

Depression and Biblical Counseling

5. Provide a biblical definition of depression. Describe manifestations of depression in both the inner and outer man. Explain the biblical factors that drive depression. Detail several biblical strategies to respond to depression.

Defining Depression Can Be Elusive. Consider some of the following responses:

“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 from *Depression: The Way Up When You’re Down*).

“*My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run with longing are all dried up.*” (C.S. Lewis from *A Grief Observed*).

“*The iron bolt mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison.*” (A quote from Charles Spurgeon in *Spurgeon’s Sorrows* by Zack Eswine).

“*I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better, it appears to me.*” (Abraham Lincoln)

English Bible translations do not use the word “depression” directly, but instead convey the concept through various terms related to emotional distress. The most common vocabulary includes 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.

In Ecclesiastes, the repeated refrain of “vanity” comes close to what modern readers understand as depression, capturing a sense of futility and meaninglessness. Additionally,

the Greek term *exaporeomai* (*despaired*, *despairing*), meaning “to find no way through” or to be at a total “loss,” focuses on the mental frustration characteristic of depression (2 Cor 1:8, 4:8).

These terms have gradually been replaced with a medicalized psychological category known as “depression.” Emil Kraepelin classified mental disorders scientifically and popularized the category *manic-depressive illness* (late 1800’s – Early 1900s). Major Depressive Disorder appeared in the DSM-III in 1980. Prozac became culturally dominant soon after this DSM-III classification.

This philosophical approach—reductionism—is a key aspect of the broader philosophy of materialism, which views all of human nature and existence as confined to the physical rather than considering mankind to be both spiritual and physical—dualism. The philosophy of materialism undergirds the widespread belief that depression is a sickness. (*Rethinking Depression* by Daniel Berger)

Many scholars and biblical counselors note that the modern label collapses very different experiences into one category, including:

- physical illness
- grief
- moral guilt
- spiritual discouragement
- chronic suffering

Each of these may require very different responses.

This is why older pastoral literature often speaks more precisely about:

- sorrow
- despair
- faintheartedness
- grief
- spiritual darkness

rather than using one single term.

Depression Is Viewed as Having Three Principal Criteria (from DSM-5):

1. Deep impairing sorrow (“feels sad” and “empty”).
2. A sense of being “hopeless.”
3. Guilt or shame (“feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt.”)

What is man? Anthropology forms the basis of how we view depression. In a materialistic anthropology, man is a being composed of material elements, his mental, emotional, and

spiritual life being simply by-products of his material structure. Human beings have not been created in the image of God—in fact, the very existence of the Creator is denied. Materialistic anthropology focuses on the physical side of man while denying the reality of what we might call his or her “mental” or “spiritual” side. This type of anthropology is guilty of idolatry: of worshiping an aspect of creation in the place of God. (Gen 2:7; Ecclesiastes 12:7; Matt 6:25, 10:28)

Sorrow, hopelessness, and guilt are immaterial/ metaphysical/spiritual – that is, these features have no physical quality. The physical effects on the body can be observed, but there is no scientific means to measure or observe actual sorrow, hopelessness, or guilt.

“Faith [not material] is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

“Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?” (Romans 8:24). Hopelessness is the metaphysical condition of the soul that longs for deliverance. The nature of both hope and hopelessness is related to a person’s faith.

Describe manifestations of depression in both the inner and outer man.

Depression manifests across the full spectrum of human experience—affecting both the inner spiritual and emotional life as well as the outer physical and behavioral dimensions. Scripture provides vivid illustrations of these dual manifestations.

Physical Manifestations

The body often bears the weight of depression’s grip. When Cain experienced depression, God observed his anger and asked, “Why has your countenance fallen?”—indicating that depression visibly alters one’s appearance (Gen 4:5–7). David’s depression over unconfessed sin produced tangible physical effects: “There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation. There is no health in my bones because of my sin. My iniquities are gone over my head. As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me (Ps 38:3-4) My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer” (Ps 32:4). Similarly, David experienced despair with dark thoughts and uncontrolled feelings, believing the enemy was prevailing and his sorrow was unending, feeling abandoned as his thoughts became dark and his feelings spiraled out of control (Psalm 13).

Spiritual Manifestations

Internally, depression involves distorted thinking patterns and spiritual disorientation. David’s view of God became skewed (Ps 13:1-2), with his thinking based on circumstances and his own understanding rather than God’s character. Depression can originate from various sources—illness, guilt, self-pity, resentment, or worry—but it develops through a

cyclical process where the initial problem is mishandled in such a way that it spirals downward into despair. This downward cycle enslaves one in hopelessness and guilt, producing a slowing down or cessation of activity.

The Path Forward

Recovery involves addressing both manifestations. The way out of depression caused by guilt is confession and seeking God's forgiveness. Transformation requires engaging one's will and changing one's thinking; while circumstances may remain unchanged, refocusing on the Lord through prayer produces restoration.

The Downward Spiral of Depression

"The downward cycle of sin moves from a problem to a faulty, sinful response, thereby causing an additional complicating problem, which is met by an additional sinful response, etc. That pattern needs to be reversed by beginning an upward cycle of righteousness, resulting in further righteousness. Here, the reverse pattern may be seen; a problem met by a biblical response leads to a solution that strengthens one's ability to solve new problems. The downward cycle enslaves one in hopelessness and guilt, thus bringing on a slowing down or cessation of activity, called depression." – Jay Adams

Explain the Biblical Factors That Drive Depression.

Biblical understanding identifies several interconnected factors that drive depression, moving beyond simplistic explanations to recognize the complex ways personal choices, circumstances, and spiritual dynamics interact.

The most fundamental driver is the failure to assume or fulfill one's God-given responsibilities. This isn't merely about feeling unmotivated—despair arises when individuals neglect their obligations, not the other way around. Depression develops through the mishandling of temporary difficulties, creating a downward spiral as one continues to respond wrongly to a down period. When people follow their emotions rather than persisting in duties, they abandon responsibilities, which generate guilt and frustration; this compounds the emotional weight, leading to further avoidance and deeper despair. (Proverb 19:24; 24:30-34, Rom 6:19).

Beyond personal neglect, oppression by others—betrayal, broken commitments, and relational wounds—can be a source of depression. Internal factors also contribute: rage, selfish desires, and anger are particularly notable causes (Gal 5:19-31). Distorted beliefs about God's character—misconceptions about divine love, forgiveness, or the future—can themselves generate depression. Physical causes matter as well: bodily deterioration, illness, and medication side effects can all play roles in depression.

Satan represents a fourth dimension, lying to individuals and attempting to convince them that faithfulness to God contradicts their interests. The biblical perspective avoids reducing depression to a single cause, instead recognizing that depression results from a cyclical process where an initial problem is mishandled in ways that enlarge it through downward spirals. Importantly, Paul's example demonstrates that external pressures alone need not produce depression; his commitment to his God-given service sustained him despite extraordinary hardship.

Strategies to Respond to Depression — Repentance

- Sin will distort our thinking; we fail to see our own sin clearly. 1 Sam 15 (Saul), 2 Sam 11(David), Psalm 73 (Asaph).
- Physical problems and sinful patterns increase (pride, blame shifting, etc.) Gen 3, Psalm 32.
- Godly sorrow is needed, not worldly sorrow (repentance NOT remorse). 2 Sam 12 (Nathan to David), Psalm 51, 1 Cor 10.
- True Repentance is confessing and receiving forgiveness, AND it also includes turning from the sin and putting on the righteous opposite. Ephesians 4:22-24, Col 3:8-10.

Strategies to Respond to Depression — Speak Truth

- Don't listen to yourself but talk to yourself (speak truth from God's Word)
- Psalm 42-43
- I am sinking in the slough of despond (Pilgrim's Progress). But he concludes by saying "again" or some translations say "still". He has found his praise and his hope, and can still praise God, recognizing that God is truly his help.
- Whatever is good... think of these things (Phil 4:8)
- Practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:9).
- See Phil 4:11 – I have learned to be content (you can hold joy and sorrow together).

Strategies to Respond to Depression — Focus on the Character & Work of Christ

- Justification has been established.
- Preach the gospel to yourself every day.
- Remember the work of Christ on the Cross and our so great salvation.

Strategies to Respond to Depression — Remember Our Unique Hope (Roman 8)

Roman 8:1-39 outlines several characteristics of the unique hope the Creator offers all people after the fall of Adam, with the aim of restoring them.

1. Genuine hope not only assuages guilt fully, but it defeats sin and fulfills God's moral law perfectly (v. 1–4). Christ's righteous fulfillment of the law fully resolves guilt and provides peace between God and man.
2. Genuine hope supernaturally enables "the natural" man's mind to be set on a relationship with God instead of on death and enslavement (Rom 8:5-17a)
3. Genuine hope does not remove sorrow, suffering, and current struggles in this world, but in the one to come (Rom 8:17b–25).
See also 2 Corinthians 6:10 — "as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things."
4. Genuine hope is dependent upon the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit and not something people create individually within themselves or corporately among themselves (Rom 8:26-27).
All people lack the strength within themselves to endure sorrow. —Psalm 119:28: "My soul weeps because of grief; Strengthen me according to Your word."
5. Genuine hope guarantees eternal Security, forgiveness, regeneration (new birth), and glorification (Rom 8:28-39).
Hebrews 10:21-23 — "and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

How Do We Minister, Shepherd, and Counsel Someone Suffering from Depression?

1. Listen sympathetically and patiently. "Help me understand your thoughts, feelings, and your motivations. What do you think is causing you to think and feel the way you do?"
2. What is the cause of this depression?
3. What is the history/pattern of depression?
4. What lies is your depression telling you? (false hopes need to be identified)
1 Tim 6:17
5. Are the person's physical needs being met?
6. Who else is being affected? Depression is contagious. Gal. 6:1
7. Offer encouragement and give hope. Romans 5:3-5, Romans 15:13
8. Pray with and for them.

The Counselor / Disciple's Goal – Practical Applications

- The successful end and goal of overcoming depression is hope and joy.

- Hope is a key issue in depression, and the critical transition is from hopeless to hopeful; every depressed person should set out to become an expert in joy. (Rom. 15:13)
- Hope is what one looks forward to as the beacon of light through the fog and the anchor for our souls. (Heb. 6:19)
- Changing from hopeless to hopeful is necessary and available on this side of life, not just reserved for glory. Hope is found in the Christian's assurance of God's promises and faithfulness to keep His promises.
- Hopelessness is in one who is unwilling to wait on the Lord, and is wanting something more than Jesus, and not really knowing Jesus. Heb. 6:15
- "Hopelessness is ultimately a denial of the resurrection." 1 Cor. 15:13-19
- The everlasting, faithful promises of God, and true hope in God, must fill the sufferer, and he must submit and open his eyes to see the goodness in the land of the living in moving from hopeless to hopeful.
- As hope is a process and skill one develops through submitting to the Lord, joy is the attitude and vehicle necessary to fuel and carry one along the path to deliverance.
- Joy takes our attention off ourselves and places it on God and all the things that have God as their source. (Neh. 8:10)
- As the depression sufferer pursues and finds joy in the Lord and the things of the Lord, his mind is turned to the Lord (upward and outward) and away from just himself (inward).
- One begins to fully experience joy when he moves from the inward selfishness to the selflessness of outwardly loving God and others.
- Finally, true joy comes with practice, and one must study, pray, fellowship with God's people, and look for and appreciate the evidence of God's joy. True joy comes when we learn to enjoy the things that God enjoys (Jude 24-25).

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