Depression and Biblical Counseling

Depression defined

- "It is technically called depression, but it can't be captured by a word. You feel numb, yet your head hurts; empty, yet inside there are screams; fatigue, yet fears abound. Things that were once pleasures now barely hold your attention. Your brain feels like it is in a fog. You feel weighted down."— Edward Welch
- A biblical understanding of depression distinguishes between sadness—a legitimate emotional response to loss and suffering in a fallen world—and the state of living persistently in depression. Sadness emerges naturally from living in a fallen world corrupted by sin, where circumstances and people bring genuine grief; however, the crucial distinction lies in how we respond to sorrow.
- English Bible translations do not use the word "depression" directly but instead convey the concept through various terms related to emotional distress. Common terms include several interconnected words that capture different dimensions of the experience.
- **Sadness** (Neh 2:2), **being downcast** (Ps 42:5, Gen 40:7 NKJV), **despair** (Deut 28:65, Ps 42:11 NASB), and **hopelessness** (1 Thess 4:13, Isa 57:10, Jer 2:25, 18:12) appear throughout Scripture as the primary expressions of depression-like states. The Scripture employs language such as being **sorrowful** (Gen 42:38, Ps 31:10, 38:17, 132:2, 2 Cor 2:7, 1 Pet 2:19) **distressed** (Gen 21:11, 1 Sam 1:10, 15:11, Ps 4:1, 18:6, 25:17) **troubled** (Gen 41:8, Job 7:3, Matt 2:3, 6:34) **perplexed** (Dan 5:9, Luke 21:25) **in agony** (Ps 6:2, Zech 9:5 in NIV), and **very heavy** (as in hand of God, 1 Sam 5:11, Isa 47:6)—terms that convey acute emotional suffering. The Old Testament uses more vivid spatial metaphors, such as "**out of the depths**" (Ps 130:1) and descriptions of being "**sunk**" in despair (Ps 69:2), to capture the depth of inner anguish.

Is Depression a Sin?

- Depression is clearly not sin in the way anger, bitterness, hostility, and malice as Scripture lays these out as sinful. The Bible does not say you shall not feel "darkness."
- However, you might find within this thing called "depression" – anger, anxiety, relentless worry. It might not just be a mood but a complaint, sometimes even unbelief.
- Depression is hard to pin down. You have to get closer to the counselee's struggle. There are more things going on in depression than a simple explanation will provide.
- Don't use the easy characterizations in the normal vs. the abnormal "mood." The old term melancholy [dark bowel], in other words, a dark emotion, is actually a helpful term.
- Job's suffering stands against the culture relating the biological to the suffering he was experiencing. Job is sorrowful but with faith. He is wrestling out his struggle before God.

- There is a tendency in some individuals' temperament. "The most realistic people are often those that are mildly depressed." – David Powlison
- Depression is NOT a thing. Our drug culture makes it a thing. Melancholy is a complex human response that is deeply unhappy. You become a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. For us today, there are times we ought to be more "depressed."
- In James 4:9, Scripture directs us to mourn over the sinfulness that has led to conflict, strife, and worldliness.

The Cyclical Process/Downward Spiral of Depression

- Worrisome thoughts lead to deeper despair and taking our eyes off of God.
- Depression operates through a self-reinforcing cycle where initial difficulties become compounded through misguided responses. Rather than stemming directly from any single triggering event, depression develops through a spiral process in which the original problem is mishandled in such a way that it is enlarged in downward helical spirals that eventually plunge one into despair.
- See Diagram: Modified from Competent to Counsel, Jay Adams, p. 145.
    - When a problem meets with a faulty, sinful response, it creates an additional complicating problem, which then receives another sinful response, perpetuating the cycle.
    - When someone surrenders to discouraging feelings, they allow their responses to deteriorate, often the focus is exclusively on their feelings.
    - This neglect intensifies the reluctance to engage.
    - That compounds the guilt from failure, which then diminishes motivation further, spiraling downward into depression.
- A critical feature of this downward movement involves the loss of spiritual focus. A downward spiral of thoughts and desires ensues: discouragement, fear, capitulation, and abandonment—while the person's attention and affection remain fixed on the problem rather than on God.
- This misdirection proves particularly destructive because self-pity—the prideful idea that "I am not getting what I deserve; I deserve better."—drives people to become excessively absorbed in themselves and to believe they understand their needs better than God does.
- The trajectory mirrors Cain's experience: after his offering was rejected, Cain's angry and depressed response set him on a path where failure to repent would plunge him into deeper sin, ultimately leading to murder.

The Upward Spiral of Righteousness

- Breaking free requires reversing direction entirely—replacing the downward cycle with an upward cycle of righteousness, where biblical responses to problems produce solutions that strengthen one's capacity to handle future difficulties (see 2 Cor 10:3-5).

- Remaining in depression represents a choice, since difficult circumstances may lower our spirits without necessitating that we remain in that condition.
- Distorted thinking patterns—focusing on how bad circumstances are rather than on God's blessings—fuel depression, since thoughts generate emotions. When the immediate problem dominates our thinking, we sink into depression; yet alongside this "mini-story" exists God's larger plan.…

The Redemptive Purpose of Depression

- The redemptive purpose of depression lies in its potential to redirect us toward God's transformative work. God's ultimate goal is conformity to Christ, requiring us to do those things that please our heavenly Father (John 8:29).
- Trials—including depression—serve to test and strengthen faith, producing endurance that matures believers, requiring both a choice to find joy within difficulty and recognition that trials accomplish God-honoring purposes (see Rom 5:3-5).
- When surrendered to Christ, the very circumstance pressing hard against us becomes the Father's best-shaped tool to shape us for eternity. Rather than remaining enslaved to distressing circumstances, believers can redirect their focus toward serving and worshiping God within those circumstances, finding purpose that transcends their emotional state.

The Connection Between Sinful Depression and Repentance

- Sinful depression operates as both consequence and catalyst—a downward spiral where unrepented sin deepens emotional despair, yet that very despair paradoxically signals the need for repentance as the pathway to freedom.
- Depression frequently stems from guilt over sinful actions, and without genuine repentance, this guilt intensifies and deepens the depression.
- The story of Cain illustrates this dynamic vividly: after presenting a sinful offering, Cain compounded his failure by responding wrongly to God's rejection through anger and depression.
- Yet here lies the paradox—depression rooted in sin contains within it an invitation to repentance. When individuals in spiritual depression declare "I am such a miserable sinner," this very self-condemnation becomes the grounds for their acceptance before God, since Christ came specifically to call sinners to repentance. Self-condemnation itself serves as evidence of genuine repentance and opens the way toward ultimate release.
- When someone confesses and forsakes sin through confession, forgiveness-seeking, and restitution, the sorrow and depression caused by sinful actions transforms into rejoicing and a clear conscience. The only hope lies in ruling over sin by breaking the developing sinful pattern through repentance and subsequent behavioral change (see 2 Tim 1:12-17).

The Need for Compassion During a Season of Grief/Sorrow/Depression

- When grief, sorrow, and depression weigh heavily on someone's heart, compassion becomes not merely helpful but essential—a lifeline that communicates presence and genuine care in the midst of darkness.
- True compassion means listening with compassion and taking their suffering seriously, for Romans 12:15 tells us to "weep with those who weep".
- Rather than assuming you understand someone's struggles based on their circumstances, you should ask directly about their specific difficulties—which may be logistical, physical, financial, relational, or spiritual. This posture of humble listening communicates that their experience matters.
- Those caught in patterns of suffering deserve a counselor's deepest compassion, for their suffering, even when self-inflicted, is genuinely real. Recognizing this reality prevents the temptation to minimize or spiritualize away someone's authentic pain.
- Compassion means loving those who suffer to the point that you are affected by their hardships, offering understanding during both their joys and their difficult seasons. When you truly hear someone's pain, you find space for it in your own heart such that you too are changed—expressing this through genuine words like "I am so sorry. This is so hard and painful." People often interpret silence as indifference, whereas compassionate speech communicates genuine solidarity (see 2 Cor 1:4, Psalm 131).

Love, Know, Speak, Do – (Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand)

- **Love**—Love is going to be communicated by your patience, by your biblically oriented optimism. There is a steady encouragement as you walk with your counselee.
- **Know**—data gathering, such as what are the big things, the panoramas of their story, but then the specific things, (people do not change in fuzzy land). We are to bring the Word of God to bear in particular situations. Find that fork in the road where a choice is made.
- **Speak**—A Changed Agenda: You want to change the core goal from "change how I feel" to "change me." God is not to become a "better Prozac." Don't treat the Bible as a drug. There should be a change from reading the Bible to feel good to reading to understand who God is. The goal of our lives must be faithfulness to our Lord.
    - Conscience is a part of mankind that often gets distorted:
        - A distorted standard – Not operating to God's standard but to a false standard.
        - A distorted view – Before whose eyes is the conscience wired.
        - Wrong atonement – Who is the savior in your counselee's world?
- **Do**—You have to do some work. Don't ask the person to do too much work. A depressed person often will not do it. Don't give them too much to study. Make things as concrete as possible. It is more profitable to give the right verse or passage than a long Bible study.

Example of Passages of Scripture for Depression

- Hebrews 13:5–6: *Make sure that* your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," so that we confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?"
- Psalm 28: [1] To You, O Lord, I call; My rock, do not be deaf to me, For if You are silent to me, I will become like those who go down to the pit. [2] Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to You for help, When I lift up my hands toward Your holy sanctuary. [3] Do not drag me away with the wicked And with those who work iniquity, Who speak peace with their neighbors, While evil is in their hearts. [4] Requite them according to their work and according to the evil of their practices; Requite them according to the deeds of their hands; Repay them their recompense. [5] Because they do not regard the works of the Lord Nor the deeds of His hands, He will tear them down and not build them up. [6] Blessed be the Lord, Because He has heard the voice of my supplication. [7] The Lord is my strength and my shield; My heart trusts in Him, and I am helped; Therefore my heart exults, And with my song I shall thank Him. [8] The Lord is their strength, And He is a saving defense to His anointed. [9] Save Your people and bless Your inheritance; Be their shepherd also, and carry them forever.

Counseling Resources.

- *The Christian Counselor's Manual,* Jay Edward Adams.
- *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling,* Jay Edward Adams.
- "*'Tony' and Bipolar Disorder,"* in *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture,* Garrett Higbee.
- *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.
- *Depression: Looking Up from the Stubborn Darkness*, Edward T. Welch.
- *Depression: The Way Up When You Are Down, Counseling,* Edward T. Welch.
- *Good Mood, Bad Mood: Help and Hope for Depression and Bipolar Disorder,* Charles D. Hodges and M. D. Charles D. Hodges Jr.
- *Compassionate Care – People Struggling with Depression, ACBC David Powlison Collection,* David Powlison.
- *Help! I'm Depressed* , Carol Trahan.
- *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Paul David Tripp.