

My Soul's Greatest Trouble

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I am reasonably confident of three things that give my heart peace and assurance and comfort while I live in this world. I'm confident that God chose me in everlasting love as the object of his grace before the world began, elect of God. What a special comfort that is. I'm confident that the Lord Jesus Christ, God's darling Son, poured out his life's blood for me and redeemed me, made atonement for all my sin, satisfied the justice of God on my behalf. What peace, what peace, what peace is found in the blood of the Christ. And I am confident that I am born of God, called by his Spirit, regenerated, born-again by God the Holy Ghost, given new life in Christ, made a new creature in Christ Jesus, been made partaker of the divine nature. I have created in me a new man created in righteousness and true holiness which only God the Holy Ghost can create.

I have a good hope through grace regarding these things. I have some measure of confidence and assurance before God regarding these things for three reasons. First, I hear the Shepherd's voice. God still speaks to me by his word. As I read it, he speaks to me. As I hear it, he speaks to me. Oh, how great it is for the sheep to hear his voice, to know his voice, to hear him called by his own name by the Shepherd. We know, brethren beloved, your election of God, Paul said, for our Gospel came not unto you in word only but in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance.

I have confidence regarding these things because hearing the Shepherd's voice, I trust him. I trust the Lord Jesus Christ. Though he slay me, yet will I trust him. I trust him. When I feel close to him, I trust him. When I feel far from him, I trust him. When I have the rare privilege of walking with him in sweet communion, I trust him. When he hides his face from me and will not speak to me and will not let me speak to him, I trust him. My hope before God is not my feeling, my hope before God is not my doing, my hope before God is Christ alone. That's all my hope. Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and I do believe that Jesus of Nazareth, that babe of Bethlehem about which everybody is talking and singing this week and the last few days and will for the next few days, I believe that babe of Bethlehem is indeed the Christ of God, that one who fully accomplished everything the prophets said he would accomplish. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. And I'm confident of these things because there is within me a true sincere love for the Son of God and his people.

We love him because he first loved us. I say little about this because what I have to say about this is worth little, because my love for Christ is insignificant, because my love for him can hardly be something worth bragging about. But this is the true confession of every heaven-born soul: we love him. Not like we want to. Not like we hope to. Not like we ought to. But love him we do, of him we do. I have no doubt of my love for that woman sitting right there. I love her. I love her. Not like I ought to. Not like I want to. But I love her. And because I don't love her like I ought to, and don't love her like I want to, that doesn't make me question my love for her. I love my Redeemer. Not like I want to. Not like I ought to. And not like I hope to. But love him I do. And here's the reason: we love him because he first loved us. His love precedes our love for him by eternity. His love exceeds our love for him infinitely. And his love causes those who are loved by him to love him.

We love him because he first loved us and being born of God, we love the children of God. We know that we love the children of God when we love God and keep his commandments. Now I have a confession to make: in spite of all these facts, there is a struggle in my soul, a tormented trial in my spirit, a heavy burden on my heart. I have a new heart, a new will, a new heaven-bent nature created in me by God the Holy Spirit, a nature that longs for and seeks after righteousness, a nature that longs for and seeks total conformity to the Lord Jesus, but I cannot do the things I would for as the Apostle Paul put it, "The flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other so that you cannot do the things you would."

Turn to Romans 7. I find the law in my members. When I would do good, evil is present with me. I find in my soul iniquity, transgression and sin. Far more hideous, far more ignominious than the most profane acts of ungodly men. You see, we all have fences thrown up around us, we all have cages around us, fences and cages that restrain us from behaving outwardly as we might, but I have discovered and then discovering there are no fences around our minds, no cages to our imaginations, no pins to lock up our thoughts.

I want to pray but I often wonder if I ever have. There's too much fleshly lust in my prayer to call it prayer. I want to worship God but there's too much pride in my worship to call it worship. I want to be completely free of earthly care, trusting God in all things, but there's too much unbelief, too much selfish resentment toward God's providence to call my faith faith and my submission submission. You see, our envy is still just the expression of our enmity against God. Our discontentedness is just our despising of God's providence. Our worry is nothing but questioning God's wisdom and goodness. Our fear is only the denial of God's power. Our covetousness is proud rebellion against God.

I hear men talk about becoming less and less sinful and progressively holier than they were yesterday. They talk about what they call progressive sanctification and their doctrine is that God's children grow more and more righteous, more and more holy until they finally become ripe for heaven. They teach that glorification is just the end and the result of their own progressive attainments in personal holiness. If their doctrine is true, then it would be possible for men by great diligence to arrive at perfection and, of course, we know their doctrine is not true. Such doctrine is contrary to experience. Every man

must honestly acknowledge that. I don't care who says he's more righteous than he was yesterday, I'm here to tell you he's a liar. If you think so, I'm here to tell you you're a liar. That's just not so. It's contrary to experience, honesty compels us to acknowledge it. More than that, it's contrary to the word of God if a man says, "I have not sinned." I don't care what he does, I don't care if he's just died as a martyr and says, "I have not sinned," the truth is not in him. He doesn't know God.

Honesty compels me to acknowledge that such doctrine is totally contrary to everything I've experienced. I have, I believe, over these past 45 years grown some in grace but my love, my faith, my commitment to Christ, my joy in the Lord, my peace, my comfort have grown, they've increased by the grace of God, but my sin, oh my sin, my sin has not diminished one iota. My sin has not diminished one iota. My outward acts of sin are more restricted, they're more controlled, but the inward evil of my flesh rages now like it has never raged before. Though I'm redeemed, justified and sanctified in Christ, I'm still a man in the flesh full of sin.

Tell me, you who know God, is it not so with you? Be honest and read what Paul says here in Romans 7:14. Here's an honest man speaking by divine inspiration but speaking honestly of his own experience, a man who had walked with God for a long time, a man who had lived by faith in Christ for a long time, and yet he is inspired by God to tell us what he experienced in the depths of his soul. Romans 7:14,

14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.
15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. 16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. 17 Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. 19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. 20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. 22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

This is my soul's greatest trouble. I wish it were not so but it is. Some of you, I know, are in the same condition. How can we live in such a state? Where can we find comfort? Is there any hope for such creatures as we are? Give me your attention, I believe I have a message from God for you.

Turn back to Psalm 73. I have endeavored to expound the seventh chapter of Romans to you as clearly as I am able. Perhaps a better way of expounding it is to illustrate it and here in Psalm 73 we have an illustration of what the Apostle Paul is describing. The fact is the believer is a person with two natures, two natures warring against one another

continually, and those two natures are flesh and spirit. This fact is never more clearly set before us than in the life of this man David, the man after God's own heart. In Psalm 73, David discusses the struggles he had in his own soul with his flesh, with his sin.

David is king in Israel. He's been ruler in Israel for some time now. He's the man chosen of God to be king in Israel. He's the man who stands head and shoulders above everybody else, a man after God's own heart, a man of faith and faithfulness. Such a man as God when God summarized his life, speaks only of three things against David. Just three things. Just three things. Oh my, what a man David was, but here David speaks of David as David. He describes before God the warfare and the struggle of his own soul, a struggle between flesh and spirit.

In the first verses of this chapter, David stands and is looking out over the fields, I guess, and he's thinking. He's at the age where men reminisce a good bit. They've got their children grown and grandchildren, and he's looking back over his life and his house was a mess. His house, his family was a mess. Just a mess. Just a mess. It appears, I can't say for certain but it appears to me that the only people in David's house who worshiped God other than David was his wife Abigail and his wife Bathsheba and his son Solomon. Everybody else lived and died hating God. His sons fighting one another and killing one another. His sons pursuing their own sisters, raping them and forcing them against their will. His sons parading David's own wives and concubines before all Israel in horrid acts of fornication.

And here stands David, a man who worshiped God and he looks across the field and pictures in his mind's eye a reprobate, ungodly, Baal worshiping heathen. There's old Joe, he's got everything a man could ever want. He's got rich lands, thousands of acres. He's got a huge palace, hundreds of servants, and his children, God has multiplied his children to him unbelievably and his grandchildren unbelievably, and they're all smart, well-educated, well-trained, every one of them prosperous, every one of them has a good name and a good reputation. They all come home every Thanksgiving, they all come home every Christmas, they all remember momma and daddy on anniversaries and birthdays. They're all just the ideal family. Just the ideal family. This man is so rich his eyes bug out with fatness. He has no concern for anything. All he has to do when he wants something is to say, "I want it," and a servant goes and buys it for him. He doesn't have to go to the store for himself. And yet he's proud. He's cruel and his oppressive. But he doesn't get sick. Never been in a hospital in his life. Doesn't know what a toothache is. He's never lost a companion. Never lost a son. Never lost a daughter. Never lost a grandchild. Never had to go to jail to bail anybody out. Oh, what greatness this man has and David said, "My steps were almost gone." He said, "I almost turned around and walked away from God. My feet had well nigh slipped because I was envious at the prosperity of that fool. I was envious at the prosperity of the wicked."

Now let's look at David's words beginning in verse 22 and learn these three things. 1. Though I am saved by the grace of God, I know that I'm a terribly foul and sinful man still. "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee." I take David's words for my own and I make the same confession before God and before you. I've seen Christ

and I've seen my sin, and I abhor myself. I've had a few trials in my life, none compared to most but a few, but the most painful thing, the most difficult trial I've ever had to endure is one that I must continue to endure as long as I live in this world, it is the ever-increasing realization and awareness of my sin. David uses three words here to describe his sin before God: foolish, ignorant, beastly.

Now remember, Cody, he's not talking about somebody else, he's talking about him. "I was foolish. I was ignorant. I was beastly." He said, "I behaved as a fool before God." He couldn't have used a stronger word. It's the same word he uses in Psalm 14 to describe the atheist. He says, "The fool has said in his heart no God." It means one who forgets God and loves evil. David said, "I forgot God and loved evil." That's the word he uses to describe himself.

Then he says, "I've been ignorant. My speech, my thoughts, my actions betray ignorance." How often we sit like ignorant men and women, how often we speak like ignorant men and women, how often we act like ignorant men and women, like men and women who know only what we see, not what God's revealed to us; only the things we see with our eyes, not the things we've experienced in our souls.

Then David goes on to say, "I have behaved like a brute beast before God." That word "beast" speaks of some hideous, monstrous, astonishingly wild creature, one that can't be tamed, one that can't be controlled. That's an accurate description of our flesh. The old man is a sinful, beastly, monstrous creature. I would disclose my whole complaint but where shall I begin? No words of mine can fully paint that worst distemper, sin.

Yes, I most truly describe myself when I describe myself as a beast before God. Like the brute beast of the earth, I'm far too much attached to this world. The hog grubbing in mud for roots and nuts cares nothing for stars. The wild ass's colt roaming the hills cares nothing for the angels of God. The ravenous wolf has no regard for eternity. Educate the beast, treat it as well as you can, but it will never have any regard for anything but its own natural appetites. How much like the beast I am. Is it not so with you?

Are you not, am I not far too fondly attached to this world? Let us never be content with that beastly attachment to the world. You say, "Pastor, but you say we have to live with them." But don't be content with it. "But you say this is the way it's gonna be for the rest of our lives." That's the way it's gonna be. Don't be content. Don't be so proud and don't be so foolish as to deny it either.

I'm also like the wild beast in this regard, I seem to have so little emotion, so little passion for heavenly things. Don't you find it astonishing, I hope painfully astonishing, that when you listen to the politicians on television, you get more engaged, more emotionally involved, more radical, that's a good word, more radical over that nonsense. Over that nonsense. I don't care whether you're Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, it doesn't matter, you get more enraged, more emotionally involved over that trivial nonsense than you do about redemption and grace and the glory of God and the will of God and the purpose of God. Look how we grovel here below, fond of these

earthly trifling toys, our souls can neither fly nor go to reach eternal joys. In vain we tune our formal songs, in vain we try to rise, Hosanna's languish on our tongues, and our devotion dies. Dear Lord and shall we ever live at this poor dying rate, our love so faint, so cold to thee, and thine to us so great.

Again, we're like the brute beast in our shortsightedness. Our hearts and minds are too much concerned for the things of time, too little concern for the things of eternity. We might well compare ourselves to beasts, brute beasts because of our animal passions. I won't go far into this dark path of painful experience, just say enough to make you understand what I'm talking about. Spurgeon put it this way, "He that hath fellowship with God will sometimes feel the devil within him til he thinketh himself the devil."

The fact is there is no evil in the world, I wrote down, of which this sinful flesh is not capable. That's two weeks, Skip. There's no evil known to humanity you haven't done and I haven't done. We're guilty. We're guilty. Your conscience and your heart screams, "My God, that's so!" We're guilty. We're guilty. We're evil and only evil and that continually. Were it not for the free grace and sovereign love of God for us, we couldn't live with ourselves. The characteristics of beasts rage within us. The pride of a lion. The lust of the horse-leech. The raging anger of the bull. The envy of the wolf. And the stubbornness of the jackass. That's what we are.

Grace, you see, doesn't change your old nature. Flesh is still just flesh. Adam is always Adam. Nothing ever changes. And grace conquers Adam, grace rules Adam, but grace doesn't change Adam.

Brother Todd called me earlier this week and he said, "I want to run something by you." He said, "What does it mean when it says 'walk in the spirit and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh'?" And he and I said exactly the same thing. I said, "Obviously you want to tell me something." He said, "That's always troubled me." He said, "When Scripture says 'you'll not fulfill the lust of the flesh' it means you're not going to reap the wages of sin." He's exactly right. We fulfill the lust of the flesh all the time. Mark does and Don does all the time. We don't talk to each other about it and don't need to. That's just fact. Our flesh rages in lust all the time and finds gratification in the lust itself, even when it's not fulfilled.

This is my painful but honest confession of sin, "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee." I'm carnal, sold unto sin. I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. Second, learn this: though I am a vile sinful man, I trust the Son of God. In the teeth of my sin, in the teeth of my sin I trust the Lord Jesus Christ. Look at Psalm 73:23, "Nevertheless," oh what a great word that is, "Nevertheless I am continually with thee." So foolish was I and ignorant, I was as a beast before thee. "Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." I am a shamefully sinful man but God, my God, is faithful, infinitely, gloriously faithful, therefore trust in the Lord Jesus I say with joy and with confidence. Nevertheless I am continually with thee. Not withstanding all my sin, God is faithful.

This is a glorious thought. If you're a believer, if you're in Christ, your sins shall never be charged to you. Be they ever so great, ever so many, ever so constant, they will never separate you from the Lord your God. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. Who shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord?

Now here are four pillars for your faith and mine. Note the connection with that word "nevertheless" with what David just confessed, "I was ignorant, foolish, as a beast before you. Nevertheless I am continually with thee." Here is a pillar for your soul: God's perseverance. God's perseverance. Preachers and religious people like to talk about their perseverance and the Bible speaks of our perseverance, the righteous shall hold on his way, but we persevere in grace, we persevere in faith, we persevere in life only because God perseveres in faithfulness, in grace, and in love for us. We are one with Christ and not until the Lord God forsakes his dear Son will he forsake us who are in his Son.

Our position, our relationship with the eternal God is immutable as God himself. We are constantly on his mind, constantly before his eye, constantly in his hand, constantly on his heart, constantly in his favor, accepted in the Beloved relentlessly. It takes very little faith when you think you have many graces and many virtues to say, "I'm accepted in Christ." But when you're aware of how vile and how base and how corrupt, how sinful you are, when you're aware that there's nothing you can bring to God and you lift your heart to heaven and say, "My Father, thank you I'm accepted in the Beloved." That's called faith.

Though I am a sinful beast before thee, I trust Christ. I trust Christ alone as my Lord and Savior. You see, it's only as sinners that we need a substitute. Our security doesn't depend on our faithfulness but God's faithfulness. Well, God help you to get this. I've said it to you just recently. I've said it a long time ago and I got a lot of flack for it but I stand by it because it's so full of comfort to my soul: my relationship with the eternal God does in great measure determine what I do, but what I do in no way determines my relationship with God. Oh. What I do good or bad doesn't have anything to do with determining my relationship to God.

Turn over a couple of pages to Psalm 89:27. When God beholds my sin, he says, "Nevertheless. Nevertheless." Psalm 89:27, "I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him," the Lord Jesus Christ, "for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law," I'd tell you what I would do if I were you, somewhere in the margin of my Bible I'd circle that word "if" and I'd write beside it "when" because the fact is you do all the time and God says, "When his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; When they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes." And that's not talking about him chastening us, he chastened our Savior in our stead, visited him with the rod and we are healed with his stripes. "Nevertheless. Nevertheless. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly

take from," Christ, "from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie," to Christ. "His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven."

Now here's another pillar for your soul: not only God's faithfulness but God's help. Thou hast holden me by my right hand. The right hand signifies strength. For God to hold me by my right hand implies that the hand of my strength is only weakness. He's held me. He is holding me and he will not let me go. He may in his wise providence allow me to fall but even when I fall, he's holding me by the right hand of my weakness.

Then he promises that God will guide. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel. He guides me with his written word and he directs my paths and I'm thankful for that. Thy word is a light to my feet, a lamp to my pathway. Oh God, thank you for the guidance of your word. He guides me by his Spirit. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy paths. Seek his way, you'll find his way. Trust him, you'll walk in his way. But the fact is sometimes I ignore his word and often I don't trust him with all my heart and I don't quit leaning to my own understanding. But still he shall guide me with his counsel according to his wise, good and gracious decree. Even when I'm envious at the prosperity of the wicked, even when I think I washed my hands in innocency, it's a foolish thing to serve God, even in my folly, in my foolishness, in my ignorance, in my beastliness, the Lord God guides me in every step according to his wise decree, ordering every step I take.

Then here's another pillar: and afterward receive me up to glory. Yes, old Adam shall soon be sent to the grave and this body will rot in the grave, as it should because of sin, but God will receive his own up into glory. As for me, as for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness. I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness. Then, Ellen, not until then I'll be satisfied, satisfied with everything.

One last thing, verses 25 and 26, Psalm 73. My soul's only hope of eternal glory is God my Savior. "Whom have I in heaven but thee?" Who can help me? Who can uphold me? Who can bring me up to glory? "Whom have I in heaven but thee?" but more than that, "there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." Christ is all my hope and I want no other. Do you understand that? Christ is all my hope and I want no other. None from you. None from me. None from the world. None from my flesh. No other hope but Jesus' blood and righteousness.

This I again confess, "My flesh and my heart faileth." Do you see the tense of the verb "fail"? He says, Bill, "My flesh and my heart fail incessantly. My flesh and my heart fail me all the time. My flesh and my heart have been a failure from the beginning. My flesh and my heart are failures now. My flesh and my heart shall fail me tomorrow. But God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." Oh, thank you, my God, for your matchless, relentless, unceasing grace in Christ Jesus. May God now make himself your portion forever in Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.