

March 18, 2007

The Number One Reason People Walk Away from the Faith

Jeremiah 15:15-21 / Job 29:18-20, 30:16-31

In my 20 + years in the pastorate I've experienced many inexpressible joys — like the joy of seeing people saved as a result of sharing the Gospel with them — or the joy of baptizing an entire family of Brits on one occasion — 2 sons, a husband, wife, and the wife's 78 year old mother / 19 other people at a public beach in Westport, MA on Father's Day 1994 on another occasion / and a group of 15 other people from all over the world (Scotland, Canada, Taiwan, England and Honduras) on a third occasion. There is no greater thrill than getting to witness the Holy Spirit working in the lives of people.

Yet I've also had my share of heart aches over the past 20 years as well. I had been in the ministry less than 2 years when one lady in all seriousness called me Satan / A man in Honduras (who I thought was a good friend) lied to my face repeatedly, stole nearly \$10,000 from the church, claimed to be me, and used some of that money to hire prostitutes — and he was a pastor. (That was real hard.)

I also had one man from Texas (an ex-lawyer) who after attending a weekly Bible Study for months (in Honduras) finally came to faith in Christ and then was found murdered only three weeks later.

But besides those last two things, the one thing that has broken my heart the most over the past 20 years has been seeing 2 people who had come to Christ through my ministry, and whom I had spent many hours counseling with and discipling — simply turn (and from all outward appearances) walk away from the faith.

And that's NOT to say they won't some day return. For I believe that if they were truly born of the Spirit they surely will at some point — like the Prodigal in Luke 15. Though that doesn't make seeing them stray any less heart-breaking.

It has even caused me to ask other people I've come across in my travels why it is that they "threw in the towel" (so to speak) on the faith. Every time I meet someone who used to be heavily involved in the church, or zealously committed to the faith, but is no longer, I ask them,

"Why?" "What turned you off to the faith?"

What led you to leave the church or stop following Christ?"

And almost across the board, there has been one common thread that runs through almost all their stories — it was the difference between what they anticipated or expected from God when they embraced the faith, and what came their way from God, or in the Christian life as they went along.

Their stories are similar in many ways to what Job expresses in 29:18, where he says: "I THOUGHT, 'I will die in my house, my days as numerous as the grains of sand. My roots will reach to the water, and the dew will lie all night on my branches. My glory will remain fresh in me, the bow ever new in my hand.'" Or in other words, "I expected a long, enjoyable, happy life where God's blessings were constantly poured out and I would die full of life and vigor."

Yet in light of what he "thought," expected, or wanted, what has he now received? Chapter 30 verse 16: "My life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me. Night pierces my bones, my gnawing pains never rest. In His great power God becomes like clothing to me, He binds me by the neck of my garment. He throws me into the mud and I am reduced to dust and ashes. In other words, he is now receiving just the opposite of what he had always hoped for.

His sentiments are similar in many ways to those in the song sung by Fantine in Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables." She's a young single mother who is jobless, homeless, and unable to provide for her child because she was fired for refusing the sexual advances of her boss. In her earlier years she had found the love of her life, the father of her child, and been ecstatically happy. But one day he simply walked out and never returned. And thinking back on her life she sings this song,

"I had a dream in time gone by,
When hope was high, and life worth living.
I dreamed that love would never die,
I dreamed that God would be forgiving.

I had a dream my life would be,
So different from this hell I'm living,
So different now from what it seemed...
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed."

That's what I'm talking about. Job had a dream of how his life would be and even how it would end, but now, "Life has killed the dream he dreamed."

In fact, it has turned out exactly OPPOSITE of what he had always hoped for. He dreamed of health and length of days (29:18). / But now he's suffering intensely with gnawing pains as he watches his life ebb away — and as far as he knows at this point, it's not going to change (30:16-17).

He dreamed of being strong (like a tree with its roots reaching down to a constant source of water), with refreshing dew resting on his branches all night long — both water and dew being a symbol of the blessings of God (29:19). / But now he's a broken man, with black, dead skin peeling from his body, and burning with fever from all the infections (30:30).

He dreamed of his glory (or honor) remaining fresh, and new strength and abilities continually being given to him (29:20). But now he's mocked, and scorned by people (30:1, 9, and 11), his dignity (or glory) is driven away (30:15), and it feels to him like God has wrapped a garment around his neck and thrown him into the mud. (30:18)

In fact, he summarizes the whole point of the passage in verse 26 where he says:

“Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when
I looked for light, then came darkness.”

I wanted this, he says, but instead I got that. I hoped for good things, but instead I've received one bad thing after another. What he dreamed of receiving from God, and what he has now actually received are as different as different could be!

In fact, if I can tweak Fantine's song just a bit I believe Job would sing:

“I dreamed of how my life would be,
but life has killed that dream in me.”

And THIS is what I'd like to suggest this morning:

When our DREAMS die, oftentimes our FAITH and COMMITMENT TO CHRIST can begin to die along with them. Despair replaces the hope, and like Job, we question if we'll ever see our youthful hopes and expectations come true at all. The death of the dream often causes our faith to take a massive blow as well.

What causes their turning from the faith? Maybe we could say its disappointment with God and the life He has ordained for them.

Maybe (like Job) it's the sinner sadness of seeing great youthful expectations and dreams, dampened or obliterated by present hardships and trauma.

Or maybe (like Job once again) it's simply the disillusionment that comes from having earnestly tried to do what we sensed God wanted us to do, and yet getting older (and seeing our life "ebb away") only to realize that few, if any, of the things we had always hoped for will ever come true.

In fact, like Job, it may not be that we simply haven't gotten what we hoped for, but that we've gotten just the opposite of what we always hoped for. "We had hoped for good, yet evil came. We had looked for light, but darkness came."

THAT cycle of events, my friends, is what I personally have found to be one of the main reasons why people walk away from church, or the faith, or their former commitment to Christ.

They look back at what they wanted, dreamed of, or hoped for when they first came to Christ, and then compare it with what has actually come their way, and to them, it seems that either they were deceived, misled, or as in Job's case, God simply had it out for them.

That's how Job FEELS. He tried to do everything God wanted, and yet God has now, "wrapped a garment around his neck and thrown him in the mud" (v. 19), looks at Job, but won't answer him (v. 20), and has turned on Job and with the might of his hand has attacked him" (v. 21).
(NIV Study Bible—"Job's rage against God has not yet subsided.")

How about you? Anyone here struggling with such disappointment (remembering that in the ultimate sense all disappointment is really disappointment with God)?

Are you starting to lose the hope that the dreams you had in your youth will ever come true? Your dreams of a long, fulfilling, happy life with your roots constantly nourished by the waters of the Spirit, and the blessings of God clinging to you like dew throughout the night?

Or, like Job, are you have you already lost it? Has "life" already killed the dream you dreamed and shattered your ability to hope? And if so, what has the loss of such hope done to your faith and your commitment to Christ?

Like many, you haven't walked away from the faith totally, or you wouldn't be here! But how is it with your SOUL? What's happening there? And what about your HEART? Can it still sing? What about your SPIRIT? Has that initial unspeakable joy turned to weeping? Does your heart still have the imprint of a smile on it, or is it stained by the tracks of many tears?

Or have you done what I mentioned last week and chosen the road of the stoic, numbing it out completely — reasoning like most that it's better to feel nothing than to feel the pain of lost hope or dreams that you fear will never come true.

And I know I'm NOT speaking to everyone. (Be a really sad place here if I was!) But if I've in any way described the state of YOUR soul, or the situation of someone you KNOW, these are the things I'd like to say for YOUR or THEIR encouragement.

FIRST, I'd like to say that if you're like many (even myself on occasion), at least PART of the problem may be that that you have, like Job, confused or blended together the pursuit of godliness and the pursuit of happiness. Because if you have what can often happen is this: When you fail to attain that elusive thing we call HAPPINESS, you can begin to give up on FAITH and GODLINESS. And if that UNHAPPINESS persists for extended periods of time, you may even find yourself throwing in the towel altogether — or at least wanting to.

Yet, it's precisely at that point (when we see ourselves going down that road) that you need to adjust your thinking and learn to separate the two. Because although the pursuit of godliness MAY often increase your joy or love for God and life, it may do just the opposite on occasion.

It's was not without reason that Jesus was called the "Man of Sorrows," or the "Suffering Servant" whom Scripture tells us "learned obedience by the things that He suffered."

And similarly, James tells us there IS a place in the Christian life for "grieving, mourning and wailing" (4:9). He even puts it in the imperative! "Grieve, mourn and wail," he says. "Change your laughter into mourning and your joy into gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up." (James 4:10)

And YES, I know that happiness and godliness are NOT mutually exclusive! The Christian who thinks that it's wrong or contrary to holiness to laugh and joke and have fun and be happy or light-hearted has totally misunderstood holiness! Being serious and sullen all the time is more a personality disorder than an expression of holiness!

I believe John Piper is right when he suggests that few things bring God more glory than a saint who is deliriously happy in God, and totally satisfied with God. Or as he has aptly put it, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." The chief end of man, he suggests, is NOT to "glorify God AND enjoy Him forever," but to "glorify God BY enjoying him forever."

That's true — as long as it doesn't become a legalism which makes the struggling saint feel they must act and put on a fake smile to be considered truly godly! (I did see that one time. One missionary friend in the Dominican Republic had her dog either stolen or killed (I don't remember which it was) and when she arrived at school that morning she walked across the patio where all the students were sitting with a big smile on her face, only to get through the door of the office where I was sitting, and burst into tears as soon as she got through the door. And when I asked her why she did that she said, "Because I didn't want to be a bad example to the kids.")

Sometimes we tend to think that way, don't we? We put on a fake smile even when we're crying inside, because we think godliness demands that we not have struggles (or at least not let people see that we have struggles).

So what can we say? We can say that Solomon was right! There is indeed, "a time for every purpose under heaven... a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance..."

Which means that as much as we wish it were otherwise, the person pursuing godliness must expect to experience BOTH—times of laughing and times of weeping, times of rejoicing and times of mourning. Hopefully the times of laughing and dancing will predominate, but it really takes BOTH to produce in us the Fruit of holiness.

Just as seeds in the soil need both sun and rain to make them grow, so our soul needs both joy and sorrow, tears and laughter, delight and pain to produce the fruit of godly character.

To wrongly conclude that pursuing godliness should always bring us happiness, and only happiness, is to embrace a common but dangerous mindset that may come back to strike us in the face again and again. And if not corrected, may strike us with the knock-out blow to our faith and Christian commitment.

Then **SECONDLY**, we must distinguish the difference between personal wants, expectations and desires, and divinely inspired dreams. Because not every dream, desire or expectation we have comes from God. And the way God often helps us to distinguish between the two is through the process of having certain dreams blocked — an occurrence that forces us to sift, and sort, and discern which ones were from God, and which ones were from us.

You see, the very nature of dreams is that they're dreams! And because they're dreams they often fail to take into consideration the realities of life. They often fail to account for human

fallenness and fickleness, the limitations of time and energy needed to accomplish some task, the intrusion of unexpected changes or events, and the need to be flexible and willing to adjust when reality makes it a necessity.

Many missionaries have gone to the field with dreams as big as their enthusiasm, only to find out that officials in their host countries are not as supportive as they thought they would be, and that sometimes they even oppose their work, thus frustrating their time-table, sapping their energy, and draining needed resources.

And thus the missionary who is NOT willing to adjust their plans, or revamp their time-table, or seek God's face on what new strategy they must now embrace to go about making their dreams a reality, will often see their dream die completely when it need not die at all! It simply needs to be re-adjusted in light of unexpected realities.

The same could be said in relation to marriage. One of the things I seek to dismantle in every couple in my pre-marital counseling sessions if it is present (because I believe it is unhealthy) is what I call "The Cinderella Mentality." That is, the idea that once two people get married life simply whisks them away into the state of "happily ever after"—no need to work at the relationship / no conflict or need to resolve differences / love simply carries you along on a cloud of unbroken bliss!

You see, youthful dreams and desires are good and necessary, but they have to be tempered by reality or they can do us great harm. Dreams are meant to be like a COMPASS that points us in the right direction, not a ROAD MAP that flawlessly lays out ahead of time every detail in every step along the way!

Then **LAST**, I need to say that the death of our dreams need not be the end of the story. For often, our old dreams MUST die if God is ever to replace them with new ones.

I don't know anyone who wants their dreams to be shattered. Our dreams are what often keep us going, fill us with hope, spawn in us energy, stamina and enthusiasm, and keep us focused. That's why when dreams die people find it hard to go on.

But what we often fail to see is that when dreams die, it's not necessarily God saying, "I have nothing left for you to do," but God saying "I have a new thing for you to do." It is often God trying to point us in a new direction — a direction we would not have considered had our old dream not died — an outdated dream that needed to be updated!

V. Raymond Edmond, one of Wheaton College's illustrious presidents tells of a time in 1926 when he was returning by ship to Ecuador. He was committed to missions and had served there 5 years even starting a Bible School. Yet due to a debilitating, painful and prolonged illness that had left him "greatly weakened," and had brought him, "into the valley of the shadow of death," he had spent time in the U.S. recovering.

Yet through that disappointing event, and insights through it that followed, he ended up at Wheaton where he influenced more people than he had ever thought possible —people such as King Haile Salessie of Ethiopia, Madame Chaing Kai-shek of Taiwan, Robert LeTourneau of LeTourneau College, Cameron Townsend of Wycliffe Bible Translators, Jim Elliot and Nate Saint who were martyred in Ecuador, and Ruth and Billy Graham.

The death of his dream to be a missionary led to the new dream, leading him to write this in retrospect: "In His all-wise providence, the Lord brings us into deep crises when doors are barred and the way is closed..." "Why does he crowd us into a corner from which there is no human escape, he asks? His purpose is that we might learn the wonderful reality of His unfailing presence."

And can I add that although God will never forsake us, He must often redirect us, closing and even locking one door, so that we will be forced thereby to seek, turn and see another door of opportunity.