

William Cowper

Legacies of Light, Part 13

Romans 3:25

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

William Cowper struggled with despair and depression often throughout his life, but through each dark period God still moved and brought him back to the truths of scripture. The Apostle Paul's words, ***Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith***, in Romans 3:24 is one verse that God used powerfully in Cowper's life to remind him about the gift of salvation and Christ's payment given to him through faith. These rich truths saw Cowper through the desperation life brought and inspired him to compose beautiful poetry reflecting the glory and praise of the Lord that live on to this day.

Discussion Points:

Trials and struggles are part of our fallen and sinful world. It is important to remember that while personal frailties of mind and body may be unrelenting, they do not signify the displeasure nor the rejection of God. It is also helpful to note that painful struggles might not eliminate ministry opportunities, but enlarge them.

- How does spending time in God's Word help with life's struggles?
- List some scripture verses that could bring encouragement a person struggling with depression or desperation.
- What can you thank and praise God for even when frailties and struggles weigh you down?

Two practical ways to combat the negative effects of suffering are interacting with friends and nature. Personal friends may not eliminate your battles, but they can share them. And, personal interaction with nature can't replace God's word, but it can enlighten and encourage you.

- In what ways can you come alongside someone who is suffering and share in their struggles?
- Read Psalm 19 and 104 and note how interacting with nature can direct your thoughts toward God.
- What are practical things you can do when you find yourself struggling?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Powerful faith does not guarantee freedom from suffering, but it does provide a guided tour through it.

- What do the scriptures say about why God allows suffering?
- How does trust in God's truths help during times of suffering? How can suffering strengthen your faith?
- What can you take for William Cowper's example as he follows God that you can put into practice into your own life?

Gospel Connection:

Romans 3:24 reminded William Cowper and reminds us that our salvation is Christ's sacrificial gift of redemption that is offered to us through faith. No matter the sin or the desperation one suffers under, salvation is available through Jesus Christ and His gracious sacrifice on the cross on our behalf.

Practical Implications:

Think: Are there times when I lose sight of God's truth and focus on the struggles instead?

Pray: Praise Him for His loving kindness, and thank Him for the salvation that He freely offers. Read over Romans 3:24 in a personal way, praying it back to God and thanking Him for each portion of the verse.

Do: Memorize an encouraging scripture that can be remembered when struggles come. Create a list of praises and thanks to God that you can read over in times of desperation.

William Cowper

Romans 3:25

In the New Testament, the Apostles often repeated the challenge to the early believers to imitate other godly individuals' faith and walk with Christ. These early believers learned what to do illustrated in other Christian's lives. Believers were also encouraged to learn what not to do, learning from the mistakes of others, so that they would not repeat the same attitudes and actions.

- Paul wrote to the Corinthians not to repeat the grumbling spirit and the nation Israel (1 Cor. 10:10).
- He told Titus and Timothy to be good examples worthy of imitating (Titus 2:7 & 1 Timothy 4:12).

One of the famous poets of the 1800's (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life*) put this challenge to rhyme when he wrote:

Lives of great men all remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sands of time.

In each of the biographical studies in this series, there is a key verse of scripture that impacted the lives of the men and women worth following. With that in mind, Romans 3:24 is a verse that changed the life of William Cowper.

Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a

propitiation in His blood through faith
(Romans 3:24).

Whenever we refer to the death and atoning sacrifice of Christ, there are a number of words that we think of, sing of, understand – words like sacrifice, offering, atonement, substitution, redemption and more. The first word that pops into our minds is probably not propitiation. And that is probably because we have a hard time pronouncing it, much less understanding it.

If you look up the word in Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, the word propitiation is a volume of theological truth wrapped up in one word. It means "a sacrifice that endures the wrath of God to the end and in so doing changes God's wrath to God's favor." The reason propitiation is not one of the most exciting and encouraging words to people today is because we have forgotten the truth that mankind is in deep trouble and facing the eternal wrath of God.

There is a myth growing in popularity today that the God of the Old Testament was angry and judgmental and vindictive, but the God of the New Testament is all about love and mercy and grace. The only reason someone would say that is because they have never really read the Old Testament and they have certainly never read the New Testament.

- Paul introduces us to God in this Book of Romans as a God who is ***revealing wrath from Heaven*** (Romans 1:18).
- The writer of Hebrews describes God as a God who is ***a consuming fire***

(Hebrews 12:29). We'd like God to be a nice warm candle, not a blowtorch set to the hottest setting.

- Paul describes God the Son returning to earth in the future, ***revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God*** (1 Thessalonians 1:7).
- And the Apostle Peter describes the judgment on planet earth in the future as he writes this horrific warning to mankind - ***The present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men*** (2 Peter 3:7).
- Jude describes eternal judgment and then he describes salvation as being ***snatched out of the fire*** (Jude 23).

Mankind doesn't like the idea of God being filled with righteous anger and wrath against sinners. Yet the truth of the gospel is not only a warning of impending judgment by God, it is the promise of being rescued by God. This is the glory and relief and joy of the gospel. God sent His Son to be our propitiation, our substitute who would endure the wrath of a holy God and satisfy the demands of holy justice.

The following story serves as the best way to illustrate propitiation. I remember as a kid reading about prairie fires, and one specific Midwestern fire that swept across the prairie, devastating crops and houses, and anything else that stood in its path. One particular farmer saw the smoke a long way off. It wasn't long before he knew that his farm would be lost and that they would never be able to outrun it. They had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Then he did something unusual; he ran and got some coals from their fireplace and lit his own field on fire. He knew the wind would sweep the fire along a mile or so ahead of that fast approaching prairie fire. He then packed up his family in their wagon and drove it onto that smoldering field he had just burned to the ground. There

they camped in the middle of that field and waited. Within a few moments that great wall of fire came toward them right up to the edge of their field. Finding nothing to feed its hunger because it was already burnt away, it licked its way around those edges that surrounded them, eventually moving away.

They were safe. Why? Because they were standing on ground that had already been burned. That ground they were standing on was their *propitiation*. That ground had already satisfied the fire. It had already endured the demands of that prairie fire and could not be burned again.

The person who stands in Christ will never have to face the fiery judgment of God because they are standing on that which has satisfied the wrath of God. The wrath of God has already burned against His Son, and because you are resting in Jesus Christ you will never experience the fiery judgment of God. You are safe in Christ forever.

Never was this truth more desperately needed than in the heart and mind of one of England's greatest poets, William Cowper. He was born in England in 1731 and died just before his 70th birthday. His father was a pastor, though more than likely unconverted. Cowper could remember seeing people leave their homes at four o'clock in the morning to come hear George Whitfield preach in some open field.ⁱ

His mother was devoted to Cowper. Sadly, he experienced the death of five siblings and eventually the death of his mother when he was only 6 years of age. Her death marked him and he never forgot the sorrow he experienced as a little boy. Unfortunately, his father gave him no sympathy. And two household servant girls used this sorrow to manipulate him, promising him that if he acted perfectly his mother would come back home. She never did, and Cowper never got over losing her.

Cowper was sent off to boarding school and it ended up being a horrific experience for this sensitive, artistic boy. He was bullied mercilessly and often beaten by the other students.

At the age of 23, having failed to enter the legal and political arena his father wanted him involved with, he sank into his first paralyzing depression.ⁱⁱ It would be the first of four major battles with mental breakdowns so severe that he did nothing more than stare out a window in the asylum.

He suffered horrific nightmares, heard voices and experienced hallucinations. But in the 1700's there was little understanding and even less medical treatment for depression and mental disorders. While in there, he was introduced to the poetry of a believer who had written poems 150 years earlier, and it gave hope to his heart. He recovered and was released. Still he knew nothing of the gospel.

Fast-forward 11 years and Cowper suffered another complete breakdown and, this time, God providentially had him placed in the St. Albans Insane Asylum. The director was 58-year-old Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, a committed evangelical who loved the gospel and wanted all his patients to hear it. **Cowper was 33 years old at the time and even though the place where he found himself – called by the villagers – The Madhouse, it became a refuge for him.**

Dr. Cotton engaged him in lengthy conversations and had the habit of leaving Bibles throughout the hospital where patients would find them opened to certain passages. One morning, by the grace of God, William Cowper sat on a window bench waiting for breakfast to be served. Fluttering in the breeze next to him was a Bible opened to Romans chapter 3. He picked it up and began to read - ***Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.***

He would later write, I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood. I believed, and received the gospel. I think I would have died with gratitude and joy. My eyes filled with tears and I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder.ⁱⁱⁱ Several

months later, William Cowper was released from 'the Madhouse' at St. Albans.

But his battles were not over. At one point he fell in love a cousin and courted her for several years. For unexplainable reasons, after they were engaged to married, her father refused to give her hand in marriage to William. Though they separated and Theodora moved away, she maintained love for him throughout the rest of her life. He would also write her 19 poems, though he never saw her again. Theodora never married, but quietly followed William's growing fame as a poet, along with his battles with depression. At one point in his life when he was in financial need, she supported him with gifts passed through a mutual friend of theirs. He would never find out it was her.

Following their breakup, William would have another breakdown and sit silently in front of a window for 16 months. He wrote a friend and shared that he always seemed to have three threads of despair to only one thread of hope in his mind.

In his later years, he was convinced all over again that God did not love him and that he would be the only person to have believed the gospel of Christ, yet be rejected by God at the gates of Heaven. It was a battle that Cowper would wage his entire Christian life. But in the midst of it all, William Cowper would write poems about the gospel and the grace of God that the church is still singing today.

Summarizing his life and tracing his footprints through tracks of truth reveal five principles worth observing and imitating.

- 1. Personal frailties of mind and body may be unrelenting, but they do not signify the displeasure nor the rejection of God.**

Frankly, it's tragic for any church or believer to look down on other believers who struggle with mental illness as if they're less loved by God or less diligent in their faith. They may very well be the heroic disciples among us.

The brain is as fallen and weak as your arthritic shoulders and knees that give you pain and for which you get medicine and therapy and assistance.

If we were honest, we would all admit to periods of discouragement and despair. And the person who thinks the mature in faith **never will** need to go visit Job as he sits out on the ash heap. What would the average Christian think of Job if they went to visit him? There he sits, suffering from 29 physical ailments, mourning over the death of his children and the loss of his family and financial empire. Job laments, “It would have been better if I’d been stillborn, or if my mother had miscarried me . . . why has God so obviously abandoned me?” Job despaired of life itself. So did Elijah, Moses, Jeremiah and Jonah.

William despaired of life to the point of taking matters into his own hands. Several times over the course of his life he would try to take his own life, but every time he tried, he failed. On one occasion he attempted to drink poison but couldn’t get his fingers to open the bottle no matter how hard he tried; on another occasion he tried to hang himself but, just after passing into unconsciousness, the rope broke and he revived.^{iv}

Talk about an instability, despair, and depression so deep that life was without hope. But God had not forsaken him. In fact, over the years, God would speak through him great truths of grace and providence and mercy.

2. Personal friends may not eliminate your battles, but they can share them.

Without medical knowledge or treatment available to him, God would bring him to points of sanity and reason, largely through the influence and encouragement of close friends. When he was released from the asylum, Cowper rented space in the home of an older woman and fellow-believer. She became to him, for the rest of his life in fact, a caring mother figure to replace the mother he had lost as a child.

And by the providence of God, her home was next door to another poet there in the village of Olney. A poet who was also a pastor; a man who had been a slave trader in his past and still struggled with the shame of what he’d done. His name was John Newton, the author of “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Newton became Cowper’s pastor and close friend.

In reading several biographies of Cowper, I learned quite a bit about John Newton. Newton didn’t believe anybody should ever have an idle moment. His answer to discouragement and depression was, in a word, service. And it wasn’t long before he had Cowper assisting him in visitation and helping the poor. He believed that introspection would accomplish nothing; our hearts and our hands should be busy serving others.

Centuries later a famous psychiatrist would teach basically the same thing. He wrote that if you felt depression creeping in you were to immediately lock up your house, drive across the railroad tracks to a poor area of town, find someone in need and give your resources and energy to helping them.^v

That was Newton’s practical philosophy for helping his friend.

Newton also encouraged Cowper to keep at his poetry and compose poems that the church could recite and later sing. Cowper eventually wrote 68 different poems and added them to Newton’s collection of 200. Together they published, in 1779, *The Olney Hymn Collection*, and it became the most influential hymnal in the evangelical church for nearly a century.

3. Painful struggles might not eliminate ministry opportunities, but enlarge them.

Cowper’s suffering provided a kind of depth and insight that would find unusual expressions on the grace and providence of God. He would write a poem entitled, “The Task”, which described ordinary life from a believer’s point of view. It would become considered the most

powerful introduction of the gospel to the common person for more than 50 years.

Yet following the successful publication of that poem, which made Cowper rich by the way, another dark episode began. Cowper lost sight of God's ability to forgive and was once more tormented by the thought that God had cast him away forever. He would write, "God who made me regrets that He did."^{vi} Because of this despair, he decided to drown himself. However, a man was sitting at the spot on the bridge Cowper had planned to jump and it distracted him, so he returned home. Realizing that God had again spared him, he sat down to write. What he wrote would become, to this day 250 years later, one of the greatest and deepest descriptions of God's sovereignty ever put into poetry.

It goes like this:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform,
He plants his footsteps in the Sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable Mines,
Of never ending Skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his Sovereign Will.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his Grace,
Behind a frowning Providence
He hides a Smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain,
God is his own Interpreter,
And he will make it plain.^{vii}

4. Personal interaction with nature can't replace God's word, but it can enlighten and encourage you.

During one period of recovery, some children in the Olney village brought Cowper three baby rabbits that needed care. He took them in and helped them thrive. Soon he began taking in

other animals that needed some form of help. He planted a garden to help feed them. It wasn't long before he was growing melons and cabbages, even writing about what he was learning about sowing and planting.^{viii} Eventually he was looking after a large number of rabbits and guinea pigs, a squirrel, pigeons, two dogs, several cats, two canary's and two goldfinches, hens, ducks and some geese.

But he wasn't just feeding them or tending to them, he was observing them. He began drawing analogies between them and his garden with truths about God's care and design. He began writing his observances out in his journal. He even made up a fun biography of the three rabbits. He began referring to himself as God's under-gardener in Paradise. He enjoyed working in his little greenhouse growing cauliflower, broccoli, cucumbers and pineapples, along with an array of flowers and myrtles and plants.^{ix} On one occasion he wrote to a friend and revealed that caring for animals and plants and working as a gardener helped him "fight off melancholy and hypochondria."^x

There is little doubt that although William Cowper suffered four major setbacks, he would have suffered much more without friends, a willingness to serve others, and a growing fascination and participation with some of God's creatures.

There is a principle to be applied here, both simple and profound – take your eyes off yourself. Go out and serve others. Relate nature to scripture. Enjoy the Lord's creative handiwork, study it and observe it. Write out the analogies you see to the word of God and the character of God and the creative glory of God and the gospel of God.

In practical terms, serve the Lord and serve others in need. Take a walk outdoors, put up a birdfeeder or plant some flowers. Get a dog. Get your hands dirty by digging and planting and pruning out in your yard.

5. Powerful faith does not guarantee freedom from suffering, but it does provide a guided tour through it.

As an older man, Cowper once remarked to a friend that God had marked him out for misery. And his friend responded, “No, William, God has marked you out for mercy.” Indeed God had. To this day, we sing of God’s gospel of grace and mercy because of what William Cowper struggled through and doubted in despair. But clinging to his faith, he gave us deeper music still.

His greatest hymn – we sang it earlier today – and we love to sing it because it rings with despair – we are under the wrath of God – we are without propitiation – God will never be satisfied with us.

But then it rings with gospel hope – God has sent Jesus – He has endured the wrath of God – God’s plan of redemption allows us who trust in Christ – to bathe in the fountain of Christ’s atoning blood, shed on our behalf.

So that we can believe what God gave us through Paul the Apostle - ***Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.***

Cowper summarized all of this when he wrote stanzas like these:

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day

And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.

Despair. Deliverance.

At the age of 69, William Cowper died in his sleep. One of his friends who saw him just after he died remarked that William had an expression on his face that he could only describe as an expression of surprise. Surprised that he indeed was being escorted into the courts of Heaven. Surprised that God was indeed satisfied with him after all because he was in Christ. A look of surprise perhaps because he would actually do the very thing he thought God would not allow him to do.

Surprised to sing what the church has been singing in faith for nearly 300 years thanks to William Cowper’s doubts and yet faith. Thanks to one who dared to hope and then write this stanza:

When this poor lispings stammering tongue
Lies silent in the grave.
Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
I’ll sing Thy power to save.

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- ii Ibid, p. 86
- iii Marion Harland, William Cowper (G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, reprint, 1899), p. 65
- iv Harland, p. 52
- v Attributed to Karl Menninger, online source, paraphrased.
- vi Harland, p. 218
- vii Edited from George Melvyn Ella, William Cowper: Poet of Paradise (Evangelical Press, 1993), p. 175
- viii Harland, p. 90
- ix Ella, p. 186; Harland, p. 90
- x Harland, p. 90.