

## **Spiritual Despair, Jedi Knights And Keeping Your Decoder Ring**

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*"Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?" (Psalm 42:11)*

### **"Luke, Beware The Dark Side"**

I can still remember where I was on May 15, 1984 when I received the news. I was driving in my car, headed downtown when the local Christian radio station ran the news blurb. Author and theologian Francis Schaeffer had died. As the news sank in I began to weep and nearly had to pull over as tears welled up in my eyes. I had encountered Schaeffer's writings while I was a college student at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill). His ability to reduce complicated schools of philosophy and theology to a level the rest of us could grasp was legendary. One of my summer college roommates had traveled to L'Abri in Switzerland and spent time with Schaeffer. While in college, my roommate (Thomas Victor Morris) wrote one of the first critiques of Schaeffer's work and was published by Moody Press (I literally took the phone call from the publisher who asked, *"Who is this guy?"*). Tom is now a PhD at Yale (last I heard). Francis Schaeffer taught an entire generation of inquisitive believers how to think and to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. His passion over the issue of abortion led several of us during our seminary days (Denver) to found a Christian pro-life advocacy organization in order to confront our Post-Christian culture with a Christian perspective on the sanctity of life. As a result, three passionate seminary students received an invitation to spend three days lecturing on ethics and abortion in the Philosophy Department at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Did Schaeffer have an impact on my life. Without question. An impact which continues to this day (which helps explain my low threshold when it comes to tolerating either theological or philosophical nonsense). So on that day in May of 1984 I wept as one weeps for the loss of a friend and mentor, and I wept because I understood what the Church had lost.

I nearly wept again last Sunday, but for a different reason. This time it was for the son of Dr. Schaeffer. I had heard several years ago that Dr. Schaeffer's son, Franky, had converted to the Greek Orthodox faith, but beyond that I had lost touch with his comings and goings. Franky had always had a "rocky" relationship with his fellow evangelicals. His early writings and movies were more than "edgy". They belied a palpable anger toward the foibles of the evangelical community as well as what he saw as the intellectual dishonesty of the larger secular establishment. If his father had been a "weeping prophet" then Franky was an "angry" one. Personally, I thought his movie "The Second American Revolution" was brilliantly done. But, alas . . . Scripture warns us that the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God, but how many of us actually HEED such warnings. It all seemed to come to a head in the late 1980s when Franky turned his back on "evangelicalism" and converted to the Greek Orthodox Faith (no slight intended toward our Greek Orthodox brothers. One of the co-founders of Feed Spokane is now in a monastery somewhere in Thessalonica studying for the Greek Orthodox ministry. After reading one of my newsletters he told me I sounded almost ready for converting. Sadly, I had to inform him that I'm allergic to incense - blessings Greg!). It was at this point that Franky Schaeffer fell off my radar screen . . . until last Sunday.

When Frank Schaeffer re-appeared on my radar, I wanted to weep. As I examined his website and read some of his posts on "Huffington Posts" I realized that Luke Skywalker (alias Frank Schaeffer) had not listened to Yoda ("Beware the dark side"). He had allowed his anger to push him to "the dark side of the force". He has essentially repudiated his evangelical heritage, along with the ministry of his parents, having sold his birthright for a bowl of "New-York-Times-Best-Selling-Author" pottage. His latest book is entitled, "Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back". It is his "memoir" in which he recounts his many encounters with a wide variety of evangelical leaders who, by his description, more resemble the cast of characters from the cabaret scene in the first Star Wars movie than anything resembling authentic followers of Christ. Luke Skywalker, it seems, now serves the Emperor and blogs for "The Death Star Gazette". The question for us at this point is simple: "How does Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight, end up as a Dark Lord of the Sith?" I found the answer in Psalm 42.

*"As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the*

*living God; When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" These things I remember, and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival." (Psalm 42: 1-4)*

Psalm 42 is one of those Psalms we believers love to quote, at least the first few verses. Verse one is "legendary" among those Christians whom A. W. Tozer calls, "the children of the burning heart". It appears on the cover of my copy of Tozer's "The Pursuit of God". But the interesting thing about Psalm 42 isn't how it begins - with the passionate pursuit of God - but how it ends. It ends with the Psalmist coping with personal, spiritual despair. "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?." (Psalm 42:11) So, how does Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight, end up as a Dark Lord of the Sith? The same way the Psalmist begins with the passionate pursuit of God and ends up in personal, spiritual despair. Both Luke and the Psalmist got there by taking their focus off of God and allowing it to fall onto people (and circumstances).

There is a genuine sense in which Luke, er, Frank is right in his despairing observations regarding American Evangelicalism and many (certainly not all, or even a majority) of its leaders. If you and I were together for a morning of sipping over-priced lattes we could probably waste it away citing an endless parade of people and events that would make P.T. Barnum both incredulous and jealous. A local mega church that spends \$1.5 million expanding its already enormous parking lot ("You're parked in the Apostle Paul, Row 13. Remember that, or you'll never see your car again!") while taking a \$20,000 offering for the homeless & needy in the city. A televangelist who builds a \$20 million personal mansion in Texas. Prosperity preachers who argue, "The question isn't why I wear a Rolex, but why you don't". Christian television ministries whose sets look like they shopped at the garage sale of a French "house of ill-repute". Healing ministries that don't heal but do raise substantial money on the promise of healing. Nationally known preachers who, when asked on national television "Is Jesus the only way?" are unable to answer the question (well, what he actually said was, "Larry, it isn't for me to judge". Don't worry, Joel, Jesus will judge for you). The list goes on and on. In light of this (and much more) the surprise isn't that Congress is investigating six well known ministries for financial misconduct. The surprise is that it took them this long to get around to it, and that Congress isn't investigating ten times that many. Do we not understand? Build a \$20 million personal mansion and Congress will investigate you. Spend \$20 million sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and Congress still might investigate you . . . to discover how you could accomplish with \$20 million what they couldn't accomplish with \$200 million! As one of my favorite radio talk show personalities might say, it's enough to make you want to wrap your head with duct tape to keep your head from exploding. Unfortunately, you might not be able to buy enough duct tape to adequately do the job.

As I observed earlier, Psalm 42 begins with the Psalmist in the passionate pursuit of God, only to find himself (or herself) "derailed" and in despair as a result of . . . people, "I will say to God my rock, 'Why hast Thou forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?' As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, While they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" And you and I will find no greater "adversaries" to our faith than the members of our own evangelical communities. How many passionate believers do you know (I know many) who have left the institutional evangelical church for house churches and other alternative expressions for no other reason than to preserve their faith.

### **"Why Are You In Despair, O My Soul?"**

O.K., lets get to the point. Some of you on this list and reading this letter are "in despair" and it's no joke. You can honestly say with the Psalmist, "I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God" (42:4). But those days are past and you are hurting. You haven't told anyone, because that would be an admission of spiritual "failure" and you're genuinely afraid the other Jedi Knights will take away your light saber and Jedi decoder ring. You thought "simple church" or "house church" was the answer to all of your spiritual anxieties. By now you've discovered that simple churches and house churches are made up of people who are just as dysfunctional as the ones you left behind in the box. All of your problems followed you home and now meet in your living room. So, what's a young Jedi Knight to do when lured toward the dark side of the force by the anger, frustration and disappointment he (or she) feels toward the spiritual dysfunctionality we see around us? I'm not Yoda. I only pretend to be a Jedi Master. But let me offer several

suggestions:

**1. Give thanks that, unlike the Psalmist, you have duct tape available.** Buy a generous supply and wrap your head frequently. Let your "battle cry" be: "Duct tape! I need more duct tape!" If you've missed the subtlety of my humor at this point (say it ain't so), my point is this: Keep your sense of humor about you. You'll need it. I'm convinced that God laughs. Someone once said, "If you want to hear God laugh, just tell Him your plans." Learn to laugh, at yourself and at others. It's cheaper than counseling, it beats weeping and it short circuits anger. Question: How many Pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Ten. One to change the bulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness. Question: How many Evangelicals does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: None. They enjoy working in the dark. Question: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Don't Know. We'll need to form a Committee and study the question. In the mean time, nobody do anything. O.K., if that wasn't funny, then you really do need counseling, my young "padawan learner"! May I suggest Lucy VanPelt. The doctor is in, and it only costs a nickel.

**2. Don't let anyone "glad-talk" you out of your despair.** Say what? That's right. Christians are often guilty of ignoring people's issues and jumping straight to what they think is the "spiritual" punch line. We often give answers to questions that people aren't asking, while ignoring as "unspiritual" the questions they ARE asking. Why he was in despair was an important issue to the Psalmist. How do we know this? Because he asks it 3 times (42:5 & 11 and 43:5). If you don't truly appreciate the question you are wrestling with, neither will you fully appreciate the answer when it comes. And here it comes . . .

**3. Get your eyes OFF of people and circumstances and get them focused back on God ALONE.** There is a basic spiritual (and practical) principle which says the more you look at a problem the bigger it becomes. We see this in Numbers 13:33. The 12 spies had gone into the land of Canaan and seen both its blessings (clusters of grapes you could carry on a pole!) and its challenges: "There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." The Nephilim were "giants" (Goliath was a descendant of Anak and the Nephilim). But the sons of Israel made the mistake of focusing on these "giants," so much so that they began to see themselves as "grasshoppers" in comparison. All they could see were giants, because they had lost sight of the God Who slays giants. The result? Despair. "We can never defeat these guys. It's hopeless!" (Read Numbers Chapter 14). Some of you are bogged down in spiritual hopelessness and despair. Not because you aren't facing very real giants and very tangible, practical problems (no minimizing the situation here), but because you have lost sight of the greatness of our God for whom NOTHING is impossible (NOTICE: I said "nothing is impossible" with God. I didn't say He is going to solve the problem the way you want Him to!).

Like the Psalmist, it is time for you to "remember":

*"O my God, my soul is in despair within me: therefore I remember Thee . . ." (42:6).*

It is time for you to get your eyes off of people and problems, and to "remember" the greatness of God. God is still King over the flood of human foolishness. He rules over His creation, even when that creation behaves in a manner that embarrasses the King and all who know Him. Jesus is still Lord over His Church. And His promise, both then and now, is that He will build His Church . . . in spite of the foibles, failures and foolishness of some who use His Name but may not even be His (Matthew 16:18; 7:21-23).

Like the Psalmist, many of you began your journey with a passion for the power and presence of God, "When shall I come and appear before God?" It was that passion and that desire that drove you into simple house church and into what you thought was the company of "the children of the burning heart"; people whom you thought shared your passion. But now you've been hit with a harsh dose of cold reality. Your passion has waned, you are in despair and you are questioning . . . everything. My goal in this letter, my young padawan learner, is to let you know . . . it's O.K. No one here is going to take away your light saber or your secret decoder ring. The well kept secret is that many a Jedi Knight has walked through this valley before you and emerged on the other side; wiser, stronger and more passionate than ever. Remember. Our hope is not in people, the outlandish things they do, or the excellent books they write. Our hope is not in our new church paradigm: house church, simple church, emergent church or any other form of Church. Our hope is not in

any other created person or thing. Our hope is in the God Who loves us in spite of ourselves, the Savior Who redeems us from all our foolishness and the Spirit Who comforts and empowers us to rise up when we fall and to fight another day. Just ask the Psalmist:

*"Why are you in despair, O my soul?  
And why have you become disturbed within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,  
The help of my countenance, and my God."*