

THE FALSE HOPE OF MODERN CHRISTIANITY

Larry Crabb – Inside out

IN dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world. The message, whether it's from fundamentalists requiring us to live by a favored set of rules or from charismatics urging a deeper surrender to the Spirit's power, is too often the same: The promise of bliss is for now! Complete satisfaction can be ours this side of heaven. Some speak of the joys of fellowship and obedience, others of a rich awareness of their value and worth. The language may be reassuringly biblical or it may reflect the influence of current psychological thought. Either way, the point of living the Christian life has shifted from knowing and serving Christ till He returns to soothing, or at least learning to ignore, the ache in our soul. We are told, sometimes explicitly but more often by example, that it's simply not necessary to feel the impact of family tensions, frightening possibilities, or discouraging news.

An inexpressible joy is available that rather than support us through hard times can actually eliminate pressure, worry, and pain from our experience. Life may have its rough spots, but the reality of Christ's presence and blessing can so thrill our soul that pain is virtually unfelt. It simply isn't necessary to wrestle with internal struggle and disorder. Just trust, surrender, persevere, obey. The effect of such teaching is to blunt the painful reality of what it's like to live as part of an imperfect, and sometimes evil, community. We learn to pretend that we feel now what we cannot feel until heaven. But not all of us are good at playing the game. Those whose integrity makes such pretense difficult sometimes worry over their apparent lack of faith. "Why don't I feel as happy and together as others? Something must be wrong with my spiritual life." To make matters worse, these people of integrity often appear less mature and their lives less inviting than folks more skilled at denial. And churches tend to reward those members who more convincingly create the illusion of intactness by parading them as examples of what every Christian should be.

Beneath the surface of everyone's life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear — and for good reason. We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity but of realism. The experience of groaning, however, is precisely what modern Christianity so often tries to help us escape. The gospel of health and wealth appeals to our legitimate longing for relief by skipping over the call to endure suffering. Faith becomes the means not to learning contentment regardless of circumstances but rather to rearranging one's circumstances to provide more comfort. Orthodox Bible preachers are rarely lured into proclaiming a prosperity gospel, but still they appeal to that same desire for relief from groaning.

They tell us that more knowledge, more commitment, more giving, more prayer — some combination of Christian disciplines — will eliminate our need to struggle with deeply felt realities. Spiritual disciplines can be misused. If we use them to create space in our soul for God to fill with a sense of His presence but fail to deliberately pray that God's Spirit will release Christ's life from our soul into others, we miss the full value of the disciplines. Yet there is no escape from an aching soul, only denial of it. The promise of one day being with Jesus in a perfect world is the Christian's only hope for complete relief. Until then, we either groan or pretend we don't.

The effect of widespread pretense, whether maintained by rigidly living on the surface of life or being consumed with emotionalism, has been traumatic for the church. Rather than being salt and

light, we've become a theologically diverse community of powerless Pharisees, penetrating very little of society because we refuse to grapple honestly with the experience of life. Beneath much of our claim to orthodoxy, there is a moral cowardice that reflects poorly on our confidence in Christ. We trust Him to forgive our sins and keep us more or less in line as a community of decent people, but is He enough to deal with things as they really are? Do we know how to face the confusing reality of a world where good parents sometimes have rebellious children and bad parents produce committed missionaries? Can we plunge into the disturbing facts of life and emerge, as the writer of the seventy-third psalm did, with a renewed confidence in God and a deeper thirst for Him? Can we enter those hidden inner regions of our soul where emptiness is more the reality than a consuming awareness of His presence and where an honest look reveals that self-serving motives stain even our noblest deeds?

Is Christ enough to deal with that kind of internal mess? Or is it better never to look at all that and just get on with the Christian life? When we reflect deeply on how life really is, both inside our soul and outside in our world, a quiet terror threatens to overwhelm us. We worry that we simply won't be able to make it if we face all that is there. In those moments, retreat into denial does not seem cowardly; it seems necessary and smart. Just keep going, get your act together, stop feeling sorry for yourself, renew your commitment to trust God, get more serious about obedience. Things really aren't as bad as you intuitively sense they are. You've simply lost your perspective and must regain it through more time in the Word and increased moral effort.

There is something terribly attractive about knowing what to do to make things better. If we can explain why we feel so bad in terms of something specific and correctable (like not spending enough time in devotions), then we can do something about it. And we like that. Nothing is more terrifying than staring at a problem for which we have no solutions under our direct control. Trusting another is perhaps the most difficult requirement of the Christian life. We hate to be dependent because we have learned to trust no one, not fully. We know better. Everyone in whom we have placed our confidence has in some way disappointed us. To trust fully, we conclude, is suicide. Fallen man has taken command of his own life, determined above all else to prove that he's adequate for the job. And like the teen who feels rich until he starts paying for his own car insurance, we remain confident of our ability to manage life until we face the reality of our own soul.

Nothing is more humbling than the recognition of (1) a deep thirst that makes us entirely dependent on someone else for satisfaction and (2) a depth of corruption that stains everything we do — even our efforts to reform — with selfishness. To realistically face what is true within us puts us in touch with a level of helplessness we don't care to experience. A woman admitted to herself that she'd lost all romantic feeling for her kind and thoughtful husband. On the advice of her pastor, she was praying to regain her warmth while at the same time moving toward her husband in chosen obedience. She wanted to believe that the spark was rekindling, but it wasn't. She then tried to convince herself that it didn't matter how she felt; obedience was all that counted. But her lack of romantic feeling for a man who treated her well troubled her deeply. There was nothing she knew to do that could change her internal condition. She felt hopeless. If awareness of what's inside forces me to admit that I'm utterly dependent on resources outside my control for the kind of change I desire, if helplessness really is at the core of my existence, I prefer to live on the surface of things. It's far more comfortable.

To admit I cannot deal with all that's within me strikes a deathblow to my claim to self-sufficiency. To deny the frightening realities within my soul seems as necessary to life as breathing. Emotionally enlivening worship, energetic missional activism, carefully structured recovery groups, and retreat from authentic community into professional counseling tend to keep our relationships shallow, safe

from exposing those frightening realities to ourselves and others. It must be said that this state of affairs is thoroughly understandable. We don't like to hurt. And there is no worse pain for fallen people than facing an emptiness we cannot fill. To enter into pain seems rather foolish when we can run from it through denial. We simply cannot get it through our head that with a nature twisted by sin, the route to joy always involves the very worst sort of internal suffering we can imagine. We rebel at that thought. We weren't designed to hurt.

The physical and personal capacities to feel that God built into us were intended to provide pleasures, such as good health and close relationships. When they don't, when our head throbs with tension and our heart is broken by rejection, we want relief. With deep passion, we long to experience what we were designed to enjoy. In the midst of that groaning, the idea that relief may not come is unbearable. It is horrible. How can we continue to live with the ache in our soul provoked by our daughter's abortion or our wife's coldness? How can life go on with a husband who looks for every opportunity to be mean while convinced of his own righteousness? How do we cope with a disfiguring illness, with our guilt over the bitterness we feel as we care for an elderly parent, or with an income that never lets us get ahead? Into that personal agitation comes the soothing message of modern Christianity: Relief is available! Either the disturbing elements in your world will settle down when you develop enough faith or you can enter a level of spiritual experience in which the struggle to cope is replaced by a fullness of soul.

Satisfaction is available, one way or another, and it's available now. Modern Christianity says it is within our power to arrange for the relief we long for. We can learn to claim promises with more faith; we can classify sin into manageable categories and then scrupulously avoid it, thereby guaranteeing the blessings we covet; we can practice new forms of meditation; we can become more involved in church activities and Bible study. It says, Something we can do will advance us to a level of spirituality that eliminates pain and struggle as ongoing, deeply felt realities. The appeal is great. When our soul is thirsty, we can dig our own wells.

Christian leaders provide the shovels and point out likely spots to dig, and off we go. Discipleship programs, witnessing strategies, Bible-memory systems, new forms of community, richer experiences of the Spirit, renewed commitment — the list goes on. Good things to do, but the energy to pursue them is often supplied by the expectation that I'll find water that will end all thirst. No more struggle, disappointment, or heartache. Heaven now. Not everyone, of course, is teaching this theology. But many are, and many more communicate the same hope by neither sharing honestly their own current struggles nor addressing realistically the struggles of others. It's tempting to stay removed from problems for which we have no ready answers. It's much easier to preach that we need less counseling and more obedience than to involve ourselves in the messy details of life where obedience comes hard.

One result of extricating ourselves from the tangled complexity of life is simplistic preaching that fails to deal with life as it is. Rather than penetrating life with liberating truth, such preaching maintains a conspiracy of pretense that things are better than they are or ever can be until Christ returns. We end up unprepared to live but strengthened in our denial. A deeply ingrained passion for independence — a legacy left to us by Adam — and a legitimate thirst to enjoy the perfect relationships for which we were designed make us respond eagerly to the hope that heaven's joys are available now — and on demand. When teenagers rebel, hurting parents would love to believe there's a way to replace the terrible heartache with happy confidence.

When singleness seems more a prison than an opportunity for expanded service, it would be wonderful to quickly transform the loneliness into a contentment that feels no loss. Maybe these

understandable desires are not within reach. Perhaps the anchor that enables people to weather life's storms and grow through them is gratitude for what happened at the cross of Christ and passionate confidence in what will yet take place at His coming. Could it be that the only source of real stability in the present (a kind of stability that does not require the character-weakening mechanism of denial) is appreciation for the past and hope for the future? Maybe the presence of Christ now, in His Word and Spirit, can be enjoyed only to the degree that it causes us to take both a backward and a forward look.

But such talk seems hopelessly non-immediate, a pie-in-the-sky kind of comfort. We want something now ! And something is available now, something wonderful and real. But we will find only its counterfeit until we realize that the intensity of our disappointment with life coupled with a Christianity that promises to relieve that disappointment now have radically shifted the foundation of our faith. No longer do we resolutely bank everything on the coming of a nail-scarred Christ for His groaning but faithfully waiting people.

Our hope has switched to a responsive Christ who satisfies His hurting people by quickly granting them the relief they demand. That hope, however, is a lie, an appealing but grotesque perversion of the good news of Christ. It's a lie responsible for leading hundreds of thousands of seeking people into either a powerless lifestyle of denial and fabricated joy or a turning away from Christianity in disillusionment and disgust. It's a lie that blocks the path to the deep transformation of character that is available now.

We can enter into a rich awareness of being alive as a Christian; we can taste His goodness in a way that whets our appetite for more. But to demand that our groaning end before heaven keeps us from all that is available now. God wants to change us into people who are truly noble, people who reflect an unswerving confidence in who He is, which equips us to face all of life and still remain faithful. Spirituality built on pretense is not spirituality at all. God wants us to be courageous people who are deeply bothered by the horrors of living as part of a fallen race, people who look honestly at every struggle, who feel overwhelmed by what we see yet emerge prepared to live: scarred, still troubled, but deeply loving. When the fact is faced that life is profoundly disappointing, the only way to make it is to learn to love. And only those who are no longer consumed with finding satisfaction now are able to love.

Only when we commit our yearnings for perfect joy to a Father we have learned to deeply trust are we free to live for others despite the reality of a perpetual ache. This book is not about relief; it is about change. Its message is not "Here's how to feel better now." Rather, it deals with the route to transformation of character. The core purpose of the church is the spiritual formation of its members, to produce "little Christs" who can reflect the Father's heart, release the Spirit's life from their souls into others, and advance Christ's mission in the world. That route, it should be noted, takes a surprising twist that cannot be seen from the narrow gate leading into it. After traveling the route for some time (one never knows how much time, but certainly more than those who are committed to immediate relief would ever endure), something unexpected and wonderful occurs. A hint of one's substance develops, and a glimpse of what it means to be alive awakens the soul to its unrealized potential for joy. And that glimpse so clearly reflects the beauty of Christ's involvement with us that a self-sufficient pride in one's value becomes unthinkable.

The ache remains, and even intensifies, as more of the fallen reality of our own soul is exposed. But the notion that our present suffering is nothing in comparison with the glory ahead begins to make sense. I'm not very far along the path to deeply felt life and joy in Christ, but I think I'm on it. Consider with me what is available in this life: a change of character that enables us to taste enough

of God now to whet our appetite for the banquet later. The kind of internal change that permits a richer taste of God is possible, but it requires surgery. The disease blocking our enjoyment of God has spread beyond the point where more effort to do what we think is right will be enough. And there is no anesthetic as the knife penetrates our soul. But this kind of change — change from the inside out — is worth the pain. It makes the Christian life possible. It frees us to groan without complaint, to love others in spite of our emptiness, and to wait for the complete satisfaction we so desperately desire.