

In the Slough of Despond

Breaking Up Stony Ground, Part 5

Selected Scripture

I recently read again the classic work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. John wrote this work while imprisoned for refusing to stop preaching without a license. While in prison, he had a dream one night – more than likely a series of dreams – that vividly played out his vast mental storehouse of biblical knowledge.

He wrote out his thoughts in the form of an allegory – and *Pilgrim's Progress* was the result.

After believing the gospel, Christian leaves his City of Destruction and begins his journey toward the Celestial City of God. He's joined by another man from the region and the first trouble they encounter is a pit filled with quicksand like mud.

Bunyan writes, "Now I saw in my dream . . . that they drew near to a very miry slough that was in the midst of the plain; and they begin heedless, did both fall suddenly into the bog. The name of the slough was Despond (or despair). Here therefore they wallowed for a time, being grievously covered with dirt; and Christian, because of the burden that was on his back, began to sink in the mire."ⁱ

His traveling companion manages to get out of the bog, but instead of helping Christian escape, abandons him and runs back to his village.

Eventually, as Christian struggles alone, a man comes by named Help (representing the Holy Spirit) and pulls him free.

Christian launches into a rather panicky rant about why this Slough of Despond – or Despair – should be allowed to remain – why hasn't it been mended, he asks. And Help responds that it cannot be mended, it can only be traveled through."ⁱⁱ

What a great – and deep thought – the slough of Despond cannot be eliminated completely . . . for those on their journey to the Celestial city, it must be traveled through.

One of the things Help points out to Christian is that there are stepping stones planted in the middle of the Slough of Despond, but Help admits with realism, and I quote, "These steps are hard to see".

Despair and discouragement will never be eliminated as potential pitfalls for believers – it must be traveled through . . . there are stepping stones, but they're hard to see; especially when there are tears in your eyes.

The Slough of Despond is an ever present danger.

Discouragement is one of the chief tools used by the chief enemy of the Pilgrim's as they walk through deep and uncharted valleys.

It can lead to all sorts of unbiblical conclusions and spiritually discouraging misconceptions that harden the soil of the heart and dry up spiritual anticipation and joy.

I want to show you a couple of men who battled this enemy in their walk with God.

Turn in your Old Testament to the Book of Psalms where David is mired down in the slough of despond.

In *chapter 13*, David is running for his life from Saul, misunderstood by his nation and his family, hiding out in order to stay alive.

And he makes the same four conclusions that every believer makes if instead of traveling through

it, they miss the steppingstones and get mired down and caught up in it, instead.

1. Conclusion #1 – I have been forgotten by God

Notice verse 1. How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

In other words, God's so busy with people and world events and big stuff, it's evidently apparent that He's forgotten about little ole' me.

In fact, he sort of throws in his somewhat hard-hearted editorial comment – Are you going to forget me . . . *forever*?

Because that's how long it feels, when you're stuck in the mire of despond . . . when you're afraid, or confused.

I can remember as a kid growing up on the coast of Virginia. One of my prized possessions was a skim board; I had cut out the board myself, sanded it down, curved off the front edges and then painted it a glossy, baby blue.

Many weekends, my friends and I would hitchhike about 10 miles to Ocean View, just outside of Norfolk. The sandy beach would stretch for miles, nearly flat . . . the waves would lightly wash over large sand bars where we'd throw our skim boards and then chase after them, jump on them and for a few seconds ride this exhilarating ride as we skimmed across the shallow water.

Then, after a while, we'd park our boards on the beach and dive into the waves.

I remember one afternoon, the undertow was stronger than usual . . . but of course, my friend and I tested our nerve by walking out chest deep and then making our way back in. One of those trips almost ended in grave trouble. Before we knew it we were both swept off our feet and we began to move out and away from the beach.

We instinctively knew to swim parallel to the coastline and I remember one large wave came in gave us just enough of a push to make it in. We crawled up on the beach and lay there, our heart's pounding, exhausted – recognizing what might have been.

There's a member in my current GreenHouse class who gave her life to Christ as a teenager, confronted by the tragedy when one of her friends, that afternoon, had been swept out by the undertow and drowned.

I can remember swimming for my life . . . and what seemed like hours only lasted a minutes – in fact, it was over in less than a minute.

The fear and panic made it seem like an eternity.

David is waist deep in the mire of despair – and when you're in the Slough of Despond – days seem like years . . . months seem like eternity.

David writes in his diary, How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

He's reached the conclusion that God's forgotten he's even around.

2. Secondly, it's actually worse than that; David reaches the conclusion that God has intentionally abandoned him.

It's one thing to forget your child at the restaurant, or at church.

You ever done that? And been willing to admit it?

I can remember years ago going out to eat after church one Sunday – we went to the Chinese buffet on Kildaire Farm Road with other folks from church. After we ate, we all got in our cars and vans and took off, leaving one of our sons behind. Not sure exactly how it happened. But it wasn't intentional.

We realized it on the way home, spun around – this was before cell phones – and raced back to the restaurant. I walked in and there he was, sitting up on one of the stools in the bar section.

Hey, I've been abandoned . . . guess I'll start drinking.

It's one thing to be forgotten, it's another thing to be purposefully abandoned.

Did you know a baby or young child is abandoned in the United States nearly every day; left . . . in a public space . . . a hospital . . . a mall . . . left, not by accident . . . on purpose.

That's the conclusion David reaches here in *verse 1, the latter part, where he cries out, "How long will you hide your face from me?"*

In other words, I know You're out there! I know You can see me . . . how long are You going to abandon me in this Slough of Despond and hide from me?

David concludes that he's been forgotten by God; He's made a second wrong conclusion that he's been abandoned by God; thirdly . . .

3. David's despair leads him to make the wrong conclusion that wisdom is no longer available from God.

Notice what he says in *verse 2. How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?*

In other words, "Life's gone from good to bad, to now worse; and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do to get over or to get past this.

And at the same time I'm surrounded by people who don't love me or want to help me . . . I'm on a bar stool in a strange place and people around me would love nothing more than to point out the fact that my life is a mess!"

Maybe you're there right now.

It might be related to family relationships; the care free days early in your marriage when there was little stress and always enough money to spare is now anchored around a baby carriage with just enough money to buy the next bundle of diapers. I can remember as a seminary student, just after our twins were born how life radically changed. We would scrape together enough change for me to go downstairs where they kept vending machines and have just enough change to buy one diet Dr. Pepper . . . that was really living.

And we thought *those* were the expensive days.

Perhaps you're at a stage now where you're struggling with conflicts or difficulties; the good times of a younger family have added antagonism and rebellion and everyone else in the family is suffering through the stress and the strain. Frankly, nobody has fun anymore.ⁱⁱⁱ

What do you do now?

Maybe it's your work; in the early days of your business you seemed to make rapid progress and succeeded at almost everything you touched. Things leveled off and, frankly, your business is now stagnant.

What's your plan now?

It can happen in our spiritual lives. There were days perhaps where you saw spiritual advances and new learning curves and you could almost chart spiritual progress.

But these days it seems like spiritual progress has morphed into a deepening slump.^{iv}

And you're left to wonder, maybe God isn't all that interested in me after all . . . maybe I'm on hold . . . maybe I've failed too many times and God's

gone looking for somebody a lot more disciplined, or faithful, or interesting, or capable.

When David writes here in *verse 2, How long must I take counsel in my soul...*" he uses a Hebrew term, "*take counsel*" – which means to plan for yourself – to adjust for yourself.^v

There's a sense that David has actually arrived at a point where he's saying, "My life isn't going like I wanted, and I'm in a rut, so I guess I'm going to have to plan my way out of this all by myself."

And that's even more dangerous.

There's nothing more dangerous about discouragement than coming to the conclusion that since you seem to be facing the tough stuff of life alone; you've got to be the one to figure out your next step.

That Slough of Despond seems to have an undertow and it pulls you deeper still . . . and all you hear while mired down in there are thoughts that tell you, "That's right – even God doesn't care about your plans . . . you got yourself into this mess and you're going to have to figure out how to get yourself out of it.

And besides, God's wisdom and counsel are reserved for more worthy people . . . better Christians . . . you don't deserve it."

William Carey, the man we call the Father of Modern Missions – used wonderfully in India for decades – wrote these words in his journal during a bout with discouragement and despair: I am defective in all my duties; in prayer I wander and am too formal . . . I soon tire; devotion languishes and I do not walk with God.

In another entry he wrote, "I have reason to lament over a barrenness of soul, and am sometimes much discouraged, for I am so dead, how can I expect to be of any use among the lost?"

Again, he writes in 1794 in his journal, "My soul is a jungle, when it ought to be a garden; I can scarcely tell if I have the grace of God or not; I am, perhaps, the . . . most inconsistent, cold creature that ever possessed the grace of Christ. If God uses me, none need despair."^{vi}

Those are the words of someone waist deep in the Slough of Despond.

David's not found the bottom yet either.

4. He makes a fourth wrong conclusion; he concludes that a solution will never appear from God.

Notice *verse 3. Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death. Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.*"

In other words, my enemies are already planning a banquet to celebrate my collapse.

If you haven't already, you ought to underline that phrase that echoes **4 times** from David's despair . . . did you notice it?

How long?

How long, O Lord are you going to forget me?

I guess it'll be **forever!**

We get discouraged and life seems to turn the lights out and we grope around in the dark and what do we say, "Lord, how long is this going to last?" How long O Lord?!

Let me point out something here. Even though David is caught in the undertow of discouragement, and even though he's implying some pretty harsh things about the character of God – at the same time, he's still hinting at his ultimate trust in God.

He's still saying, "**O Lord my God.**" Did you notice that in *verse 3? Consider and answer me O Lord my God!*"

And he's also implying something about the sovereignty of God.

"**How long O Lord**" is a recognition that God not only determines the depth of your trials, He determines the length of your trials.

Even in his despair, David is implying that he still knows God is still in control . . . that God knows how deep this pit is . . . that God knows long it'll last.

So even though David is at his worst . . . he's still clinging to what he knows best.

And you – let me encourage you – when you're waist deep in discouragement – the very fact that you complain – and you will – and demand – and question – and you will!

How long, O Lord is actually a declaration of faith in the glorious sovereignty of God who not only determines the depths of your trial; He determines the length of your trial.

I want to pause here and show you one more individual that has slipped into the Slough of Despond – he's the last person you would ever expect to find wallowing in that mire.

His name is Elijah – and he's found in *First Kings*.

When I say that name, most of you who are old enough in the faith to have read some of his exploits, your thoughts of Elijah are probably like mine. He's one tough, gritty, determined, courageous prophet.

By the time you read his biography and you get to *chapter 18* you come to that signature moment that has forever attached itself to this legend of Elijah's faith.

He is about to stand alone as he calls all the false prophets of Baal; he challenges them to a dual on top of Mount Carmel.

Elijah sets the rules down for this dual and they are absolutely fair and square.

They each get to use the same weapon – an altar of stone.

They each get the same powder and one bullet – well, in this case, one bull prepared as a sacrifice on the altar.

Then Elijah even allows the prophets of Baal to take aim first.

And that's where the rules of this dual got a little interesting; the rule is only their [G]od is allowed to pull the trigger.

In other words, they were to prepare their altar; put a bull on it and then petition their god to send fire from heaven.

And the God who sent fire from heaven and consumed the sacrifice would obviously be the real God worth following.

So the prophets of Baal went first – and from *verses 26 to 29* – which represents most of the morning and into the afternoon.

They prayed and prayed and danced and yelled and screamed to get their god to pull the trigger . . . and nothing happened. No fire fell from heaven.

Finally, they gave up.

Elijah steps forward and prays a simple prayer in *verses 36 and 37* and fire immediately falls from heaven.

And it isn't a candle that comes down from heaven either; it was fireball (v. 38) that completely consumed not only the animal, and the wood, but the stones of the altar (!) and the dirt around it and the water Elijah had poured around the altar as well.

This fireball streaks down from the sky and – whoosh – it consumes everything in a moment. There's nothing there but smoke drifting up from this crater while everyone stands there speechless.

Then, *verse 39*, all the people begin to prostrate themselves and chant, "**The Lord, He is God . . . the Lord, He is God.**"

He obviously is!

Is this a great day to be a prophet of God or what?

Is this a great day to be a believer? Sign me up!

The next chapter informs us that within hours, Jezebel, the queen, who'd been paying the salaries of these false prophets, puts out a contract on Elijah's head and promises him – *verse 2* – that by the end of 48 hours, he'll be dead.

Now for a shocking verse – *verse 3*. ***Then he was afraid and ran for his life . . . verse 4b. O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers . . . verse 14b . . . I am the only one left – and they're trying to kill me.***

He expected a national revival, the overthrow of Jezebel and Ahab and a return of the people to the worship of the true and living God.

So, if you can imagine it – in one day – he goes from a man of stunning faith and great courage in the face of nearly 500 pagan prophets and his entire nation, to throwing in the towel . . . while the ground on Mount Carmel is still smoldering.

Waist deep in despair – things didn't turn out the way he thought they would.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there isn't very much distance between Mount Carmel and the Slough of Despond. You can travel from that mountain top to the pit in a matter of hours – sometimes minutes.

The great dual of faith turns into a fiasco and the prophet of God is now on the run.

We won't have time to explore the details, but God graciously comes along, feeds His servant; lets him rest a while; rebukes him for thinking he was the only servant of God, reminds Elijah of his sovereign power and Elijah gets back on his feet and pulls out of the Slough of Despond.

Back in *Psalms 13*, David recovers his spiritual footing as well.

If you remember, John Bunyan's allegory wrote that there were steps through the Slough of Despond, but they are difficult to see.

There are three stepping stones that take us through the Slough of Despond, offered by David in his closing remarks.

a. We'll engrave on the first stepping stone the word, recalling.

Notice verse 5. But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

In other words, in spite of what it looks like . . . in spite of the undertow of my circumstances that want to bury me . . . your love is steadfast. I've seen it at work in the past . . . I've trusted it . . . it's been steady and firm and true. My feet won't slip from salvation which is yours to give – and I've been given it.

By the way, notice that *verse 5* begins with that little word, ***“But”***.

In other words, nothing around David has changed – Saul was still hunting after him; he was still hungry; he was still without means of support.

But . . . David began recalling . . . in other words, “Hey, you know what? God's love for me has been steadfast . . . I've seen it in the past – even when God seemed invisible, God was still involved.

Even when He seemed absent . . . He was very much aware.

The first step out of the mire is engraved, recalling.

b. The second step is recommitting.

Look at verse 6 – the first phrase – if you can believe it. David writes, ***I will sing to the Lord.***

Remember, nothing's changed. So you're supposed to just start singing?

Even though David's circumstances don't change, his attitude does.

What David is revealing is a stepping stone that doesn't avoid the Slough of Despond – remember, these stepping stones don't take you around it – in John Bunyan's wonderful analogy – the stepping stones take you through it, on firm ground.

What David is showing us in this phrase – ***I will sing to the Lord*** - is the stunning truth that even if outward circumstances cannot be changed, inward attitudes can.

My grace, God says, is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect – that is, it makes progress – in weakness.”

Take the step of recalling . . .

It'll lead you to the step of recommitting.

c. Thirdly, take the stepping stone marked, recalculating.

Notice, David ends by writing, ***He has dealt bountifully with me***

I've overlooked present blessing . . . but if I look, they're around me.

So **recalculate** . . . sounds like your GPS, doesn't it?

I know you don't like to listen to her . . . I don't either – she's such a smart alec.

But it's actually a good illustration . . . you get off on the wrong path and you might need to stop – and make a U-turn . . . recalculating is a part of getting back on the right path.

Notice how differently David now summarizes his life, he writes, ***“He has dealt bountifully with me.”***

Wait a second. You're still hiding out . . . there's a price on your head.

Oh you see, once you're mind and heart retrace God's goodness . . . and you make a recommitment . . . you will recalculate God's ministry to you and through you.

Don't miss this step. Recalculate your life in terms of the grace and goodness and all the benefits of God to you.

Several years ago, Max Lucado wrote about a young man he knew who, at the age of 32 was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Over the 16 years it would cost him his career, his mobility, and eventually his life.

Because of MS, he couldn't feed himself or walk. He transparently battled depression and fear, but through it all, his church and his friends watched him never lose his gratitude to Jesus Christ.

On one occasion as friends saw his health failing, they asked him to compile a list of requests so they could intercede for him. His response was to

compile a list of 6 concerns for which to be prayerful; but then he added 18 blessings for which he wanted them to join him in praising God. His blessings outweighed his concerns, three to one.

Lucado referenced, in the same context, a leper on the island of Tobago. A short term missionary met her – this leper – while on a mission trip.

On the final day, he was leading music in a service there at the leper colony. He asked if anyone had a favorite hymn they wanted to sing. When he did, a woman turned around to face him and he saw the most disfigured face he'd ever seen. She had no ears and nothing for a nose. Her lips were gone and her hands were stubs without fingers.

But she raised her fingerless hand and asked, “Can we sing, “Count Your Many Blessings, name them one by one.”

This short term missionary started the song but couldn't finish it without tears streaming down his face.

Someone later commented to him, “I suppose you'll never be able to sing that song again.” To which he responded. Oh yes, I will sing it again . . . just never in the same way.

When you're waist deep in the Slough of Despond . . . look for these stepping stones . . .

Recalling . . . recommitting and recalculating.

You end of trusting . . . and praising . . . and obeying with fresh faith and obedience and gratitude.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/19/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress (1688; reprint, Scripture Truth, no date), p. 16

ii Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, Building Blocks of Biblical Character (Insight for Living, 1993), p. 45

iii Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, Psalms: Volume 1 (Baker Books, 1994), p. 108

iv Ibid, p. 109

v Charles R. Swindoll, Living Beyond the Daily Grind: Book 1 (Word Publishing, 1988), p. 41

vi Quotes taken from S. Pearce Carey, William Carey (The Watchman Trust, 1923), p. 126