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Encouragement In The Dark Days of Life - Part 1

Introduction

Many years ago I had a very severe bout of depression. It was unquestionably “My dark Hour”. During those dark days and nights it seemed that life had no future and irrespective of what direction I looked, everything was dark. Saints at times made the darkness darker still by telling me to “get out of it” or “if you were a real christian you would not be like that” or “a real christian cannot get depressed”. I decided to stop praying, closed my Bible and decided, “that is it for me!”. As the intensity grew I began to question my own salvation. Then one day when during a “having nothing to do with spiritual things”, the gracious Spirit of God brought three persons to my heart:

- a) First there was David. The sweet psalmist of Israel knew what it was to be depressed. Three times he repeated the agony of his heart saying, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?” (Psa. 42:5, 11; 43:5). That was astounding and what an encouragement. That great man knew the darkness of depression.
- b) Then the gracious Spirit brought to my mind Elijah when he sat under the juniper trees and wanted to die (1 Kgs. 19:4). This mighty prophet who stood fearless before the four hundred prophets of Baal and who sat at the table of that wicked woman Jezebel and her equally evil husband Ahab (1 Kgs. 19:19), was depressed. This was most encouraging. David who gave us the beautiful Psalms and the great prophet Elijah, both of them knew depression.
- c) Then the greatest of all encouragements came when the Spirit caused me to consider the Lord in Gethsemane when He began to “be very heavy” (Matt. 26:37, 43). The word means to be greatly distressed, “to be put to grief”, “to be sore troubled”.
 - i) What words of cheer these three examples were. Thereafter when I was told I was not much of a christian, I replied saying, “I am in the best of company for David knew what this was, Elijah knew what it was, and our blessed Lord knew what it was, I am in the best of company”.
 - ii) As I live and move among the saints, now having been in multiple parts of the world ministering the Word of God for some 50 years, I have yet to find a saint who does not at times need a word of encouragement, a “Be of good cheer”.
 - iii) Sadly, today the latest publishing trend is “self help books” to help people think better about themselves when dark days through depression, danger or disease are upon them. What words of hope could Socrates say, or Plato, or any modern TV so called “evangelist” speak to those who are in depressions darkness? In looking at the philosophies of man they all fail for they are all dependent on self help and the hurting individual needs to go back constantly to get another “pick me up”. There is only one who can not only speak words of cheer and comfort, but provide that which is needed to strengthen the hurting individual. Only the Lord can give peace in the storms of life, calmness in the diseases and sickness of life, and hope in the unknown and dark times of depression.
 - iv) Only the God of Hope (Rom. 15:13) can whisper, “Be of good cheer”, and by the intercessory work of our Lord and strengthening by the Holy Spirit our spirits can be lifted again.

The Meaning of The Word “Cheer”

As with many words, context must be taken into consideration. For instance, take the word “record”. It can refer to a recording of a speech etc., it can indicate an official document, or the excellency of an accomplishment is recorded. It all depends on the context. The same with how words are used in the scriptures.

- a) The word translated “cheer” comes from a word meaning “courage”, “to be strengthened”, “to comfort”.
 - i) When the woman who had the issue of blood was healed it would have been with trepidation she would have approached the Lord. It is my understanding that the Greek word in this case is best translated, “Be of good comfort”.
 - ii) When the disciples were in the storm tossed boat, it would be (to my mind) better translated “Courage”, thus reading, “be of good courage it is I, be not afraid” (Jn. 6:20).

In the above references what a comfort it would have been to know the Lord of creation was the speaker, to know one’s sins had been forgiven, to know as Paul would have learnt the purposes of God cannot be thwarted by angry humans. The contexts must be considered in each case of the following references.

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“Be of Good Cheer”

In reading the historical books of the New Testament, Matthew through Acts, it is observed the Lord said this expression five times, four times on earth and once from Heaven. He said it to:

- a) The man sick of the palsy (Matt. 9:2)
- b) The lady with the issue of blood (translated “comfort” in KJV) (Matt. 9:22)
- c) The disciples in the boat (Matt. 14:27)
- d) The disciples (Jn. 16:33)
- e) Paul (Acts 23:11)

The Unnaturalness of The Command

When the Lord spoke it was not just words or a nice little cliché. It was a command of comfort, “Be of good cheer”. If we were to put ourselves in the situation of the various individuals when the Lord spoke these words, we would say, “It’s impossible”. To Jairus who had just heard the heart breaking news, “Thy daughter is dead; trouble not the Master” (Lk. 8:49), what devastating news for any parent, and in that dark hour the Lord says, “Be of good cheer”. How could he be of good cheer? Consider the disciples being in the boat in the storm tossed sea and drowning appears imminent. In that frightening situation when those with hearts like a lion melt in fear, the Lord says, “Be of good cheer”. How could they be of good cheer or courage? If anyone else said it, it would be a wicked mockery, but not the Lord. It’s not natural to be of good cheer in such dire situations.

The Speaker in Each Case

The importance is to observe who said these words and in what circumstances were they said to the individuals. Here is the first observation:

- a) In every case except one, the Lord speaks to the individuals. How precious this is, whether individually or to a number of disciples in the same situation the Lord speaks, “Be of good cheer”. Later Peter wrote, “Casting all your care upon Him: for He careth for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). On that storm tossed sea he learnt the Lord cared for him. The interesting thing is not just the truth conveyed but the fact that the first word “care” is a plural word meaning, “Casting all your cares upon Him”. The second word is singular indicating God has only one care, and that is you or I. So the verse can read, “Casting all your cares upon Him: for He had only one care and it is you”. Isaiah, who wrote of He who “carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4) also wrote, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11). Also, when I am old, then He says, “And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you” (Isa. 46:4). The Almighty God, creator of all, speaks peace and encouragement to our hearts saying, “Be of good cheer”. With such a one speaking, how could the individual not be encouraged?
- b) Then in the five before mentioned references the Lord speaks. This is the man who lived a human life with all its attending joys and sorrows, who knew what it was to pray, weep, feel pain, suffer for righteousness, honor God and live for the glory of God and the Father. He knew dark days. How hard it must have been to live in that Jewish family where none of his brethren believed in Him and thought he was mad. Consider when after three years of teaching, preaching, and discipling He had only twelve weak failing human individuals. He was so desolate and could have said, “Lover and friend hast Thou put far from me (Psa. 88:18), or “I am like a pelican of the wilderness, I am like an owl of the desert, I watch, and am as a sparrow, alone upon the house top” (Psa. 102:6-7). He knew the need for encouragement for none ever was afflicted as He was.

... Rowan Jennings