

## **GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY** **(William Cowper)**

William Cowper was born in 1731, the son of a minister in Hertfordshire who was also chaplain to King George II. When he was only six years old, his mother died ... and her passing had a lasting effect upon the rest of his life, - he was *so* devoted to her memory. Soon afterwards, his father sent him to boarding school where he was very lonely, insecure, timid and regularly bullied. When he was nine, his father sent him to the Westminster private school. Sadly, even though his father was a minister, he had never taught the Gospel to his sons, and religion did not seem to be of a high priority.

In fact, William's father decided William should study to become a lawyer, and he did very well, becoming a barrister. William did not like it though. ... Also, from earlier days, he had been bothered with depression, and this depression became more and more severe, he wrote, "I was struck with such a dejection of spirits as none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of ... Day and night I was upon the rack, lying down in horror, and rising up in despair ... I had need of something more salutary than amusement, but I had not one to direct me where to find it." ... When he was eighteen he fell in love with a girl (his cousin), but her father did not approve. After seven years, and being engaged, they had to end it ... and it broke William's heart. ... His mother's death ... and then he could not marry the woman he loved, Theodora Cowper.

Next, his father died, and his stepmother also, followed by his closest friend who drowned. ... In 1759 (28 years old) he was appointed Commissioner of Bankrupts in London, and four years later he was offered the position of Clerk of the Journals of the House of Lords. To gain this prestigious position, he had to be formally interviewed ... He was well-qualified for it but he felt it so insurmountable that he suffered a total mental breakdown, during which he tried more than once to end his life. ... His life was crumbling, and he could not do anything about it. ... He was literally going mad! ... He thought of poisoning himself, drowning himself, going into a monastery in France ... He tried to hang himself three times ... and the third time he fell unconscious, but the rope broke ... He was in tatters, and his career was finished, at the age of 32.

He was committed to a care-home for the insane, - in the language of the day, a 'lunatic asylum', - which was run by an evangelical Christian. It was there, after six months, as he wrote in his own words, "I flung myself into a chair near the window, and seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply it for comfort and instruction. The first verse I saw was the 25<sup>th</sup> of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of Romans, **Whom**

God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. Immediately I received strength to believe it and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon was sealed in His blood ... I could only look up to Heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder”.

Altogether, he was in the home for eighteen months. Afterwards, he went to live near his brother John who was a minister in Cambridge. However, problems began to pile upon him again, - he could not live on his own, he could not deal with responsibility, he could not work his finances, and he could not find any Christian friends, “I felt like a traveller in the midst of an inhospitable desert, without a friend to comfort”.

Then, in the autumn of 1765 (William was 34), he met and befriended a Christian, William Unwin ... and he moved in with Unwin’s parents, Rev. Morley Unwin and his wife Mary, - Mary was much younger than her husband, but only eight years older than William Cowper.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1767, Mary’s husband (Morley) died, after falling from his horse and fracturing his skull. During this time, the curate of Olney called at the manse to extend his sympathy, - the curate’s name was John Newton ... and he invited Mary and her daughter Susanna to move to Olney, which they did in September 1767. Also, John Newton invited William Cowper, and they became great friends and worked together in the parish.

Cowper’s depression did not leave him though, for often it came back to trouble him, - he found it hard taking any degree of pressure. As a means to confront his thoughts, Newton encouraged him to write hymns, - in fact, they both started to write hymns (the ‘Olney Hymns’). This was of a help to Cowper, but in 1773 he suffered extreme depression for eleven whole months. Again, there were repeated attempts at suicide, and each time God providentially prevented him.

I would like to slip a Bible verse in here ... Paul wrote, **Rom. 8:26** Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit [*Himself*] maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. ... Even during those times when we are so low, and we don’t know the words or can’t find the words to pray ... when it seems our faith is empty and so weak the Word of God promises us the Holy Spirit is interceding on our behalf, - He is praying for us, **27** And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is

the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God. ... And the prayer which is offered according to the will of God is always for our best because the next verse says, <sup>28</sup> And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

And so, William was slowly nursed back to *some* measure of normality by Mary Unwin ... and you can visit his beautiful garden in Olney to see the help such ordinary pursuits were to him. Spiritually though, he never really recovered.

In 1780, John Newton left for London and became a minister there ... but he remained in constant contact with Cowper. He poured himself into writing hundreds of poems, - one of them was a hundred pages long! Through those blackest of times, he never stopped trusting in Christ as his Saviour.

Then Mary Unwin suffered a physical and mental breakdown, and for four years William looked after her until she died. For the next four years, the horrible darkness would not go away, until he died on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1800. ... A sad life, - he was the fourth of the first four children ... and the first three died. Then his brother John was born, and two more who were born afterwards died. His mother died when he was only six ... and his dad died. His best friend died. He couldn't marry the woman he loved. ... He hated the schools he was sent to and he did not enjoy his work ... His life is one long sad story. Through many of it, though, he knew Jesus as his Saviour ... and it comes across clearly in so many of his hymns. ... On his grave stone are inscribed the words,

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

... In fact, those are the words Spurgeon had inscribed on his tombstone also.

John Newton conducted Cowper's funeral service, and during his sermon he said, "What a glorious surprise must it be to find himself released from all his chains in a moment and in the presence of the Lord Whom he loved and Whom he served".

The things in life often throw so many questions at us, and during those times even a Christian can ask, "Where is God? ... Where is He when I need Him *now*?!" ... And instead of 'the sunshine coming through', the clouds get darker until there is hardly any light at all. ... Listen to how Cowper had written,

I delivered thee when bound,  
 And, when bleeding, healed thy wound;  
 Sought thee wandering, set thee right,  
 Turned thy darkness into light.

“Mine is an unchanging love,  
 Higher than the heights above,  
 Deeper than the depths beneath,  
 Free and faithful, strong as death.

Thou shalt see My glory soon,  
 When the work of grace is done

Remember how Job pleaded to the Lord, **Job 10:1** My soul is weary of my life ... **18** Wherefore then hast thou brought me forth out of the womb? Oh that I had given up the ghost, and no eye had seen me! ... That is how the faithful Job battled in his life, **Job 19:8** He hath fenced up my way that I cannot pass, and he hath set darkness in my paths. **9** He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. ... He was surrounded by heartache and confusion ... “What have I done to deserve this?!”. ... His heart was torn apart, and his mind was turning over and over ... And yes, depression and such severe times of anguish and brokenness *do* come upon God’s people, and even Job, - like William Cowper, - knew its full force, ... and who very often gets the blame, **6** Know now that God hath overthrown me, and hath compassed me with his net. ... **11** He hath also kindled his wrath against me, and he counteth me unto him as one of his enemies.

We become all confused ... Deep-down, Job knew how good God is, - God had blessed him with abundance. God had blessed him with a loving family and great riches. God had held him up before Satan ... **1:8** there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God ... Job’s heartache and misery did not come as some kind of punishment from God for doing something in the past which was totally evil because God specifically said to Satan that Job ‘escheweth’, - he *shuns*, - evil, he turns away from it ... and when his seven sons and three daughters previously came together for days of feasting, - ‘family get-togethers’, - he prayed earnestly for them (Job 1:5) in case they sinned.

And previously, - on one of those occasions, - a messenger brought him the news that foreign invaders had ransacked his fields, killed the workers, and raided his livestock. No sooner had that message been delivered, but another messenger told of how lightning had come and struck all the sheep and the

shepherds ... But the *worst* news came when he heard about how a mighty storm collapsed the house with his sons and daughters inside ... and they were all killed ... It is enough 'to put you off your head'!

Being realistic, as Christians, are we supposed to be somehow detached from such powerful and strenuous hurt?! As Christians, how do we deal with depression ... with a breakdown ... with severe pressure? Is it something we shouldn't have? Is it because we don't have enough faith? ...

... Listen to King David, **Ps. 38:8** I am feeble and sore broken: I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart. **9** Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee. **10** My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me.

... Listen to Elijah, **I Kings 19:4** But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life

... Listen to Jonah, **4:3** Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

... Listen to Jeremiah, **20:14** Cursed be the day wherein I was born.

**Ps. 42:11** Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted Do you see a pattern? ... As low as they were, they remained convinced of the Lord's power and presence, - like William Cowper. Listen again to David, *hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.*

Depression is an illness which is not beyond the power of God. It is not a sin and it is not necessarily a demonic attack, but at the same time, it is an opportunity the devil can use ... and *yes*, William Cowper *struggled*. Another story tells of how he called for a carriage to come to his home in London. He climbed into it and instructed the driver to take him to one of the bridges in the city ... and it was his intention, when the driver had told him they had arrived, to disembark and throw himself into the Thames, to end it all. However, it was a very foggy night, and the driver could hardly see in front of him. After riding round the cobbled streets of London, the driver stopped at a certain location, and William jumped out, intending to throw himself off the bridge ... but, where was he? The driver had got lost and made a mistake ... and dropped William outside his own front door, from where he had been picked up. ... The driver made a mistake, but God did not ... and here is what Cowper wrote,

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
 The clouds ye so much dread  
 Are big with mercy and shall break  
 In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
 But trust Him for His grace;  
 Behind a frowning providence  
 He hides a smiling face.

He wrote from experience ... Cowper would be the first to tell you, though, it *is* a struggle for you feel as if you are not being faithful to God. It's as if the illness is caused by disobedience, and what follows is the feeling of failure, and then you find yourself withdrawing for everyone and everything ... and you feel as if you have let everybody down ... and you have let *God* down, ... and nobody understands, **Ps. 38:11** *My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off ... I'm all alone!*

So, even though Cowper wrote many great hymns, behind his hymns was a heart in anguish ... but through the keeping power of God, he kept on trusting ...

My God! how perfect are Thy ways!  
 But mine polluted are;  
 Sin twines itself about my praise,  
 And slides into my prayer.

When I would speak what Thou hast done  
 To save me from my sin;  
 I cannot make Thy mercies known  
 But self-applause creeps in.

Another hymn he wrote says,

The saints should never be dismayed,  
 Nor sink in hopeless fear;  
 For when they least expect His aid,  
 The Saviour will appear.

Wait for His seasonable aid,  
 And though it tarry, wait:  
 The promise may be long delayed,  
 But cannot come too late.

William Cowper had William Unwin, and Mary Unwin, and John Newton, - good friends ... but one-by-one they all had to leave him. Throughout his suffering though, - and he *did* realise it, - he always had the Lord. ... Now, I don't want to be 'light' or patronising, but he *had* the Lord, in the same way Job declared, in the midst of his heartache, confusion and pain, for he said, **Job 19:23** Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! **24** That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever! **25** For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: **26** And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: **27** Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me. ... And that is something no one or nothing can take away from you, - your hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. There may be times when you think you are on your own, but He has promised He will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5).

And deep down in William Cowper's heart, he knew it too. In one of the final hymns he wrote, he referred to those difficult times,

What though it [*Thy chastening rod*] pierced my fainting heart,

I bless Thine hand that caused the smart;

It taught my tears awhile to flow,

But saved me from eternal woe.

I love Thee therefore O my God,

And breathe towards Thy dear abode;

Where in Thy presence fully blest,

Thy chosen saints forever rest.

In life, many difficulties and burdens come along. Sometimes we deal with them and they never return. Sometimes they come in cycles. Other times, it is as if they will never go away ... And now I don't want to be patronising ... but we have a bigger and greater God than anything this world can throw at us.

God loved us in eternity before we ever came to be ... and He keeps on loving us knowing what we are and how we are. He loves us through our struggles and pain, - He hears our cries. His love for us is an eternal love ... it is enduring, and everlasting ... And nothing can ever take His love away from His people. Christian, you are His, and when this life is over He will take you to be with forever. Remember what Paul wrote, we have a Saviour Who *maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God* (Rom. 8:27). Amen.

*[For further reading, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/insanity-and-spiritual-songs-in-the-soul-of-a-saint>]*