

SOURCES AND REMEDIES OF DISQUIETUDE

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Presumption and despair are the two fatal rocks on which we are in danger of making shipwreck of faith and of a good conscience. A vain conceit of our own righteousness and strength exposes to the one; sad and gloomy reflections on our own sin and corruptions, as if they exceeded the mercies of God and excluded us from the hope of forgiveness, plunge us into the other. There is a godly jealousy of ourselves which is highly proper and necessary, as it leads to watchfulness and circumspection and a constant dependence upon divine strength. But this jealousy may, like zeal, be without knowledge, and may exceed its just and proper limits. Let us point out some of those things on account of which good men take counsel in their souls and have sorrow in their heart daily.

1. Many humble and sincere Christians are apt to complain of irregular and wandering thoughts, in prayer and other religious duties.

Whence they conclude that their minds are not duly impressed with a sense of divine things. Doubts and fears of this nature constitute the grand distinction between man, as a being capable of religion, and the inferior creatures. In everything we attempt we are interrupted with various impressions and distractions of mind. There are many who cannot attend upon any religious duty with that steadiness and alacrity which they discover in their secular employments. Others, more deserving of our sympathy, both desire and endeavour to have their minds composed when engaged in devotional duties; but, to their sorrow of heart, they fall short of their wishes and fail in their attempts. The best of men are not wholly exempted from these wanderings of heart.

It may be asked, how are we to distinguish the suggestions and temptations of Satan from those that arise from the remains of sin and corruption in the renewed heart? We may distinguish them by the welcome reception we give them on the one hand, and by the pain and uneasiness they give us on the other. Do you abhor the evil thoughts and suggestions you complain of? In that case you have no reason to be cast down or discouraged. His grace will be sufficient for you. It is the consent of the will that constitutes the criminality of any action whatever; and, while it is our daily struggle to withhold this, and we are, by divine grace, enabled to withhold it, we have no reason to be cast down or disquieted.

2. Another source of inward disquietude arises from the defects and imperfections that attend our best services.

“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Ecclesiastes 7:20) is the language of Scripture and of universal experience. But this consideration, though it ought to humble, need not discourage us in our Christian warfare. Though we cannot hope wholly to eradicate our sins and corruptions, it is our duty to resist and oppose them by our constant endeavours and fervent prayers. Those who imagine that they have arrived at sinless perfection must be unacquainted with the spirituality of the Moral Law, and with the extent of its obligations. This is our encouragement, that “if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1). With regard to those who have fallen into grievous sins after the most solemn engagements, their case requires to be treated with the utmost caution. A good man may be “overtaken in a fault” (Galatians 6:1). Such are fit objects of Christian compassion, and stand in need of all that comfort which the nature of the Gospel covenant, rightly understood, abundantly administers.

3. Another source of disquietude arises from the outward troubles and afflictions of life.

When these overtake the Christian, he naturally looks up to God for relief. But guilt is suspicious, and there is sin enough in the best of men to justify the severest trials with which they may be visited in this world. When affliction brings the sins of men of distinguished piety to their remembrance, the recollection of them is accompanied with many aggravating circumstances. In all the trying circumstances of this changeful life the Christian has an anchor of hope sure and steadfast.

4. Another source of disquietude is seen in the case of David.

The Lord "hid His face from him" (Psalm 22:24). He walked in darkness. This is not peculiar to the case of David. The exercised Christian knows what is meant by it, and has felt it in his painful experience. Job experienced the same. David says, "But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation" (Psalm 13:5). This remedy will be found effectual in every similar case. We shall not pretend to state all the reasons why God permits some of His dearest children to lose their spiritual comfort. One reason may be, that they are apt to build too much on their frames and feelings.

5. Finally here are some practical reflections:

(a) If the thoughts of our hearts and the actions of our lives have so great an influence on our present peace and future happiness, we ought constantly to observe and duly to regulate them.

(b) Religion is intended to regulate our practice, as well as to soothe and elevate our minds. As in the natural, so in the spiritual life, activity and enjoyment are essentially connected with one another; and the more we attend to the weightier matters of the law, the more will our comforts abound.