

# Battling the Unbelief of Despondency

by John Piper

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*John Piper explores the nature of despondency and the spiritual warfare against it, emphasizing the importance of faith and community in overcoming despair.*

**Duration:** 19:32

**Scripture:** Psalm 73:26, Matthew 26:36-38

**Topics:** "Spiritual Warfare", "Sovereignty Of God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of finding trusted friends to open up to and seek support from during difficult times. He uses the example of Jesus choosing Peter and the sons of Zebedee to be with him in his moment of sorrow. Jesus also opens his soul to them, confessing his deep sorrow. The speaker encourages listeners to ask for help in spiritual warfare, to fight against the temptations and attacks of the enemy. Lastly, he highlights the importance of pouring out one's soul to the Father and finding rest in the sovereignty of God's wisdom, trusting that every trial and struggle leads to a glorious outcome.

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## Transcript

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant. I was like a beast toward thee. Nevertheless, I am continually with thee.

Thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. I want you to focus on verse 26 for just a few minutes. It says, my flesh and my heart may fail because that's the definition of despondency that I want us to work with.

Do you see the three parts to that little phrase? My flesh and my heart may fail. My flesh, that means there's a physical component to despondency, isn't there? The body weakens, there's fatigue, there's a sense of listlessness and sluggishness. Secondly, and my heart, that means there's this emotional, spiritual dimension to despondency.

Our hearts are discouraged, dejected, gloomy, burned out. Third, fail. The word means come to an end, run out, be exhausted of resources.

It's like your life is a tank and in it is water that you need for refreshment and somebody pulls the plug at the bottom and it just all runs out. And this word in Hebrew, kalah, means just come to an end, be exhausted, depleted of resources to handle problems in life. Now the question is, is unbelief the root of that experience of despondency? And with 10 minutes to preach here, I'm passing over a lot.

The answer is yes and no. It's not simple, in other words, so I'm going to pick a simple sentence to get from Scripture because we need clear, simple things to live by. Here's the sentence that I think is simple and true.

Unbelief is the root of yielding to despondency. So I'll just pass over the issue of where despondency comes from because it's very complex. And you can read the manuscript if you want to read something about that complexity that I've written about.

Wherever it comes from, unbelief is the root of making peace with it, yielding to it, giving no spiritual warfare to fight it, being negligent in putting on the armor of God, and so on. Now, I want to illustrate this briefly by just looking quickly at the Psalm and looking at Jesus. The Psalm, verse 26, contains this truth, my flesh and my heart may fail.

Now, literally, it's just fail. It's not may fail. There's no may implied in this Hebrew verb.

It's just my flesh and my heart are failing. I am discouraged. I am despondent.

I am at my wit's end. And then comes the spiritual counterattack in the next phrase, but God. I remember old Prexy down at Wheaton, V. Raymond Edmund wrote a whole book called But God.

You seen that little devotional book just went through and found all those great verses that say, but God, but God. So here's this man. The cork is pulled at the bottom of his life.

His heart, his flesh are just about depleted. And he just says, perhaps with his last breath, but God is the rock or strength of my weak, failing life and my portion forever. So my point is, wherever this despondency may come from, it's unbelief that doesn't say, but God, it's unbelief that puts up no resistance.

It's unbelief that doesn't take the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit and fight that much. I think we can say with clarity from scripture, my body is shot. My heart is almost dead.

And for whatever reason, I will not yield. I will trust to God though. My strength is gone.

Psalm 19, seven, the law of the Lord is perfect. Reviving the soul. The word of God is given to revive souls.

The saints souls need to be restored and revived. That means despondency comes and the word of God is given to restore it. Let's go to Jesus.

Turn with me to Matthew 26 verses 36 following. I want us to be with Jesus for a few minutes in Gethsemane. We've just celebrated the Lord's supper.

A few hours later, Jesus is in Gethsemane and what's happening there is probably the greatest spiritual warfare in a human soul that's ever happened or ever will happen. Satan, no doubt, has drawn near. You remember when it said in the wilderness, he withdrew from him until an opportune time.

When do you think that was? Right now, I think. And not only did he draw near, I'll bet he gathered all the most powerful hosts of his wicked army. And whatever Paul means by the spiritual or what does he say in Ephesians 6, the flaming darts of the evil one, whatever he means by that, you can be assured they were flying with volleys against the soul of the son of God as he knelt there wrestling for his faithfulness.

Let's read a couple of verses starting at verse 36. Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane and he said to his disciples, sit here while I go yonder and pray. And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

Then he said to them, my soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Now, what's going on here? Why is Jesus so distressed and troubled and sorrowful? John 12, 27 says, now is my soul troubled. What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour.

No, for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Now, I think that text tells us what the nature of the temptation was. Satan was firing volley after volley into the mind of Jesus Christ and thoughts came into his mind from Satan.

Thoughts like, this is a dead end street. Calvary is just a black hole. It's gonna hurt like nothing has ever hurt any human being ever.

And these rascals aren't worth it, etc., etc., out of Satan's wicked heart into the mind of the son of God. Satan wants to produce in Jesus a spirit of despondency that sinks unopposed in resignation and says, it won't work. There's no point in pressing on anymore.

Now, I want us to think about this warfare for a minute and compare it to the disciples. Jesus is a sinless man, according to Hebrews 4, 15 and 2 Corinthians 5, 20. He never sinned at all, not in thought, emotion or deed.

He was sinless, which means that the emotional turmoil that he was experiencing at this moment was a fitting response to the kind of extraordinary temptation he was enduring. The demonic thought that Calvary is a black hole of meaninglessness and emptiness and purposelessness is so horrendous, there ought to be caused a jarring, a shock in the soul of the son of God, as well as yours and mine. It's like a bomb.

Satan drops bombs on the peaceful sea of our lives. And if it's an atomic bomb, isn't it true that as soon as it explodes, there's this massive shock wave before the deadly rays begin to make their way over people's lives? That's what I would say in Jesus' life is not sin. The shock wave of a satanic temptation that the death of the son of God would be pointless is so powerful that it rolls him, it knocks him.

Now, the amazing thing about this is that the word used here that he was troubled is also used of the disciples. Only Jesus says of the disciples, don't be troubled. John 14.1, let not your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God. Believe also in me or John 14.27, my peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives to you. Let not your hearts be troubled.

When I read that yesterday, I said, now, wait a minute, I've got to figure this out here. I'm saying the sinless son of God can be troubled. Same word.

And he tells the disciples, don't be troubled. It's as though Satan drops this bomb right in the experience of Jesus and the disciples. Same bomb, really.

They were about to be despondent because Jesus was going away and it looked to them like it was back to fishing. There's no kingdom here. This is a pointless thing.

Nothing good has happened. And now our best friend and our thought Lord is gone. And Jesus says, no, don't be troubled.

And yet he was troubled. Is this a contradiction? Is it okay for Jesus to be troubled and not okay for the disciples to be troubled? I don't think there's a contradiction. And here's how I would put the two together.

On the side of the disciples, I would say what Jesus is really saying is when the bomb drops in your life and Satan colors the shockwave of this experience with black hopelessness, don't yield. Believe. In other words, he's telling them counterattack.

Let not your hearts be troubled. Attack. Believe in God.

Believe also in me. He's not saying this first shockwave that can knock you over or pull the plug out of your life won't be there. He's saying counterattack.

Believe. Take my peace. Listen to what I've said.

Look at the word of God. I will show you the path of life. Now, with regard to Jesus, no one knew better than the son of God that if he didn't immediately counterattack the shockwave of Satan's satanic temptation, he'd be done for.

And so I want us in closing to look very carefully at how Jesus responded to his troubled soul and the satanic attack on his peace with God. It's right here, five steps. And as I mentioned these five steps in Matthew 26, 37 following, I want you, perhaps before I do this, just to fix in your mind what it is that threatens your tranquility most, that causes despondency or disheartened feelings to rise most often in your own life.

What's the shell that Satan drops or fires most frequently into your life? And then as I mentioned these five steps that the Lord Jesus took when the bomb dropped in his life, I want you to just translate them immediately into your experience because they're all relevant. All right. There are five of them.

Number one, Jesus chose some close friends to be with him. Verse 37, and taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. So he didn't withdraw.

He took the inner ring, the most precious trusted friends, and pulled aside with them. Second, he opened his soul to them. Verse 38, then he said to them, my soul is very sorrowful, even to death.

You can imagine their mouths dropping open, their king confessing his weakness. He opened his soul to them. Third, he asked for their help in spiritual warfare.

Verse 38, second half, remain here and watch with me. Other texts say pray. Other texts say don't let yourself come into temptation.

Stay here and fight with me. Fight with me. Fourth, he poured out his heart to the father in prayer.

Verse 39, my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. It's just fine to pray that the bombshell that has dropped into your life be taken away. That's just right.

Whatever it is, when Satan fires it at you, it's just fine to say, take it away, father. You're stronger than he is. But number five, he rested his soul in the sovereign wisdom of God.

Second half of verse 39, nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. So here's the lesson. When Satan drops a bombshell on the peace of your life, the initial shockwaves of emotional response are not necessarily sin.

What is sin is not to do what Jesus did when the bomb fell in the garden of Gethsemane. That's sin. Sin is yielding to depression.

Sin is not taking the armor of God. Sin is not waging spiritual warfare. Jesus shows us another way.

It's not painless, but it's not passive either. And I want us to follow him in it. Let me just sum it up as we close.

Number one, find your trusted friends. Who are they? Who are your inner ring to open your soul to them? Three, ask them to fight with you, to wage war with you, to support you, to watch with you and pray with you. Fourth, pour out your soul to the father.

And five, rest in the sovereignty of his wisdom, come what may. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. So I close with this image.

Leave it in your mind. I think the lesson of Jesus' life and the lesson of the Psalms is this. Every cave that you're in, wandering along, feeling the rocks, stumbling, stepping, bumping your head, every cave that you are in is a tunnel that opens into glory, into a day like today in heaven with the sun shining and the grass green and the waters flowing.

If you don't sit down in the cave and blow out the candle of faith, let's stand for prayer.

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