

# The Roots of Sorrow: Reflections on Depression and Hope

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*In his suicide note a prominent pastor included these words: “God forgive me for not being any stronger than I am. But when a minister becomes clinically depressed, there are very few places where he can turn for help (at least without ruining his ministry). . . It feels as if I’m sinking farther and farther into a downward spiral of depression. I feel like a drowning man, trying frantically to lift up my head to take just one more breath. But one way or the other, I know I am going down.”*

The pastor had undergone a great deal of stress in the months leading to his suicide, including a terrible accident, and he was struggling to cope with a recent return to his leadership responsibilities. When, in the grip of severe depression, he took his own life, he became the third pastor in his area to do so within a span of two years.

Church members and friends who knew and loved him nevertheless feel compelled to ask unsettling questions. How is it possible for a faithful Christian to be depressed enough to take his life? Isn’t the idea of a depressed believer a contradiction in terms?

Many of us have felt this conflict in our own lives. We know that the preacher Charles Spurgeon, reformer Martin Luther, author John Bunyan and hymnwriter William Cowper all struggled with depression. The Bible itself tells us of the moments when Job, Elijah, Jeremiah, Moses, Jonah and Paul were desperate enough to want to die.

In recent years, the incidence of depression has increased drastically, to the point that depression is often called “the common cold of mental illness.”

By 1996, over 15 million people in the US had been prescribed Prozac, the drug most commonly used for depression, and most of us have had a friend or relative in the grip of depression at one time or another.

But the Christian community is wonderfully equipped both to understand depression in all its complexity and to offer help to those caught in its grip. By taking to heart our theology and applying the whole message of the Gospel, the Church can be the most significant agent of hope and change for victims of depression.

## The Roots of Sorrow

The Bible gives a rich framework for understanding the many factors that contribute to depression. I will use the theological categories of the world, the flesh and the devil as a way of categorizing these.

### The World

Firstly, the Bible teaches that we live in a fallen world, where things happen to us through no fault of our own. Adam and Eve, in rebelling against God, brought a curse on both the entire human race and all of God's creation. Living in the shadow of the fall, we all experience loss, abuse, sickness, disappointments, wars, and natural disasters. Sadness and depression thus can be natural, even God-given, responses to life in a sinful, broken world.

Secondly, as our society turns from the way God intended it to live, negative consequences multiply. Research psychologist and author Martin Seligman writes: "It is shocking that Americans, on average, may be victims of unprecedented psychological misery in a nation with unprecedented prosperity, world power and material well-being." But with the breakdown of the family, erosion of community, social isolation, and the heavy use of the often anti-social electronic media, it is not surprising that depression is reaching epidemic proportions. Even secular researchers concur that healthy family and community life is a key preventative with respect to depression. In light of Scripture's commitment to covenantal community, Christians should not be surprised at this connection.

In addition, the flood of commercials, catalogues, and credit cards makes it hard not to be dissatisfied and to covet more than we have already. The easy accessibility of pornography, gambling, and addictive substances, all make it easy for people to get caught in desperate, vicious cycles of sin and misery.

Finally, postmodern philosophy infiltrates every area of life, denying that truth can ever be discovered and creating an underlying hopelessness, meaninglessness and cynicism.

"The world" represents hardships and difficulties that happen to us through no direct fault of our own. It also represents the destructive influences and ideas that surround us in our culture. Paul says that we groan with the whole creation, longing for the day when we will be set free from all these effects of sin and bondage and decay (Rom. 8:22).

### The Flesh

In the Bible, "the flesh" refers both to our sinful nature and to our physical bodies. Our sinful nature appears in the area of internal attitudes, thoughts and emotions that react to the external circumstances of life. God designs each of us with a temperament which significantly and uniquely shapes the way in which we respond to similar circumstances depending on levels of sensitivity, optimism, pessimism, extroversion, introversion, and conscientiousness. But this God-given nature is bent by sin.

Depression may be inappropriate or wrong when we wallow in self-pity, bitterness or hurt, when we refuse to forgive, or when, because of perfectionism, or low self-esteem, we become workaholics or suffer burnout.

Some people have to live with a major struggle against negative thinking and feeling because of deprivation and abuse as children. Such patterns of reaction often started as reflex survival mechanisms at a very young age. The bentness of their sinful nature may thus be compounded by the sins of others.

In addition to these factors, we cannot ignore the reality of our physiology and biology. A physical problem such as a malfunctioning thyroid, a major injury, or hormonal shifts can drastically affect a person's outlook. Research has demonstrated that some people are genetically and biochemically more vulnerable to depression than others. A combination of difficult circumstances and a person's reaction to those circumstances may tip them over the edge into what we call clinical depression. This is not just feeling blue for a few hours but is a deep depression which lasts for two or more weeks and may involve loss of appetite, difficulty concentrating, insomnia, passivity, indecisiveness, pessimistic preoccupation, tearfulness, suicidal ideas and occasionally delusions and hallucinations. There may be profound guilt, feelings of failure and worthlessness, and a feeling of being cut off from God. Such depression is agonizing, often worse than physical pain.

In this state a biological vicious cycle has usually taken hold of the person's mind and emotions, and antidepressants can be very helpful and even life-saving in these circumstances. Unfortunately some pastors are reluctant to encourage people to take medication, and many doctors and psychiatrists are too ready to use pills for all the ills of life.

We have seen that the flesh is fallen and this is not always simply a matter of personal sin. There are physiological, temperamental and environmental factors which also contribute to depression.

## The Devil

We must not forget the reality of the devil who seeks to gain a foothold in our lives (Eph. 4:26, 27). Wherever we are weak and vulnerable, whether in the area of bitterness or anger, self-pity or lust, the devil works hard to exacerbate the situation and thwart our attempts to draw near to God. Also, in the story of Job, we see that it is not always possible to tell what larger spiritual battle may account for hardships in our lives.

## Help for the Depressed

The Bible gives us the framework we need to be able to understand the complexity of factors that contribute to depression. Yes, we sin, but we also cope with broken bodies and bent minds in a world that groans in the shadow of the fall, a world in which the devil still has significant influence. The Bible teaches that we are people of great dignity because we are made with the glory of God's image, and people of great depravity because every aspect is affected by sin. How we make sense of struggle and suffering makes a huge difference to how we respond to it. It is important to keep sight of the big picture when caught in the day-by-day conflicts. Becoming a Christian does not solve all our problems. But we are assured of forgiveness for all our sins, and we are adopted into God's family. It is what Christ has done, not what we do, that is the reason for our acceptance by God. He will never let us go (John 10:29). This "amazing grace" should lead to a life of grateful obedience in the ongoing battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. God uses the circumstances of conflict to help us to become more like Christ, and until we are in glory, this struggle against all the effects of sin will not cease.

In this battle, hope is vital. We need to remember that the final victory is assured, and that even on this side of glory significant healing is possible. And if God sometimes uses difficult circumstances to discipline us, we can be encouraged that this is a sign of His love (Hebrews 12:6). There are some practical things that can be done to prevent a slide into deeper depression, as well as to help ourselves or someone else out of such a state.

### Take Stock of Ourselves

We need to learn to ask ourselves “Why are you downcast, O my soul?” (Psalm 42:5). Sadness can become an opportunity to examine our attitudes, values, motives and relationships to see where they reflect the dignity and glory of being made in God’s image and where they reflect depravity and sinfulness. The Psalms enable us to listen in on the writers exposing their inner world as they journey from despair to delight, from troubles to trust. We must cultivate an openness to looking within, allowing God to work on our thoughts, emotions, and behavior and be ready to repent when we identify personal sin, and ready to respond in a godly way to other people’s sin.

### Find Real Community

We also often need help from others to make sense of what is going on, and to help us break out of patterns of sin and brokenness. Such freedom to discuss our inner-selves with another person assumes a relationship of covenantal depth—a friend or relative whose acceptance rests not on our performance but on unconditional love. In this culture there is a desperate need for the Church to be a caring community and loving family. Sadly, the therapeutic potential of the body of Christ often goes unrecognized, and too many churches operate on the basis of *performance and appearance*.

### Tend to the Physical Factors

Exercise, a healthy diet and time for relaxation are vital aspects of caring for our bodies, the “temples of the Holy Spirit.” A person who suffers with severe depression for more than two weeks should have a physical examination and be considered for antidepressant medication. Antidepressants should always be used in conjunction with counseling. When there is severe suicidal depression, hospitalization will often be necessary. Recovery may take many months.

### Resist the Devil

Paul reminds us that we do not just struggle against our self-centeredness, our sinful nature and “the world” but against “spiritual forces of evil.” We must put on the whole armor of God each day and pray often for protection from the devil’s “fiery darts” (Eph. 6:10-18).

### Conclusion

Christians too often see depression as a sign of weakness or a lack of spirituality. As a result, people are unable to be honest about their real experiences of life; instead, they live behind a super-spiritual mask of false happiness. Sometimes depression is sin or a result of sin, but sometimes it is an appropriate, God-given reaction to other people’s sin and the brokenness and evil in the world. Sometimes it becomes an illness.

God calls us to be realists. This means that we often live with two emotions at once. Paul says that we “groan” with the whole creation, longing for release. He also encourages us to “rejoice always,” because God is working in the world and in us, and He will continue to do so in the future. We are to be a people who, this side of glory, will be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10).

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