

## Spiritual Fainting Fits

The huge jet slowly taxied towards the take-off runway and the crew chatted as they stowed seat belts and life vests they had used for the emergency drill. The passengers relaxed in their seats and looked out the window. Finally, the aircraft lined up at the head of the runway, the engines roared into life and the plane started to accelerate down the runway. Passengers were forced back against their seats by the irresistible g-force. First the nose, then the whole body of the plane lifted up gracefully into the sky. The ground dropped away quickly. The jet climbed and banked to the right, passing through low level clouds and bursting into the bright early morning sunshine. It was nice up here, compared to the dull day on the tarmac. It was going to be a nice flight. The seat-belt sign was extinguished and a few passengers started to move around. A soothing voice from the cockpit emerged from the rows of speakers:

*“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome aboard our flight today. We trust you are settled in for a quick trip of just one hour and ten minutes. This aircraft is one of a kind. It is controlled by an onboard piloting system. There is no pilot. The take-off, flight and landing are all computer-controlled from the ground. The system has been tested many times and is state of the art avionic technology. Nothing can go wrong .... go wrong .... go wrong....”*

Whereupon, half of the passengers promptly fainted.

### *The strongest saint occasionally faints*

Sometimes things go wrong in the Christian journey. The strongest believer suffers from spiritual fainting fits. Bad news is received. Things don't work out as expected. Relationships sour. University exam results are poor. Sickness is not quickly healed. Answers to prayer are delayed. Personal issues worsen unexpectedly. Everything is going well and we are climbing through the low-level clouds of life, but power is suddenly lost and the vehicle comes to an abrupt halt. When this happens, it is impossible to escape the pull of gravity. Or else, cruising level has been attained, everyone is sitting back enjoying the service when air turbulence suddenly strikes and the aircraft seems to be thrown around the sky. Some passengers get sick; others grasp the arm rests, their knuckles white. An unfavourable comment, a sideways glance; criticism, a negative telephone call, stress, and the craft goes into freefall. A feeling of light-headedness is followed by loss of direction; the patient sees double and finally passes out. Spiritual fainting fits” can happen to any Christian, at any time.

Sometimes fainting fits are the direct result of sin in our lives. If we know this to be the case, the only remedy is to repent, ask for God's forgiveness and turn around in our behaviour and thinking. Easier said than done, but unless we grasp the scorpion and overcome it, it will continue to bite until paralysis sets in and we no longer care, not long want to repent, no longer hear the Holy Spirit convicting us, and backsliding becomes a way of life.

Having said that, spiritual fainting is not necessarily a sign of defeat or sin, but can be the result of testing and proving, as we experience God's discipline, teaching, correcting and moulding us. The tough times we face are real. They are not the figments of our imagination. They can be arduous and long. When they occur, the critical issue is how we maintain equilibrium and cope, how long it takes us to respond to the divine smelling salts and recover.

### *Recognising the symptoms*

He lay in bed longer than usual, occasionally glancing at his watch and groaning. Finally, his wife came into the room and told him he must pull himself together and get dressed for church. This was the last place he wished to go. He thought of the people who usually went, how they treated him, how he always felt they were just going through the motions each week. No, he would stay at home today and have a rest. His wife became insistent. "You really must go to church today. After all, you are the pastor".

What are the symptoms of spiritual malaise? When it strikes, the Christian life seems to be a continuous struggle. We feel sorry for ourselves. We echo the old song, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen". Going to church becomes a chore. We feel we don't fit in. Too many people are joyful. Everyone else is on a different wave-length. The river flows while we feel dry. It seems no one understands what we are going through; if they notice us at all. Everyone else is being blessed, receiving some prophetic word, feeling the presence of God. For us, however, looking happy is hard work. Prayer seems unproductive. The Bible seems dry and arcane; only the genealogies make sense. The anointing power or presence of God is distant and theoretical – or so we believe. The music at church seems out of tune and repetitive (maybe it is, but we find it irritating). The preaching is meaningless. The easiest thing in the world is to miss a week or two, a month or two, hope nobody notices; feel resentful if they don't, then relieved they don't. A process of spiritual desiccation takes place. Love for God's people cools; then love for God Himself.

Have you ever felt like you were running on one cylinder, with dirty spark plugs, no motivation, no focus, with a near empty tank and rusting connections? There are times when the strong are not vigorous; the joyful are not singing; the brave are not courageous.

Have you ever felt like giving up and running away? You just don't understand what is going on, why God allows bad things to happen? King David, in the Old Testament, echoed that sentiment on many occasions. One poignant occasion was his flight from Absalom, his son who was about to enter the city at the head of a revolutionary army that threatened to destroy everything David stood for. As he stood on the roof of his palace and observed preparations to evacuate the city, David saw a dove emerge from a corner in the roof. With a barely audible flap of its wings, the bird took off, circled the palace and was gone. It seemed so easy. David wished he could have gone as effortlessly. "Oh, that I had wings of a dove; then I would fly away and be at rest" (Psalm 55:5-8). Instead, he had to

live through the insurrection, suffer rejection by the common people, experience the ignominy of his wives being raped on the palace roof by Absalom and ultimately put on a brave face (with a sorrowful heart) when his victorious general reported that the revolt was over and his favourite son was dead. "Oh Absalom, my son, would to God that I had died for you". We all wish, from time to time, that we could simply fly away "and be at rest".

These are symptoms of spiritual fainting fits.

### *Dealing with the symptoms*

How do we respond to major reverses in our lives? As Christians, are we any different from our non-Christian neighbours? The temptation is to draw back with a weary "who needs it?" It is easy to focus on the problems, as though that will help. I have had friends in Christian service who have fainted so long and so hard they have abandoned ministry, faith, marriage, friendships and even God. Nothing will coax them back. They know all the "answers"; they have counseled people and know all the "tools of the trade".

The first thing to be aware of is that we are not alone if we are fainting from some unexpected malaise. Look at the "great" men and women of God, usually lauded for their high octane faith and miracles. Noah had problems with one of his sons. The hands of Moses grew heavy in battle. Ten of twelve spies sent to check out the Promised Land returned with bad news and cast a pall of gloom over the nation. David lost heart in the heat of battle. Elijah wanted to give up and die after a great victory over the enemies of God at Mt Carmel. Jeremiah wanted to quit the prophetic ministry on numerous occasions. John the Baptist had doubts. Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief; who asked that the cup of suffering be taken away. Paul had a series of reverses, whippings, shipwrecks, organized opposition, being labeled the "off-scouring of the earth" and suffering constant spiritual attacks, after which he threw up his hands and sighed, "Who is enough for these things?"

In a letter to New Testament churches, the Apostle Peter said that the trial of our faith is precious in the sight of God, even if that trial feels like going through fire at the time. God is faithful. He is able to keep us (Jude 24). The problems of the moment feel heavy, but they are only temporary. "Don't think it strange that fiery trials come to test you, as though something unusual was happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). As Christians, we are called to walk in the light, but if the light appears dim or switched off we feel we are losing direction. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are tempted to cry out, "God, why me?", until we realize everyone goes through periods of trial, testing and discipline (Hebrews 12:5-13). They will never be big enough to overwhelm us (1 Corinthians 10:13); God will always be with us, and will provide us with strength and a way out. Spiritual fainting fits only become rigor mortis if we give up hope (Hebrews 12:5).

### *Get out the smelling salts*

To faint is human. To stay there is unwise. To not want to get up again is simply dangerous. If you lie in the middle of the road, cars will drive over you. If you stay morbid, lose heart, give up, people and circumstances will roll over you. Suffering may even feel good at time, but after every bump it will be harder to get back up and you will end up feeling really “flat”.

God is our heavenly Father, and He loves us. When it seems the symptoms are too great to deal with, He comes to our side with smelling salts that are powerful enough to revive us. Like a good Counsellor, the Holy Spirit talks to us and shows us the way through negative feelings and circumstances.

Like a good earthly father, God teaches us, using adversity as discipline to train us. The primary meaning of the word “discipline” in the New Testament is not punishment but teaching. Hard times do not imply God is not with us. Quiet times do not mean He is “not there”. Tired times do not indicate we can’t make it. The Christian life is not sustained by human strength or wisdom, but by the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). God does not set out to harm us (as Satan would have us believe). Through trials, fatigue, needs and reverses, God teaches us to rely on Him, to walk by faith, trust His Word and learn new lessons. This is so that we will not become proud, leaning on our own abilities, complacent, taking His blessing and provision for granted. We can become resentful and bitter; complain and rebel; or we can grow.

### *Treatments Prescribed by Doctor Jesus*

The first step in recovering from spiritual fainting fits is to renew our prayer life. Prayer is like fresh air to the human spirit. When adversity comes, we do not feel like praying, but that is when we need to redouble our efforts. The Holy Spirit prompts us to pray. When we don’t know what to pray for, He prays through us. If we don’t “come apart” to spend time with God, we will certainly come apart in other ways. “Prayer on run” is not the same as “waiting on the Lord (Isaiah 40:29-31; Psalm 27:13, 14). In prayer we can hear from God, get answers and perspective, take responsibility and renew our thinking. Sometimes, like the disciples we feel like sleeping instead of praying, but as we pray faith is renewed.

The second step is to sustain our Bible reading. God’s Word has power; it is the verbal expression of Himself. As anyone who has changed their eating regime from unhealthy to nutritious food knows, true renewal comes from changing our mental and emotional diet. Feeding on God’s Word gives us new strength.

Third, we need the help and understanding of Christian friends when things go wrong. People will fail you; sometimes they will be Christians. The right kinds of Christian friends can also build us up. When it comes to relationships, make up your mind to Make up mind to seek out “master builders”, not demolition crews. Build up, don’t tear down. Hang out with people who help you become strong.

Fourth, learn to be a worshiper Hebrews 12:12. encourages us to “strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees”. Worship is good spiritual therapy. It takes our attention off ourselves and places it squarely on God. When our minds and

mouths are filled w. praise, there is no room for anything else. In my experience, worship meets inner needs; releases faith; and leads to spiritual healing. Open your heart and mind. Open your mouth. Let faith begin to arise. Praise God for what you have, who you have become because of His enormous grace and forbearance. Get out of bed, begin to walk around, allow the Holy Spirit to renew your hope and transform your attitudes. Don't give up (Isaiah 40:10; Psalm 73:26).

Finally, guard your heart (Proverbs 4:23; Galatians 6:9; Hebrews 10:35). Avoid the enthusiasm killers, the vision-robbers, who may be giving up around you and trying to talk you out of trusting God. He cares for you. He wants to rejuvenate you, wants you to grow in obedience and usefulness, to be an agent of change in your world.