

Coffee with Phil. 39. Consolation Not Desolation

Introduction.

Well, hi there and welcome to today's podcast, this is Coffee with Phil, my name's Phil Strong and this is episode 39 of Coffee with Phil, and today, we're going to go in a very interesting direction. I'm not sure what you think of the title of this podcast, Consolation Not Desolation, and by the end of it, you may agree with me, or in fact, I might disagree with myself.

Look, today is going to be really interesting. We're gonna talk about monks, mysticism, and we're going to talk about meditation. We're going to talk about what's going on, on the inside and how it might determine what we do on the outside. And this is really deep, and I've gotta say that I'm no expert, but my whole goal in recording this podcast is really to invite you to consider what does this look like for you. And in that I would also say that, you know, my whole point of this podcast is talking about a life of faith. Talking about a walk of faith and how do we do this walk of faith. And so I'm going to start by talking about Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and then we're going to end up by talking about our faith walk, and hopefully Saint Ignatius and a couple of other people have got some wisdom for us. So, let's just see what that looks like.

So, I want to start by asking a question, what is consolation and what is desolation? These are key phrases that we'll get into here today, and I will define them shortly, but it's far more than our feelings. When I first started looking into this, I was reminded of a quote that I've shared with you several times in this season of the podcast. I've certainly said to you that I have learned that God uses our emotions as signposts to help us find direction, and this has been something that has been taught to me by many of my guides, spiritual guides, and mentors, most of whom I find in books, and many of them say the same thing. But what I've discovered is it goes all the way back to Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and that's a place in Spain that I haven't been to, but he was the one that discovered this, and I'll talk about him shortly. But I want you to understand the whole point of this, and why would you listen to this, is the big issue here that I'm going to talk about, as the main reason for talking about it is the issue of faith. Faith. How do I see God in my world? That's my definition of faith today. How do I see God in my world? And I've been wrestling with this lately, in a good way, and getting some revelation, and I want to share that with you today, as far as how I'm walking it out.

St Ignatius of Loyola

But let me start by introducing you to Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the reason he's a Saint, is that he was canonised by the Catholic Church, already some of you are getting a little bit twitchy in your seats and reaching for the pause button or the skip, but don't do it, because we can learn a lot from these old timers, these fathers of the faith, these ones that have gone before us, and what I want you to do is to try and find the truth for you today in what I'm sharing with you.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, he discovered that life was more than feelings, and discovered that God was leading him, and I'll talk about that in a minute, but I would say this, I want you to understand, right at the beginning, that what I'm talking about today is far more than feelings. I want you to remember that we are physical beings living a spiritual reality. We've got to come to terms with the fact that we wrestle

not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, that we are people that are living a life in partnership with God, the creator of the universe, but in opposition with an enemy that tries to divide us away from our connection with God, and that's what this whole podcast is about, and that's what I'm wrestling with.

So let me introduce you to Saint Ignatius. He was alive in the 15th and 16th century, so if you really want to know the details, he was born in 1491 and lived right through till 1556. He was in the army and got injured, and during his recovery he had surgery. Can you imagine what surgery was like in the early fifteen hundreds, ah brutal, I think would be a word. Anyway, he's recovering from the surgery and he's contemplating life, he gets led to faith and Jesus Christ, through artwork and through revelation of what was depicted in the artwork, and the writings that he was given, and it says he was, he went through a spiritual conversion. So, he was one of those ones that came to his senses, turned toward Jesus, and understood that Jesus Christ is the son of God that could bring him to a relationship a with God as his father. In this place of deep conversion, he realised he needed to move away from a life in the military, and move into a full-time call to what he writes as a 'religious life'. And so anyway, that's his conversion, and he went on this journey and that was led by what he learned in his surgical recovery. Which you know, he's lying there trying to recover, and he's doing what's called contemplative meditation, and this is like in modern day terms you'd call this, I would call this, daydreaming with God, and so I've written down this definition because you might think meditation is bad and to be honest it is, if all you're doing is emptying your mind to achieve a state of nothingness, well, that's not God's design.

Contemplative meditation, by my definition, is allowing God's spirit to lead our minds to come to a place of discerning what he's saying, and a revelation of what he's showing us. So, the goal of contemplative meditation is allowing God's spirit to lead our mind to a place of discerning what God is saying and understanding the revelation that he puts before us. And so in this place here's Ignatius, he's on his recovery bed, and his mind is wandering, and he's wandering from the heights of euphoria, to understanding what God wants to do in him and through him, to the depths of despair and hopelessness, and in this place Ignatius has this moment of revelation, he's discerning that God was communicating directly with him, inviting him to reflect on his life and make decisions, and from a basis of connection with God to lead him in a wonderful direction. And so this is what Saint Ignatius just describes as consolation and desolation. And I want to move to explain that for you, because Ignatius gives us this framework for interpreting what's going on inside of us, and connecting with how God wants to lead us.

And so he writes this long writing called 'the spiritual exercises with regards to the rules for discerning of spirits', and this gets a little bit deep and complicated. I don't want to get into it, but what I do want to highlight with regards to Saint Ignatius is that he was the founder of the Jesuit movement, which is the group of people that devoted their lives to Jesus, and they were deep, and meditative contemplation, and going on long walks to connect with Jesus in a spiritual way.

Consolation and Desolation.

But consolation and desolation, let me give you definition here. Consolation is the positive upside, and desolation is the negative downside, but both of them can be used by God, and that's the key. Let me quote from the Jesuit website here. Ignatius says that consolation is when some interior movement in the soul is caused through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its creator and Lord, and

when it can and consequence love no created thing on the face of the Earth in itself, but in the creator of them all. So, this is the lens through which we look at the world, through the lens of God's love, that everything we see is from a connection with God, and so, I would describe this consolation as being this inner world are connecting with our inner world. Now Saint Ignatius calls it the interior movement of the soul, which can be described as our emotions.

But, when we dig into this, we understand that it's far more than a feeling, rather this is actually, more than a feeling, it's actually a framework for how we live and this is far greater, it's a state of being, it's a mindfulness in connection with God. The consolation is our connection with God, and seeing the world through the lens of God's love for us, now the contrast to that is what's called desolation. Which is the opposite. And Ignatius describes Desolation as the contrary of the above, darkness of the soul, disturbance of the soul, movement toward things low and earthly, and in that the agitations and temptations, moving to self-confidence without hope, without love, when one finds itself separated from his creator and Lord. So, let's keep it really, really simple and say a consolation is a moving toward God, and seeing the world through God's love for us, and desolation is moving away from God, and as a result of that, moving into a state of hopelessness, and in the worst case, sin and destruction.

Now this gets heavy, but let me just help you to understand what causes desolation. Desolation, moving away from God. Ignatius says to us, we can become desolate either through our own negligence to the matters of the spirit, which means not taking care of ourselves in our spiritual lifestyle, or, he says, God allows desolation 'cause he wants us to see how much we need him, to follow him, and obviously, thirdly, God does this in his sovereignty to remind us that we're not in control of God's grace, or in fact, we're not in control of our lives. And this is, I shared to you recently a podcast, with regards to my journey through a wall, and you can find that on the list of podcasts. But the point I want to make is that desolation is part of life, and we will walk through desolation. Our challenge is to see God in the midst of this desolation, so that we might reach for him, and this is what I've been learning recently. The ebb and flow of consolation and desolation is in fact the normal path of the Christian life. It's a matter of how life works, and so do we want to turn ourselves towards God, or do we want to turn ourselves away from God? And so we have a choice in life, when circumstances happen, and this is really what I want to make it practical for us right now. So let's get into the practicality of what your life, and my life, can look like as we wrestle for the walk of faith between consolation and desolation, let's get into it.

Your life and mine.

So, think of life being really practical. You're going through life, and something happens, you get an unexpected outcome in your work. You get a phone call where something doesn't go the way you planned, or someone actually confronts you and gives you some feedback that you don't like, or you get into a situation that's far beyond your capability, and you're just like, I don't know how I'm gonna resolve this. Maybe get into a fight with your, or a disagreement, with your spouse, your partner, and you're like, man, what's going on, are we even supposed to be living together in the same house? This is a moment of life, and this causes us to respond in our emotions and our inner life in that deep seat of our soul that Saint Ignatius was saying, would be affected, and we can choose to turn two ways. Often as human beings we get affected by the negativity of the spirits around us that are trying to tear us away from God, and this is where Ignatius was very clear that this is a spiritual battle, and there are two sides to that battle, there are two sides to the spirit world. God's spirit is trying to lead us into a place where we might remain connected with him, and the evil spirits, that unclean spirits are trying to tear us away

from God. So you have a situation at work, or at home, and all of a sudden you get gripped with fear, or anxiety, difficulty, pain, and how are you gonna respond to that? 'Cause you see, that's the spirit world trying to tear you away from God, and you can turn towards it, and you can embrace it and agree with it, but you can turn away from it, and you can reach for what God might say to you in the situation. These are the two tensions. Desolation is where you move toward the anxiety, and embrace the anxiety, and try and solve the problem while sitting in the midst of your anxiety, and fear or pain, or upset being upset. Or you can turn out of that desolation toward God, and the consolation, is really, remember, trying to see life through the lens of God's love for you, and to take hold of the promises, and the comfort that we have, being God's children.

And so what I find is, my good friend, Peter Scazzero, one of my spiritual mentors, never met the guy, I've listened to hours of his teaching, and just completed one of his programmes called 'Emotionally Healthy Spirituality'. I've been walking through this with a small group of friends. Peter Scazzero says this, he says, in a moment of uncertainty, where is this found? This is found in his podcast, 5 questions to guide you in decision making, and we'll put the link to this podcast in the show notes, you can find it on his website, or I get mine through Spotify. But he says this, question #2 is the one I want to focus on, he says, what do I sense God saying? And in this moment, when we're gripped with this tension, we have to say, what is the Holy Spirit saying to me through my experience with consolation and desolation? Peter says you've got to pay attention to your emotions. God uses our inner emotions, and that's that deep seat of our soul that I was describing before. God uses our inner emotions to communicate to us.

Consolations are evidence of God's presence, such as peace, and joy, and desire to be with others, feeling drawn toward the love of God. Desolations in contrast are emotions experienced when turning away from God, such as anxiety, fear, irritability, feeling alienated from others, feeling driven away from God. Emotions are not foolproof, so we need to carefully discern what they might be saying to us. Peter continues, and he says emotions are a gift from God that tell us something, if we know how to read them. They can help discern if we are choosing God's will or choosing our own self-will. And I found this remarkable as I unpacked it, thinking my reaction and my response, my behaviour to any situation, can be defined as either turning toward God or turning away from God.

So, I have a challenge, let's just think about challenges I've had recently. I'd say I've got a financial mountain I'm trying to climb, and it's shadow over me is huge and dark, and I don't know how I'm going to walk through, or climb this mountain, and I can get gripped with uncertainty, and fear, and anxiety, and if I embrace it, and I turn toward that as a desolation, I find myself getting more hopeless, I find myself in a place of no faith whatsoever, and then I find myself in a position where I'm going, how am I going to fix this? Whereas in contrast, if I get gripped by that moment, and I think the mountain of this financial challenge ahead of me is massive and its shadow is dark, and I'm certain that I'm just not able to deal with this. In consolation I turn toward God, and in consolation I look at the situation through the lens of God's love for me, and in consolation I'd reach out to God and say, well, I can't do this on my own, I need God close to me, if I get close to God, then God will be my solution in this problem, and that's how consolations can help me. So, consolations are a discipline that I can have in order to become more hopeful, and to remain connected with God, and this is the brilliance in the writing of Saint Ignatius, in his framework that he gives us in what's called his spiritual disciplines, and this is what I found fascinating. He's got this rule or principles and, he's got fourteen of these rules, and you might think, oh my gosh, I finished school, I don't want more rules. Well, what we discovered in Peter

Scazzero's programme is that the original meaning of this word, rule, in the way that it was translated into English, is not helpful. But the meaning of it is, to have a trellis, or a framework, and the picture that's given is that these rules become a framework through which something can bring life and to grow. So, you imagine a tomato plant that you might put against a frame, or a trellis, and the framework helps the plant to have structure, to grow, to receive light, in order that it might bear fruit, that's what a trellis does in a garden. Well, in the minds of the fathers of the faith, and these meditative, contemplative, men of faith in search for life with Jesus Christ in the spirit, they created these rules, because they knew the rules would be the framework they needed in order to thrive in life and partnership with Jesus and his spirit. So don't think of rules as negative. But what I've been doing lately is, I've been calling them a framework, my framework for how I want to live my life in order that it would help me to grow and allow God's light to shine into my life, in order that I would bear fruit in my life, that gives glory to God as my creator.

And Saint Ignatius creates these rules that he lays out, there's fourteen of them, I don't want to go through it. But the point I'm making is that these rules help us to combat, or overcome desolation in order that we might turn through the disheartened state, and to reach for God through disciplines. Through prayer, through contemplation, through commanding our soul to praise God, to resist the devil so that he flees from us. And thinking of God as sovereign, and his providence in the situation, in order that we might choose God in the midst of our wake up call, which would cause us to come back to our place of faith and conversion of faith in who God is as our saviour. So, God can use the darkest times in our lives in order that we might reach for God, and this is where I want to bring it back to our life of faith.

Our faith walk.

Our faith walk, this is what this whole podcast is about. How do we live through the good, the bad and the ugly in our faith walk, as we wrestle with this, and here's what I've decided. A faith lifestyle, a life of faith, confronts us often, it confronts us with a need to have faith. So, in the example I gave you before, there's a financial situation where I need to have faith in God's provision, in his guidance, his wisdom, and his leading. Kathy in her health challenges in this season of her life, the life of faith requires us, it confronts us, to have faith for her healing and deliverance, that God will bring her to a place of wholeness.

If you've ever been in a situation where you've been disconnected from loved ones, that lifestyle moment confronts you with the need to have faith that God is a God of reconciliation and restoration. And in my wandering, and in my pondering, in my scripture reading, I come across the story of Jesus in the way he relates to a father, who has a son, who is possessed by an unclean spirit. And the story's in Mark Chapter 9, you can read it, it starts at verse 14. And the father comes, and he's looking, he's hopeless, except for that Jesus might help his son to be set free from the demonisation, this boy can't speak, and it says, when the spirit seizes him, it throws him to the ground, he foams at the mouth, he gnashes his teeth, his body becomes rigid. This unclean spirit's got control of this young boy and is robbing him of life, and Jesus says everything is possible for one who believes, and I just love this response that the boy's father says, he's, look, I do believe, but help me with my unbelief, help me with my unbelief. And I just found this amazing, this father is standing before the creator of all, Jesus, who has set people free from blindness, he's healed the lame, he's healed the deaf, he's certainly delivered many people from unclean spirits, and this man knows it, he's seen it with his own eyes, and he's come

searching for freedom, and he says, if you can do it, will you help me? And he says, look, I am believing, but you gotta help me with this wrestling with this unbelief, there's a tension.

And I was reading commentaries on this, and really I just want to cut to the chase, I don't want to get into teaching moment, I want to say this. Here's what Jesus is actually saying, I can do it, and if your faith takes hold of my omnipotence, all is done. And what I mean by that is, in the midst of our desolation, if we turn to Jesus and say, help me with my unbelief, help me with my lack of faith in this situation. If you hold on to him, that's the consolation that you need. That's looking at life through the lens of God's love for you. But when we doubt, when we turn away, and we think Jesus doesn't want to transform my situation, we let go of Jesus and we fall into desolation. And desolation only leads to destruction because it removes us from connection with Jesus.

The final key.

So, as I close this podcast, I want to come back to our friend Saint Ignatius, and rule number six in his spiritual disciplines, is part of the framework for thriving in life and overcoming spiritual challenges. Rule number six is, don't forget to pray. I'm personalising it. Don't forget to pray. There's a lot more words than that. But prayer is our connection with God. Prayer is our conversation with God. Prayer is our lamenting, our crying, our yelling, our arguing, our shouting at God, or our pleading with God. But all God wants is that we would talk with him. And if we reach out to him and say I do believe, would you help me with my lack of faith? God is willing to reach down, and to transform our hearts, in order that we be connected with him, in order that we would find hope in our circumstances.

I've been reading John Eldridge's latest book, it's called 'Resilient, restoring your weary soul in these turbulent times', in the chapter that I was reading over the weekend is about connection with Jesus, and John writes this on page 143, If you wanted to find it. He says finding God always begins with loving him. So friends get on your face before God, pour out your heart to him, worship him, love on him, and in that, you will find God, and when you turn to God and hold on to him, you will find consolation in your trouble, you'll find hope, and faith to overcome, and you will find Jesus will help you with your unbelief.

That was a really interesting conversation. I hope it didn't get too much of a mind bender for you. But as always, I've really enjoyed spending time with you. I hope this has helped you in your life of faith, and I pray that you, and those that you do life with, will find strength in Jesus Christ. Don't forget to share this podcast with a friend of yours to give them hope, and I'll look forward to catching up with you soon on Coffee with Phil. Take care.