



## Deep Agony of Soul

It will be a happy day when evangelical Christians experience more agony of soul. This is not a plea for emotionalism, but for us all to ask the question: Do our convictions these days produce in us such profound and holy emotions as we see in great Christians of the past? Or, to put the question another way, are we only men of shallow conviction, able to give nominal assent to the truths of God but not emotionally engaged in the great things which we profess? To put this into historical terms, are we perhaps unconsciously sliding into Sandemanianism, which regarded bare 'faith' as enough, and which disliked a faith that has feeling?

Our simple way of testing this question of feeling is to enquire when we last heard anyone 'break down' in the prayer meeting, or when we last saw tears in the eyes of the preacher. We are grateful for fluent speech, and we are edified by well-ordered discourses. But we ought not to forget that the most moving prayers and sermons of the past were often those in which the man praying or preaching was sobbing his heart out.

Of course, if sobs and tears in religious meetings are nothing more than affectation they are utterly abominable. Our argument here is not that we should try to make ourselves cry when we speak in our public meetings. Rather, it is that we should wish to have feelings commensurate with the lofty truths which we profess to love.

Our feelings, so we argue, should arise in our hearts from a spontaneous appreciation of those mighty, great, and transcendental doctrines which are the substance and marrow of our Christian creed. Genuine religious emotion is the product of truth within the regenerate soul. Truth, when rightly understood, is overwhelming. It masters us, overmasters us, humbles us, overwhelms us, reduces us to seeing ourselves as mere specks of nothingness in the presence of God. If truth does not have this effect upon us, we must be no more than 'little men' of small conviction and shallow faith. Nothing is more pitiable a sight than to see men profess the great truths of Scripture, and yet not to be emotionally shaped, moulded and controlled by these truths.

The subject before us cannot simply be reduced to one of temperament. It will not suffice merely to affirm that 'some people are naturally more emotional than others'. This, of course, is true but does not take account of the main point: Where, today, are the men of profound feeling? Admitting as we must that some are more naturally inclined to show their emotions than others, where are to be found, in our times, those whose souls know deep agonies of concern for Christ's cause?

It would make a profitable theme for ministerial discussion as to whether there is such a thing as 'emotional heresy'. By this term we have in mind the possibility that a professing Christian might be sound in understanding and orthodox in creed but somehow also detached and unmoved in heart by these things. An unfeeling Christian must surely be a contradiction in terms. So too is a 'cold Calvinist'. The contradiction here arises from the discrepancy between what is professedly believed and what is not felt. The conviction generated by what is believed should be registered in the tone of the affections also. An unfeeling or cold evangelicalism is as disappointing as a painted fire in an icy room. Evangelical belief without love, zeal, conviction, excitement, compassion and brotherly kindness is a kind of 'heresy' in the emotions.

It is very clear from the Word of God that great faith produces deep emotions in the souls of those who have it. The men and women whom we meet in the pages of Scripture do not merely profess a creed; they also sigh and groan, weep and lament, shout and cry aloud for joy. Isaiah exclaimed, '*Woe is me!*' (Isa. 6:5). Jeremiah wished his '*head were waters and his eyes a fountain of tears*'

(Jer. 9:1). When Ezekiel saw God's judgments taking place he *'fell down upon his face, and cried with a loud voice'* (Ezek. 11:13). The prophetic experiences of Daniel brought him to feel that *'his comeliness was turned in him into corruption, and he retained no strength'* (Dan. 10:8). Micah's sense of spiritual loneliness wrought in him a cry of distress: *'Woe is me! I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits ... The good man is perished out of the earth: there is none upright among men'* (Mic. 7:1-2). Faith reacts in every case here to circumstances as those circumstances are perceived in the light of God and of his truth.

When we pass from the Old to the New Testament the record is the same. The emotional life of our blessed Saviour is a study in itself. But, in brief, we see him weeping, sighing, sobbing over Jerusalem, praying *'with strong crying and tears'* (Heb. 5:7), *'rejoicing in spirit'*, looking round about at hard-hearted Pharisees *'with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts'* (Mark 3:5), and expressing delighted surprise when he discovers faith in unexpected places (Matt. 8:10).

Surely we may say that we find this same wide range of emotions also in the apostles of Christ. Paul's expressions of feeling cover the entire spectrum from delight and ecstatic joy, on the one hand, to deep grief and sorrow on the other. (See 2 Cor. 2:3; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:20 and Rom. 9:2).

Let us look at the last reference above, where Paul states: *'I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart'* (Rom. 9:2). There are not a few reasons why this deep agony of soul in Paul might come as something of a shock to us. For one thing, Paul has just concluded one of the most lyrical and triumphant passages in all his great epistles: *'I am persuaded that neither death, nor life ... nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'* (Rom. 8:38-39). 'Surely', we may say, 'such persuasion could not leave Paul with anything other than a mood of jubilation and triumph. So why, just two verses later, does he speak of his "continual sorrow"?' Then again, we may ask how it is that the casting away of the Jews (the obvious cause of Paul's agony of spirit) should occasion him this intense grief. Has he perhaps forgotten for a moment what he is about to go on to tell us, that God has *'mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth'* (Rom. 9:18)? If absolute predestination explains the reprobation of some souls, what need is there for all this emotion felt by Paul?

This is the heart of the entire issue before us: the place of emotion in the true believer's life. If we are assured of our perseverance and of the heavenly glory, why should we feel this agony of which Paul speaks? Looking at the question from another perspective, why, if Paul believed in sovereignty, in election, predestination and reprobation, should the plight of his fellow-countrymen affect him so deeply? That the emotion which he felt was deep is evident from the way he describes it: *'great heaviness'* and *'continual sorrow in my heart'* (Rom. 9:2).

If we had been his counsellors we would almost certainly have put it to Paul that his agony was misguided and inconsistent with what he knew of God's eternal decree for the Jews and with his own personal hope of eternal glory. Perhaps it is partly because he was aware of our surprise that he insists on telling us that he speaks *'the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost'* (Rom. 9:1).

Strange as it seems to us in our shallow age, it is quite possible for a believer to be full of assurance as to his own eternal security, full of understanding as to the circumstances which occasion him sorrow, and yet at the same time to suffer *'great heaviness'* and *'continual sorrow'* none the less. This, without question, was Paul's emotional condition due to the melancholy spiritual state of his fellow-countrymen. Further, this agony of spirit was not confined to the time of writing but was part of his day-by-day experience. It was, indeed, his life-long experience, something that only left Paul when he left this life.

If we, in our own day and age, know little or nothing of this agony of which Paul speaks, it might suggest that we have missed, or else overlooked in our Bible-reading, one of the great basic lessons of the Christian life, that our own certainty of salvation must never dull our compassion for the souls of those who are lost. The true believer, and more still the gospel preacher, must expect

to feel in no small measure this same deep sorrow whenever he recalls the fearful and never-ending misery to which all unconverted persons are hastening.

The point, then, needs to be made here that the deep agony which Paul, and all like him, have felt at the remembrance of the lost condition of unbelievers has nothing to do with temperament. It is a spiritual emotion, which is the fruit of theological understanding. Paul sorrowed to think that his fellow-countrymen, by their rejection of Christ, were placing themselves in a terrible condition. As he puts it elsewhere: *'The wrath is come upon them to the uttermost'* (1 Thess. 2:16). The same wrath of God will come upon all who reject Christ, whether they be Jews or Gentiles.

It must surely explain in part the absence of agony in much modern Christianity that the doctrine of hell is not held with the same conviction as it once was. Indeed, in some evangelical circles, it is more or less denied outright in favour of a theory of annihilation for the wicked. One can understand why men, even men who in other respects are admirable for their adherence to the gospel, should want to give up the biblical doctrine of hell. Life for the Christian, and especially for the Christian minister, becomes emotionally far easier if one ceases to believe in hell.

The reasons for this are obvious. If the lost are merely annihilated at their deaths, then they do not face anything much to worry them – or us. After all, non-existence is, by definition, not painful. On the other hand, if unbelievers all enter hell at their deaths, they face an eternity of pain, misery, darkness and terror. Who, believing such a doctrine of hell, can look at the state of modern society, with all its artificial pleasures and its well-disguised godlessness, and not at once identify with Paul's inner sadness: *'great heaviness', 'continual sorrow of heart'?*

Perhaps the conclusion all this leads us to is that we all need a fresh baptism of love and compassion for lost sinners.

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