

Letter to a Failure

by Desmond Ford

*A letter to a dear family member says that
what gets your attention gets you. Giving attention
to ourselves leads to low self-worth.
We best benefit when giving our attention to
God's unconditional love at Calvary.*

Dear Sue,

We've been friends for many years, and now you've done me the honor of asking my advice at a time when your life hardly seems worth living. Well, from one sinner to another, I'll try.

You say you are "sick and tired of yourself." You have a head-knowledge of Christianity, but your experience is a dowdy, patchwork quilt. You want to know how to change this situation, and ask for a strategy of behavior.

Start at Rock Bottom

Sue, rock bottom is not a bad place to sink to. In a lonely hotel room, R. A. Torrey (Dwight L. Moody's great friend and successor) reached the verge of suicide before his life was transformed. When he found himself needy enough, he found God was near enough.

Moody's own experience, though not duplicating Torrey's agnostic despair, reflects the same truth. Moody tried to demonstrate perpetual motion by calling on as many as 200 homes in a day. This was for the spiritual welfare of the occupants of those homes. He only discovered his own deep poverty of soul.

Then it was God revealed himself in power. A new Moody went forth to shake the world.



Different Ways

Have you ever noticed, Sue, the different ways Christ dealt with those who came to him? He told the haughty Pharisee, Nicodemus, that he would never enter heaven without being "born again" (Jn 3:3). There is no such demand made of the Samaritan woman in the next chapter (John 4). Instead, he told

her about "the gift of God" and a fountain of everlasting life available for the taking.

Similarly, in Matthew 24, we find Jesus uttering a series of terrible woes against people who felt soul-whole. What a contrast to the spirit Jesus manifested towards publicans and sinners who knew they were outcasts.

I remind you of the words of Augustine: "You could not be seeking God but for the fact that He has found you."

Dawn Through Tempest

God is a soul farmer. God breaks up the soil of the heart before planting the seed of eternal life and everlasting joy. How does God do this? By letting us go our own willful ways, until we are almost shattered by the recoil of the whirlwind.

God is very well mannered, and does not thrust himself where he is not wanted. But he is ever beside us, standing patiently amid the shadows, waiting to answer our feeblest call.

Rita Snowden tells the story of the guide and an inexperienced climber forced to stay all night on the Pyrenees mountains. Towards dawn, there came a tempestuous wind that twisted trees and started rocks rolling down the slopes. The

newcomer to Spain was filled with terror and apprehension.

The guide murmured softly, "This is the way dawn comes to the Pyrenees."

Our dawn sometimes comes through storm and tempest.

Universe of Law

It sometimes takes a long time to learn that the universe is just that—a **uni-verse**. It is not a **multiverse**. The universe runs by one inviolable law.

In our early years we frolic heedlessly, thinking we can do as we please without paying the piper. We live cafeteria-style, a life of self-service. We act as though the world owed us everything, and we owed it nothing. We seek kicks, and think we can dodge the kickbacks, forgetting the warnings of teachers such as William James:

Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never-so-little scar. The drunken Rip Van Winkle, in Jefferson's play, excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying, "I won't count this time!" Well, he may not count it, and a kind Heaven may not count it; but it is being counted none the less. Down among his nerve-cells and fibers the molecules are counting it, registering and storing it up to be used against him when the next temptation comes. Nothing we ever do is, in strict scientific literalness, wiped out (*Talks To Teachers*, p. 78).

This warning, of course, reinforces the biblical teaching of the tremendous importance of choice—whether of thought, word, or deed.

The Bible itself is just a plain statement of how life works. It shows how all good and all evil must harvest. When we see this, our rebellion against commandments slackens. We sense that the laws of God are clues to living. They are not arbitrary. Rather, they are the loving counsels of the One who made all things and alone knows how

all things work and work out.

The Issue of Self-Worth

Sue, I still haven't reached the heart of the matter.

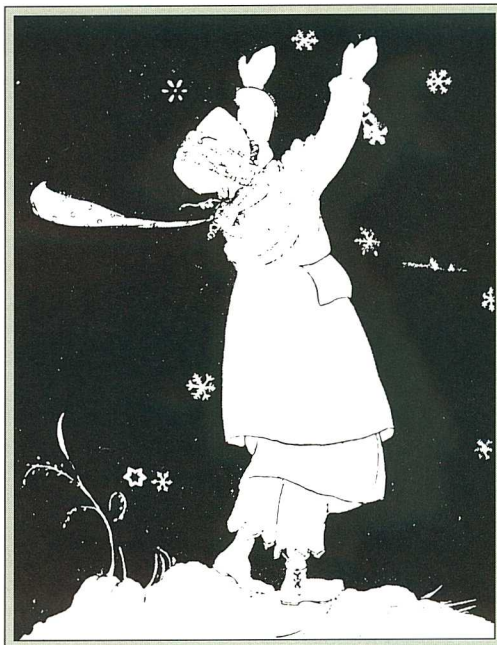
You have made resolutions again and again. All your promises, have proved to be ropes of sand. Following a meeting where you experienced the wooing of the Spirit of God, you faced yourself and hated what you saw. Then came the cataracts of tears, the fierce resolves. All in vain.

You are also aware of how your failures have affected you. You've become extremely critical of all who stand in your way, especially anyone representing any sort of authority. The way you speak gives a listener the impression **you** are the real authority on life, and all others are failures. This is a well-known phenomenon. Psychologists call it "projection." It is those who hate themselves who are hard on others.

Your real problem revolves around the issue of self-worth. The human heart is frequently ambivalent in its emotions, both loving and hating itself.

Looking Up

How can we solve this?



Let me first confess that too often I have viewed other people in a way quite different from the way our Lord and Maker does. Jesus saw people,

not as they are, but as they might be, transformed by his grace.

This is a perspective we must share. Whatever gets our attention, gets us. If we concentrate on our own weaknesses (or the weaknesses of others), then life deteriorates on a geometric scale. It is true that "Looking around brings confusion. Looking within brings despair. Only looking up brings hope, joy and faith."

It's true. It's the way it was with Noah and his family in the cataclysm that ended the old world.

They had only one window in the ark. They could not look out at their neighbors being crushed by falling boulders or drowned by swirling waters. They could not look behind them at the ruins of their former homes, or ahead at nature's threatening convulsions. They could only look up, through the only window—overhead. This reminded them that God was to be the target of their thoughts and hopes throughout the traumatic voyage.

Self-love from God's Love

Sue, your greatest need (and mine) is not a series of admonitions on how to improve your life. What we all need is, according to an old preacher, "The expulsive power of a new affection." He meant that the only way of driving out our self-centeredness is to be filled with a greater love than self-love.

This is the hub of all that I can ever say to you. **A TRUE SELF-LOVE, AND LOVE FOR GOD AND MY FELLOW MAN, COMES ONLY THROUGH THE CONVICTION THAT GOD LOVES ME—INFINITELY AND ENDLESSLY.**

I am not going to give you directions on how long to study your Bible, how much to pray, or how many meetings to attend. All that is in vain if the vital point I've just made is not seen. If Bible study, prayer and meetings contribute to that point, then they are good. Otherwise, they are useless.

Seek God First

This is what the adage means that every person's chief duty is adoration (of God). By beholding we become changed. I repeat: "Whatever gets our attention gets us."

Where are you looking, Sue? What are you listening to? What do you read? What stuff are your daydreams made of?

Do you give God the woodchips or the logs of your time and energy? Scripture says that a fool's eyes are at the ends of the earth. Anywhere except upon the God in whom he lives, moves, and has his being! Folly indeed!

God is the Author and Finisher of life. God is our chief Good, the one Indispensable. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these [other] things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33 KJV).

Good News Not Good Advice

And so, Sue, I'm not going to advise you further. Advice is not what you need. It's about time you started believing—not good advice—but the good news!

The good news that Christ receives sinners. That he does not reckon sins against any who come to him. That all the failures of the past can be forgiven in a moment of time as you see that Christ paid for them all!

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" (Jn 3:36 NIV). Has it **now** not **will have**.

What does it mean to believe in the Son? It means to see that Jesus was made to be sin for you, though he had no sin. Thus, you might be treated as righteous, though you are not righteous (2 Cor 5:21). It means to recognize the central truth of Scripture. "One died for all, and therefore all died" (2 Cor 5:14). You paid for your sins in your Representative, in A.D. 31.

This good news breaks the chain of guilt that enslaves, worries and torments you in all your quieter moments. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

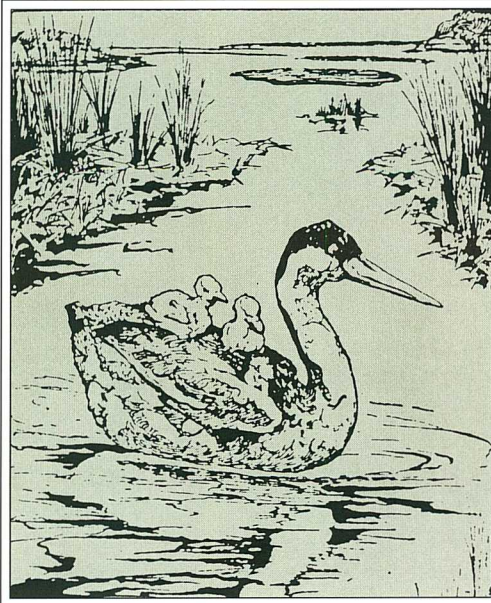
Faith Not Feeling

Now for a warning. If you look at your feelings, you'll miss what God wants to give you. Having faith in Christ is not some kind of feeling. It is choosing to believe what God says—and acting on it regardless of how you feel.

Will you read that again? Feelings

are what happen to you. Neither you nor God need be concerned with them. God looks at your choices only. Choose to believe.

Whether you feel like it or not, act



as though you knew the good news to be infallibly true. True for you.

Remember the man who came to Christ at Cana and asked for the healing of his son at Capernaum? The father was told to go his way believing Christ had already healed his son. Every step of the way home illustrates what faith is. Faith is going on in God's way, according to God's directions, believing all will turn out as God has promised.

Your feelings will come right if you ignore them. According to Romans 15:13, joy and peace come **through** believing, not **before**. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

When do you feel better, before or after you take the recommended medicine? One troubled woman came to Dwight Moody. He asked her, "What saved Noah, the ark or his feelings?" She got the point and went away rejoicing.

Look to Calvary

Sue, you've been looking in all the wrong places. You've been looking at yourself and others. Give all that away. Look to Calvary.

See Christ dying for you, as though you are the only person in the world. Notice that his hands are nailed because of the wrong things your hands have done. His feet are spiked because of the wrong places your feet have taken you. His brow is pierced because of the idle and malicious thoughts you have thought.

Hear Jesus say to one who was guilty of all the sins in the book, "I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43). It's all for you, Sue. Take it. Take it now, regardless of how you feel.

Choose God's Unconditional Love

Your dad has told you many times that you are undisciplined. So was he, Sue, before he became a Christian. The good news I've repeated to you is the only solution.

When we see that God accepts us just as we are, weak and vicious, then simultaneously we receive strength to cease being what we have been. "For sin shall not be your master, because you not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14).

When you see that Christ paid for all your sins—past, present, and future—then the knowledge of his loving kindness snaps the bonds of evil habits. When you see that Christ accepts you regardless of your failures to keep his commandments, you are set free for the first time in your life. To our surprise we find obedience both easy and a pleasure.

Sue, stop and think. You must choose, right now, either to believe your own weak, deceptive heart—or **God!** The wrong choice leads to sorrow, disappointment, frustration, and eternal death. The other leads to happiness, fulfillment, satisfaction, and eternal life.

Here my letter must end. When the unconditional love of God is offered, what else can be said? That love is yours if you want it, Sue. It will change all else.

Will you take it? Will you take it now?

Your Friend,

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