

## Topic 19: Overcoming

### The Ongoing Battle with Sin and Temptation

“Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

—1 Timothy 6:12

In his book *Learning from the Giants*, John C. Maxwell observed that “Disappointment comes when reality falls short of our expectations.” For example, you finally make reservations at that chic new bistro that everyone has been *raving* about. You’re primed for stellar service and amazing French food—but for some reason, the chef and staff at Le Veau D’or have an off night. You leave majorly bummed out. Why?

Here’s the truth, at one time or another, every Christian ends up *disappointed*. This is because we often get it in our heads that following Jesus is going to lead to a certain outcome . . . but then life, reality and/or God don’t cooperate.

Let’s examine this idea of spiritual disappointment—the common phenomenon of spiritual reality not living up to our spiritual expectations. And the struggle we all experience as a result of this disappointment.

### Great Expectations

Put a check mark in the box for any of the following spiritual expectations you’ve had.

- If I humbly ask God to forgive my sins, he will.
- Turning to Jesus is the quickest, surest way to fix my problems—marital, financial, occupational, academic, social, medical, etc.
- God will always be with me, always love me, always approve of what I do.
- If I pray hard enough God might “zap me” and take away sinful desires or bad habits.
- If I tack the expression “in Jesus’ name, amen” to the end of my prayers, God is obligated to give me whatever I’ve asked for.
- I should always expect to “sense” or “feel” God’s presence in my life.



- A devoted Christian should never and will never get depressed.
- If I follow certain principles or parenting techniques my kids will never turn away from God.
- If I have enough faith I can enjoy a life of continual physical health and financial prosperity.
- The gospel and followers of Christ will always be honored in our culture.
- Here and now, I can have the experience of heaven—flawless people, including myself; perfect situations; everything and everyone unaffected by sin; etc.
- There are certain sins that I would *never* commit.
- In many aspects, following Jesus will actually make my life harder and more complicated.
- I can mature in my faith, in this life, to the point that I will no longer be tempted by certain sins.
- It's possible to arrive at a place in this life where I have constant peace, unending bliss, and unshakeable faith all day, every day.
- I can be wholeheartedly devoted to Christ and be liked and admired and accepted by everyone.
- The spiritual life is going to be an exhausting race and a brutal battle.

For each box you checked, ask yourself these questions:

- ▶ Why do I expect this to be true in my experience?
- ▶ What passage(s) in the Bible tells me I should expect this?
- ▶ Has this expectation always been true in my experience?

## Bible Study

Listen to the confessions of three very different Christians:

- ▶ “My upbringing was totally dysfunctional. I was the only child of a single mom with drug and alcohol issues. By the time I graduated high school, my mom had been married four times to three different guys! In between, she had five or six live-in boyfriends. We moved about every six months. It was constant drama. So when I heard the gospel as a teenager, all that talk of “new life” and “being saved,” I jumped at it. For sure, my life changed. But if I’m honest, there’s still a lot of drama in my life, and it’s not even my mom now. I look at some of the ways I act and think *I am so screwed up! Shouldn’t I be different?*”—Savannah, 23, grad student
- ▶ “For as long as I can remember, two things have been true. One, I have always loved God and tried to follow Christ. And, two, I’ve been attracted to guys. I never consciously chose that. It just is. Over the last 20 years, I bet I’ve prayed 10,000 times, ‘God, if I’m not supposed to have these urges, would you please . . . please . . . take them away?’ He hasn’t. You tell me: Why wouldn’t God answer that prayer?”—Karl, 33, accountant



▶ “For the first six or seven years after divinity school, being a pastor was really gratifying. Then it slowly became grueling. I felt like all around me people were drowning, and meanwhile I was barely keeping my own head above the waterline. I never thought serving God and serving people would be so hard.”—Walter, 49, ex-minister

1. What words or phrases would you use to describe what these three are feeling?

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2. In what ways do you relate to their disappointment or disillusionment?

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3. What are the biggest disappointments you’ve experienced so far with God, the spiritual life, or following Christ?

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## Spiritual Reality According to the Bible

Take a few minutes to read, ponder, and write a response to these nine Scripture passages that discuss and/or describe the experience of being a follower of Christ. The first one has been filled out as an example.

The passage	What it reveals about struggle	My reality
<p>"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)</p>	<p><i>Doing good can wear you out and make you feel like giving up, but there's a reward if we hang in there!</i></p>	<p><i>Volunteering in kids' ministry is tough. I feel like quitting some weeks, but I know it's worth it!</i></p>
<p>"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)</p>		
<p>"For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." (Romans 7:19)</p>		
<p>"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." (Romans 5:3-4, ESV)</p>		
<p>"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12, ESV)</p>		
<p>"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure." (1 Corinthians 10:13, NLT)</p>		
<p>"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)</p>		



The passage	What it reveals about struggle	My reality
"Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8, NASB)		
"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (John 16:33, NLT)		
"Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul." (1 Peter 2:11)		

4. What are your big takeaways from this exercise? How do these verses describe the spiritual reality of a follower of Jesus?

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We speak often of becoming *disillusioned*—and we say that like it's a bad thing. But consider for a moment what that word really means. The prefix *dis*—means "apart, away, or without," so to be *disillusioned* is literally to be "without illusions." It means to be pulled away from what we only *thought* was real and true! Disillusionment is actually *the process of coming back to reality*. That may not be fun. But it's vital and good.

### What's the reality of the spiritual life, of following Jesus?

When we read the Scripture, we often spin it by

- ▶ Forcing the Bible to say things it doesn't say
- ▶ Ignoring its clear but dark truths

However, if we *don't* spin Scripture, we would likely come to the following conclusions:

- ▶ Life is hard. And faith in Christ doesn't promise to make things easy. In fact, following Jesus means we can expect the world to hate us, the enemy of our souls to assault us, and our unredeemed human nature to fiercely resist God's transforming work within us. We can and should expect an epic struggle because the spiritual life is a fight. We live in a world at war.



- ▶ We can expect to grow spiritually, but never arrive at perfection this side of heaven. We will face powerful temptations up until the day we die. We will resist them sometimes, and we will cave in lots of other times. Not even our worst failures will alter God’s love for us.
- ▶ Even though we are God’s beloved children, we should expect to face trials—lots of little ones and others that are big and terrifying. No Christian gets a pass from suffering. The Scripture doesn’t guarantee anyone a disease-free or accident-free life. On the contrary, the Bible says life will have its bitter moments and its glorious ones too. And the history of God’s people shows this to be true. When the pain doesn’t take our breath

away, the beauty just might. We will cry a lot. And we will do our share of laughing too.

“Your life is not going to be easy, and it should not be easy. It ought to be hard. It ought to be radical; it ought to be restless; it ought to lead you to places you’d rather not go.”  
—Henri Nouwen

We could go on and on:

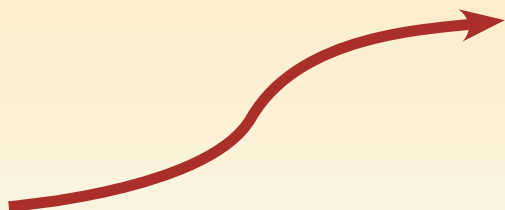
- ▶ How we won’t understand many things.
- ▶ How many of our prayers won’t be answered in ways we’d like.
- ▶ How serving others will be exhausting, and how some will never acknowledge our sacrifice, and others will actually grumble at our efforts.

We will want to quit again and again, which is why we need to follow Jesus with others alongside to encourage us.

Understanding these things is how we become healthily disillusioned about the spiritual life. These are the realities we should expect.

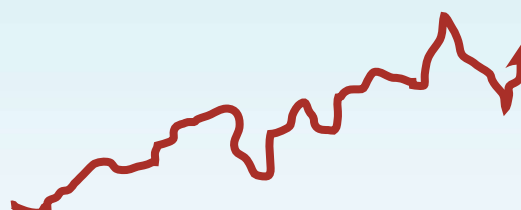
“How often we look upon God as our last and feeblest resource. We go to him because we have nowhere else to go. And then we learn that the storms of life have driven us, not upon the rocks, but into the desired haven.”—George MacDonald

**How we imagine the spiritual life . . .**



- smooth
- predictable
- always inspiring
- full of clarity

**What the spiritual life is really like . . .**



- hard
- unpredictable
- full of ups and downs
- full of ambiguity



## Take-Home Reflections

C. S. Lewis' ingenious book, *The Screwtape Letters* tells the tale of a crafty, mid-level devil giving advice to a less wily apprentice. Screwtape, the older demon, discusses the way God often gives new converts obvious reminders of his presence, warm spiritual feelings, and even a strong desire to turn away from temptation.

"But," Screwtape continues, "He never allows this state of affairs to last long. Sooner or later He withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all those supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be."

In other words, God allows his children to struggle. Struggle is a normal part of the spiritual life. Struggle is how we grow and make progress in the faith. If you are struggling in the faith, it's not a sign of failure. It's a sign you are on the path that all disciples are called to walk.

So keep walking. *And make sure you walk with other believers.* Discipleship is a hard battle and a holy journey, but we were never meant to fight or journey alone (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

If we don't give up, we will be able to say what the apostle Paul said just before his death, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

## Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our verse, 1 Timothy 6:12.
2. Read the sections from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians in which he describes his life as a devoted follower and servant of Jesus (2 Corinthians 6:4–10; 11:23–28). Why and how do you think Paul was able to endure such struggle?
3. Wrestle with one or two of the following:
  - ▶ What were your expectations of God and of the spiritual life when you first came to faith?
  - ▶ Have any of those expectations changed as you've grown spiritually?
  - ▶ What has this lesson helped you see differently about following Jesus?
  - ▶ What specific spiritual battles are most fierce in your life right now—fighting envy, lust, or doubt; trying to develop healthy spiritual habits, etc.?