

PROBLEMS PRAYING?

WORKING THROUGH THE OBSTACLES

If you've ever tried to spend any time in prayer, you may have struggled with the thought, "I feel so dumb talking with no one here." You may also wonder why God would ever want to hear from you or speak to your heart. "Why would God want to talk with *me*?" Here is a picture: Have you ever admired someone you were acquaintances with, but not close friends with and thought, "If only I could talk with this person, share my dreams, get to know them and let them get to know me"? This is God's heart toward you.

I'm not religious. Don't believe that being spiritual means being something you're not. We're spiritual in our very nature. . . we don't have to *try* to be spiritual. Neither should you believe you have to observe religious duties or be in some way pious. We are sinners. We are real people. God is not going to strike you down for having passions or impure thoughts, nor for struggling with personal failures. He's neither looking for people to jump through hoops of observances, nor fill squares of religious servitude.

I feel like a fraud, a hypocrite. Don't believe you have to give God "Sunday school" answers either. Are you afraid, scared, bitter, angry, lonely? That's okay. Do you feel passionless, faithless, shame-filled, enraged, cheated, betrayed or used? Let him know. In fact, let him have it. Hit him with the realities of what you feel. We're talking broad shoulders here. God is not only big enough to take it, He prefers you engage him at these points. He is not sin-filled, petty, easily offended, easily angered, vindictive, nor judgmental. In short, He's not like us. He *is* loving, caring, and wants to enter into our hurts, wounds and pain to help and to heal. God is not ashamed of you. He is proud of His creation and understands we are embattled.

The fact is, honesty is an in-road by which God can strengthen your heart. Honesty helps us cry out to Him. If we don't embrace the realities of our condition, we are deceiving ourselves. If we believe that we have to work hard to show others that we have it all together or that we are "cured" of human realities, we are actively working to deceive them (though many see through our charade). Relax and get in touch with *what* you are and *where* you are, but the goal is not to stay here. It is more important that you eventually realize and live out of *who* you are as God reveals to you who you *really* are in Him.

I get distracted by all I have to do. Have you ever tried to talk or pray only to be distracted by all that screams for your attention? Coursework hangs over your head, a phone call needs to be made, you need to pick up something at the store, a bill needs paying, etc. Don't see these as distractions from your desire to pray; see each as one more thing you can take to your Father. He cares about your whole life, your whole day, your whole week, your whole future; that definitely includes everything on your plate now. Don't eliminate these thoughts just because you don't view them as spiritual. The spiritual is greater than the physical because it encompasses the physical. Your life and physical needs are relevant to who you are spiritually every moment that you live.

Jot down such "distractions" on a to-do list or on your calendar or schedule. In fact, consider these thoughts gifts from God rather than distractions. Be grateful for the things that come to mind. Understand that their "urgency" need not take you from God's presence. Talk to Him about them. Present the stress or the worry associated with them, if any. You are with God, the One who has finely tuned the universe. The worlds in our solar system do not move apart from Him. God displays pleasure

in all that he has done. He ultimately displays organization and structure, even when it appears to us chaotic or random. Most of all, He delights in you! Talk to Him about the things on your plate.

I get thrown by bizarre and twisted thoughts. Welcome to the human race. This is *not* abnormal *nor* uncommon. It may not be in line with what God designed (and that is what distresses us, because we sense instinctively that this is not what God intended for us to experience), but it is not rare by any means in the human experience.

Paul writes, *“But remember this—the wrong desires that come into your life aren't anything new and different. Many others have faced exactly the same problems before you”* (1 Cor. 10:13 TLB). God wants us to know that we are not alone in this. We are not *failing* in some unique and singular way—the way that we fear. The New Living Translation puts it this way: *“But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience.”* You are not alone . . . especially in your failures.

Every true thought, every noble idea, every bit of courage and fight we have within us comes from God: *“Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights. Unlike them, he never changes or casts shifting shadows”* (James 1:17-18 NLT). Yes, God is faithful and constant in His love and care.

So where do these disturbing thoughts come from? Scripture is clear: they come from the “father of lies” (the one who gives birth to every kind of lie); the one who seeks to steal from us our God-given identities, to kill life within us and destroy us; the enemy of our souls; the evil one. God tells us not to fear our adversary. In fact, Satan fears God, trembles and shakes at the name of God Most High. Our enemy fears the Son of God who appeared for the specific purpose of destroying the devil’s work in our lives. Jesus’ power in us is greater. Darkness has never been able to swallow light. Rather, light has always shown in the darkness.

“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8-9 NIV).

Does the fact that you have such thoughts mean you are completely defeated already? Not at all. We suffer defeat when we imagine that we are the source of these thoughts, that these thoughts come from us. “Well, naturally they come from me!” you may think, “They’re *my thoughts!*” Sure, we can be dragged away by our own evil desires, but is every morbid thought really *your* thought? Just because it passes through your mind, does it mean it is yours, that it originated in you?

In times of war, false relays, messages designed to look authentic, messages designed to throw the enemy into distress and confusion, go out. Truth and love, faith and hope, grace and peace, patience and trust are the former communications, the standing orders, the true and unchanging message that keeps us unmoved in our determination, that keep us moving on with focus.

So what is our strategy in this war? All such thoughts have to be exposed. To expose something means it is brought to light so that it is no longer hidden or obscure. Only then can it be taken captive.

Taking a thought captive does not mean that such thoughts don't continue to come. It means you take them to God as they come. "But God cannot tolerate sin!" we protest. Let's also consider the source of *that* thought because it, too, is still another piece of misinformation needing to be exposed and taken captive.

Jesus, the sinless Son of Man, actually became sin and was nailed to a cross. Through Jesus, sin was condemned in sinful man. Mankind was not condemned; sin was condemned! Jesus took the sin of the whole world (including every lie ever bought into by human society) upon Himself. In that selfless act, Jesus, as man, returned dignity to the whole of mankind. The lies keep so many pinned down. Be courageous, and be free. It goes without saying that you have to be free in order to assist in setting others free. God loves you and cherishes you, no matter your momentary situation, slave or free.

So just as such thoughts passing through our minds are not sin in themselves, neither are temptations sin. To be tempted and to resist such deceitfulness and persuasiveness is to suffer. To suffer is not to sin. How could it be? Neither is suffering the same as being punished by God. You may take punishment from the enemy, but that's the extent. What else should we expect from an enemy at war? Victory is assured, and mankind will one day judge angels, fallen and otherwise. That is the elevation and honor given man because of Christ. By Grace and Truth you will endure and overcome. Love suffered long for us; Truth reveals Himself to us.

Now, to give into a temptation, *is* sin, but even then, is sin your undoing in some final, fatal way? Not in the least. Sin has been overcome by Christ, remember? So we simply call that spade a spade. We label it sin. We acknowledge it to God and others. By bringing it into the light and declaring it taken up by Christ, we turn the tables. Remember, only when lies are brought into the light do you have the opportunity of asserting your advantage in Christ. Sin is a lie acted upon. Respond with truth.

Confessing sin is not the same as saying, "I am a loser." To say that you are bad is to "confess" a lie. It is to be deceived, and it simply isn't true. You are *not* bad in Christ. Your redeemed heart is good. Mankind has been declared righteous in Christ and by Christ. God said mankind was worthy of His sacrifice. You were worth it to Him, or He never would have given Himself in exchange for you. He paid the ultimate price for you and me. *His sacrifice makes us worthy*. If we weren't worth it, He wouldn't have done it. Paul said that nothing good dwelled in him apart from Christ. He referred to himself as the "worst of (chief among) sinners." But Paul never spoke about who he was in Christ that way. It was no longer Paul sinning; it was sin at work in Paul. Paul's sin identity was gone, replaced by a Jesus identity.

How in the world do I listen to God? First, simply ask God to reveal His heart. Read through a few chapters of Scripture in context—from a letter, an account, or a psalm—and then read through it again. Mark your Bible (underlining and putting in brackets text, etc.) Then pick out that most significant phrase, the one that most jumps out at you the most. Hear what God is saying, contemplate it, and meditate on what he is saying to *you*. Listen for His reassuring, kind, compassionate voice. Listen for the intensity of passionate love, for the concern of a loving father, for the sure hope of a joy-filled spirit. When you hear it, stay there awhile.

If what you hear is harsh and condemning, closely consider the sources of the tone you are hearing. Be assured it is not from God. God desires intimacy. His anger lasts only a *moment*, but His favor lasts a lifetime. It is the adversary that is an accuser and a condemner.

How can I become intimate with God? Sometimes we feel God is distant, but the Scriptures say that He is never far from each one of us. So cry out to Him. Ask Him to search you and know you. Ask Him to reveal *your* heart. One way God does this is through journaling. Journal your thoughts in a constant fashion without pausing to scrutinize them (or worrying about proper spelling or grammar). This will lay things out in a way that *you* can see. God already knows what you're thinking. You might as well know too.

Journal *to God* as if writing a love letter in reply to Him. You do this by responding to key things He's spoken to you during your time alone with Him. Now you have complete intimacy—you are able to see just how He is at work in you as prayer emanates from both your heart and the tip of your pen. When you respond to His Word this way, by first writing a passage of Scripture prominently at the top of your journal page, you are now dealing with Truth.

I just seem to hit wall after wall, failure after failure. Don't make the mistake of believing that difficulties mean God is against you, nor that this is somehow a sign of personal disfavor with you and who you are. Those feelings, no matter how strong, are not in line with the truth and, therefore, simply not from God. If you have such feelings, it is not your fault they are so pervading. God holds you blameless so that you can live a blameless life. Such feelings need to be worked through, usually with the help of those who know you and love you, and sometimes through professional clergy and counselors. We are of a *fallen race*, but we have been redeemed.

God is for you. This Son of God and Man died for *all* mankind. As men and women created in His image, *we are His favored race*. Worship in your heart over His goodness and over all He has done, over His promises and all He is going to do in and through you. We invite you to believe, to trust, to hope.