

The Advantage of Despair

by John Whittle

I shall not easily forget the deep impression made on me upon hearing another missionary's startling experience as he related it in a public meeting. He told of his being in the depth of despair, because it seemed that God had forsaken him, his work and his family. He sat up in bed one night with his wife by his side, and cried out, "God, if there be a God, go to hell!" I hope you are not so pious as to consider this impious. This is the sort of struggle which breeds spiritual giants. This is solid ground for heaven to work upon. One might say that this man was in hell himself and just wanted God's company — a flippant thought perhaps, but beneath the surface this was the truth. He had not forsaken God; rather he was crying out for more of Him. His perspective of God was not adequate; so he incorrectly presumed that his God had let him down.

First let us examine the rather positive title I have used; hopefully it will help us with what appears to be a rather negative subject. I have been stirred by some of Kierkegaard's writings. and on despair there is none better. He says:

Despair is a sickness in the spirit, in the self ... The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be sharply observant of this sickness constitutes the Christian's advantage over the natural man; to be healed of this sickness is the Christian's bliss. So then it is an infinite advantage to be able to despair. (Soren Kierkegaard, Sickness Unto Death).

The advantage is not strictly the despair, but the ability to know when one is in despair. This is the gift that is inherent in every man's being. The sickness is an alienation from the self, however slight; a deep anxiety of being which is only cured by the total acceptance of self. This acceptance is the inner message and meaning of the gospel. Our acceptance of God in Christ includes our recognition of God's acceptance of us. Those who read these lines will doubtless have experienced this. But now let us face the deeper implications of despair.

Irrespective of the extent to which our initial conversion affects our previous attitude of alienation from ourselves because of our sins, it is more than likely that such matters as a persistent inferiority, the seeming problems of negative circumstances, sorrows, losses, failures or breakdowns will again and again work havoc, leading to another disorientation of the self. Though this disorientation is sometimes lengthy, it is only temporary and is always God's perfect way for us — God's way to our ultimate wholeness.

One writer refers to this phenomenon as *the second despair*, which in experience it certainly seems to be. Actually, of course, there is only one despair — my alienation from my true self, which is Christ. In the first stage of my understanding and experience of Christ I do not despair deeply enough. So God in His infinite variety of ways brings me to a deeper despair. Then the deep healing starts; the Grand Canyon of my divided self is filled and becomes the fertile field in which the fruit of the Spirit grows.

I can only see *myself* as whole if I see *life* as whole, and wholly God's will for me. I cannot be a whole self while seeing a divided world, or the division will begin to appear again in me, at least in the surface of my consciousness. So I must be cured in my view of life. It must no longer be separation, but union, the union of all things. Another excellent writer, Paul Tillich, puts it this way:

*The new being is manifest in the Christ because in Him the separation never overcome the unity between Him and God, between Him and mankind, between Him and Himself. This gives His picture in the Gospels its overwhelming and inexhaustible power. In Him we look at a human life that maintained the union in spite of everything that drove Him into separation. He represents and mediates the power of the new being because He represents and mediates the power of an undisrupted union (Paul Tillich, *The New Being*. Scribner's).*

Now the meaning of despair is that man is made for an absolute. Anything he allows to become an absolute to him that is really not an absolute (for example, Christian "service," perfection of Bible knowledge or doctrine, or even behavior) has to be destroyed, as that is the cause of the agony. This of course includes an inadequate view of God, along with less worthy substitutes for the Absolute. These delusive absolutes must all come to dissolution, including the tidy, compassable and controllable version of God to which I have personally tended to cling.

This is delightfully stated for us by Anna in a new book, *Mister God, This Is Anna*, a story with many rich insights. This amazing child of six years old shares insights with her older friend, a twenty year old man named Fynn. She does so rather stumblingly, but with flashes of brilliance. Her background is East London dockside cockney, and you can imagine what puckish and pathetic humor this lends to the story. She asks, "Why do we go to church?" (something she was not fond of doing), and answers it herself: "To understand God less." This seemed crazy to Fynn and he said so. She replied, "You go to church to make Mister God really, really big. When you make Mister God really, really, *really* big, then you really, *really* don't understand Mister God — then you do." After affirming that this was over his head, way over his head, Fynn proceeds in later years to explain her explanation:

*When you're little you understand Mister God. He sits up there on His throne, a golden one of course; He has got whiskers and a crown and everyone is singing hymns to Him like mad. God is useful and usable. You can ask Him for things; He can strike your enemies deader than a doornail: and He is pretty good at putting hexes on the bully next door, like warts and things. Mister God is so understandable, so useful and usable, He is like some object — perhaps the most important object of all — but nevertheless an object and absolutely understandable. Later on you understand Him to be a bit different, but you are still able to grasp what He is. Even though you understand Him. He doesn't seem to understand you! He doesn't seem to understand that you simply must have a new bike, so your understanding of Him changes a bit more. In whatever way or state you understand Mister God, so you diminish His size. He becomes an understandable entity among other understandable entities. So Mister God keeps on shedding bits all the way through your life until the time comes when you admit freely that you don't understand Mister God at all. At this point you have let Mister God be His proper size — and wham! — there He is, laughing at you. (Fynn, *Mister God, This Is Anna*, Ballantine Books, 1976.)*

"There He is laughing at you" — perhaps "with you"? — a God who is seen as adequate at last, because He is exactly like you. This sort of stretching God undertakes for us all and in us all, so that we may know God "in our middle," as Anna says.

From one extreme of expression to another, we touch on Job's despair. I always feel that with Job there was what I call a holy defiance of God — after all, it was God who started up the whole affair. Here is Job on the stretch and it is God who is doing it, though the agony is Job's.

“Though He slay me yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15) is the phrase we settle on as if it were the cry of a pious devotion. Examine it more closely and something else appears. God is going way out beyond all Job’s categories in which he understood and related himself to Him. This was the agony of despair, for he was losing the only God whom he had known. Look at the Revised Standard Version of the text, *“Behold He will slay me; I have no hope, yet I will defend my ways to His face.”* The extensive footnote on this rendering contains this phrase: *“The context suggests a mood of defiance, not of selfless devotion ... He discovers in the depth of his despair that his passionate desire to see God, his would-be slayer, is evidence of his inward purity, for no godless man would ever dare to come before God”* (see verse 16).

This, as you see, ties in with the opening incident of the missionary, in seeming rebellion, but in reality demanding a bigger God to appear for and within him. Through despair we are on the way to true enlargement and freedom. Despair is like the springboard above the pool. It holds you in separation while you give yourself up to it, separation from the blissful immersion in God that you so much desire. But despair has movement in it — it is far from the stillness and sterility of indifference which has no inherent movement at all. The springboard of despair will work for you at the slightest movement of faith, launching you from separation into unity, from despair into fulfillment. The agony will give place to the ecstasy.

I hope I have in a small way been able to rescue despair from the negative and fearful feeling we have about it. Despair truly has its positive aspect. The *“dark night of the soul,”* known to many who pursue and are relentlessly pursued by God, leads to a brilliant day. But each comes to that dawn in God’s own way for him — inevitably through some form of blessed despair.