

Conflicted Faith

**How to Grow in Faith
Through Positive Conflict With God**

GRAHAM SEEL

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Conflicted Faith: How to Grow in Faith Through Positive Conflict

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Published by Graham Seel, 2071 Bethany Ct, Concord CA 94518

United States ISBN: 9798725089691

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Printed in the United States of America

First edition – June 2021

Cover Illustration: Jacob's ladder and Jacob wrestling an angel
Photograph by Jose Luiz

Dedication

To my family:

my wife Margaret

my daughters Carol, Juliette and Joanna

my grandchildren

You have taught me, challenged me, encouraged me, and loved me.

Thank you!

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Conflicted Faith – An Introduction

I have been a Christian for 50 years. It has been full of joy, fulfillment, excitement, and hope. It has also been very hard at times. When I first felt God's hand on me, in a Christmas Eve service in 1970, I had no idea of the journey he was going to take me on. If I'd known the fears, doubts, sorrows, guilt, and generally mixed-up thoughts and emotions I'd experience, perhaps I would have resisted. Outwardly I've mostly seemed to have my act together. But inwardly, I have been almost continually conflicted in one way or another. Worst of all, it often seemed like I was the only one dealing with conflict in my faith.

Then, a couple of years ago, I met a kindred spirit. Actually, I didn't so much meet him as read him. This person who seemed to understand my conflicts was a 17th century English poet, lawyer, politician, and minister called John Donne. Here, at last, was someone who admitted his spiritual life was messy, just like mine. His career path was all over the place, like mine. He was torn between extremes, seemingly lurching from one challenge to another. Passionate and bold, scared of what others might think of him, he nevertheless couldn't keep quiet about his conflicted faith.

Struggling with God

The Biblical character Jacob was a liar and cheat, so full of ambition that he stole his brother's birthright and then his paternal blessing. Even then, he wasn't satisfied with the blessing his father Isaac should have given to brother Esau. When he had an encounter with the angel of the Lord, he insisted that he wouldn't stop until the angel had given him another blessing "*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*" (see Genesis 32:22-32).

Jacob's battle with the angel of God is a metaphor (whether or not it also happened literally is neither here nor there). The psalms, especially of David, the man after God's own heart, are full of struggles with God. We find

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arguments, doubt, fear, anger, depression, and countless other emotions, all aimed at God. They are also full of praise, wonder, joy, and adoration. Most of the time, it is the negative emotions that come first. Then David and the other psalm writers work through the pain and anguish and discover that God has been there all the time, in their midst.

When we first become Christians, we expect everything to be easier, better, more fulfilling. It usually doesn't take long to discover that life has become harder and messier in many ways. After all, previously, we only had to worry about ourselves. We could do things our way, and our priorities and values were what they were, and we were satisfied with them. Our standard of comparison was other people, and there was always somebody worse than us. But now, as followers of Jesus, we have a new standard, the character of the Son of God himself. We have a whole new set of values and expectations that often conflict badly with our self-centered way of living.

When we start out, we think believing, trusting, and obedience are simple. But as we learn more about God and ourselves, we realize the opposite is true. We're not sure what to believe, especially since everyone seems to have different ideas. Our insecure hearts refuse to trust God. We fear suffering, pain, and death. We mourn for lost people, places, and even things. We wage constant internal war between the character of Christ and our sinful nature. In some ways, perhaps because our expectations have become so much higher, we are more dissatisfied than we ever were before.

At the same time, we know that we are loved beyond anything we ever imagined possible. We know that we are valued and given eternal importance. We see hope for the future, even the distant future beyond our death. From time to time, we experience great joy. And we wouldn't abandon any of this to return to our lives before Jesus.

Is Conflicted Faith Inevitable?

But what about faith: isn't it supposed to be sure and firm, confident and certain? Faith is "*confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*" (Hebrews 11:1) The trouble is that far too much of the time, my faith seems to be anything but confident or assured. How about you?

Conflict isn't necessarily bad. Let that settle a bit. Conflict isn't always destructive; sometimes it can be the only constructive option. You know how things go when you and your spouse or parent or child brush things under the carpet to avoid a confrontation? What is needed is constructive, kind, gentle conflict, taken to a resolution.

In 50 years as a Christian, I've learned that for my faith to grow, for me to mature, I need conflict. In some ways, I need to struggle with God. Recall

how Jacob's name was changed, as the angel of the Lord tells him: "*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.*" (Genesis 32:28). This new name, which will become the name of the entire people of God, probably means something like "he struggles with God." In other words, it is because of Jacob's conflict with God, not despite it, that he became Israel, the ancestor of the very aptly named chosen people – those who struggle with God.

If God used conflict to shape his people, then we can be sure he uses conflict to shape the church, the new Israel. And if conflict shapes the church, then surely it shapes your faith and mine, as members by faith in the Body of Christ.

Introducing Our Tour Guide

So what about my kindred spirit, John Donne. My first encounter with him was in choral singing – Benjamin Britten's setting of "At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow." It is the custom in the Cantare Con Vivo chamber ensemble for singers to introduce songs, and this one fell to me. So I researched it (since it didn't make a whole lot of sense) and its author and started to get intrigued. Then, a couple of weeks later, while I was mentoring a young Christian man, another of John Donne's poems opened up some fascinating conversation. I read more and saw that in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne, many of the questions and conflicts I experienced were raised in ways I could never have done.

I won't give a full biography. If you are interested, you can start with the Wikipedia article on him, or the Library of Congress biography, and follow references to your heart's content. But there are a few things you should know.

John Donne (pronounced "Dun") was born in 1572 into a secretly Catholic family. (Throughout this book, we'll address John Donne as JD for brevity). This was the time of Elizabeth I, who continued her father Henry VIII's insistence on outlawing Roman Catholicism. JD died in 1631, as an Anglican priest who was close to being invested as a bishop. For comparison, Shakespeare lived entirely within JD's life span, from 1585 to 1613. JD was recognized early as a brilliant poet, primarily writing love poetry, sometimes quite risqué. He quickly discovered the sonnet form that was popularized by the school of Petrarch in Renaissance Italy. We'll touch on the sonnet in a moment to show why it was so well suited to JD's purposes.

JD's life was very much one of ups and downs. He lost his father at age four and two sisters by the time he was six. He studied at Oxford and Cambridge but couldn't get a degree without forswearing his Catholicism.

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By the time he was 21, his brother had died of bubonic plague in Newgate Prison, where he had been imprisoned for harboring a Catholic priest. Illness would bother JD throughout his life, both in his own body and also in family losses. But this was normal for his time – imagine Covid-19 raging unchecked, with no understanding of precautions, minimal treatment options, and not the slightest hope of a vaccine. This gives you a sense of the bubonic plague that spread throughout England in the early 1600s.

JD became private secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal (which was a much bigger job than it sounds!) He qualified as a lawyer, traveled extensively, learned several languages, and gradually moved from Catholic to Anglican faith. He was known as a high-liver, squandering his money on women, drink, and entertainment. He survived quite well this way, until he fell in love with, and secretly married, Anne More, who was the 16-year-old daughter of his boss's noble friend. He lost his job and spent time in Fleet prison. As he wrote after leaving jail: "John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-done."

Anne gave birth to 12 children in 16 years, of whom five died very young, and the last birth killed Anne herself. JD mourned her profoundly and came close to suicide in his despair. Nevertheless, he resumed his career, became a rather nondescript Member of Parliament, and then at King James I's encouragement, he became a priest in the Church of England. His poetry continued, winning him generous patrons. Unlike his other careers – diplomat, MP, lawyer – his clerical career blossomed. He became Dean of St. Paul's and was slated to become a bishop right before his final illness and death.

The Holy Sonnets

Throughout his life, JD wrote 19 spiritual sonnets that have been collected together as the "Holy Sonnets." Most were probably written during his marriage to Anne, though a few were later. He didn't write any of them for publication, nor were they intended to get him patrons. Unlike any of his other writings, these were personal expressions of his wavering faith. He poured all of his genius into expressing his Jacob-like struggles with God. His literary inventiveness came into play, with bold and sometimes extreme imagery that spoke the unspeakable and expressed the inexpressible.

As I studied these sonnets, I became enthralled by their power to speak what I hadn't dared or known how to speak to other people. In conjunction with extensive biblical references, this book uses the sonnets as a guide to how to handle a variety of types of conflict in faith. Some will be familiar to you, and some may not. But I believe you will relate to many of them and will see that these are common conflicts to us all. Unfortunately, we rarely

seem able to discuss them with other believers. I pray that you will be empowered to present them to God, receive his grace, and share them with others.

Sonnets and Chapters

A sonnet is highly structured, with very strict rules. There are several kinds of sonnet and JD tends to mix them up. Different authors had slightly different rhyme schemes, for example, and JD used whatever worked best for his purpose. However, each sonnet consists of exactly 14 lines of iambic pentameter (ten syllables in a de-da-de-da pattern), with a strict rhyme scheme. Typically it breaks down into 3 four-line stanzas and a two-line conclusion, though sometimes it breaks down as octet (eight lines) and sestet (six lines). We'll touch on a couple more features during the book when relevant.

Just as JD's sonnets stand alone, even though they build upon one another, so the chapters in this book form complete examinations of one of the questions we face in our life of faith. I encourage you to take your time. This is not intended to be a quick read. CH Spurgeon once complained that his students were reading many books, but really absorbing none of them. "Master those books you have. Read them thoroughly. Bathe in them until they saturate you. Read and re-read them...digest them...a student will find that his mental constitution is more affected by one book thoroughly mastered than by 20 books he has merely skimmed."

Each chapter is written around one of the 19 sonnets, and draws on the main theme or conflict it deals with. I introduce the topic, using stories, Scriptures and personal observations. We read the sonnet, followed by my somewhat loose paraphrase, and then work through the sonnet. But this is not an academic exercise. Rather we let the sonnet inspire our own thoughts of how conflicts work themselves out in our own lives. We refer to Scripture often as a higher authority, and also to explain the many biblical analogies JD uses in his poetry.

We can then draw some conclusions and point to the hope of God's promises that, like Jacob, we may receive a blessing after the conflict is over. There are questions intended for you or, even better a study group, to work through. They are not trivial "yes or no" questions, but are intended to encourage you think more deeply and research more fully until God has done with you what he wants through these conflicts. Each chapter ends with a prayer, meditation or poem from another source.

Will you join me on this journey, with John Donne as our tour guide?

Heart Overrules Head

As a young man, James was very bright, and school learning came easily. He graduated from college summa cum laude, went to Law School, and passed the California Bar on the first attempt. At the same time, he took on church leadership positions and was soon highly influential at his home church as a teacher, leader, and occasional preacher. James knew so much about the Bible, theology, and the arts. As a Bible teacher, he knew how to share his knowledge, bringing the Bible to life and applying it to other people's lives.

But there was a problem that most people never suspected. He had all the right answers for other people, but too much of the time his answers didn't ring true for himself! In his head, he knew why God had made people, how he loved them and equipped them, and how he was leading them to build his Kingdom. On a personal level, in his heart, he wasn't so sure. Was this really true? Was it true for him?

Our head – our intellect, belief system, and knowledge, will store all sorts of useful learning, but it remains theoretical until it is put to use. Our heart – our feelings, emotions, trusted beliefs, instincts – often depends on actual experience.

When Head and Heart Disagree

The story of my friend James could have been about John Donne. He was very intelligent, widely read, knowledgeable about Catholic spirituality, and Calvinist theology. Even the King urged him to become an Anglican priest. Like many people with powerful intellects, he knew the theory inside out but wasn't quite so good at personal application. JD had grown up Catholic (which was illegal in 17th century England) and adopted the Church of England and its (mostly) Calvinist theology. Whether this was by

Heart Overrules Head

conviction or political expediency isn't entirely clear. But it certainly created confusion for him! His head had aligned itself with Puritan theology, but was his heart still in his Catholic home?

When he wrote most of the Holy Sonnets, he had no interest in being a lowly parish priest. His heart was set on a high diplomatic position, but no post opened up for him no matter what he did. He saw others promoted ahead of him and struggled with self-esteem and bitterness.

There is a kind of nervous anxiety about JD's job hunting, letter writing, and poetry at this time. You may be able to relate – I know I can. He was so dependent on his mind, his extraordinary debating skills, and his writing skills that he rather left his emotions behind.

Original

AS due by many titles I resigne
My selfe to thee, O God, first I was made
By thee, and for thee, and when I was decay'd
Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine;
I am thy sonne, made with thy selfe to shine,
Thy servant, whose paines thou hast still repaid,
Thy sheepe, thine Image, and, till I betray'd
My selfe, a temple of thy Spirit divine;
Why doth the devill then usurpe on mee?
Why doth he steale, nay ravish that's thy right?
Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,
Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt'not chuse me,
And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.

Paraphrase

Because of the titles you have given, I re-commit
Myself to You, O God; in the beginning I was made
By you and for you, and when I let all that go to ruin
Your blood bought back what you owned at first;
I am your son, made to shine with and for you;
Your servant, whose debts you even repaid;
Your sheep, made in your image, and until I betrayed
Myself, I was a temple of the Holy Spirit;
Why then does the devil attack me?
Why does he steal and ravage what is rightfully Yours?
Unless You rise up and fight for what is Yours,
Oh, I will quickly despair when I see

That You love humankind much, but won't choose me
Since Satan hates me but doesn't want to lose me.

His mind worked out a series of truths, and then his heart called his mind a liar. Here's how he expressed it in one of his earliest Holy Sonnets:

I Know It In My Head

As due by many titles I resigne My selfe to thee, O God,

JD wants to submit or be resigned to God. When we think about how God has blessed us, the titles by which we have been called, the grace that has been poured out on us, and that God, in fact, owns us, how can we not surrender? “Resign” is an interesting word. It has a bit of a negative connotation in the way we usually use it. I prefer to read it as “re-sign” – to put our signature once more to God’s covenant promises to us! But when our head tells us all this, will our hearts follow suit? It is one thing to sign a contract, but not every contract is kept. Thousands of litigation attorneys are very grateful!

So why is it so hard to surrender? Is it pride? I won’t hand myself over to someone else – even God – because I need to be in charge. Is it fear? When I give myself up to God, I don’t know what will happen, how I’ll manage, how much pain I may have to go through. Is it anger? Why should I submit to the God who has let me suffer so much? Perhaps it is control? I want to be in control of my own life, rather than have someone else control me. Whatever it is, surrender seems to be one of the hardest things to do.

*first I was made
By thee, and for thee*

Everything starts with our understanding that we only exist because God chose to make us. Even though God used “natural” biological and perhaps even evolutionary methods, they are all his doing, and his design and plan are evident. We know our uniqueness and (on good days) our value. In theory, we also know that God designed us for his purpose and made us for him. In theory: but the practice doesn’t always look like that. We’ll explore this theme further in “Are We More Highly Evolved Than Apes?”

and when I was decay'd

In fact, there are times in our lives when we depart so far from God’s intent for us that we seem to have destroyed the whole image of God that is supposed to be in us. Think of a nice Fuji apple (a favorite in my household) – shiny, juicy, crisp, and tasty. It is made to be eaten and enjoyed and to

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provide nourishment as well. But if it just sits in the bowl, it gets softer, the sheen disappears, the flavor is compromised, and, eventually, it rots. It has decayed. Since it doesn't have free will, it isn't an apple's fault if we don't eat it. But sometimes, we prevent God from using us for what he intended for us. For JD, this causes a process similar to that of the uneaten apple – we are “decay'd”.

Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine

There is no way back for a rotten apple. But for us, by the grace of God, there is! No matter how much we have wasted our time in superficial things, no matter how selfish and self-centered we have been, God has repurchased us with the blood of Christ. The great paradox JD expresses here is that God buys back what he already owned! We are his by right, yet we have run away, and He has to take radical action to get us back – so extreme that it cost the life of his Son, Jesus.

The prophet Hosea experienced a little of the pain that this must have caused God. He is told to marry a prostitute by the name of Gomer. After bearing a couple of children, Gomer then leaves him and goes back to her old immoral lifestyle. Eventually, she falls so low that she ends up in slavery. Hosea is then told by God to find her and buy her back, even though she was once his wife, and make her his wife once more. God uses Hosea's experience as a symbol of God's relationship with his own bride, Israel. We read about this in Hosea chapters 1 and 3. In the Old Testament, this is a picture of what God has done for his people.

I am thy sonne, made with thy selfe to shine,

It sometimes pays to reflect upon the different ways in which God has lifted us, with titles and descriptions that are far beyond anything we deserve. JD does this with five excellent Biblical illustrations of how God sees us.

First, he sees us as God's children – adopted with delight because of Jesus Christ (not because there is anything special about us!) “*God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*” (Eph 1:5 NLT) How amazing is that? I've talked to people who grew up with adoptive parents, and often they'll say they're better off than me because their parents chose them, while mine didn't get too much choice once they conceived! They have a point. The idea that God made this decision to bring us into his family is quite extraordinary. Like Hosea bringing Gomer back, this was a deliberate and very costly act by God.

JD makes a pun around the sound of “son” (sometimes he just can't help himself) He suggests that God adopted him not only to have a bigger family

but to share God's glory – shining like the “sun”. The Bible is full of references to God shining. It also has several commands to us to shine (like Matthew 5:6 “*let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*”). Later on, Matthew feeds JD's pun even more: “*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*” (Matthew 13:43).

Thy servant,

We are adopted children of God, but we're also servants. Most of us don't relish this title. For some, with an ancestral history of slavery, it is deeply abhorrent. For others of us, we don't like to serve – we'd prefer to be served. But then we remember the most excellent Servant of all: the one who said, “*even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*” (Matthew 20:28). He has called us friends rather than servants (John 15:15), but still, our greatest calling is to be “*servants of the Most High God*” (Acts 16:17).

Serving is what we were made for – this is what it means to be “made by thee, and for thee” (lines 2-3) – made by God to serve God. Paradoxically, this is what fulfills us, because this is what allows us to depend on, and be guided by, the God who designed us, values us, and has the perfect plans for us!

whose paines thou hast still repaid,

Servants (as against slaves) generally receive rewards for their labor (their “paines”). Sometimes it may be as little as board and lodging. Sometimes they might receive a good salary. But never is the reward so great as to include deliverance from death, provision of everything needed for life, and ultimately life in glory with the Son of God Himself! We serve the perfect Master, who protects, values, equips, and loves us. Our little work in the service of God has been already so amply repaid that we cannot imagine serving any other master.

My wife works for a building contractor who desperately needs her book-keeping, HR, compliance, and administrative gifts, as well as her amazing common sense. Her reward started with payment in advance. In a barter system, her boss renewed our kitchen, built out our garage, and painted inside and outside the house. He did all this to ensure her continuing service to him – paying in advance for the “paines” she would endure for him (and yes, at times, it gets quite painful!). But sooner or later, she works enough to have caught up with the work he has done, and he looks for more ways to get her back into his “debt”. With God, we will always be in debt, and no amount of

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service will ever repay God – he has rewarded us in advance far more than could ever possibly be earned. This is grace!

Thy sheep,

As well as adopted children and servants, the Bible also describes us as sheep, a popular image in both Old and New Testaments. Yet, it is perhaps not so popular for us. Phillip Keller describes sheep as stubborn, smelly, and stupid (in the beautiful devotional commentary “A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23”). This is not how we’d like to think of ourselves (however apt these adjectives might be!)

But sheep also have a shepherd. A good shepherd loves his sheep, looks for the best pastures for them, heals them, leads them, disciplines them gently, and generally provides everything they need. The most important thing for any sheep is the quality of its shepherd. We have the only perfect Shepherd, prophesied throughout Scripture through men like David, and fulfilled entirely in Jesus Christ. With a shepherd like him, this is a title we can carry with pride and joy.

thine Image

In the sonnet “Thou hast made me”, JD dwells more on the idea of our being made in the very image of God. See “Decaying Creation” for a discussion. All we need to note for now is that we can think of this as a summary of all the other titles. It is the basis for our extraordinary value in God’s eyes.

and, till I betray’d

My selfe,

The problem with our having such great value is that we have such a long way to fall. When we sin, we not only disobey God, but we also betray the image of God he created in us. When we sin, we stop being what God made us to be. When we rebel against God, the betrayal is not just of him but also our potential selves.

a temple of thy Spirit divine;

Even so, we cannot forget that if we are in relationship with God, he has chosen not just to redeem us but to make us the home of his Spirit. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them of the seriousness of sin against their bodies by saying: “*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*” (1 Cor 6:19). A temple is the dwelling place of God just as in the Old Testament the Jews saw God as, in a sense, living in the Temple in Jerusalem. As believers, we

have taken over that role – we are the place where God’s Spirit dwells, where people should be able to see God clearly. What a privilege! What an honor! How he must love us!

But The Heart Wins!

God has given us so many great reassurances. He has described us in so many evocative ways to show us how much he loves and values us. The problem is that while we may know all this in our heads, our hearts can be slow to catch up. For some, the heart never gets there – knowledge does not become relationship. This is where high intelligence can be a curse. For decades, my friend James (name changed) fooled everyone (and himself) with his outstanding Bible and religious knowledge. It seemed like he knew everything. But he didn’t have an intimate relationship with the God he thought he knew so well. It was like a woman who, having made an in-depth study of a man, falls in love with the idea of him, devotes her life to following and learning about him, and yet has never met him. That’s not the basis for a marriage. Nor is it the basis for a relationship with God.

JD knows the theory as well as anyone but, in practice, he is dealing with disappointment, depression, and discouragement. He isn’t “feeling it”. I’ve been there – perhaps we all have at one time or another. We feel dry, empty, and disillusioned. The wrong team is winning our internal battles.

Why doth the devill then usurpe on mee?

One of the biggest challenges of these dry, empty times is that we feel defenseless against temptation. It is as though God has just given us up to the forces of evil, variously called the devil, Satan, the enemy, or the accuser.

It doesn’t make sense! God owns us, chooses us, honors us, and glorifies us. We are his, and nobody else has any rights over us.

Why doth he steale, nay ravish that’s thy right?

It isn’t as though Satan just sneaks in while God isn’t looking or waits for us to slip quietly into his hands. This attack is active. It is intrusive. JD uses a metaphor that we would not use today, the metaphor of spiritual rape. This is a highly offensive and emotional analogy for anyone who has experienced any kind of sexual abuse. Even in JD’s time, this was a shockingly violent analogy. What he’s trying to say is that this invasion of Satan’s is horribly offensive to God’s rights and his intimate relationship with us – his people. How dare Satan steal and ravish God’s own possession? Do we sometimes also wonder why God allows this? After all, we know he could stop it at any time. Why does he allow Satan to get in and take over our lives?

Heart Overrules Head

Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,

While in theory, we're able to resist temptation, so often we feel helpless to do so. We long for God to stand up for us and to defend his precious possession. We start to plead with God, asking for him to intervene – if not for our sakes, then for his reputation! We're a bit like Joshua, emotionally blackmailing God by saying that if he destroys all of Israel, then the nations around will say that he wasn't able to deliver them into the Promised Land. His Name would no longer be revered! (See Joshua 7, especially verses 7-9).

*Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt'not chuse me,*

We are most likely to despair when there is a disconnect between what we believe in theory and what we experience in everyday living. We know the general truth that God loves the people he has made. The Bible also teaches that he chooses some to be saved, and others not. For example, see Matthew 24:30 “*And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.*” More specifically, Jesus states this through the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

We know God's love, grace, and mercy in principle. But the big question is, “Am I included in God's grace?”

And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.

Our confusion and fear can get us to the point of doubting God's wisdom. JD sees in this an extraordinary paradox. God, who loves humankind, seems to have deserted me. Satan, who apparently hates me, is the one who won't let go of me! Do we really belong to God? Or has Satan taken us captive again?

If we spend long in this conflicted state, we can become very discouraged, fearful, and depressed. But we need to remember that this feeling isn't unique to us. JD felt it 400 years ago, and biblical writers felt it thousands of years before him. Millions are right there with us today. We are not alone!

Heart Rules Over Head

The conflict between head and heart is real. The two are rarely well synchronized. Sometimes our head gets ahead – we know things intellectually but haven't really experienced or felt them. At other times our heart leads – we have emotional experiences that we simply don't understand mentally.

The good news is that this is all within God's plan. Generally speaking, the biblical pattern is head first, heart second. In Romans 12:2, Paul urges us, "*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" We start out wanting to be like the rest of the world, enjoying the same things, having the same values and priorities as those around us. But God's plan is to change us. By the power of his Spirit, he will renew our minds, causing a transformation in us. From there he will reveal to us the perfection of his will, and give us the ability to test it (live it out), and see how very good it is. The renewing of our mind leads to the changing of our heart.

When our head knowledge doesn't seem to have seeped down to our heart, it is good to pray Romans 12:2. We thank God for the renewal that is going on in our minds, and ask him to follow through on the promise of the second half of the verse so that in our transformation we can be fully conformed to his will for us.

It is appropriate, it is even God's will, for us to plead with him to change our minds and our hearts. When Jesus invites us to ask, seek and knock (Matthew 7:7), each verb is accompanied by a promise (you will receive, you will find, it will be opened to you). Through prayer, daily experience, suffering and blessing our hearts will be transformed as well as our minds.

Reflection

1. Matthew 7:7 contains three promises. But do you really expect to receive when you ask, to find when you seek, and to see open doors when you knock?
2. Matthew 13:43 says: "*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.*" Do you see this as applying to you? What does this mean to you?
3. We are created in the image of God, according to Genesis 1:27. Clearly this doesn't mean that we are God, or that we're identical to him. Theologians talk about communicable and incommunicable attributes of God. We're obviously not infinite, or eternal, or omnipotent. These are incommunicable attributes. What attributes of God do you think he communicated to us in making us in his image? Think about the character of Jesus, who set aside the attributes unique to deity and showed us what the communicable attributes look like when perfectly lived out!
4. Have you ever been on a sheep farm and watched the shepherd working with his sheep? When the Bible describes us as sheep

Heart Overrides Head

and God as the shepherd are you honored or insulted? Look for example at Matthew 18:12-14.

5. What does it mean to be a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19)? How should this impact your behavior, attitudes, relationships and priorities?
6. Do you ever feel a disconnect between your head knowledge and your heart's experience? Which do you trust? How can you ask God to reconcile head and heart?

Poem

My mind is sense, it keeps me safe.
My heart is passion, it beats it breaks.
My mind and heart are always challenged
My heart and mind are never balanced.

My heart wants love, my mind needs reason.
Until, that is, there was a turn in season.

Now my mind yearns for adoration
But now my heart rejects affection
Now my mind believes in justice and truth
But now my heart only sees the end of youth
Finally, my mind sees the good
But now my heart is misunderstood.
My mind and heart never agree
My heart and mind will never see.

My mind is sense, it keeps me safe.
My heart is passion it beats and breaks.

(Kasen Raines, <https://powerpoetry.org/poems/heart-vs-mind> September 2014)