

## ***The Tyranny of Feelings***

Telephone—it's John . . . again.

"Hello John, how are you?"

"Dreadful. My whole life is wrong . . . Nothing to live for. Why do I get so much bad luck? . . ." and so on.

John's 74, retired, and in a chronic slough of despond. He hates his life, thinks he's done it all wrong, wishes he could go back and start again. In real terms he's not had a bad life. From coal miner's son to Associate University Professor would classify as a successful life in most people's book, but he can't see it. All he can see is the negatives.

Actually I have some sympathy with John. I went through similar emotions 40 years ago in the early years of my Christian life. It was tied up with my tendency to passive dependency, looking to god to solve problems that I should have been sorting out for myself, that sort of thing. You'll find it all in the book in a bit more detail. And I know just how all-embracing those negative feelings can be.

It reminds me of something I've often experienced skiing. You go up the mountain with your skis and it's a clear blue sunny day—except for that one little cloud huddled at the top of the peak. And that's just the peak you've planned to go up. So up you go, and suddenly you're in the cloud. It's a thick fog, you can't see a thing. You put your skis on and feel your way forward, peering into the murk just looking for some sort of shape to fix on to, orientate yourself. It's a little scary. It seems like it just goes on forever, that the whole world is shrouded in this fog. It's hard to believe the sun even exists, the foggy sensation is so all-embracing. You feel your way forward, inching down the mountain, hoping you're on the right track. And then suddenly, down a few more feet, and—you're out! Bright sun all around. And you look back and you see that fog that seemed so all-embracing for what it is: a tiny little island of cloud in a sea of bright sunshine.

Feelings can be like that. When you're in them they just swallow you up, envelope you. You can't see anything else, it's all blotted out. You know in your head that there are people out there happy, content—but you can't visualize it. You're trapped in the feelings.

Is there a way out? I found one—or rather god thrust one upon me. I've described in the book how I'd maneuvered myself into an introverted hell of drug abuse etc. which had sapped my self-will to such an extent that all I could do was be carried along, passively, unable it seemed to lift a finger to help myself. Then God lifted me out and dropped me into the bizarre cult of the Children of God. I won't discuss here the rights and wrongs of the Children of God theology. It was fairly misguided in some directions, I see now, but at the time it was lifesaving for me. In a way it was a bit like doing National Service. I was thrown into a rigid military-style discipline where from morning till night you worked till you dropped. No time to rest, no time to think, just never-ending constant activity. It was hell—and at the same time it was lifesaving for me. The discipline, the forced activity, broke all those nasty vicious circles in my brain, all the cycles of negativity. Suddenly I was able to take control of my life again, make decisions, get things done. I won't say that was the end of it. I've been back through some pretty rough times again since then, but it's been different. Since then I've always known, in part at least the secret of how to step out of negativity.

So how to do it? Here's my formula:

1. We need to recognize some key facts about our feelings. Which are:

- that they're not actually very important. That's right. Our feelings don't really matter. All they are is electrical impulses circulating around neural circuits of our brains, and lighting up on pleasure centres or pain centres to give up our familiar feelings and sensations. They have no existence.
- And they're not very important because they have no moral values attached to them. God doesn't judge us on our feelings. Our decisions, our actions, those are the things that matter, the things that have morality attached, to stir God's interest. But not our feelings.

2. What we are called to is to live, act, decide function. That's what matters, what we do, not what we feel.

- The biggest trap which brings us into tyranny is when we allow our feelings to determine our actions. "That would be a good thing to do, sure; but I don't feel like doing it, so I won't do it." That's when we're on the slippery slope. Our feelings determine our actions (on non-actions), our actions reinforce our feelings, intensify them, and soon we're on the slippery slope.
- One of the characteristics of my own situation back then was that I allowed my feelings to influence my obedience to God. "I know all about love your neighbour; but that's for others to do. Not for me. I'm too screwed up for all that. Once God has sorted out my problems, got me straight, then I'll love my neighbour. Not before." It's very common. And what we all overlook is that it can be THROUGH loving our neighbour that we find healing. The feelings follow the actions.

I wish I could get all this across to my friend John. He spends his days immersed in regret, paralyzed by negative feelings, getting worse and worse. It won't get any better until he gets up and starts to MOVE.

I don't think it's going to happen, ever. The cloud is just so thick, he no longer believes that he sun could be shining just round the corner.

So sad.