
THE ENGLISH PURITANS AND SPIRITUAL DESERTION: A PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE ON THE PLACE OF SPIRITUAL DRYNESS IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE



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Abstract: Spiritual depression is a term originally employed by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones to describe the phenomenon of Christians experiencing a state of the soul that is marked by an unusually potent and longstanding sense of pessimism, inadequacy, despondency, and lack of activity within (but not limited to) one's relationship with God for what appears to be no discernable cause. Although St. John of the Cross' The Dark Night of the Soul is arguably the most historically influential work on the subject, the English Puritans also developed a robust perspective of their own—one built upon the principles of the Reformation and a solidly Protestant perspective of the spiritual life. The Puritan concept of spiritual desertion is most lucidly articulated in a lesser-known work by Joseph Symonds titled, The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul—a rich and invaluable resource for contemporary pastoral care.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' writings on spiritual depression represent a lucid contemporary Evangelical articulation of a topic that has been treated by many classical works throughout the history of the Church: spiritual desolation. Lloyd-Jones described "spiritual depression" as a phenomenon present among many Christians, causing them to give the impression that they are unhappy, cast down, and in possession of a disquieted soul.¹ He cited Psalm 42 as the paradigmatic account of spiritual depression, which bore witness to a certain unhappiness of the soul which was characterized by tears, a downcast and disturbed inward disposition, and a yearning for God that was frustrated by a disheartening impression of God's neglect.²

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (London: Pickering and Inglis LTD, 1965), 10.

² Ibid., 9.

How spiritual depression often relates to the Christian life is captured by the common question: "I do not seem to experience the presence of God like I used to. I am an active member of my congregation and I read Scripture and pray regularly but these things do not seem to draw me closer to God anymore. Is there something wrong with me?" While this may seem to be primarily an existential question, it is in fact a theological question. For example, if one were to believe that spiritual depression is a form of God's abandonment in response to sin, one's theology must account for the notion that God is prone to withdraw his love whenever his children disobey Him.³

When one considers the topic of spiritual depression in view of the spiritual classics written throughout the history of the Christian Church, it is difficult to avoid St. John of the Cross' seminal works, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Indeed, because of the massive amount of scholarship that grew out of St. John of the Cross' extraordinary work, it is difficult not to abandon the search altogether for other historical Christian perspectives on spiritual depression. The purpose of this present manuscript, therefore, is to give voice to another perspective—specifically, one from a lesser-known divine who was part of a rich spiritual tradition closer to Evangelicalism—English Puritan Joseph Symonds. In the pages that follow, Symonds' work, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, will be examined in its own right, in light of its historical context (i.e., English Puritanism), and in view of related material written by other English Puritan authors.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ENGLISH PURITANISM

J.I. Packer defined English Puritanism as "that movement in 16th and 17th century England which sought further reformation and renewal in the Church of England than the Elizabethan settlement allowed."⁴ Being historically located soon after the Protestant Reformation, one could describe English Puritanism as a bridge between medieval Christianity and modern Protestant Christianity. The Puritan hero bore no resemblance to the questing knight of medieval chivalry, who left the confines of everyday life to pursue extraordinary feats in the name of honor, passionate love, courage, and devotion to one's master.⁵ Rather, Puritanism challenged every man to become a Christian hero within the context of his own everyday domestic and commercial dealings. Following the lines of the Reformers, the Puritans sought to expound theologically and fully live out the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Puritan teaching gave a new dignity to marriage and

³ Archibald Hart, *Counseling the Depressed* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1987), 28.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 35.

⁵ Leon Gautier, *Chivalry* (Hills, MN: Crescent Publishing, 1989), 3.

employment, encouraging common people to see in the least circumstance of their lives an opportunity for Christian service.⁶

The Christianity of the Middle Ages had preached the base and demoralizing surrender of the individual—the surrender of his understanding to the Church, of his conscience to the priest, and of his will to the prince. The policy of Calvin, which the Puritans extended and applied, was a vigorous effort to produce a positive education of the individual soul. It was chiefly an attempt to combine individual and equal freedom with strict, self-imposed law; to found human society upon the common endeavor to pursue moral perfection.⁷ John Wycliffe, though predating the movement by more than two centuries, is considered by many to be one of its chief exemplars. Like those after him, Wycliffe declared the Bible to be the supreme and sole standard of truth and law, affirmed a direct relation between God and man through Christ, denied the possibility of one meriting anything by good works, and swept away the whole system of a mediating and sacrificing priesthood, the foundation on which the medieval Church was based.⁸

Puritan Spirituality

The Puritan understanding and experience of union and communion with God was marked by a depth and richness comparable to the great religious orders of their Roman Catholic counterparts. John Owen described spiritual acts of communion as “[an] intense fixation of the mind, by contemplation on God in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration and delight. . . . They do not ravish the soul into irrational ecstasy. Rather they fill it in all its faculties with overwhelming joy in the Divine Grace revealed in Christ.”⁹ That mystical union with God which the Puritans both experienced and wrote about was to them not only the goal of the Christian life—it was also the beginning. They viewed the reality of the Christian’s union with God as the fruit of justification; it may indeed be realized more and more as time goes on, but the believer strives for deeper union within the context of a present union already accessible. For the Puritan, the “three ways” are not so much purgation, illumination, and union, but justification, sanctification, and glorification.¹⁰

⁶ N.H. Keeble, “Puritan Spirituality,” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon Wakefield (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983), 325.

⁷ James Heron, *A Short History of Puritanism: A Handbook for Guilds and Bible Classes* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 6.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ John Owen, *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (London: Nathanael Ponder, 1682), 136.

¹⁰ Ibid., 102.

1. The Puritans on Conversion and Assurance

Since justification marked the beginning of the spiritual life, it is not surprising to discover how dominant the topic of conversion was to Puritan spirituality. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* provides a helpful framework to exposit the Puritans' approach to conversion. Drawing from Pilgrim's story, Packer offers two keen observations. First, as conversion appears at the story's opening chapter, it represents the beginning of a lifelong journey that has as its destination the promised Celestial City. Second, conversion is a "complex, often long-drawn-out process that advances by stages from conviction of sin and need as its beginning to assurance of salvation as its climax. It involves learning the key gospel truths, internalizing them in a life-shaping way, and being so changed at heart that revulsion at sin, desire for God, love for Christ and eager hope of being with him in heaven become basic to one's being."¹¹

The Puritan extended the concept of conversion to cover the whole process of being effectually called, a process which included not only the initial moment when an individual decided to follow Christ, but also God's salvific intention that persisted from the past,¹² as well as His sustaining grace which continues the process of conversion until God gives assurance that it is complete.¹³ As such, they saw one's justification and sanctification as fluid processes; although they could be logically distinguished from each other, they were not to be divided into separate, mutually-exclusive phenomena. This approach both starkly contrasts and stands to correct the exclusive emphasis placed on the initial moment of decision seemingly common among many evangelistic methods employed today. Another point of contrast may be found in the Puritan approach to salvific assurance in the Christian life. While assurance is commonly expected immediately after the point of decision in our present context, the Puritans saw assurance as something which was not to be expected until much later in the conversion process.

¹¹ J.I. Packer, *The Pilgrim's Principles: John Bunyan Revisited* (London: St. Antholin's Lectureship Charity Lecture, 1999), 15.

¹² The reformed doctrine of the covenant of redemption (i.e., the eternal agreement of each person of the Trinity to assume a particular role in the plan of salvation for humankind) was frequently mentioned in Puritan literature as a comfort to troubled souls. Puritan divines would remind their parishioners that because God's intention to save existed from eternity past, He is not so fickle as to change His mind in light of past sin. A central component to the covenant of redemption is the covenant between God the Father and Christ—that is, the will of the Father giving the Son to be the Head and Redeemer of the elect and the will of the Son presenting himself as a willing Sponsor or Mediator for them. While Scripture does not explicitly mention this covenant, it can be inferred from a number of passages including: Hebrews 13:20, Titus 1:2, Luke 22:29, and John 10:18.

¹³ Packer, *The Pilgrim's Principles: John Bunyan Revisited*, 17.

Although they believed that some measure of assurance was available at the outset, full assurance was not normally enjoyed except by those who have first labored for it and sought after it, serving God faithfully and patiently for some time without it. It was an aspect of faith which normally appeared only when faith had reached a high degree of development, far beyond its minimal saving exercise.¹⁴ Therefore, full assurance was not something to which every believer was entitled, but a special gift of grace worthy of much striving.

Assurance comes in as a reward of faith. . . . A man's faith must fight first, and have a conquest, and then assurance is the crown, the triumph of faith . . . and what tries faith more than temptation, and fears, and doubts, and reasonings against a man's own estate? That triumphing assurance, Rom. 8:37, 39 . . . comes after a trial, as none are crowned till they have striven.¹⁵

Implicit to this view of assurance is the expectation of many forms of inward and outward desolation throughout the Christian life, as illustrated by the many obstacles Christian faced throughout his journey to the Celestial City. As such, the Puritan pastor often encouraged his people to come to him and disclose the state of their hearts so that counsel and advice could be given. In this way, he built up an amazing stock of knowledge not only of God's dealings with His children but also of the Christian's experience of these dealings.¹⁶ Joseph Symonds' *Case and Cure of the Deserted Soul* is just one of many fine examples of such knowledge preserved and published.

Symonds' *Case and Cure of the Deserted Soul* belongs to a larger category of Puritan books written with the intention of comforting (i.e., strengthening and encouraging) Christians who were experiencing different forms of desolation; these are called paraenetic books.¹⁷ This category not only includes books on spiritual desertion, but also countless volumes covering themes such as the love of God, the work of Christ, the renewing ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the covenant of grace—that commitment to save made by all three Persons of the Trinity.¹⁸ Given the expectation that salvific assurance was not to be expected until later in the spiritual journey, it is of no surprise that topics concerning the comforting of distressed souls so dominated Puritan devotional literature.

¹⁴ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 181–182.

¹⁵ Cited in Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 182 from Thomas Goodwin's *Works*, ed. J. Miller (London: James Nichol, 1861), 8:346.

¹⁶ G.A. Hemming, "The Puritan's Dealings with Troubled Souls," in *Puritan Papers*, ed. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, 2000), 1:31.

¹⁷ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 41.

¹⁸ Ibid.

2. The Puritans and Spiritual Desolation

Being keen on the plight of the common Christian, the Puritans addressed the many forms of desolation experienced by troubled parishioners, including spiritual aridity, melancholy, and physical suffering. The Puritans realized that the child of God did not walk in a state of unbroken joy, that there came times when Christians lost sense of God's presence and favor. Such a believer may complain that he had an indefinable sense that all is not well with him spiritually; he might have lost all his joy; he might have fallen back into some obvious sin which he thought he had put behind him forever; he might have lost his assurance of salvation; he might even have found assurance of damnation. He might be finding in his heart doubtings of the gospel, of the goodness of God, of the very existence of God.¹⁹

Perhaps because of their strong belief in the total corruption of the heart,²⁰ Puritan pastors were not taken aback by what they heard from their counselees, regardless of how atrocious or vile these matters might have been. For example, Richard Sibbes wrote:

Some again are haunted with hideous representations to their fantasies, and with vile and unworthy thoughts of God, of Christ, of the word, etc. . . . which as busy flies disquiet and molest their peace; these are cast in like wild-fire by Satan, as may be discerned by the 1) strangeness, 2) strength and violence, 3) horribleness of them even unto nature corrupt.²¹

After receiving an honest and stark discourse of the parishioner's troubled soul, the puritan pastor would then carefully discern the nature of the parishioner's desolation before dispensing any counsel. As evidenced by the passage above, one plausible explanation for a troubled soul was the direct work of Satan. However, not all problems were diagnosed as spiritual in nature. Melancholy (i.e., depression) was recognized as a condition with possibly both physical and spiritual causes. Richard Baxter, himself a sufferer of melancholia, concluded that this condition was "physical as well as spiritual and thus should be treated by 'physick' as well as by faith."²² As such, recorded in his writings are five pages of medications prescribed to relieve depression. Nevertheless, Baxter also saw the necessity for pastoral and

¹⁹ G.A. Hemming, "The Puritan's Dealings with Troubled Souls," in *Puritan Papers*, 1:32.

²⁰ Edward Hindson, *Introduction to Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1976), 178.

²¹ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax some sermons contracted out of Matt. 12:20 at the desire and for the good of weaker Christians* (London: R. Dawlman, 1658), 94.

²² John F. Sena, "Melancholic Madness and the Puritans," 302.

spiritual treatment and believed that it was a minister's obligation to provide both physical as well as spiritual assistance to his flock.²³

Puritans were familiar with suffering—both in its inward and outward forms. Said Packer, "Suffering, which the world would inflict out of malice and God would send and sanctify as a nurturing discipline, was to them part of the Christian course."²⁴ John Geree went so far as to say that the Puritan saw all of life as warfare (i.e., spiritual warfare), his motto for life was *Vincit qui patitur* (he who suffers wins).²⁵ They could see life no other way, especially since Christ Himself suffered as He did while on earth. This was exactly Robert Bolton's sentiment, as he preached the following in a sermon titled, *A Cordial for a Fainting Christian*:

Many afflictions are proper to God's children, as temptations, doubting of salvation, etc . . . nay sometimes hideous suggestions, as were to Christ, that no Christian is in the height: For the son of God to be tempted to make away himself; nay he that thought it no robbery to be equal with God to be tempted to worship the Devil, was more then any Christian ever had . . . Let all Christians prepare for new sufferings; for till death set us free, we are not to look to be free from troubles; and never more need to be prepared then now, when not only the Church beyond the Seas, but many good men be in great troubles.²⁶

In spite of the many forms of desolation suffered by the Puritans, they never gave way to the feeling that because the condition of the world (along with their experience of the world) was so deplorable that the Second Coming of Christ was the only hope for humankind. In their minds, to have done so would have been a forfeiting of the precious promises made available by Christ's first coming.²⁷ What one sees instead is a spirituality that profoundly synthesized the realities of life with the unfulfilled promises of future hope, an approach to the Christian life that acknowledged the nature of the Kingdom of God as already-but-not-yet.²⁸ If what they hoped for seemed impossible, the Puritans did not despair; instead, they contemplated more deeply the authority and glory which even now belongs to Christ, the Head of the Church.²⁹

²³ Linda Lewis, "The Causes, Forms and Relief of Spiritual Anxiety in the works of Richard Sibbes 1577–1635," 95.

²⁴ Packer, *The Pilgrim's Principles: John Bunyan Revisited*, 7.

²⁵ Cited in Packer, *The Pilgrim's Principles: John Bunyan Revisited*, 7 from John Geree's *The Character of an Old English Puritane* (1646).

²⁶ Robert Bolton, *A Cordial for a Fainting Christian* (London: T. Paine, 1644), 16.

²⁷ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 90.

²⁸ George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (London: Paternoster Press, 1959).

²⁹ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 90.

3. The Puritans and Spiritual Consolation

The comfort and consoling work of Christ was a rich motif within Puritan literature. In *Method of Grace*, John Flavel went so far as to describe Christ Himself as “the very consolation of believers: he is pure comfort wrapped up in flesh and blood . . . the only consolation of believers, and of none besides them.”³⁰ Elsewhere, Richard Sibbes added, “. . . after she [the Church] had been humbled, Christ sweetly entertains her again, and falls into commendation of her Beauty. . . . Therefore if there be any bruised reed, let him not except himself, when Christ does not except him; come unto me all ye that are weary, and heavy laden . . .”³¹

In light of the great value that they placed on inward consolation, the Puritans should not be seen as cosmic killjoys, nor did they view God as such. Spiritual comfort, joy, and pleasure—not just fear of divine judgment—were what motivated them to fulfill their Christian duties. This was keenly evident in the American Puritan Jonathan Edwards, who wrote the following resolution within his diary: “Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.”³²

The purpose of inward consolation was not only for enjoyment, it was also God’s grace to the believer to resist temptation and to mortify sin: “The nature of consolation . . . is nothing else but the cheeriness of a man’s spirit whereby he is upheld, and fortified against all evils felt, or feared.”³³ Inward consolation helped the believer resist sin by cultivating godly affections, which would in effect turn one away from being led by one’s carnal lusts. Flavel identified three types of comfort: natural, sinful, and spiritual. Natural comfort was the refreshment of our natural spirits by the good creatures of God. Sinful comfort was the satisfaction and pleasure men took in the fulfilling of their lusts, by the abuse of the creatures of God. Spiritual comfort, on the other hand, was the refreshment, peace, and joy which gracious souls had in Christ by the exercise of faith, hope, and other graces.³⁴ In light of this discussion, it is clear that the Puritans (including Joseph Symonds) emphatically acknowledged the legitimate Christian need for consolation while also recognizing that not all forms of comfort were helpful to one’s progress in the Christian life.

³⁰ John Flavel, *The Method of Grace in Bringing Home the Eternal Redemption, Contrived by the Father, and Accomplished by the Son, through the Effectual Application of the Spirit into God’s Elect* (London: Tho. Parkhurst, 1699), 271–272.

³¹ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed and Smoking Flax, some sermons contracted out of Matthew 12:20 at the desire and for the good of weaker Christians* (London: R. Dawlman, 1658), 129–130.

³² Jonathan Edwards, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 276.

³³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, 273.

³⁴ Ibid.

Recognizing, then, that the Christian's process of sanctification did not lead him to a denial of his need for consolation but rather to the proper seeking of it, the problem of spiritual desertion was indeed a formidable one to the Puritan. While the outwardly afflicted could be spiritually comforted and edified, the same could not be said of the one who was spiritually deserted. Flavel explained, "In spiritual desertion, and the hiding of God's face, matter of affliction, and casting down to believers . . . yes, yes, it quails their hearts, nothing can comfort them. Thou hidest thy face, and I was troubled (Psalm 30:7). Outward afflictions do but break the skin, this touches the quick; they like rain fall only upon the tiles, this soaks into the house."³⁵ The deserted were forced to persevere in their position despite having their need for comfort continually denied.

4. The Puritans and Meditation

The Puritan practice of meditation was centered upon the Word of God and its application to life. The Puritan sermon was the model for Puritan meditation.³⁶ They saw reason as the king of all faculties and viewed the spoken word as the one agency by which one's will and affections could be reached. Even Puritan theologians were described as being preachers first and theological writers second.³⁷ Puritan preaching sought to challenge hearers to search and challenge their hearts, stir their affections to hate sin and love righteousness, and be encouraged by God's promises through rational persuasion by means of proofs, demonstrations, and the silencing of objections.³⁸ Perhaps this at least in part accounts for why so much of Puritan paraenetic literature consists of rational arguments from Scripture arranged in list form.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Puritan literature was its thoroughness; they dwelt on each word and phrase of a biblical passage as though "every grain of gold must be wrestled from the heavenly mine."³⁹ The contemporary person might think that a more existential approach would be appropriate to the comforting of troubled souls. Yet the puritans were amazingly effective in their comforting—so much so that they emulated this same approach in their own private practice of meditation. They would often comfort themselves by means of self-persuasion, as they considered and reminded themselves of the many promises of God found in Scripture.

³⁵ Ibid., 275.

³⁶ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 24.

³⁷ Edward Hindson, *Introduction to Puritan Theology*, 20.

³⁸ Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 6.

³⁹ Gordon Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety*, 24.

Nothing was more important to the practice of Puritan piety than the reading of Scripture. The Puritans believed that all Scripture reading should be accompanied by both prayer and meditation.⁴⁰ This was so because they eagerly sought to apply all that they read—as though each passage were addressed particularly to the reader, as if the words of the Bible were spoken by God standing at their side.⁴¹ In fact, they viewed the story of their own lives as recapitulations of Bible history. The people of God in the wilderness, along with the patriarchs and prophets, were the companions of the Puritans much like the saints were to the Catholics.⁴² The practice of reframing the believer’s experience in light of Bible history helped make God more real to them and enabled them to find meaning in both their joy and suffering under the context of divine ordinance.

In speaking of spiritual desertions, Thomas Goodwin related such experiences to similar episodes found within the lives of biblical characters such as King Saul, Jonah, David, and even Jesus Christ:

And this is here [God’s presence] utterly withdrawn: and it may thus come to pass, that the soul in regard of any sense or sight of this, may be left in that case that Saul really was left in: 1 Samuel 28:15, “God is departed from me, and answers me not, neither by Prophets nor by dreams” . . . Such was Jonah’s case, *I am cast out of thy sight* (Jonah 2:4), that is, he could not get a sight of him; not one smile, not one glance or cast of his countenance, not a beam of comfort; and so thought himself cast out. And so he dealt with David often, and sometimes a long time together, Psalm 13:1: *How long will thou hide thy face from me?* . . . So from Job (Job 13:24), yea and from Christ himself; *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*⁴³

A common type of mediation was “self-examination,” or “meditation on experience”—a practice that formed a regular part of the believer’s evening devotional exercises.⁴⁴ Self-examination was a spiritual exercise whose aim was to chart repentance and also to further the salvific work of God in the soul.⁴⁵ The Puritan’s life was to be above all else a rigorously scrutinized one.⁴⁶ When a repentant sinner appealed for God’s grace, he

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁴¹ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 22.

⁴² Gordon Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety*, 27.

⁴³ Thomas Goodwin, *A Child of Light Walking in Darkness* (London: R. Dawlmann, 1659), 15–16.

⁴⁴ Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Williamsburg, VA: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 168–170.

⁴⁵ Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety*, 168.

⁴⁶ Gordon Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion*, 74.

would know that if he were among the elect, divine power would enable him to be faithful to the end. However, to many, the question of whether one was indeed among the elect was particularly troubling. Puritan divine William Perkins recognized this and devoted an entire work to address this very issue, titled, *The Greatest Test that Ever Was: How a man may know, whether he be the child of God or not*. In it, Perkins warns, “I say truly . . . it may come to pass, that many in their own thinking shall be predestined: yet in truth they are not persuaded so, for they are deceived.”⁴⁷ Although the threat of self-deception was significant, Perkins asserted that it was nonetheless possible for Christians to be assured of their salvation through the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ To him, the key principle that guided the process of discerning one’s election was that “those who were predestinate to the end . . . are also predestinate to the means, without which they cannot attain to the end.”⁴⁹ In other words, a life lived befitting a child of God was the best evidence that one was indeed a child of God.

As such, the Puritan kept constant watch over his moral and spiritual life for evidence of the fruits of the Spirit, which were the outward signs of saving grace in the heart.⁵⁰ To be certain that these signs were genuine, it was necessary to make a rigorous distinction between the effects of grace, and behavior that was the result of natural causes. It was the task of the Puritan pastor, then, to “transpose abstract doctrine into a rule of practice so that by diligent self-examination the perplexed believer could accurately dissect his soul.”⁵¹ This process towards assurance would start from the pulpit and end with private self-examination.

I have thus attempted to briefly introduce the historical, theological, and spiritual context of Joseph Symonds’ work, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*. Puritan spirituality appeared to reflect the turbulence of its times, as evidenced by the abundance of paraenetic literature (Symonds’ work would be categorized as such), which was written to comfort, strengthen, and encourage the many who were spiritually depressed and downtrodden. In light of their view on assurance as a work of God’s grace that was typically enjoyed late in the conversion process, it is not surprising that anxiety concerning one’s election was a topic of great concern to both the common parishioner as well as the divine. As it will soon become apparent, the concept of spiritual desertion gave the Puritans an effective means to understand, express, and ultimately treat a uniquely severe case of desolation affecting both the inward and outward person.

⁴⁷ William Perkins, *The Greatest Test that Ever Was: How a man may know whether he be the child of God or not* (London: Robert Walde-graue, 1592), 29.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁰ Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., 10.

THE LIFE OF JOSEPH SYMONDS

Unfortunately, little is known about the life of Joseph Symonds. For example, it is not known where or when he was born. As a young man, he had been the assistant of the famous Puritan Thomas Gataker at Rotherhithe, near London, but afterwards he became rector of St. Martin's, Ironmongers' Lane, in the metropolis of London.⁵² Due to his independent stance towards church governance, he forsook the Church of England, left his post, and settled in Rotterdam, Holland, where he was chosen to be the pastor of the English church there.⁵³ Although he was a pastor of a church in a foreign land, he was sometimes called to preach before the British parliament nonetheless, as evidenced by the title of one of his published sermons: "A Sermon lately preached at Westminster, before sundry of the Honorable House of Commons, 1641: By Joseph Symonds, late minister in Ironmongers'-lane, London, now pastor of the Church at Rotterdam."⁵⁴

In 1647, Symonds became fellow of Eton College, and eventually was vice-president of that historic school. As school records indicate that his fellowship terminated on October 17, 1652, it is presumed that this was the exact date of his death. In a letter from Thomas Doolittle to Richard Baxter, it appears that Essex was the place of Joseph Symonds' death.⁵⁵

SPIRITUAL DESERTION ACCORDING TO JOSEPH SYMONDS

Similar to the format of many other Puritan writings, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul* presents the topic of spiritual desertion in a logically structured and orderly manner. A total of 37 chapters systematically guided the reader through the definition of spiritual desertion, its causes and symptoms, guidelines determining how it could be distinguished from other spiritual ailments, and directives for recovery. Joseph Symonds defined spiritual desertion as God's withdrawing Himself in respect of quickening, quieting, or comforting the souls of the truly regenerate.⁵⁶ According to him, those who were deserted typically complained of at least one of the following three symptoms: 1) that God did not carry on their spiritual life as they were accustomed to, 2) that God no longer gave them peace, joy, comfort, and assurance, and 3) that God brought them into outward straits without deliverance.⁵⁷ Since God no longer carried them, the deserted lived

⁵² Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans* (London: James Black, 1813), 3:39.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, 79.

⁵⁶ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18.

as if they were dead to all spiritual things, neither seeing, hearing, nor tasting the things of God:

Thou were wont to find God feeding thee with milk, and the honey of the Gospel, and causing his glory to pass before thee in his house; but now those days are gone, the word does not warm thee, cheer thee, humble thee, quicken thee as in former days; but you come for manna to feed your starving soul and find none; you come in deadness and go away without life; . . . the Gospel is hidden to you; that ministry that is a shining and burning light to others is to you without power.⁵⁸

The spiritual deadness caused by desertion was a universal deadness affecting the entire person. Not only have they grown less in godly affection, but also less in godly inclination and action. The deserted did not yearn as much for the presence of God, nor were they inclined to seek it, show concern for its absence, or even recognize its presence. As a result, they would likely suffer a concomitant loss of God's comforting presence, as this spiritual deadness also encumbered their ability to ascertain and receive spiritual comfort. This combination of deadness and loss of comfort could easily lead even the most devout into spiritual lethargy (if their condition no longer concerned them) or spiritual frenzy (if their condition did indeed cause much fear and grief).⁵⁹ Last, the inward turmoil caused by spiritual desertion might also be further coupled with unresolved outward troubles as well. When this was the case, the sufferer was afflicted on all fronts and indeed placed within "the lowest pitch of misery that a believer can fall into."⁶⁰

A chief biblical example of spiritual desertion was King David, whose encounter with it occasioned him to write Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Symonds noted how even though the favor of God was upon David throughout His life, it did not invalidate the legitimacy of his experience as friendless, helpless, woeful, and comfortless at the time of his desertion. Furthermore, Symonds argued that David was to be understood as a type of Christ, and as such, his sorrow was in fact just a shadow of Christ's own sorrow on the cross.⁶¹ In light of this, Christ's echoing of the phrase "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" prior to surrendering His life on the cross chronicled the ultimate example of spiritual desertion. It was the conclusive proof of the case that God indeed withdrew His quickening, quieting, and comforting presence from His children for a time.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 129–130.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22–23.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., 5.

1. What Spiritual Deserterion is Not

First, Symonds limited the scope of spiritual deserterion to the regenerate only.⁶² Flavel described regeneration as the infusion of supernatural, divine, and new qualities by the Holy Spirit into the soul, which subsequently becomes the grounds of all holy action.⁶³ It was a holistic work, touching one's mind, affections, and will. As such, the proof that one was indeed regenerate would be the presence of right thinking, right feeling, and right acting in relationship to God. All evidences had to be present within an individual before it was possible for him to experience spiritual deserterion. To Symonds, it was simply not enough for one to claim to have once felt the presence of God; such feelings needed to be accompanied by corresponding thoughts and actions in order for deserterion to be diagnosed in an individual. Indeed, the unregenerate might experience all the signs of deserterion but would not be considered as such because Christ was never with them in the first place. Such a case would have been a matter of a hypocrite being deceived about his true spiritual estate.⁶⁴

In speaking of spiritual deserterion among the truly regenerate, Symonds noted that God's withdrawal, though real, was always only a temporary withdrawal. "God leaves them for a season, not forever. If He goes from them, it is but as one that goes from home, to return again: I will not leave you comfortless, or as orphans, but I will come again (John 14:18). . . . Though the River has her ebbings, yet it has her flowings. The tide of comfort will come in again."⁶⁵ However, although deserterions were not permanent withdrawals of God, they were prolonged withdrawals nonetheless. The ebbings of comfort that Symonds referred to were not to be understood as the transient ebbings that typically come and go over the course of a day; they were rather seasons of ebbings. Said Symonds, "Not every interruption of communion with God, not every present distemper and indisposedness proves God to have withdrawn Himself . . . the deadness of a deserted soul is not a transient, but an abiding deadness . . . not a present short abatement of God's quickening presence, but a continued cessation for some space of time: it may be long."⁶⁶

Furthermore, Symonds argued that deserterion was a withdrawal only of God's acts of love, not of His love itself. God's affection for His deserted child was the same even though the expression of His affection temporarily changed.⁶⁷ In light of this, it cannot be said that God loves His children differently in light of his deserterions; the withdrawal or giving of consolation are both expressions of that same divine love. Symonds explained, "A

⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁶³ Flavel, *The Method of Grace*, 6.

⁶⁴ Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 3.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9–10.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 39–40.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.

father may have a dear affection to his child, yet show but little in his carriage.”⁶⁸

2. Discerning Spiritual Deserter

Spiritual deserter was not a condition that was disposed to being immediately discerned or noticed, for indeed a believer might be deserted and not know it. Symonds observed how God’s departure was often gradual, coming not all at once but by degrees: “As the sun rises by degrees and sets by degrees, and so night creeps often upon men before they are aware.”⁶⁹ For this reason, it was often the case that a believer would not discover their deserted state until its process had already progressed for some time. A number of other factors also contribute to people’s inability to recognize the onset of spiritual deserter. These include: pride and conceitedness fueled by comparing oneself to others worse than them, the testimony and applause of others (even from the godly), the abundance of apparently godly activity done apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, and the common tendency not to consider one’s own estate.⁷⁰ In light of this, Symonds strongly suggested that believers intentionally discern and judge for themselves whether or not they were deserted. To help them in this endeavor, he offered some rules for help in judging one’s estate.

The chief rule that Joseph Symonds offered for the discernment of spiritual deserter was to consider the various forms of grace previously given by the Lord. It was often the case that many of these graces have been previously taken for granted. Examples include: the strength to perform holy endeavors, the ability to apprehend spiritual things through Scripture, and even the inclination to seek after God. Symonds asserted that in times of deserter, the withdrawal of many such graces could be discerned through observing decay in the human spirit with respect to its activity, light and sight, and affections.⁷¹

Decay in spiritual activity was chiefly denoted by two things: unfruitfulness in good and less willingness towards good. By unfruitfulness in good, Symonds was referring to the deserted believer’s loss of ability to demonstrate inward signs of grace as well as outward works done in the power of the Holy Spirit. There was less mourning for sin, less rejoicing in God, less hope on His promises, and less desire for Christ’s appearing.⁷² This would be coupled with less giving of alms, less time spent in prayer and the reading of Scripture, and less private acts of charity. Symonds admitted, however, that the abatement of good works alone was not a clear

⁶⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 41–43.

⁷¹ Ibid., 49.

⁷² Ibid., 51.

indicator of desertion because pride could easily motivate one to perform public duties for human applause.⁷³ Also, God would sometimes lead the godly away from outward service for various reasons such as bodily infirmity or personal rest.⁷⁴

The second manner by which the human spirit decayed in spiritual deserton was in regard to its light and sight, the eye of the deserted soul being weakened in its ability to perceive God and spiritual things.⁷⁵ To Symonds, one's ability to conceive or apprehend anything of God was ultimately the sustained supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, who persistently stirred, strengthened, and directed the mind. At the moment the Spirit's work abated, the human soul would immediately lose its spiritual sight even if it were to seek earnestly after God through the Word or Sacraments.⁷⁶ Often, the result of this type of decay was the prevailing of unbelief in the mind of the believer. The lack of evidence of God left the deserted to struggle with various "doubtings, disputes, objections, strange reasonings about spiritual truths; so much that the soul is greatly perplexed and snared in the diversity, crossness, subtlety, and ambiguity of her own reasonings."⁷⁷

In addition to a constrained ability to apprehend new things of God coupled by plagues of unbelief, the deserted man lost touch with his former evidences of God and His grace. More specifically, his former light lost its previous efficacy to affect, impel, repel, and humble his heart.⁷⁸ Remembering and recalling the past work of God has long been an activity that has edified the souls of the saints. In Psalm 42:4–6, King David followed this practice in the midst of his suffering and lamenting: "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. . . . My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of Jordan." According to Symonds, such remembering impelled the believer to fulfill his duties joyfully, restrained him from evil, humbled his heart, and warmed his affections for God.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, all these benefits were lost for the deserted. The deserted may recall certain memories of God, but these do not touch his heart and offer little help to his depressed condition: "A man is not affected with the things that he knows, as in former days; time was when the apprehension of God's love did work mightily, melting to repentance, quickening to obedience . . . but now the thoughts of divine love do not so raise the heart."⁸⁰

⁷³ Ibid., 51.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 64.

THE CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL DESERTION

i. For Spiritual Edification

Generally speaking, Symonds viewed spiritual desertion as a means of grace to edify and bless the children of God. It was one of the tools, albeit a particularly unpleasant one at the time, which God employed as He saw fit to facilitate the Christian's process of sanctification. Sanctification was facilitated in part by the deserted believer's deeper yearning for the perfect comfort of heaven. The lack of God's manifest presence in this world caused one to seek after its perfect expression all the more at the time of glorification. Whenever an absence of God was suffered, the Christian would be reminded of the distance between heaven and earth: "Comfort belongs not to sanctification, but glorification, therefore the fullness of it is kept until we be set in glory."⁸¹ The believer's hunger for God and spiritual things grew deeper for the present life as well, not just the afterlife. Symonds explained, "The soul longs after God, that in him it may find all supplied, which it wants in the world. Now the more God stirs up desires of himself the more the soul is prepared to communion with him, and the more it has of him, the hungry man eats most, and he that is most thirsty, drinks most."⁸²

Symonds believed that desertions also occurred to establish the godly in fuller comfort. As God's method of redemption for Israel was to bring them through Egypt, the Red Sea, and the wilderness before they reached Canaan, it was often the case that God premised affliction of the soul before great comforts.⁸³ When the soul has passed through dire straits and then sees the wonders of the Lord in the depths of darkness and deadness, the deserted are more profoundly edified and encouraged by the future evidences and comforts of God.⁸⁴ Such enlightened souls are often the ones who are later called upon for special acts of service, which may help explain why so many outstanding saints have experienced desertion. Symonds offered the following exhortation to his readers:

They that go down into the deeps see many wonders which others know not. Experience gives wisdom . . . some are ordinary passengers, and it is enough for them to look to themselves being able to do but little for others; but some must be pilots, and therefore must be acquainted with winds, and seas, and rocks, and sands, that they may not only save themselves, but others.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid., 483.

⁸² Ibid., 125.

⁸³ Ibid., 486.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 488.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 511–512.

2. For Instruction

Spiritual deserotion was a means by which God instructed His children on the value of grace as well as the reality of their own sinfulness and weakness. These lessons in fact worked hand in hand as a deeper knowledge of one's sin inevitably led to a greater appreciation for the grace that redeemed it. Symonds found evidence of the didactic intentions behind God's acts of deserotion in 2 Chronicles 32:31, where God temporarily left Hezekiah in order to try him, so that he might know all that was in his heart.⁸⁶ As we will see, the self-knowledge that typically came out of God's testing was largely for the benefit and edification of the believer.

Symonds held to a strong view of man's profound and comprehensive moral depravity, which applied also to the regenerate. Because divine grace kept human depravity from fully manifesting itself, many enjoyed a grace-sustained life without ever being mindful or conscience of the true depth of their sinfulness. Moreover, God may have previously been present in many gracious counsels, checks, and impulsions, and yet elicit little thanks or acknowledgement.⁸⁷ This ignorance was remedied by the temporary withdrawal of divine grace associated with spiritual deserotion:

A man would not think that he is so bad as he is while he enjoys an abundant aid of spiritual grace, as while the soul is in the body, that putrefying quality, and the filthiness of it does not so much appear, but when the soul has left it; then it becomes a rotten carcass . . . while it is fed with the continued issues and streams of pure water from a clear fountain, [it] shows not its filth, but when the streams are cut off, then the foulness of it discovers itself.⁸⁸

Similarly, it was often the case that a Christian would believe that he had been freed from his lusts only to wonder in shame and astonishment as these lusts reappeared in strength of force during the night of deserotion.⁸⁹ Such a man would likely be led to consider the liberality of God's previous dispensing of grace, as well as the necessity of it. The payoff of this added understanding and self-knowledge was a newfound value, desire, and gratitude for God's grace that was not possible if the believer had not been deserted. To them, present grace could no longer be easily taken for granted and opportunities for receiving future grace could no longer be taken lightly. However, perhaps the greatest instruction afforded by deserotion was to know God as the God of comfort firsthand:

And therefore that they may have a sight of that dark and dismal nature of their own hearts, he shuts in his light; and then when the soul

⁸⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 136.

lies in a mournful and distressed case . . . , and reckon himself past all hope; then I say, God shows himself to be the God of comfort, by commanding light to shine out of darkness, and quieting the high and raging storms, which did bear down all before them.⁹⁰

3. For Correction

In addition to instructing the believer in the ways of grace and human depravity, spiritual desertion was also a means by which God corrected and disciplined believers out of love.⁹¹ To Symonds, the chief blemish that desertion corrected was spiritual pride, which led a person to believe that his strength, which was actually afforded by divine grace, originated from himself. Reflecting on the importance God placed on the correction of human pride, Symonds related the corrective qualities of desertion to those of the Apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh: "Pride, which is a swelling and tumor of the spirit, or a lifting up in the heart through a supposed abundance of revelation in the mind (2 Corinthians 12:7), or of other rich endowments of spiritual graces; it brought upon the Apostle that goring thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him, lest he should be exalted above measure."⁹²

Another flaw which spiritual desertion corrected was carelessness, evidenced by the habit of not accepting the seasons of grace when God drew near. As God withdrew Himself during times of desertion, conversely, there were also periods when God drew especially near the believer. When such was the case, a believer might enjoy and draw special excitement and inspiration towards many godly thoughts and resolutions.⁹³ If these graces were sought after and taken hold of, they would have likely born much fruit. However, Symonds observed that these special seasons of grace were often negligently squandered by believers who "chose not to hoist up their sails to these gales" and were therefore justly left to a spirit of dullness.⁹⁴

From Symonds' perspective, grace did not cease to be grace if it required action on the part of its recipient. Even though grace was a free gift that could not be earned, it was still to be sought after even laboriously, irrespective of the fact that these efforts were not meritorious. In light of its exceedingly great value, any other human response to grace would be unfitting and inappropriate. Symonds went so far as to say that anyone who advocated the contrary was likely guilty of spiritual sloth: "It is just, that he that labors not should not eat, he that digs not for the pearl should not find

⁹⁰ Ibid., 508–509.

⁹¹ Ibid., 140.

⁹² Ibid., 141.

⁹³ Ibid., 143.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 144.

it, but that the fruit of spiritual slothfulness should be a decay in spiritual estate.”⁹⁵

Last, spiritual deserotion corrected rigidity and unmercifulness. Symonds observed how certain saints lacked tenderness and compassion, dealing with their brethren roughly by censures, neglects, and contempt.⁹⁶ This relational approach needed to be corrected because Christ is full of mercy, one who will not quench the smoking flax, nor break the bruised reed.⁹⁷ When this was the case, deserotion would soften the hearts of the rigid by showing them their own need for mercy and grace.

THE RELIEF OF DESERTION

1. Concerning Cases of Melancholy

Following the likes of other notable Puritan divines such as Richard Baxter and Robert Bolton, Joseph Symonds recognized spiritual deserotion and melancholy (i.e., psychological troubles) as distinct conditions even though their sufferers may have complained of similar symptoms. As such, he began his discussion on the cure of spiritual deserotion with the following admonition warning his readers not to apply spiritual remedies to a physical ailment: “As for the first, who are oppressed with melancholy, that dark and dusky humor, which disturbs both soul and body; their cure belongs rather to the Physician than to the Divine, and Galen is more proper for them than a minister of the gospel: it is a pestilent humor where it abounds, one calls it the devil’s bath.”⁹⁸

2. Concerning the Possibility of Recovery

Before he offered directives for the relief of spiritual deserotion, Symonds sought first to establish that recovery was indeed possible. He reminded the reader of other believers who have successfully recovered in the past, such as King David.⁹⁹ He also reasoned that the present condition of the deserted was not worse off than their condition before conversion; if God appeared to them when they were completely without Him and while still in darkness and bondage to sin, how much more would God appear to them if they earnestly sought after Him?¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the deserted had

⁹⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 503.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 504.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 515.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 521.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 521.

many promises of God: rest to the weary, strength to the weak, light to the blind, and health to the sick. These promises were given so that those lacking would have hope.¹⁰¹

Moreover, that the sufferer had the ability and responsibility to both cooperate with and facilitate this process of recovery was a critical conviction of Symonds. If this was not true, his discussion on the cure of desertion would have been short-lived. By way of persuasion, he counseled deserted believers to labor tirelessly for a constant communion with God despite being in their spiritually depressed state.¹⁰² Citing 1 Chronicles 22:16—"Sit not weeping and sighing, for that will not profit, you must be doing"—Symonds argued that the manner by which this was accomplished was the diligent, wise, and constant use of the available means of grace. He added:

Be doing: many cry Lord help, but they stir not up themselves, but think to live all upon supply from heaven: but if you keep the seed in the garden God will not increase your store, you must plough and sow . . . ; you have a life in you, and you must put it forth, God has said he will help you: that is, you must do what you can, and he then will join with you.¹⁰³

By exhorting the deserted to work for their recovery, Symonds was not insinuating that recuperation was effected by the power of human strength. In fact, he clearly acknowledged one's need of divine assistance: "It is true, that which you want is out of your reach, you are not able to make crooked things to become straight, and lay those swelling mountains of corruption level, but yet you must set to the work."¹⁰⁴ To him, reasoning that all was of God and then resigning oneself into fatalistic passivity was an ill-drawn conclusion from a true principle; believers indeed possessed the power to do good by virtue of the fact that they were regenerate. If this were not so, there would be no difference between the regenerate and the unregenerate.¹⁰⁵

Instead, Symonds recognized that God's transformative work on the human heart entailed a dynamic synergy between divine and human initiative. Symonds found this synergy keenly illustrated in the biblical account of Joshua and the fall of Jericho in Judges 7:18. Even though the strength of the noise made by the ram horns did not physically cause the walls of Jericho to fall, Joshua was still required faithfully to complete his work in his bid to overthrow the city.¹⁰⁶ In light of this, Symonds exhorted the deserted

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 298.

¹⁰² Ibid., 174.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 274.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 358.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 359.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 359.

to employ faithfully and diligently all available means of grace for the relief of their condition.

3. Employing Available Means of Grace

Among all the means of grace available to retain a divine presence, prayer was to be employed most liberally. Symonds offered three guidelines for the prayers of the deserted. First, as evidenced by David's prayer in Psalm 119:10 ("With my whole heart have I sought thee, oh let me not wander from thy commandments"), prayer was to be initiated by a strong desire of walking with God.¹⁰⁷ Second, prayer was to be sustained by sensitivity to one's perpetual insufficiency of strength to curb inward corruption and properly perform spiritual duty.¹⁰⁸ Third, the goal of prayer must be the ends and purposes of God, otherwise prayer would be a means of manipulating God into the service of people. Said Symonds, "God must be your last end, come then and say, 'Lord help me that I may honor thee, I owe all to thee, but I can do nothing without thee; if I have life from thee, I will live to thee; what I receive from thee, I will lay out for thee.'"¹⁰⁹

In addition to prayer, Symonds made mention of other means of grace that should be used. He exhorted his readers to attend the ordinances faithfully and thoughtfully, to persevere in the practice of other good works, and to receive help of other saints. Speaking of the benefits of godly fellowship, he wrote, "Crave their counsels, their prayers, use their company, for they are living, and they will impart their life: they will be helpful to the infirmed . . . woe be to him that is alone, if he fall, who shall raise him up?"¹¹⁰ An excellent example of godly friendship curbing the effects of melancholy was that of John Newton and William Cowper. Newton stood by Cowper through many attempts at suicide, sacrificing his own vacation so as not to leave Cowper alone. They frequently took long walks between homes and talked of God and His purposes for the church in addition to collaborating together in the writing of a hymnbook consisting of 276 hymns (including the famous hymn, "Amazing Grace").¹¹¹

Another way deserted believers could labor towards recovery was to stir their hearts by their understanding. Symonds reasoned that the heart could be changed through the use of reason; if one were to meditate on

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 242.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 243.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 248.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 366.

¹¹¹ John Piper, "Insanity and Spiritual Songs in the Soul of a Saint: Reflections on the life of William Cowper," http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1463_Insanity_and_Spiritual_Songs_in_the_Soul_of_a_Saint/ (accessed March 21, 1997).

and apply truths of Scripture, the will may be provoked and awakened.¹¹² To this end, he suggested the following rules and resolutions: as far as it was possible, to steer every notion of the mind to the betterment of the heart, to be frequent in deep thoughts, to focus thoughts on matters that concern the individual, to observe the temper of one's heart and take note of which thoughts are most efficacious, to sustain thoughts once they take hold, and finally to arm one's thoughts with prayer—asking God to be in them.¹¹³

4. Pursuing the Cause

Last, Symonds admonished his readers to pursue the cause of their desertion: "Pursue your loss and sad condition to the birth of it, consider how long this night of darkness has been upon you."¹¹⁴ If it could be discerned that the desertion was related to the persistence of some gross sin (which to him, was not always the case), Symonds admonished the deserted to bewail and repent from that sin. He explained, "Repentance is the way to make up your losses, and to repair your ruins, God has promised grace and mercy to the penitent. . . . Till you repent, your sin is continued and consequently God's displeasure."¹¹⁵

CONCLUSION

It would not be a stretch to believe that the phenomenon of spiritual desertion still occurred in the context of contemporary Evangelical Christianity. For if God deserted the likes of King David and the Apostle Paul, not to mention many English and American Puritans, then it would follow that He continues this practice even now. Spiritual desertion, as Symonds understood it to be, was a biblically-sanctioned means of grace by which God instructed and corrected his children out of love and for their sanctification. Although a more thorough reflection on Symonds' work could not be presented here due to space limitations, it is my hope that this present discussion would help highlight the importance of developing a broader, more robust view of the role of spiritual consolation in the Christian life—specifically, one which rejects therapeutic religion (i.e., the hunger for peace of mind, personal well-being, and psychic self-improvement and security as its

¹¹² Symonds, *The Case and Cure of a Deserted Soul*, 363.

¹¹³ Ibid., 365.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 338.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 345–347.

own end¹¹⁶) but also one which values the right seeking of spiritual consolation while respecting the mystery of God's tendency to at times seemingly withdraw himself from his beloved children.

¹¹⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 33.

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