

BE GRACIOUS TO ME, O LORD, FOR I AM PINING AWAY;

HEAL ME, O LORD, FOR MY BONES ARE DISMAYED.

AND MY SOUL IS GREATLY DISMAYED;

BUT YOU, O LORD-HOW LONG?

I AM WEARY WITH MY SIGHING;

EVERY NIGHT I MAKE MY BED SWIM,

I DISSOLVE MY COUCH WITH MY TEARS.

PSALM 6:2-3,6



# the Middle Time



CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD,

AND RENEW A STEADFAST SPIRIT WITHIN ME.

DO NOT CAST ME AWAY FROM YOUR PRESENCE

AND DO NOT TAKE YOUR HOLY SPIRIT FROM ME.

RESTORE TO ME THE JOY OF YOUR SALVATION

AND SUSTAIN ME WITH A WILLING SPIRIT.

PSALM 51:10-12

# doldrums

**BACK IN THE DAYS** WHEN the United States was a military presence in Vietnam, I was one of about a thousand sailors aboard the cruiser *U.S.S. Chicago*—a flag ship running a circuitous route around the Gulf of Tonkin. Being a teenager from the land-locked state of Iowa, I was a stranger to the rolling, flip-flopping acrobatics that even a large warship can experience on the high seas.

A military ship is not a luxury ocean liner filled with paying customers. The government does not spend a lot of money on stabilizers intended as a digestive aid during high seas. The green-gilled swabby is expected to get used to eating from a tray that is trying desperately to fly across the room, and to learn how to walk with a curious rolling gait through passageways that are tipping and rolling from side to side.

But odder still were those infrequent days when the vast ocean was strangely calm, its surface utterly flat. With the top of the liquid depths as smooth and still as a linoleum floor, it felt as if the massive warship was nothing more than a toy boat sitting in a vast, empty room. The eerie calm was as unnerving as the silence of a vast desert roaring in the ears. Had we been on a sailing ship, we

would have been helpless to move an inch. It was, in its barren vastness, quite claustrophobic.

In nautical parlance it's called the "doldrums"—a word that has been borrowed to describe that flat, sluggish, unproductive feeling that most humans experience from time to time. In Spiritual terms it can describe a period of listless separation from God—a feeling of "*He* no longer cares, so why should *I*," or that God has simply become irrelevant for the moment. Our mind becomes sluggish and dispirited, our thoughts rooted to the soil, rather than soaring with the eagle.

When we are there—and we all will be—the remedy is nearer than we think, for the Lord never steps away from His children. He is as near as a loving, attentive dad who remains always nearby to pick up his child and encourage, and comfort, and to wipe away every tear.

A Psalm of David.  
Hear my cry, O God;  
Give heed to my prayer.  
From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint;  
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.  
For You have been a refuge for me,  
A tower of strength against the enemy.  
Let me dwell in Your tent forever;  
Let me take refuge in the shelter of Your wings.

Psalm 61:1-4

*My heart has no desire to stay  
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;  
Though some may dwell where these abound,  
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,  
By faith on heaven's table land,  
A higher plane than I have found;  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

*(Johnson Oatman, Jr.)*

*Lord God, there are times when my spirit-energy seems to vaporize, leaving me feeling cold and disconnected from You. There are times when my thoughts become thick and wrapped in a cocoon of cotton—until my life in You becomes only a distant, alien memory. When that happens, come to my rescue, Lord, and lift me out of my doldrums. Revive my spirit with Yours, and lead me to a higher place—that place where You dwell.*

**AS SUMMER LAZILY EXTENDS ITSELF** through July and into August, everything around us seems to slow down. Most of the birds have had their families, and have either moved on—or at least are enjoying a break from filling the gaping, voracious beaks of the young. The deer have had their fawns, and are now patiently conducting them into an exploration of their new lives. The turtles in the pond do little more than sun themselves, and even the excitable, hardworking chipmunks have slowed their pace.

“Come, let us return to the Lord.  
For He has torn us, but He will heal us;  
He has wounded us,  
    but He will bandage us.  
He will revive us after two days;  
He will raise us up on the third day,  
That we may live before Him.  
So let us know,  
    let us press on to know the Lord.  
His going forth is as certain as the dawn;  
And He will come to us like the rain,  
Like the spring rain watering the earth.”  
Hosea 6:1-3

*Revive Us Again*  
*Revive Us Again*

Many of the growing things have shifted into neutral as well. After the vigorous growth of the spring and early summer, the trees and bushes now look much the same day after day. And, while changes are taking place, the garden will appear much the same tomorrow as it does today. The potatoes are established, the tomatoes have filled their supporting cages, and the vine crops have laid out their overwhelming growth to cover the soil.

Even the lawn has slowed its growth. The heavy rains we received this morning would have, in the spring, excited luxuriant growth, and would have required mowing every few days. But now, during the lazy middle days of summer, the grass takes its sweet time to reach such a height.

For thus says the high and exalted One  
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,  
“I dwell on a high and holy place,  
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit  
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly  
And to revive the heart of the contrite.”  
Isaiah 57:15

In the springtime of our relationship with the Lord, there is excited, luxuriant growth. We look forward to time spent with Him. We open His word with eager anticipation, hungry for His counsel. There is a powerful, almost overwhelming desire to love Him, to serve Him.

But as springtime moves into summer, and summer begins its slow descent into autumn, the pace of the relationship slows. Our early fervor diminishes, it becomes easier to go days without seeking the Lord’s counsel, and the obligations of this age re-exert their

claim on our time and affections. We search harder for the words to our prayers, and our ears become less attuned to His voice.

In the summer of our relationship with God, it is easy to think that the growth has stopped—that because the rains have diminished and the heat has caused us to stop looking up, we must settle for the monotonous plateau on which we find ourselves.

But if we think of that relationship in terms of a lifetime, instead of a solitary year, we come to realize that while there will indeed be the slower seasons of summer and autumn, there will just as surely follow the bracing rush of winter and the glorious new growth of the spring.

We don’t spend just one year with the Lord; we spend a lifetime—indeed, an eternity. And while we will surely experience summers in which we become sluggish and lazy, to accept that condition as the inevitable norm is to deny that springtime will occur again.

*Father, there are days that I step away from You—or worse, forget about You. There are days that the thick, gasping smog of my world dulls senses tuned to Yours, and it seems easier to just go along. But then, Father, my spirit cries out to Yours; that part of me connected to You reaches out beyond the smog to grasp Your extended hand. And, once again, it is spring.*

# Drowning

**WHEN I WAS A VERY LITTLE BOY** the municipal swimming pool in my hometown was a huge and imposing ocean of chlorinated water. Revisiting that dilapidated container in Riverview Park as an adult, I can see that it was barely larger than a typical backyard pool, but as a boy its waters seemed to stretch to the horizon.

One day those waters got the better of me. I could not swim, but I could walk on the bottom. So, spying an older friend who was swimming the circumference of the pool, I pursued, safely trudging after them as they rounded the shallow end, then headed for the opposite end, where the diving boards were. Intent on the pursuit, I failed to notice that the water was deepening, and in moments I was beneath the waves, struggling for air.

Even after the decades that have passed since that incident, I can still feel the claustrophobic sensation of being immersed in that smothering cocoon—of being utterly surrounded by something unfriendly, cut off from all sound and life-giving air. But then, after what seemed an eternity, a strong hand reached down into my watery grave and yanked me up and out onto the safety of dry land. Just when all seemed lost, my dad reached down into my abyss, and pulled me to safety.

There are days when God seems not to exist. There are days when it seems there must be a thick, iron canopy arched above the clouds, blocking any two-way communication between earth and heaven. And there are days when,

though He does still exist, God just doesn't seem to care about our mournful entreaties.

How shortsighted we have become in this age of instant news, instant food, and instant gratification. How short-tempered we have become to expect God to adjust His schedule to ours, to expect Him to realize how terribly busy we are, so would He please just take care of this one simple matter of answering our prayer! I mean, how hard can it be?

Immersed in the watery grave of a smothering, narcissistic world, we can feel, at times, utterly cut off from our heavenly Father. But we cannot escape the hard truth of His sovereign will. What good is there in calling upon a God who does only our bidding? That would not be a god, but a marionette. The truth of living is found in the waiting, in the dependency, in the strong arm that ultimately reaches down into our abyss and draws us up to safety.

**But as for me, my prayer is to You, O Lord, at an acceptable time; O God, in the greatness of Your lovingkindness,**

**Answer me with Your saving truth. Deliver me from the mire and do not let me sink;**

**May I be delivered from my foes and from the deep waters.**

**May the flood of water not overflow me**

**Nor the deep swallow me up,  
Nor the pit shut its mouth on me.**

Psalm 69:13-15

Save me, O God,  
For the waters have threatened my life.  
I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me.  
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched;  
My eyes fail while I wait for my God.

Psalm 69:1-3

ALL THE SEA OUTSIDE A VESSEL IS LESS TO BE FEARED THAN THAT WHICH FINDS ITS WAY INTO THE HOLD. IN WATER ONE MIGHT SWIM, BUT IN MUD AND MIRE ALL STRUGGLING IS HOPELESS; THE MIRE SUCKS DOWN ITS VICTIM. [NOW] THE SORROW GATHERS EVEN GREATER FORCE; HE IS AS ONE CAST INTO THE SEA, THE WATERS GO OVER HIS HEAD. HIS SORROWS WERE FIRST WITHIN, THEN AROUND, AND NOW ABOVE HIM. MANY OF US KNOW WHAT WATCHING AND WAITING MEAN; AND WE KNOW SOMETHING OF THE FAILING EYE WHEN HOPE IS LONG DEFERRED. JESUS KNEW HOW BOTH TO PRAY AND TO WATCH, AND HE WOULD HAVE US LEARN THE LIKE. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE SHOULD PRAY TILL THE THROAT IS DRY, AND WATCH TILL THE EYES GROW DIM. ONLY THUS CAN WE HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH HIM IN HIS SUFFERINGS. WHAT! CAN WE NOT WATCH WITH HIM ONE HOUR? DOES THE FLESH SHRINK BACK? O CRUEL FLESH TO BE SO TENDER OF THYSELF, AND SO UNGENEROUS TO THY LORD!

(CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON)

*O Lord, my God, in Your mercy You have reached down and lifted me up to a place of safety. You have heard my cry, and cared about me when everyone else fell silent. What little I have with which to praise You! So, along with all of Your creation, I will lift up my voice—just as You lifted up me from the abyss—and I will shout Your praise. May this humble choir bring glory and honor to Your name.*

*O Thou, to whose all-searching sight  
The darkness shineth as the light,  
Search, prove my heart; it pants for Thee;  
O burst these bonds, and set it free!*

*Wash out its stains, refine its dross,  
Nail my affections to the Cross;  
Hallow each thought; let all within  
Be clean, as Thou, my Lord, art clean!  
(Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf)*

**ABOUT TWELVE YEARS AGO, WHEN** we were preparing to leave southern California to move back to our home state of Iowa, more than one person questioned our sanity in leaving the land of perpetual sun for the backwater of five-foot snow drifts. My reply was always the same: I love the snow, and the different seasons of the Midwest; the one thing I hate, however, is the summer humidity.

I recall the humidity of the Philippines, back in 1970 when I was touring the South Pacific islands courtesy of the United States Navy. Because our ship was sort of air conditioned, a swabby

oxygen a rare commodity and the water cooler a popular one. Tools slip from one's hand from the sweat running down the arm; salty drippings blind the eyes. All together, I'd rather have root canal, thank you.

But this morning we awoke to the clean fresh delight of dry, cooler air. How wonderful to once again throw open the windows, to be greeted by sweet morning air devoid of the oppressively thick wetness—to once again hear the birds and frogs and crickets, rather than the monotonous drone of the air conditioner. We could breathe again!

And that fresh, drier air felt very much like the happy freedom of praise.

You have turned for me my  
mourning into dancing;  
You have loosed my sackcloth  
and girded me with gladness,  
That my soul may sing praise to  
You and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give thanks  
to You forever.

Psalm 30:11-12

The world with its transient pleasures eventually sucks away all our joy. It wraps itself around us, suffocating our hope as if with a wet woolen blanket on a miserably hot day. It lies heavy on the lungs, whispering temptations into the ear, while it sucks out any remaining happiness, freedoms, and expectations for release.

But when we throw off the world and its sickly-sweet enticements, and return to the open arms of our forgiving Savior, suddenly the weight of oppression is lifted. The air is once again clean and bright, and filled with the sweet sounds of heavenly praise.

And we can breathe again!

## Breathing Free

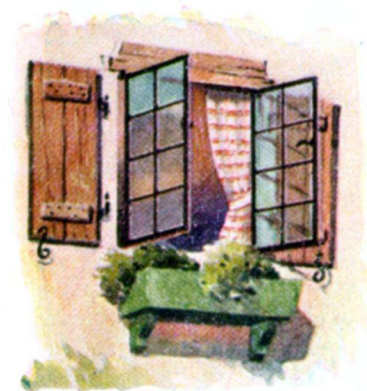
could ready himself for liberty in relative comfort: showering and putting on the freshly starched whites in preparation for hitting the sights and sounds of Olongapo City, just outside the gates of the Subic Bay Naval Station. Scrubbed and pressed, I would bound up the ladder, throw open the hatch—and immediately be wilted down to a sweat-drenched wad of cotton by the oppressive humidity of that fair land.

Sometimes, during the periods of summer humidity in Iowa, I wax nostalgic for the relative comfort of the Philippines.

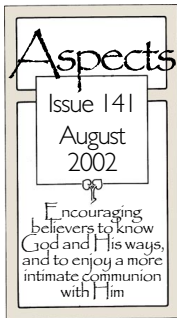
We've been living with these clammy, breath-sucking, sweltering conditions for most of this summer. During such periods, the heavy, wet air makes

For His anger is but for a moment,  
His favor is for a lifetime;  
Weeping may last for the night,  
But a shout of joy comes in the morning.  
Psalm 30:5

*I am made of this damnable flesh, and I live in a strange place where weak flesh is deified. But Father, as I throw open the window to a new day, the fresh scent of Your grace is on the breeze. Where before I inhaled the heavy, suffocating stench of a world that has forgotten You, now I breathe in the sweet aroma of Your truth. Forgive me, Father, for forgetting—even for a moment—that my life is in Yours, and that Your presence is as close as the praise on my lips.*







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