in the good cause. Fishermen must mend their nets, and we must every now and then repair our mental waste and set our machinery in order for future service.

To tug the oar from day to day, like a galley-slave who knows no holidays, suits not mortal men. Mill-streams go on and on for ever, but we must have our pauses and our intervals. Who can help being out of breath when the race is continued without intermissions? Even beasts of burden must be turned out to grass occasionally; the very sea pauses to ebb and flood; earth keeps the Sabbath of the wintry months; and man, even when exalted to be God’s ambassador, must rest or faint; must trim his lamp or let it burn low; must recruit his vigor or grow prematurely old. It is wisdom to take occasional furlough. In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less. On, on, on for ever, without recreation, may suit spirits emancipated from this “heavy clay,” but while we are in this tabernacle, we must every now and then cry halt, and serve the Lord by holy inaction and consecrated leisure. Let no tender conscience doubt the lawfulness of going out of harness for a while, but learn from the experience of others the necessity and duty of taking timely rest.

One Crushing Stroke has sometimes laid the minister very low. The brother most relied upon becomes a traitor. Judas lifts up his heel against the man who trusted him, and the preacher’s heart for a moment fails him. We are all too apt to look to an arm of flesh, and from that tendency many of our sorrows arise. Equally overwhelming is the blow when an honored and beloved member yields to temptation, and disgraces the holy name with which he was named. Anything is better than this. This makes the preacher long for a lodge in some vast wilderness, where he may hide his head for ever, and hear no more the blasphemous jeers of the ungodly. Ten years of toil do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel the traitor,⁵ or Demas the apostate.⁶ Strife also, and division, and slander, and foolish criticism, have often laid holy men prostrate, and made them go as with a sword in their bones. Hard words wound some delicate minds very keenly. Many of the best of ministers, from the very spirituality of their character, are exceedingly sensitive – too sensitive for such a world as this. The trials of a true minister are not few, and such as are caused by ungrateful saints are harder to bear than coarsest attacks of avowed enemies. Let no man who looks for ease of mind and

5.. II Samuel 15-17.

6.. IITimothy4:10.

seeks the quietude of life enter the ministry; if he does so he will flee it in disgust.

To the lot of the few does it fall to pass through such a horror of great darkness as that which fell upon me after the deplorable accident at the Surry Music Hall. I was pressed beyond measure and out of bounds with an enormous weight of misery. The tumult, the panic, the deaths, were day and night before me, and made life a burden. Then I sang in my sorrow:

“The tumult of my thoughts doth but increase my woe, My spirit languisheth, my heart is desolate and low.”

From that dream of horror I was awakened in a moment by the gracious application to my soul of the text, “*Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him.*”⁷ The fact that Jesus is still great, let His servants suffer as they may, piloted me back to claim reason and peace. Should so terrible a calamity overtake any of my brethren, let them both patiently hope and quietly wait for the salvation of God.

When Troubles Multiply, and discouragements follow each other in long succession, like Job’s messengers, then, too, amid the perturbation of soul occasioned by evil tidings, despondency despoils the heart of all its peace. Constant dropping wears away at stones, and the bravest minds feel the fret of repeated afflictions. If a scanty cupboard is rendered a severer trail by the sickness of a wife or the loss of a child, and if ungenerous remarks of hearers are followed by the opposition of deacons and the coolness of members, then, like Jacob, we are apt to cry, “*All these things are against me.*” When David returned to Ziklag and found the city burned, goods stolen, wives carried off, and his troops ready to stone him, we read, “*but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God;*”⁸ and well was it for him that he could do so, for he would then have fainted. Accumulated distresses increase each other’s weight; they play into each other’s hands, and, like bands of robbers, ruthlessly destroy our comfort. Wave upon wave is severe work for the strongest swimmer. The place where two seas meet between the buffetings of adversity, the spirit would stand prepared; but when they come suddenly and heavily, like the battering of great hailstones, the pilgrim may well be amazed. The last ounce breaks the camel’s back, and when that last ounce is laid upon us, what wonder if we for awhile are ready to give up the ghost!

Unknown Causes

This evil will also come upon us, we know not why, and then it is all the more difficult to drive it away. Causeless depression is not to be reasoned with, nor can David’s harp charm it away by sweet discoursings. We just as well fight with the mist as with this shapeless, undefinable, yet all-beclouding hopelessness. One affords himself no pity when in this case, because it seems so unreasonable, and even sinful, to be troubled without manifest cause; and yet troubled the man is, even in the very depths of his spirit. If those who laugh at such melancholy did but feel the grief of it for one hour, their laughter would be sobered into compassion. Resolution might, perhaps, shake it off, but where are we to find the resolution when the whole man is unstrung? The iron bolt which so mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits

7.. Philippians 2:9a.

8.. I Samuel 30:6b.

in gloomy prison, needs a heavenly hand to push it back; and when that hand is seen we cry with the apostle,

“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (II Corinthians 1:3-4).

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (I Corinthians 1:26-31).

Instruments shall be used, but their intrinsic weakness shall be clearly manifested; there shall be no division of the glory, no diminishing the honor due to the Great Worker. By all the castings down of His servants God is glorified, for they are led to magnify Him when He sets them on their feet, and even while prostrate in the dust their faith yields Him praise. They speak all the more sweetly of His faithfulness, and are the more firmly established in His love. Such mature men as some elderly preachers are, could not have been produced if they had *“not been emptied from vessel to vessel,”*⁹ and made to see their own emptiness and the vanity of all things round about them. Glory be to God for the furnace, the hammer, and the file.

The lesson of wisdom is, be not dismayed by soul-trouble. Even if the enemy’s foot be on your neck, expect to rise and overthrow him. Cast your burden upon the Lord, who *“forsaketh not His saints.”*¹⁰ Put no trust in feelings. Care more for a grain of faith than for a ton of excitement. Be not surprised when friends fail you: it is a failing world. Never count upon immutability in man: inconsistency you may count upon without fear of disappointment. The disciples of Jesus forsook Him: be not amazed if your adherents wander away: as they were not your all when with you, all is not gone from you with their departure. Be content to be nothing, for that is what you are. When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed of being full, except in the Lord.

Between this and heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our Head. In nothing let it be turned aside from the path which the divine call has urged us to pursue.

Lectures to My Students

“The Minister’s Fainting Fits,” (edited and revised)

9.. Jeremiah 48:11.

10.. Psalm 37:28.

Men Who Are Down

No man's lot is fully known till he is dead: change of fortune is the lot of life. He who rides in the carriage may yet have to clean it. Carpenters change places, and he who is up high may have to take his turn in the pit. In less than a few years, we shall all be bald and poor too, and who knows what he may come to before that? The thought that we may ourselves be under the window should make us careful when we are throwing out our dirty water. With what measure we mete, it shall be measured to us again, and therefore let us look well to dealings with the unfortunate.

Nothing makes me more sick of human nature than to see the way in which men treat others when they fall down the ladder of fortune. "Down with him," they cry, "He always was good for nothing."

Down among the dead men,
Down, down, down,
Down among the dead men,
There let him lie.

Dog won't eat dog, but man will eat each other up like cannibals and boast of it, too. There are thousands in this world who fly like vultures to feed on a tradesman or a merchant as soon as he gets into trouble. Where the carcass is, thither will the eagles be gathered together. Instead of a little help, they give the sinking man a great deal of cruelty and cry, "serves him right!" All the world will beat the man whom fortune buffets. If providence smites him, all men's whips begin to crack. The dog is drowning, and therefore all his friends empty their buckets over him. The tree has fallen, and everybody runs for his hatchet. The house is on fire, and all his neighbors warm themselves. The man has ill luck, therefore his friends give him ill usage: he has tumbled into the road, and they drive their carts over him; he is down and selfishness cries, "Let him be kept down, then there will be more room for those who are up."

How aggravating it is when those who knocked you down kick you for not standing up. It is not very pleasant to hear that you have been a great fool, and there were fifty ways at least of keeping out of your difficulty, only you had not the sense to see them. You ought not to have lost the game: even Tom Fool can see where you made a bad move. "He ought to have locked the stable door!" – everybody can see that, but nobody offers to buy the loser a new nag. "What a pity he went so far on the ice!" – that's very true, but that won't save the poor fellow from drowning. When a man's coat is threadbare, it is an easy thing to pick a hole in it. Good advice is poor food for a hungry family.

A man of words
and not of deeds
Is like a garden
full of weeds.

Lend me a bit of string to tie up the traces, and find fault with my old hardness when I get home. Help my old horse to a few oats, and then tell him to mend his pace. Feel for me; and I shall feel much obliged to you, but mind you feel in your pocket or else a fig for your feelings.

Most men who go downhill meet with Judas before they get to the bottom. Those whom they helped in their better days generally forget the debt or repay it with unkindness. The young sucker runs away with sap from the old tree. The foal drains his mother and then kicks her. The old saying is, "I taught you to swim, and now you would drown me," and many a time it comes true. The dog wags his tail till he gets the bone, and then he snaps and bites at the man who fed him. Eaten bread is forgotten, and the hand that gave it is despised. The candle lights others and is burnt away itself. For the most part, nothing is more easily blotted out than a good turn. Everyone for himself is the world's golden rule, and we all know who takes the hindmost. The fox looks after his own skin and has no idea of losing his brush out of gratitude to a friend.

A noble spirit always takes the side of the weak, but noble spirits do not often ride along our roads. They are as scarce as eagles; you can get magpies, hawks, and kites by the score, but the nobler breed you don't see once in a lifetime. Did you ever hear the crows read the burial service over a dead sheep before they eat it? Well, that's wonderfully like the neighbors crying, "What a pity! How did it happen? Oh dear! Oh dear!" and then hurrying to work to get each of them a share of the plunder. Most people will help those who do not need it; every traveler throws a stone where there is a heap already; all the cooks baste a fat pig, but the lean one gets burned.

In times of prosperity
friends will be plenty:
In time of adversity
not one in twenty.

When the wind serves, all aid. While the pot boils, friendship blooms. But flatterers haunt not cottages, and the faded rose no suitor knows. All the neighbors are cousins to the rich man, but the poor man's brother does not know him. When we have a ewe and a lamb, everyone cries, "Welcome, Peter!" The squire can be heard for half a mile, if he only whispers, but Widow Needy is not heard across the park railing, let her call as she may. Men willingly pour water into a full tub and give feasts to those who are not hungry, because they look to have as good or bad in return. Have a goose, and get a goose. Have a horse of your own; then you can borrow one. It is safe to lend barley where the barn is full of wheat, but who lends or gives where there's none? Who, indeed, unless it be some antiquated old soul who believes in his Bible, loves his Lord, and therefore gives, "hoping for nothing again?"

I have noticed certain gentry who pretend to be great friends to a falling man because there are some few pickings yet to be got off his bones. The lawyer and the money lender will cover the poor fellow with their wings and then peck at him with their bills till there's nothing left. When those folks are very polite and considerate, poor men need to beware. It was not a good sign when the fox walked into the hen house and said, "Good morning to you all, my

very dear friends.”

Down men, however, must not despair, for God is yet alive, and He is a friend of the friendless. If there be no one else found to hold out a hand to him who has fallen, the Lord’s hand shall not fail to bring deliverance to those who trust Him. A good man may be put in the fire, but he cannot be burned. His hope may be drenched but not drowned. He plucks up courage, sets a stout heart to a stiff hill, and gets over rough ground where others lie down and die. While there’s life, there’s hope. Therefore, my friend, if you’ve tumbled off the back of prosperity, John Ploughman bids you not to lie in a ditch, but up with you and try again. Jonah went to the bottom of the sea, but he got to shore again all the better for his watery journey.

Though the bird’s in the nest, It may get away yet; Though I’m down in the dust, In my God I will trust,	I will hope in Him still, And leave all to his will; For He’ll surely appear, And will banish my fear.
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Let it never be forgotten that when a man is down, he has a grand opportunity for trusting in God. A false faith can only float in smooth water; but true faith, like a lifeboat, is at home in storms. If our religion does not bare us up in time of trial, what is the use of it? If we cannot believe God when our circumstances appear to be against us, we do not believe Him at all. We trust a thief as far as we can see him; shall we dare to trust our God in that fashion? No, no. The Lord is good, He will yet appear for servants, and we shall praise His name.

Down among the dead men! No, sir, not I. Down among the men! I will not lie.	Up among the hopeful, I will ascend, Up among the joyful, sing without end.
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John Ploughman’s Talks

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