

Proverbs 18:14; Isaiah 40:27-31 Sept. 19, 2021
Matt. 5:1-11

There are 66 books in the Bible, and though written at different times and places, by different people, there is a coherent message throughout. One of those books is one we often overlook, or maybe just glance at now and then to find a handy quote. Yet, it contains much good advice and insight on the many experiences, temptations, challenges, and sorrows that we go through in life. That's why I'm continuing this series on the book of Proverbs, or at least some of the proverbs in that book.

A Broken Spirit

Several weeks ago, reading in Proverbs 18, my attention was arrested by this verse: *The spirit of a man can endure his sickness, But as for a broken spirit who can bear it? Prov. 18:14.* Since I read those words, I've continued to ponder what they mean. Just as the verse says, it seems that sicknesses, hardships, even much physical pain can be endured. We know these things and what they do to us. **But how does a broken spirit affect a person?**

On average, a person can survive without water for about 3 days, but some have reported to survive around 8 to 10. The human body can survive a surprisingly long time on water alone; with no food intake. How long depends on how much reserve the body has stored. When the body is deprived of new fuel (i.e., food), it breaks into its energy reserves to keep going. For most people survival without food can last one or two months. But how long with a broken spirit?

Here's a clue from another proverb: *A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit, Proverbs 15:13.* Heart and spirit are linked and the effect shows. Happy and cheerful, both positive attitudes, are contrasted with heartache which brings sorrow. Heart and spirit produce an outward effect, and they affect each other.

Heartache, and the sorrow it brings, presses us down in ways that make it hard to carry on with normal living. Anyone who's experienced the death of a close relative or friend, maybe a beloved pet, or crashing of one's plans and goals, knows what that means. **There are many things we experience in life that can crush our spirits,** if even only for a short time.

This past year, right up to the very days we are living now, has brought us much to lament and much to discourage us. COVID of course, wildfires throughout the Western U.S. (and other countries as well), floods in the East and hurricane damage, social and political polarization in our country, humanitarian crises on our Southern border and in Afghanistan, and if you've been out of work, or inflation is already biting you, the future probably doesn't look so good. Then, there are personal or family challenges, tragedies, or set-backs. All of these

things can get you down. And sometimes the physical pain that can be endured for a long time just goes on too long. That too can break one's spirit. Maybe some of you know what I'm talking about. Without the spirit to move forward in any endeavor, it all comes to a standstill; even the will to resist evil. **Every great and valuable work of humankind began on a spiritual foundation.** The spirit comes before the material.

When the spirit is broken motivation flees and if that persists despair and apathy can set in. Let's hope you don't ever feel like Job did when he said: *My spirit is broken, my days are cut short, the grave awaits me*, Job 17:1. When the spirit is gone the motivation to endure flees.

[Drained By The Mundane]

[At times it may be just plain old "I'm tired of doing the same old same old, day after day, year after year." My cousin the farmer was visiting and expressed his fatigue: "I've planted 42 crops and I'm tired." Doing the same thing over and over can wear you down, even more so if you don't see good results, improvement, or advancement.

Kathleen Norris, in her book *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work,"* explains that the Christian monks of an earlier era lived by a daily routine of worship, prayer, work, and rest that, over time, for some, led to *acedia*. The word comes from a Greek root that means "a lack of concern or care." It describes the boredom and apathy, a spiritual torpor, that some monks faced after many years of living the same daily routine....¹ Fast-paced postmodern life looks for meaning, fulfillment, and healing in unusual, dramatic events, or new and ecstatic experiences. The Christian faith, on the other hand, affirms that meaning is found in everyday living, and that, most often, blessings come through ordinary events.... To sense God in the exceptional experience is one thing, such as Peter's walk on the water with Jesus (Matthew 14:25-33), but walking on dry land with Jesus is quite a different thing. It requires the supernatural grace of God to live twenty-four hours of every day, all year long, as a disciple of Jesus, unnoticed and unrewarded by the world.]

Does God Abandon?

When the spirit is broken, where is God? Back in June I reflected on the words of Psalm 73 – a psalm of Asaph, worship leader in Jerusalem in the days of King David. *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold*, Psalm 73:1-2. **Even long-time believers go through times of great doubt.** It can happen to any of us at any time because life is hard and sometimes very strange. When things aren't going swimmingly, we may cry out to God ... or maybe ignore God, feeling that because things aren't well for me God doesn't care.

What happens when you lose your “drive” or your motivation to continue doing what you’ve been doing? How is it you can lose your “spirit” to continue to pursue God’s call? Does God abandon you at that point?

Sometimes that feeling of God being distant or absent arises because of our own sin. There are times, however, when our vital forces are worn out, not because of sin but because of service. But this kind of exhaustion, this spiritual fatigue, results from disconnection from the true supply source. Did your service arise from your own sympathy or pity for those you’ve served, or did it arise from the redemption we have in Jesus Christ? We must go always back to the foundations of our motivation and re-collect the source of power.² **To renew your spirit your supply must come from our heavenly Father.**

There are times in the spiritual life when you experience confusion. It’s not a matter of right or wrong, but a matter of God leading you into uncharted territory. Only by going through the confusion can you get to what God wants. In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11, Jesus tells of a friend who appears not to care, when he’s asked for a bit of help, yet eventually he does help. That is how our Heavenly Father will appear at times. You think He doesn’t care, because your prayers aren’t answered immediately, but in time everything will be explained. Sometimes even love has to wait in pain or confusion for the blessing to come.³

Mending the Broken Spirit

The witness of the Bible confirms what my experience has taught me about the healing of a broken heart or spirit. Remembering what God has done, and observing what God continues to do to bring forth life, to redeem His people, and to lead us toward our eternal home ... remembering these things turns me toward healing. In time hope is renewed, life can go on, and I am revived in motivation.

Jesus said, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Matt. 5:3.* **When our own spirits are broken there is room for the Spirit of God to come in. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to live as new creations. With Him we can live in the power and hope found in the eternal realms of God.**

This is really a question of life purpose ... maybe you don’t see it here. The destined end of humanity, of you and me, is not happiness, nor health, nor success, nor wealth ... but holiness (1st Peter 1:16). We have many things in our lives that we yearn and strive for. Some are very good and noble things. Yet God must set aside our hopes and desires ... in a sense break our spirit for those things ... so that His Spirit can fill us. The one thing that matters is whether you will accept the God Who will make you holy.⁴

In Luke chapter 18 Jesus tells a story of a widow who sought justice from the judge – one who did not have regard for anyone. He ignored her, but she kept nagging him. At last he gave her legal remedy, lest she wear him out. How much

more will our heavenly Father hear our case? **Nevertheless, When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? Luke 18:1-8.** Will He find faith which trusts in Him in spite of delay and confusion?

Faithfulness, not feelings, is what carries you through the storms and doldrums of life. Not faith in yourself – for your spirit can be broken – but faith in Christ Jesus who has saved you from destruction and who gives the Holy Spirit to be your strength through all that assaults and challenges of life. Many of us are familiar with these words of Jesus spoken from the cross: **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?** These are the words of verse 1 of **Psalm 22**. Many have long thought Jesus was expressing his great sense of loss and abandonment by His heavenly Father. And yes, those words say that. Yet, many believe (as do I) that He was beginning to speak His faith in God, for Psalm 22 continues like this: *My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; And by night, but I have not rest. Yet You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel... The psalm continues: All who see me sneer at me; They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying, "Commit yourself to the LORD; let Him deliver him; Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him" Yet ... Upon You I was cast from birth; You have been my God from my mother's womb... Then Psalm 22 says ...stand in awe of Him all you descendants of Israel. For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from him; But when he cried to Him for help, He heard... Psalm 22:1-3, 7, 10, 23-24. In His distress from the Cross Jesus, with his labored breath, began to recite this proclamation of faith.*

The Christian faith is incarnational and down-to-earth, asking believers not to place their trust in ideas, ideologies, or institutions, but in a God who was vulnerable enough to become human and die, and who desires to be with people in everyday circumstances. To give in to boredom or loss of motivation ignores the daily gifts that God offers. To give in and give up misses the power of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. God in the flesh was an assertion that as difficult and painful as life can be, it is worth something to be in the present, alive, doing one's daily part.⁵

Hope From Habakkuk

Sometimes I get down, discouraged, and my spirit to work for the Lord flags, as it does for many other responsibilities of life. I imagine some of you have felt that way too. Yet **when I return to Scripture** and the promises of God found there, **the Lord begins to revive my spirit.** Some of my favorite verses of Scripture come from another obscure book: Habakkuk.

Virtually nothing is known about the prophet Habakkuk. He was preaching in and around Jerusalem during the final years before the Babylonian Exile – say

around 600 b. c. – perhaps he knew Jeremiah. As Habakkuk observed the sinfulness and faithlessness all around him he complained to God: *How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?* All around him he saw unparalleled apostasy, violence, and lawlessness. Wickedness appeared to be winning and Habakkuk was completely baffled and angry; struggling to understand why God didn't do something, fast! At last Habakkuk realized that God had proven faithful in the PAST and so he resolves to trust God with the FUTURE regardless of how things appeared to be in the PRESENT. **Faith in God includes faith in His timing.** Habakkuk was irritated because, from his point of view, God wasn't working fast enough to deal with the sin problem. But God reveals, that even when it appears that He is slow, He in fact, has a plan and at the right time He will put that plan into action and it will come in a way no one expects.

So, Habakkuk sings out these words that have often bolstered my faith when my spirit is broken. ***Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and he enables me to tread on the heights,*** Hab. 3:17-19.

When your spirit is downcast, when your spirit is broken, when hope seems far off, turn to the Lord, open the Bible, read the words that bring life.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever, Psalm 73:26.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work"* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 6.

² Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, February, 9.

³ Ibid, September 12.

⁴ Ibid, September 1.

⁵ Norris, 6.