

## **Dealing With Depression Biblically**

We've been looking at dealing with common issues biblically. First, we looked at anger; last week we looked at worry. We've been seeing that though the world has many supposed answers, they fall short of the Bible's advice. Too often the Bible's advice is ignored, because Christians are simply too lazy to study the Word for themselves, to search out its truths and saturate their minds with it.

Today we look at another issue, that of depression. Depression: all of us face it at some point. That feeling of emptiness, loss and meaninglessness. That feeling of hopelessness and restlessness. It's a terribly draining emotion, one that leaves you with so little zest for life, something that saps a person of their creative energies, of their drive and zeal.

As we've seen with anger and worry, the world has many methods for dealing with depression. The world is convinced that depression is primarily a physical condition. So there are loads of different pills to take, to lift the spirits, to 'restore the chemical imbalances in the brain'. Others resort to alcohol, drugs, food music, entertainment, sex to try and dull the depression. In fact, the world's philosophy really revolves around fighting that empty feeling with an ongoing barrage of entertainment through TV, music, friends, restaurants, holidays and so on. Anything but that sad, empty feeling. Ultimately, though, it does not seem to be working, for people remain depressed, and the world seems to have to go ever further, faster, higher, louder to achieve the same anti-depressant excitement.

What does the Bible say about depression? As we have been seeing, our goal is always to get the Bible's perspective on the issue. Once we see it, we choose to think correctly, to think about the problem as God does. So our minds are renewed. When we think correctly, the major battle is won, whether it be anger, hurt, worry or depression, for all those emotions occur within the mind. So let us examine what the Bible says about depression. Once again, so much of this comes from Bob Jones University Press' tracts by Jim Berg on dealing with these various emotions.

First, we should note that sometimes depression can have physical causes. Hormonal imbalances, an infection, a thyroid condition and other physical causes can possibly cause depression. If depression persists, it's acceptable to go to a doctor to see if there is any organic condition underlying the depression. But it is my belief that physical causes are not always the true cause of depression. Rather, depression often results from living incorrectly, from thinking incorrectly and from handling life in a way out of God's will. Very often, the 'chemical imbalance in the brain' may be a symptom of the problem, not the cause. If there is a medical condition causing the depression, then some treatment will be needed. But too often, physicians quickly prescribe a pill which 'lifts' the patient for a time, till it wears off and they descend back into depression.

I believe, like with all the emotions, we don't want to treat symptoms, we want to treat the cause. What is the cause of depression? Proverbs 13:12 sums it up: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but *when* the desire cometh, *it is* a tree of life." The Bible is saying that when hope is taken away, the heart, the centre of us becomes sick, diseased, deeply sorrowful. Now that is extremely relevant for depression.

Depression, at its root, is a loss of hope. It is a deep-seated hopelessness about life. A loss of hope is what is at the core of depression. Consider that someone who has hope

that things will get better, or has some form of optimism for the future cannot, by definition, be chronically depressed. Depression is at some level a loss of hope about the present, the future, life, dreams, goals and so on.

All of us experience loss at some point. When something was very valuable to us and we lose it, we experience great disappointment. The loss of an opportunity for promotion, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, even the loss of someone else's respect and love for us. These things and a thousand others cause us disappointment. Loss brings disappointment. All of us experience great and small losses bringing us varying degrees of disappointment and sorrow. Feeling disappointment and sorrow is quite natural. God designed us to experience this feeling of sorrow when we lose something. If we felt no sorrow over loss, we would be behaving in an unnatural, cold way. God Himself feels great sorrow over the losses brought about by sin. Sorrow is a natural emotion which God uses to great effect in our lives. 2 Corinthians 7:10. God often uses real sorrow to bring about lasting change in our lives. So, as we experience loss or disappointment in our lives, and we think about that loss, we feel sorrow. Thus far, everything is normal and natural.

Where do things go wrong? Well, the minute disappointment starts to become discouragement, we are on the road to depression. Sorrow is healthy, but sorrowing can quickly become a loss of hope. Sorrowing with no hope becomes depression. You can feel sorrow, but the minute you begin thinking, 'things will never get better', or 'there is no purpose for my pain' or 'no one else is going through what I am going through' we are losing hope. Once you become convinced that nothing can be done about the situation, that it is hopeless: you are sorrowing without hope, and you are depressed.

The progression is -

- Loss, then
- Disappointment, then
- Sorrow, then
- Discouragement ,
- Hopelessness, then
- Depression.

A normal response to loss is sorrow. An unbiblical response is sorrowing without hope; that's depression. If you go from disappointment to discouragement, then you are heading for depression. A biblical example is I Thessalonians 4:13. Here Paul exhorts the Thessalonians not to become depressed about their fellow believers that have died. To be depressed would be to sorrow without hope. To think they died for no reason, or to feel that they would never see them again. That is sorrowing without hope, and it's depression. Instead, Paul tells them of Christ's soon return, emphasizing that there they will see their brethren again, and those dead in Christ will be raised again.

Sorrow is natural. Sorrowing without hope is a decision we make. When your unemployment continues, that's a cause for disappointment and sorrow. But the moment you say, "I'll never be employed, there'll never be a job for me, no one will hire me", you have lost hope. Your disappointment has turned into discouragement. As you continue to meditate on your hopelessness , you descend into depression.

What is the solution?

**First, do some diagnosis about what you have lost.** Your depression more than likely has come about through some form of loss which has discouraged you and brought about hopelessness. Here you need to ask yourself some questions about your loss.

- a) Was the thing you lost wrong for you to have in the first place? Some examples might be a girl who is depressed because she has lost her unsaved boyfriend. It was a relationship that was never meant to be. Or perhaps a Christian who loses his chance to get a job at a worldly place. Or a person who loses money spent on foolish means of getting rich quick. These losses represent losing something that was illegitimate for us to have in the first place. We must realize that God never meant for us to have some things. I John 2:15-17. Think of a pouting three-year old. You take something away from them that might harm them, and what do they do? Cry, sulk and look miserable. Yet do you give it back to them? Not if you love them. You can put up with their sulking because it's self-inflicted, all you did was remove from them what would hurt them. Now if God removes something from your life that you know was clearly out of His will, then getting depressed about it will not solve anything. The problem lies squarely inside of you, lusting for what isn't meant for you. The solution is to agree with God that what you wanted or had was out of His will, and it was wrong for you to hope for it in the first place.
- b) Was the thing I lost taken away from me because I was becoming dependent on it? Had it become a crutch for me, the thing I used to make life work my own way? A student who relies on getting straight A's to feel he is smart may have that removed because it is his crutch apart from God. An injury preventing us from playing some sport because it had become an obsession to us. One to whom image is everything has his reputation ruined. The car gets smashed. That human relationship turns sour. See, these things may seem trivial to some, but remember that God is a Jealous God. When you receive the Lord Jesus Christ, you do not just receive heavenly benefits for eternity. You literally become God's slave. Slaves don't have rights of their own or even rights over their own bodies. Slaves own nothing, and do nothing for themselves. They are owned by another: all they do is for another, all their rights are owned by another. God has complete rights over the believer. Any child of His who is seeking to make life work his own way, who is substituting God with another person or thing, can expect a Jealous God to act to remove that thing. When God removes something from you, it is always because He has something better for you. God does not remove things just for the sake of it, anymore than a parent would snatch a toy out of a child's hand just to upset them. Consider if the thing causing your depression, the thing you lost which has caused hopelessness, was in some way the thing you had become dependent on for security, meaning, happiness, joy. What have you lost that you needed to make life work your own way? Again, if you find that the thing you have lost had indeed become a crutch to you, had become a god in your life, then the solution will be to return to God as your final hope and trust. Jeremiah 2:13: "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, *and* hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water". Two evils: one, forsaking God as your trust; two, making your own cisterns, making your own way of making life work. Prov 3:5-6 is the solution.: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart;

and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

- c) Could God have allowed or arranged the thing I lost because my Christian life is too shallow? See, sometimes, you may genuinely be trying to do right, but you have settled into a routine, settled into a comfort zone, where you will not seek God in a deeper way. God often then allows suffering into our lives to strengthen and grow us. Jesus told us that the branch which bears fruit will be purged (pruned) so that it will bear more fruit. Read James 1:1-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7. Get God’s perspective on suffering. Realise that sometimes God has just got to stir up your nest to get you moving and growing for Him. Consider your loss, and if it is not out of the will of God, if it was not a god in your life, then accept it as part of God’s loving plan to draw you ever nearer to Himself. That is the diagnosis we do over our loss. It takes some careful study, and some real time of self-examination. That thought leads us into our second point for depression. That is

### **Be careful of substitutes**

People are generally afraid of self-examination. The self-diagnosis you need to do takes time, and it takes some courage too. It means facing the silence. It means facing your own sadness and horror at your own loss. Sometimes it means seeing that our loss is the fruit of our own decisions to live independently of God. It is much easier to run to substitutes. Be very careful of filling that void inside you with things that would be wrong. Some, when they are down, feel they must liven up the deadness inside with passion, so they turn to sexual fantasies or activities out of God’s will. Some turn to food, binging on it to bring some pleasure to dull the disappointment. Others go on a spending spree, buying things, saying, “I deserve a bit of happiness” and trying to forget. Some will purposefully neglect responsibilities at home, work or school, because you want a break from pressures. Some will do something reckless or dangerous to get a rush, and again drive away the depression. Some turn to alcohol, drugs and even music to drive away the depression and lift the spirits for a moment. Still others contemplate an overdose or suicide. Please understand that by doing these things when you are depressed, you are only complicating your life. You will beyond your current depression have to deal with the debt, guilt, shame and addiction of making choices such as these. There is nothing wrong with using a legitimate means of pleasure or entertainment, but don’t use it as a substitute for meditating on the Scriptures in self-examination to really tackle the problem. Realise these things can often worsen the depression by causing further problems or loss in your life. If you’ve indulged in these things, you need to confess and forsake them: Proverbs 28:13. Realise that these things will begin to become crutches in themselves. By their very nature they will drive you away from the Scriptures and prayer, not toward them. See them as poor substitutes for the real joy God has waiting for you. C. S. Lewis once said that we are too often like children playing with mud pies who will not go with their mother because they cannot conceive of what a holiday at the beach means. God offers us infinite joy, we cannot imagine it, nor try to, and so meddle around with little snippets of happiness.

### **Third, take your hope thermometer.**

As we said, disappointment that loses hope becomes depression. Take your hope thermometer. How’s your hope? Have you lost hope in the situation? Have you lost hope that life will ever make sense, that it will all work together for good, that God is

in control, that God has a design and a plan for your life? To lose hope in these things is basically summed up in one word: unbelief. Your circumstances may drive you to doubt, but that is exactly what faith is, trusting in God in spite of the circumstances. To say, "God doesn't care" when His Word says He does is to doubt His Word. "But you would too, if you knew my loss!" Friend, what kind of a value would a trial be if it didn't test your faith? What possible value could there be in a circumstance which didn't shake up your hope and faith? Only when your faith and hope is battered will it be strengthened. Only when you trust God more, can you obey God more. Only when you obey God more, will you be more useful to Him. I'm afraid that when you have lost hope, you have done nothing except choose to disbelieve God's promises. A loss of hope has no remedy except renewing your trust in Him. Multitudes of examples could be used, but ultimately, the best are found in the Word itself. Hebrews 11 is the hall of fame for heroes of faith. Their example is one of persevering in trusting God, when there circumstances were about as antagonistic to trusting God as anyone ever experienced. Yet, they hung on to the simple belief "God said so"

Sometimes, when circumstances have stripped you of everything, all you can hang onto is the childlike faith that says, "But God said so" He said it, the circumstances look like they contradict it, but He said it. Isaiah 55:11: "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it." What He says, will come to pass. Your and my job is not to figure out how or when, but to agree that it will. Frankly, there is no excuse for a loss of hope for the child of God, since the one we are hoping in is unchanging and all-powerful.

We said thinking correctly is the battle won. Consider Psalm 42 and Psalm 73. There men who were on the road to self-pity and despair turned their thinking around and meditated on what is true and right. For you to come out of depression will mean meditating on Scriptures that deal with God's faithfulness and His promises. It will mean really meditating on them continually until you believe them. God promises stability only to those who meditate on His Word Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1.

So when depressed, start by self-diagnosis. What have you lost that has caused you this depression? Was that thing wrong for you, had it become a god, or is God just pruning you? Likewise have you resorted to substitutes to deal with it? Then finally, if you are slipping into hopelessness and self-pity, reverse it by meditating on God's Word, by focusing on God's unchanging faithfulness and His unbroken promises. Meditate till your mind is renewed.

"That by two immutable things, in which *it was* impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;" Heb 6:18-19