

Soul-Weariness

By Tracy Balzer, Christos Graduate and Author

It was Christmastime, and my husband and I looked forward to a trip home to Seattle. We'd been married for just over a year and were living in Kentucky where Cary was in his first year of seminary. Not only were we excited to see family, but Cary's lifelong friend and college roommate, Brad, was getting married. We had some celebrating to do.

But our dreams of a relaxing flight home were not to be realized. Impenetrable fog at the Seattle airport forced us to be rerouted numerous times, turning our otherwise simple itinerary into what we now refer to as the "See the Country Tour." With each diversion – Cincinnati, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Phoenix – our desire to get home intensified. What was to be a six hour journey had stretched into two days, and we were forced to face the possibility of missing the wedding altogether.

Anyone who has done much traveling at all recognizes the intense feelings that come with such a scenario. We so desperately want to be somewhere, but are kept from being there. Our bodies are one place, but our hearts are somewhere else. It is the kind of weariness that is felt deep in one's bones.

In a similar way, our souls can be plagued with weariness when our internal lives are not where we want them to be. We become aware of it because our connection with God seems distant rather than close. The words of our prayers are laborious and unnatural. And there is a deep, inner sense of unrest, an awareness of spiritual disequilibrium that is throwing our balance off.

The Good Way

When Jesus invited us to a life of rest in the eleventh chapter of Matthew, he wasn't just spouting pretty words. A great many of his teachings were ultimately about this very thing. He spoke of paths to take, ways to live that would give rest to the deepest parts of ourselves. The prophet Jeremiah penned a very similar admonition hundreds of years earlier:

"Stand at the crossroads and look...
Ask where the good way is, and walk in it
And you will find rest for your souls." (Jer. 6:16)

Soul-weariness results when the way we choose is not the "good way". When I am soul-weary—when I am unable to experience the rest Jesus has promised—it is most often because I have wandered from his prescription for rest; I have stood at the crossroads and have felt the pull of all options. But the soul is not meant to be split in different directions. It was created to be wholly consecrated to God. Only then does the soul know deep, abiding rest.

In the great primer for Christian life, The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us wise direction in our pursuit of soul-rest. He includes numerous warnings against making choices that pick away at our souls. By re-visiting them we see how susceptible we are to pathways that actually suck the life right out of us. No wonder we feel internally heavy, weary, fatigued.

Soul-weariness: Serving Two Masters

Take, for example, Jesus' warning in Matthew 5:24: "You cannot serve two masters (God and money)." This is not just good wisdom, it is objective truth: it simply is impossible to be faithful to two opposing masters. To try to do so is to split the soul, to divide our loyalties in such a way that the result is not rest or abundance, but depletion.

I may hold the firm conviction that money is not my master. However, there are daily battles, some of them very subtle, that must be waged to maintain that conviction. I need to recognize the presence of the otherwise seemingly benign forces that challenge it. For example, years ago I realized that casual strolling through the shopping mall causes soul weariness in me, because I am surrounded by materialistic values that suck life from my spirit. Too much time in the mall and I come away burdened by the awareness of all of the things I don't have, strangely tempted to believe the lie that I am somehow deprived.

This creates a soul-draining dissonance in me. I cannot know rest if I'm splitting my soul between God (who has truly given me an abundant life) and the clothes on the perfect models in the Ann Taylor window. Jesus clearly instructs us that our hearts belong to the treasures they seek (Matt. 6:21). I've learned that when a trip to the shopping mall is in order (with a teenaged daughter, it's inevitable), I need to keep his teaching before me: "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

Soul-weariness: Worry

Jesus also warns us that worrying is another soul-splitting force in our lives. It's disturbing how worry is such a natural default for so many of us who sincerely want to follow Christ, myself included. The truth is, there are many troubling events that surround us on a daily basis. And they occupy a variety of positions on a wide spectrum of importance. On one end of the continuum, for example, I am confronted with something like the unexpected expense of a major car repair. Not earth shattering, but still, my response is: *worry*. A bit farther along the continuum are the concerns I have for my two daughters' safety in the midst of a potential swine flu epidemic. Again: *worry*. Right next to it is the state of the economy and our personal finances: *worry*. And next, on the end of the continuum where the concerns are greatest, is the news of my mother's lung cancer: *acute worry*.

In his rather extended lesson on this topic (Matthew 6:25-34) Jesus illustrates the futility of worry, that letting it have its way cannot add "a single hour" to our lives. He is not telling us to throw up our hands in submission to fate, that worrying is pointless because "what will be will be." What he is saying is that instead of adding to our lives, worry *drains* life from us and distracts us from the more fruitful work of "seek[ing] first the kingdom and his righteousness." Worry keeps us from the rest that comes from living in according to a larger vision. We know rest when we look at life through the lens of the Kingdom of God, where "all these things shall be added to [us]."

"In this world you will have trouble," Jesus warned his disciples near the end of his earthly life. "But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This is Jesus' assurance that our souls can know rest, even in the midst of a troubled world. They will not know his rest if they are divided between God and worry. "My soul finds rest in God alone," (ref.)

Soul-weariness: Criticism

Another source of soul-weariness is our pre-occupation with the failings of others. Jesus teaches about this in Matthew 7:1-5). It's easy to identify the source of this kind of unrest once we muse upon the exact opposite – how our souls feel full and alive and fulfilled when we intentionally encourage others and bring attention to their strengths. That sense of fulfillment is a manifestation of the rest that Jesus is offering to us.

By contrast, the scenario Jesus utilizes – the pointing out of a speck in our brother's eye while we have a log in our own—is a dramatic illustration of soul *dis*-integration, the opposite of rest. How can we possibly hope to know rest when we are avoiding the truth about ourselves? How can we hope to find rest for our souls when our critical words and actions are causing distress in a brother or sister? There are two competing forces at war here, and we would do right to cheer for neither of them.

Jesus doesn't make this point just so we'll be nicer to each other (but wouldn't it be good if we were?). He is giving us good spiritual direction, reminding us that the same kind of judgment we mete out on others will come right back to us. In other words, we have the ability to either create or refuse the right conditions for soul rest. We can either be truthful about our own spiritual blindness -- which would lead to healing and the ability to help others--or we can deny our own shortcomings and live a double life, effectively choosing the spiritual dissonance that comes with hypocrisy. The soul cannot thrive in such duplicitous conditions.

I remember learning once that what makes judgmentalism wrong is that we presume to know the motives behind someone's actions, which, of course, can only be known by God alone. It is a heady role we assume, one that is not only offensive in its arrogance, it is exhausting to try to maintain.

"See how I do it."

I love Eugene Peterson's rendition of Matthew 11:29 (the Message): "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Jesus will show us how to take a real rest. Walking with him, working with him through the written word of the Gospels can bring healing to weary souls. His teachings urge us, over and over, to take the "good path," the path that leads to an integrated soul that is full of life and vitality.

We did make it to the wedding that Christmas, safe and sound, but decidedly exhausted after having experienced so many detours, delays, and desperate attempts to get where we wanted to be. When I start to notice that kind of fatigue in the deepest parts of myself, a visit to the Sermon on the Mount is the way to get back on the proper path to peace, redirecting my soul to the place where it should be. When I listen to Jesus and choose the "good path," it's not long before I once again find myself at home.