

Counseling Those Who Are Depressed

by Edward T. Welch

Listening to Depression

First, just listen. "Hell" comes up often. "Hell came to pay me a surprise visit." "If there is a hell upon earth, it is to be found in a melancholy heart," observed Robert Burton in the 1600s. The poet Robert Lowell wrote, "I myself am hell." A mother describes her child's experience as "Danny's Descent into Hell." "A Room in Hell." "A lonely, private hell." John of the Cross called it "the dark night of the soul." "Hellish torments," recounted J. B. Phillips. "Hell's black depths," said William Styron, author of *Sophie's Choice* and other popular but sometimes dark novels.¹

They are poets. Although many never read a word of published poetry, prose does not capture their experience, so it is either poetry or silence. They are eloquent, even when they feel pithed of their emotional core, devoid of personhood.

"When the doctor came to my room, he said, 'I am going to ask you a question. If you don't feel ready to answer it, please don't.' Then he asked, 'Who are you?'"

"I panicked, 'What do you mean?'"

"When you look inside, who do you see?"

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"It was horrible. When I looked inside I couldn't see anyone. All I saw was a black hole.

"I am no one," I said."

The images are dark and evocative. Desperately alone, doom, black holes, emptiness. "I felt like I was walking through a field of dead flowers and found one beautiful rose, but when I bent down to smell it I fell into an invisible hole." "I heard my silent scream echo through and pierce my empty soul." "There is nothing I hate more than nothing."² "My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run with longing, are in me dried up."³ "It is entirely natural to think ceaselessly of oblivion."

¹ Quotes in this paragraph are from the following sources. Andrew Solomon, "Anatomy of Melancholy," *The New Yorker*, January 12, 1998, p. 61. Robert Burton cited in John Greist and James Jefferson, *Depression and Its Treatment* (New York: Warner, 1992), p. 4. Robert Lowell, "Skunk Hour." Sandra McCoy, "Danny's Descent into Hell," *A Reader's Digest Reprint*. Martha Manning, *Undercurrents: A Therapist's Reckoning with Depression* (New York: Harper, 1995), p. 10. Lillian V. Grissen, *A Path Through the Sea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 9. J. B. Phillips, *The Price of Success* (New York: Shaw, 1985), p. 201. William Styron, *Darkness Visible* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 84.

² Edie Bricknell, "Nothing."

³ C. S. Lewis, "The Naked Seed."

Depression...involves a complete absence: absence of affect, absence of feeling, absence of response, absence of interest. The pain you feel in the course of a major clinical depression is an attempt on nature's part...to fill up the empty space. But for all intents and purposes, the deeply depressed are just the walking, waking dead.⁴

The mental pain seems unbearable. Time stands still. "I can't go on," said a twelve-year-old girl. "I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for," recounted Spurgeon of one of his many episodes.⁵

If certainty of any good thing ever existed—and you can't remember when it did—it is replaced by constant doubt. You doubt that you are loved by anyone.

"A veritable howling tempest in the brain."⁶ "Malignant sadness."⁷ "My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long."⁸ "The unhappiness was like dust that infiltrated everything." "The iron bolt...mysteriously fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison."⁹ But it is not just pain. It feels like meaningless pain. "That is all I want in life: for this pain to seem purposeful."¹⁰ If pain leads to childbirth then it is tolerable, but if it just leads to blackness or nothing, then it threatens to destroy.

Abraham Lincoln thought the pain would lead to death; the body couldn't tolerate it.

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.¹¹

⁴ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Prozac Nation* (New York: Riverhead), p. 22.

⁵ Darrel Amundsen, "The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon," *Christian History*, 10 (1991), p. 64.

⁶ Styron, p. 38.

⁷ "Spirit of the Age," *The Economist*, December 19, 1998, p. 113.

⁸ Psalm 32:3.

⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), p. 24.

¹⁰ Wurtzel, p. 50.

¹¹ Cited in John H. Greist and James W. Jefferson, *Depression and Its Treatment* (New York: Warner, 1992), p. 8.

What tortures many people is that they *don't* die. "Exhaustion combined with sleeplessness is a rare torture." "The pain seeps into everything." The thought that they might remain in this horrible state is too much to consider. "No one knows how badly I want to die." But death has its own horrors. It feels like a vanishing point where they cease to exist at all. And what about the uncertainty of life after death? Is there annihilation? Will divine judgment crush and destroy?

The mind is stuck. How can people think about anything else when *it* is there? "I'm in a straightjacket." "I'm completely bound and tied up—there is a gag in my mouth." Without one's normal mental resources, the world is frightening. Panic. Self-reliance seems impossible. Infantile dependence is the only way to survive. Being alone is terrifying. Abandonment is a constant fear. "I fear everyone and everything."

I tried to sleep but couldn't. Part of it was that I was scared to wake up with a feeling of panic in the pit of my stomach. Anxiety was always present, and for no good reason it just got worse. I wanted to be out of the house, but I was scared to be alone. No matter what I did, I couldn't concentrate except on questions such as "Am I going insane? What have I done to deserve this? What sort of punishment is this?"

Decisions? Impossible. The mind is stuck—locked. How can you choose? Nothing is working; the engine of your mind is barely turning over.

Certainty? The only certainty is that misery will persist. If certainty of any good thing ever existed—and you can't remember when it did—it is replaced by constant doubt. You doubt that you are loved by anyone. You doubt your spouse's intentions. You doubt your spouse's fidelity. If a believer in Jesus Christ, you doubt the presence of Christ. You doubt the very foundation of your faith. "God have mercy on the man/Who doubts what he's sure of."¹²

The only thing you know is that you are guilty, shameful, and worthless. It is not that you have made mistakes in your life, or sinned, or reaped futility. It is that you *are* a mistake, you *are* sin, you *are* futility. God, therefore, has turned His back. Why bother going on in such a state?

If forced to make distinctions, you might say that there are times that are worse than others, but who is able to measure different degrees of hell? Let's just say that there can be a rhythm to it. Asleep at 11:00 p.m., up at 2:00 a.m. Anguish, fears, and a torrent of pain lay hold of you while you try to live through the morning. It settles into the normal deep sadness and paralysis

¹² Bruce Springsteen, "Brilliant Disguise."

until mid-afternoon, and is followed by a steady drizzle of fear, pain, guilt, panic, deadness, and fatigue until evening. Sometimes you might even reach the peaks of general malaise. It is true: the body can't take the pounding pain for too long. So you get some occasional breaks from the worst of it.

It can be quieter for some people. Instead of a bottomless abyss, howling in the brain and blackness, life is flat, gray, and cold. Nothing holds any interest. A

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Why do anything? Why commit suicide?
Nothing seems to matter.*

barely walking zombie. Everything is drab, lifeless, and tired. Why work? Why get out of bed? Why do anything? Why commit suicide? Nothing seems to matter. You are afraid that if one of your children died, you *still* wouldn't feel anything.

Yet, pain does break through in this more lifeless, numb state. It comes especially when you remember that you were once alive. Was it another person? Another lifetime? No, it must have been you. You remember that you actually wanted to have a sexual relationship with your spouse. A book on the shelf once kept you up all night; you couldn't put it down. That music would make you want to get up and dance. But you try to forget those times, because the contrast between then and now is almost unbearable—you prefer numbness.

It feels like you are always sick. In past generations

or places less psychologically minded they describe it solely in physical terms. For example, in China they call it *shenjing shuairi*, an alleged physical problem characterized by dizziness, fatigue, and headaches. Your body doesn't feel right. You are always tired. Doctors are consulted more than pastors or counselors.

In the early 1900s, a businessman reported these symptoms to his doctor.

It's not just my body that's tired but my brain. I constantly feel as though an iron vise were tightening on my cranium. My head feels empty. My mind won't work. My ideas are confused and I can no longer concentrate. My memory is shot. When I read, I can't remember at the bottom of the page what I've read at the top...As for my will, my energy is gone. I no longer know what I want, what I'm supposed to do. I doubt, I hesitate, I don't dare make a decision. Moreover, I've no appetite and I sleep badly. I have no sexual desire.¹³

"How could this be all in my mind?" he thinks.

You wait for a medical doctor to say that he made a mistake.

"The good news is that it's not all in your mind after all. I apologize for the misdiagnosis. The bad news is that the cancer will kill you in about a week and a half."

You are confident that everyone would be better off without you.

Is it any wonder that suicidal thoughts are always close?

¹³ Cited in Edward Shorter, *From the Mind to the Body: The Cultural Origins of Psychosomatic Symptoms* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 135.

Loving Those Who Are Depressed

You have heard the depressed person. You don't understand why the person feels depressed, but you have *some* sense of what it must be like. Now what?

You already have a few ideas for a direction that might be helpful. For example, comments about fears, anxieties, and aloneness can be keyed directly to important truths of Scripture. But you want to move slowly. You don't want to overwhelm depressed people with words. You have heard enough talks on suffering to know that your quiet presence might be enough, at least initially. Their pain, however, is so intense you don't know if they can go on. Did they share their heart with you so you could just sit there and do nothing? You don't think so. And their desperation is so intense that you are concerned they could hurt themselves or even take their own life. So you have to do something. But what?

You *shouldn't* immediately launch into what helped you or what helped your next door neighbor. Depression is common enough that most of us have our pet remedies. Yet there is no remedy that works for everyone. If you offer something canned, pat, predictable, or impersonal, it will simply seem like you aren't really listening.

"You have to try St. John's Wort."

"Are you exercising enough?"

"I have a devotional book for you that you are going to love."

"By faith, remember that God loves you."

"Just do the next thing."

"You need to trust in the Lord."

"You need to put one foot in front of the other and do the next thing."

"You are really under a lot of stress. You

should take a vacation."

"You need to really force yourself out of bed and think more positive thoughts."

Every depressed person who has ever shared anything about his or her depression to someone else has heard well-intended advice that seemed meaningless. Depressed people will try to listen, and might even try some of the advice they hear, but if it sounds hollow, they are unlikely to seek you out again. Rarely are they looking for advice.

The problem is that nearly *anything* you say, at least initially, can seem irrelevant, trite, or superficial. Those who are depressed have probably heard it before, and they are in a place where it is very difficult for words to penetrate the fatigue, fog, fear, and despair. The curious thing is that when they begin to move out of their depression, and you ask them to summarize what helped them, they will mention the same platitudes that seemed so irrelevant earlier. But right now, words—even good words, such as theological propositions and wise advice—will probably not go deep. Or, to be more precise, they will not go deep if they are *just* words.

Words *can* reach depressed people, but only words that are accompanied by love, understanding, and faith. In this, those who are depressed are similar to anyone else. That is, we rarely hear very well when someone talks to us without any real interest, love, or compassion. But when godly love is wrapped around words, people listen. Isn't it true that two people can say the exact same thing, yet the words of one may be empty, and the other beautiful? The difference, of course, is that one person is a short-term, unaffected consultant, while the other loves the depressed person like a

member of the family.

How Do You Love a Depressed Person?

Everyone who ministers to hurting people has heard them recite lists of inept words and advice they have received. Certainly, we don't want to add to the list. As such, when we are wise, our first instinct says to be quiet. Talk less, listen more. This is generally good advice, but it should never be confused with passivity. The model we have from our loving God is that love is always active. When the triune God hears the cries of His people or sees their misery, He acts.

For example, when Jesus' ministry was becoming especially popular, crowds followed him everywhere. Yet while in Nain, though pressed by the crowds, Jesus saw a small funeral procession for the only son of a widow. "The Lord saw her" (Lk. 7:13). When He saw her, His compassion was aroused, "His heart went out to her," and then He said what every book will tell you *not* to say. He said, "Don't cry," inviting her faith to look outside of herself, outside of grief and despair, to Him. This was an expression of Jesus' love that was on the move, anticipating what was to come. Jesus proceeded to defile Himself by touching the coffin, and He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" His seeing was not simply seeing; it was seeing-and-doing. Likewise, His compassion was active; it was compassion-doing. It was part of Jesus moving toward the woman and bringing life back to her son.

Loving, therefore, is work. It is accepting the other person's struggles as your own. It is listening to the other person until their pain personally affects you, until it *moves* you. It is constantly thinking, "How can the interests of this person be more important than my own?" "How can I show the love of Jesus to this person right now?" It is looking for ways to show mercy. You don't have to know why a person is in pain in order to show mercy. God shows mercy, whether our troubles are caused by ourselves or someone else.

Consider that the Depressed Person May Be Quite Heroic

Have you ever done something for which you were completely unmotivated? You may not like your work, but you do it because you dislike poverty more than you dislike your job. You may be unmotivated to do home maintenance, but you do it because you want to bolster the resale value of your home or you want to deal with the leak now before it turns into an expensive nightmare.

Most of what we do, we do because we *want* to do it. We are motivated to do it. We *feel* like doing it. Now consider what it might be like to be divorced from any

feeling. With depression, you don't feel anything, or at least you don't feel anything that would motivate you to do something constructive. This means that the depressed person who does anything "good," such as serving other people, going to work, or getting out of bed in the morning, is many times doing it out of faith.

"I will greet my children when they come home because, by faith, I believe my heavenly Father has greeted and invited me."

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"I will have a sexual relationship with my spouse by faith, because that, I believe, is one way that God calls me to serve."

If you want to see faith at work, watch for someone who does anything simply because of Christ. Apart from Christ, they would be inert or disappear, but because of Christ they trudge through the day. This is heroic faith.

One way to love a depressed person, assuming you see this, is to honor the small faith they have. That doesn't mean that you tell them how great they are doing. Instead, it means that you let them know that the Spirit has not abandoned them, and you have the evidence to prove it.

Feed Your Own Faith

The faith you see in a depressed person will invariably be small. Yet, in God's economy, Scripture suggests that we don't need much. Something the size of a mustard seed is more than enough. But when life is especially difficult, it is time to seek Christ for more faith.

Those who are depressed do not have experiential support for the promises of God. For example, although God says that He is present and will never leave, the experience of depression is that *nobody* is present. They feel like they are in a hermetically sealed bubble that keeps them from real contact with other people. As such, the dilemma for those who are depressed is not so much that they are experientially numb to the promises of God, but that their feelings *deny* the promises of God. They say that God is far and doesn't hear. Most depressed people don't realize that,

although their feelings usually say something that might be very important, feelings can also lie.

Once again, this is hard for those who have never been depressed to understand. Usually, our personal emotions are in synch with God's promises, or at least they do not keep mumbling that the promises are myths. We can drift through parts of our life without having to desperately cling to the promises of God. A depressed person does not have that option.

Although it may seem self-serving at first, one way to love those who struggle with depression is to per-

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sonally say "Amen" to the promises of God. Say "Amen" to that fact that

you will grow to be more like Christ in the midst of trouble (Rom. 8:29),

your God loves you with an everlasting love (Rom. 8:32),

He will never leave you or never forsake you (Heb. 13:5), and

He hears your cry (Ps. 5).

Do you believe these? They must be certainties in our own hearts. Since the despair of depression can easily be caught by would-be counselors, we must have a personal, growing confidence in Christ.

One of the comments you hear from people who came out of depression, or who grew in faith while in it, is "even though I was filled with doubts, I knew that my friend never doubted." The situation is similar to that of a parent and child in that sometimes a child has very little personal faith, but the child knows that the *parent* has faith, and that faith carries the child along until faith becomes more personal. Similarly, those who are depressed may initially need to piggyback on your own faith.

The result might not always seem sympathetic. For example, when the depressed person complains that God doesn't care, the faith-filled friend will quickly disagree. Perhaps the depressed person is saying, "*it feels as if God doesn't care,*" but even that should be countered by the person who has a growing confidence in the goodness of God.

Persevere in the Relationship

Depression does not pass on through like a bad thunderstorm. Instead, it can linger for weeks, months, or years. Therefore, helpers must be prepared for the long haul.

The typical pattern for those who help is that they begin with a spurt of loving and encouraging energy, almost as if their enthusiasm and comfort will revive the person who is depressed. But when they see that their words and deeds go under appreciated or, at least, are ineffective, they begin to back away. Sometimes those who try to comfort notice that the depression becomes contagious in that *they* feel depressed after spending an afternoon with the depressed person.

The reality is that those who are depressed are almost always blessed by loving contact with other brothers or sisters in Christ. They may not say it at the time. In fact, they may occasionally encourage friends not to visit, saying, "I'm hopeless. I appreciate your concern but it isn't going to help." Such comments, however, are usually the depressed person's way of either testing the care of the friends or simply saying that they feel undeserving of the friendship and they want to give the friends a mannerly way out.

Faithfulness is a critical way to show love. A consistent presence is a signpost that points to Christ. This doesn't necessarily mean that you must take time off from work to be with the person round the clock, although it might. Ministry to those who are depressed is like many types of ministry in that it calls us to love in a way that challenges our natural selfishness. Typically, however, those who help should establish a pace that can be maintained over time rather than one that is intensive but short-lived. As such, faithfulness is demonstrated in short but daily phone calls, long walks on a nice day, or reading something to the depressed person that might have special interest.

Treat the Depressed Person as a Friend

When you have demonstrated that you are staying in the relationship, a way to love is to treat the depressed person as a friend. This, of course, is self-evident. A friend treats others like a friend. But our tendency is to treat depressed people differently because they *are* different than they once were. Also, they "have depression," which implies that they are too fragile to talk about anything that might be difficult.

One of the problems with the word depression is that it can define people. Instead of being a simple summary of a difficult and complex experience, *depression* transforms into a diagnosis. Even more, it can become an identity, both to depressed people themselves and their friends. The diagnosed person is then treated like

a patient, and we act like the doctor. Visits are akin to hospital rounds during which doctor-friends discuss the case in the hallway before they sugarcoat everything once they enter the patient's room. The result is that there really is no relationship. Truly Christian rela-

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tionships are mutual and open. A good friend who loves you has the freedom to say almost anything and you will listen. A good friend can speak about your strengths *and* weaknesses, your faith *and* your sin. And they will speak openly about these things as evidence of the friendship, not in spite of it.

For example, a thirty-five-year-old man had strug-

gled with depression for almost a year, and it was beginning to show in his physical appearance. When he came to church he was unwashed and unkempt, and, as a result of his indifference, his clothes were so mismatched that they called attention to him. Everyone at church saw these outward signs, but no one said anything because he was "clinically depressed." Yet one friend who saw him on a particular Sunday was loving and honest.

You look horrible! Your hair is a mess, you are gaining weight, and your clothes look like you are a street person. Tomorrow I am going to pick you up at 9:00 in the morning. I'm going to take you to the barbershop, then we are going to go clothes shopping.

That depressed man later said that those comments brought the turning point in his depression.

These are just a few samples of love. There are hundreds of others. An exhaustive list is not really necessary because if you love someone deeply from the heart, you will be creative in ways to love and encourage.

Understanding Depression

Trying to make sense of depression is no easy task. Depression has no universal cause. It cannot be reduced to idolatry, biology, reaction to loss, or disobedient laziness. While there are similarities in the experience of depression, the causes are varied. In fact, not only are the causes varied, they are sometimes cloaked in mystery.

Yet, enigmas don't render Scripture less competent. Even if *we* cannot decode depression, Scripture speaks to it at length. It gives methodological direction to our ministry for every depressed person by teaching us how to love in word and deed, regardless of the possible causes. Also, it provides meaningful content that guides every depressed person toward Christ and, as a result, toward joy. As such, we can offer life-changing ministry to every depressed person.

The following map for understanding depression comes in three parts. The logic that connects these three is that they follow the natural progression of a counseling relationship. That is, when you first meet a depressed person, (1) all you know is that he or she is in great emotional pain and turmoil. You approach such a person as you would anyone who is suffering. Later, as you understand the person's suffering, (2) you begin to hear of circumstances in the person's life that are, in some way, connected to the depression. But connecting circumstances and depression doesn't complete our understanding of depression. As in all biblical counseling, (3) circumstances reveal issues of the heart. Typically the heart is saying something in depression. Depression has a reason. A skilled and compassionate friend or counselor is able to draw out these reasons.

1. Begin with Suffering

When considering how Scripture addresses depression, the place to begin is with the biblical material on suffering, trials and hardships.

"I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for."

"Diabolical discomfort."

"Malignant sadness."

If we are certain of anything with depression, it is that depressed people are in pain.

By starting with the category of suffering, we have the advantage of entering into the depressed person's life with fewer preconceptions. We aren't immediately thinking that the person must take medication, and we aren't thinking that some hidden sin fuels all the depressive feelings. Instead, since our theories haven't started filtering the data, we then are able to freely show compassion and mercy without passing initial judgments.

Of course, all counselors gradually begin to see connections between depression and other features of the depressed person's life. Theories are inevitable and appropriate. As these theories emerge from the data rather than are imposed on it, they can lead to more precise counsel, growth in faith, and a lessening of the depressive symptoms. But, although accurate theories may help, they are not always necessary. Consider Job's insight into or theories about his horrible suffering. He did not know the events that occurred in the heavenly court. Yet, even without accurate theories about his suffering, he was dramatically changed with counsel that is available to everyone. Through God's counsel, Job understood that

his Redeemer, whose name he praised, hears us when we cry out to Him, has wisdom that is much greater than our own, is over all things, and can be trusted. His response was to walk humbly before his God in repentance, faith, and obedience. This was the only counsel that Job was given, and it was the only counsel he needed.

We, however, have even more. From our vantage point, having been born after the earthly ministry of

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Jesus, we know more of God's character and plan than did Job. Our doctrine of suffering is much broader than his. For example, whereas Job became acutely aware of God's sovereign power, we are also aware of His unfathomable love toward us who were His enemies. Whereas those of Job's era could only imagine one cause of suffering—personal sin—we see much more. We recognize that suffering comes from ourselves, others, the Edenic curse, Satan, and God Himself.

The details of a doctrine of suffering are not necessary here. Summaries have appeared in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*¹, and there are excellent books that clarify a biblical perspective on suffering.² What follows are simply a few features of the biblical teaching that deserve special emphasis.

Move Toward Sufferers in Love

Scripture doesn't give a precise, prioritized agenda for ministering to those who suffer, but a handful of critical teachings are quickly apparent. Most obvious and most important is that we show love and mercy to the person who is suffering. This sounds redundant, but it can't be emphasized enough. People who are going through intense pain feel especially alone and distant from the body of Christ. They look at other

Christians and have a sense that everyone else has a relatively pain-free life accompanied by many temporal blessings. Love means that we move toward those who are depressed, come alongside them, and bear their burdens with them. If we don't know how to partner with them, we ask for their advice. If *they* don't know how we can partner with them, we pray for them, speak with them daily, help them in practical ways, or ask others who are more experienced with depression to give ideas on how to love.

Don't Assume a Sin-Depression Connection

Those who are depressed tend to keep quiet about their depression, especially in church. One reason for this is that they intuitively connect depression with some sin, known or unknown. Their thinking is that something this bad must be divine judgement on some heinous sin. "Job's counselors" often reside within the sufferer!

If this isn't the way the depressed person thinks, then it is probably the way *we* do. Although we might not trace depression back to some past sin, we might see it as a consequence of wrong ways of thinking and living. After all, if you spend much time with a depressed person, you will find that they are by no means perfect. You might find anger, fears, doubts, distorted beliefs, and unbelief. Whatever sins you may find, however, does not mean that sin caused the emotional suffering. Scripture very explicitly warns us to not make the sin-suffering connection unless it is absolutely obvious (cf. Job, John 9). Suffering can come from a number of places. To reduce a person's suffering to the consequences of their own sin, especially when we don't have clear knowledge of the situation, is unbiblical and potentially destructive.

Call Them to Arms (but Realize that They Don't Feel Able to Fight)

Suffering, however, is always a spiritual problem. *Persistent* suffering that wears people down is an even more difficult spiritual problem.

For example, those who struggle with chronic back pain have a spiritual problem. They have entered into the realm of pain where spiritual battle is guaranteed. Of course, spiritual battle is a feature of every Christian's life, but suffering seems to intensify it. At some point in their hardships they usually wonder about God's love. "Does God hear me?" "Does He really love me as His child?" "Has He abandoned me?" "Why is He doing this? He said that I won't receive more than I can handle!" "Is there any purpose to my life?" To combat these common questions, they need the body of Christ to equip them with the truth of God's character

¹ Ed Welch, "Exalting Pain? Ignoring Pain? What do we do with Suffering?," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 12:3 (Spring 1994), pp. 4-19.

² E.g., Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). Dan McCartney, *Why Does It Have To Hurt?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998). Sinclair Ferguson, *Deserted By God?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

and promises. If misunderstandings of Scripture appear—and they, too, are almost inevitable—the body of Christ must be available to offer clarity and hope.

Or consider the woman who is living with the pain of a disengaged, uninterested husband. Even if the woman did not contribute to the disintegration of the marriage, she still has spiritual problems whose answers reside in the message of Christ and her response of faith, new obedience, or repentance. Nothing else will go deep enough.

It is possible that this woman will feel like she failed miserably in her marriage and *that* is the reason why her husband no longer cares. In such a situation, coun-

In light of their increased spiritual vulnerability, those who are depressed are in need of daily encouragement.

selors will want to give her the opportunity to consider her own sin in the relationship, but it will be done only *after* she has knowledge of the forgiving and passionate love of her heavenly Father. When she understands this, then she can consider her own faults more accurately. Yet, even then, her judgments can be skewed. Her conscience might be confused with the judgment of an angry husband who could never be pleased. As a result, her conscience may operate with wrong or incomplete data, and it needs to be biblically informed. Or it is possible she will be filled with wrath at her husband's evident failures. In this case, too, cure of her soul is a task demanding skillful, careful, and patient surgery.

This is what those who are depressed face. Misinterpretations abound. Spiritual battle is intense. To make the problem even worse, Satan, ever the opportunist, sees an opening with depression. Pain is his opportunity to cast doubts about God's care. The instinctive introspection of depression is his opportunity to exaggerate the sense of aloneness and introduce the idea that no other people care and that life is meaningless. Misery is his opportunity to attribute depression to personal sin and pangs of conscience.

In light of their increased spiritual vulnerability, those who are depressed are in need of daily encouragement. Sadly, many friends think that depression is best left to the experts and are reluctant to get involved because they doubt their ability to minister effectively.

Fight by Knowing the Love of Christ

Satan wages spiritual attacks with a few basic strategies. Among the most popular are suggestions

that God does not really love or care, that God is indifferent to our pain, perhaps even sadistic, or that God doesn't even exist. This must be countered with steady volleys of the love of Christ, directed at the depressed person's heart.

Try to agree together on a portion of Scripture that points toward Christ. Consider reading the Psalms together as a way to remember that God teaches us how to speak to Him about the wrestlings within our own hearts. Above all else, look for opportunities to get to the gospel itself—the thing of first importance (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

The gospel is the evidence that the love of Christ is much more than good intentions or passive compassion. The gospel shows us that Christ's love was a holy love that surpassed our understanding. If we are angry that God allows depression in our lives, we should be reminded that His love is much more sophisticated than we know. (We should also repent for standing in judgment of God.) It is love that has His glory, and, as a result, our best interests at its core.

Whether we know it or not, what brings glory to God and what is in our best interests is that we grow to be more like Jesus, living in humble reliance on and obedience to the Father. Furthermore, if Jesus learned obedience to the Father through suffering, we should expect the same refining process in our own lives. Therefore, suffering does not oppose love; instead, it is a result of it (Heb. 12:8). We are under the mistaken impression that divine love cannot coexist with human pain. Such thinking is one of Satan's most effective strategies and it must be attacked with the gospel of grace.

2. Suffering Points to the Heat, the Difficult or Beguiling Circumstances of Our Lives

When you enter into a person's suffering, it usually points you in a particular direction. It tells you something. The language is not always clear, but it does have a certain meaning. Depression is no different. It points us in a number of possible directions of which the first is typically some very difficult circumstances. Like anger or fear, depression is usually provoked by something outside the person. Sometimes depressed people can pinpoint a situation, saying, "I am depressed because..." For others, it is not a particular event, but it might be the sheer number of challenging situations in their lives, in which case depression is another way of saying, "I give up."³ There are also some who, at least

³ K. S. Kendler, R. C. Kessler, M. C. Neale, A. C. Heath, and L. J. Eaves, "The Prediction of Major Depression in Women: Toward an Integrated Etiologic Model," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 150 (1993), pp. 1139-1148.

initially, see absolutely no connection between their circumstances and their feelings. They might say that things couldn't be better, which makes the emergence of their depression even more frightening. But, whether depressed people can point to circumstances or not, relevant connections usually can be made between life situations and their depression.

Depression Points to Our Past-Present-Future Story

Linda, now thirty-eight, said that her circumstances couldn't be better but her depression couldn't be worse. Her husband loved her, her children were healthy and growing in Christ, and she had enough money to pay bills with cash to spare at the end of each month. When she reviewed her past, that too seemed relatively smooth and uneventful. She was raised in a prosperous home, her parents were still together, and she was offered guidance by both her parents.

The childhood home, Linda said, had been structured. There were clear guidelines and expectations, which made her feel "secure and loved." When asked specifics, however, Linda recounted expectations that seemed inordinate and oppressive. Grades, future career, the resume of each prospective spouse, clothes, all school decisions, from elementary to graduate school—these were just a few of the areas that her father controlled. Tears, apparent weakness, and independent choice were unacceptable. What was odd was that Linda appeared unaffected by all these, as if her past was good and normal.

When asked about her history of depression, she calmly summarized how she had been hospitalized in a psychiatric institution at age thirteen "because I was never hungry." She started taking psychiatric medication at that time and, except for pregnancies and times when psychiatrists changed prescriptions, she had been taking something ever since.

What would it be like to live in a world where mistakes, as defined by a father, were unacceptable? What would it be like to live in an environment that was controlled to the last detail? Even to this day, when authority figures speak, she seems to become glazed and subservient, never questioning, even when requests are ungodly.

Depression, therefore, suits her. She is numb, so she doesn't have to live with the sadness and regret. She feels like she can't think clearly, so outside authority isn't questioned. Every act of submission or doing the expected then contributes to a sense of depersonalization and loss of identity, rather than expresses faith and a sense of identity.

As the counselor considered these connections aloud, Linda became more attentive. To hear it from

another person gave her an opportunity to reflect and think. Linda began to see that what she was feeling was most likely linked, in some way, to the daily patterns of the home in which she was raised. Once she saw this, she was pointed further, even to issues in her relationship with God. Her operative belief system embodied significant falsehoods.

At first glance, this strategy of considering past influences can seem either out-of-date or unbiblical. In the secular world, it sounds old-fashioned. Is it the 1970s and 1980s story of "my parents made me do it"? Today, problems are supposed to be genetic and bio-

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chemical. In the Christian world it can sound unbiblical. Does it set Linda up for blaming her parents for her present struggles? To first target links with her past circumstances seems to take the attention off her own heart. But the strategy of understanding connections with her past, whether it be events from yesterday or two decades ago, is a normal part of understanding a person that has biblical warrant.

When you partner with someone who is suffering, you will almost always come to notice their difficult circumstances. Pain is usually tied to something that happened *to us*—or is happening or might happen. The struggle that some biblical counselors have is *not* that there are painful, historical events in our lives. The struggle is with how far back in the past we go to understand these circumstances. When gathering data from the more distant past, it appears to show sympathy with a Freudian methodology that assumes archeological, final causes rather than simple links and connections. But any overlap between the approach to Linda and psychodynamic theories is coincidental. Anyone who wants to understand people must know something about past contexts and influences, whether you want to understand the argument from last night, the job situation last month, the church split last year, or the milieu in childhood. It is the *interpretation* of these significant circumstances that distinguishes various counseling theories.

God's sovereign control over history and our own personal stories makes past situations *more* important, not less. What happened to us was not a series of random, unrelated events. Even though suffering has mul-

tiple causes, God's hand is always over everything. This does not mean that we can discern the full meaning of every difficult event in our lives. To do so would be an attempt to walk by knowledge and insight rather than faith. But, at least, it means that God speaks to the difficult circumstances of our lives and teaches us how to interpret them.

It is possible that the reason some biblical counselors get suspicious when someone investigates significant events in the more distant past is that it seems as if the counselor is using the past to mitigate sinful expressions of the heart. Like a court of law, if we can

What do we do with those who are in obvious sin and obvious pain? The answer, of course, is that we address both, without minimizing either one.

find past circumstances that were damaging, the law-breaker seems less guilty. What do we do with those who are in obvious sin *and* obvious pain? The answer, of course, is that we address both, without minimizing either one. Such an approach is a challenging middle path, between ignoring sin or ignoring suffering, and we must not veer from it.

In Linda's case, the possible link between her depression and her past allows us to be more specific with biblical instruction. For example, Romans 5-8, a section of Scripture that at first appears to have little relevance to Linda's specific situation, in fact brims with application. It suggests that Linda's overlord has been the law, and the pivotal figures are Adam, Satan, and her own heart, even more than her father. Her father became a sign that pointed her to deeper spiritual realities and issues of her own heart. As such, discussions of lordship, freedom in Christ, being united with Christ, and being instruments of righteousness suddenly reveal present realities more than abstract theological propositions. If we spoke about these without highlighting the possible impact of her past family traditions, she might hear wonderful sermons on the liberation of the gospel and believe them, but she might relate these solely to her past justification, without seeing how relevant they are to her present way of thinking.

Might there be other relevant parts of Linda's past story? If so, how many do you consider? Perhaps there have been important past-present connections that we missed. How can we be confident that we have the nec-

essary data to shed light on historical links to depression? In Linda's case, even if there is a legitimate connection between family standards and her depression, there could be dozens of other connections as well. How do we know when we have gathered enough data? The answer comes out of the counselor's experience and Linda's personal judgment. To put it simply, the counselor should feel like he or she understands Linda, and Linda should feel like the counselor knows her well enough to offer biblical help.

Linda's case unfolded as the counselor understood relevant parts of her *past* story, but her past is not the only door into her life. Unlike secular theories, Scripture provides entry points by way of her present and future story as well. For example, careful understanding of her *present* relationships with her father and immediate boss would have led us to the same themes and same Scripture. Also, the counselor could have asked about Linda's fears and anxieties, thus considering her view of the future. In Linda's case, her emotional numbness distanced her from her fears. Therefore, she might have denied any particular anxieties. In most depressed people, however, the entry gate of future fears and anxieties can be key to the critical issues in their lives.

Depression Points to Our Cultural Situation

There is no limit to the contributing influences on depression. Scripture mentions many of the prominent ones: parents, teachers, peers, poor health, poverty, demons, and others. Yet, the list is not intended to be exhaustive. Depressed people have suggested connections with the phase of the moon, stress while in the womb, changes in the ozone layer, diet and exercise, and maybe they are right, in part. Some contributions, however, are more likely than others. Among those that are likely is one that tends to be frequently ignored by individualistic thinking, whether the individual's problem is seen as sin or biochemistry; therefore, it deserves special mention.

Over the past twenty years, those who study depression have suggested connections between cultural changes and the incidence of depression. It is of interest to biblical counselors that depression is on the increase. The incidence rate of depression for those born after 1950 seems to be as much as 20 times higher than the incidence rate for those born before 1910.⁴ Like all statistics, these can be molded to suit many different arguments, but it is a commonly accepted observation that depression has significantly increased over the last

⁴ James Buie, "'Me' Decades Generate Depression," *APA Monitor*, February 1991, p. 18.

three generations. The question, of course, is, Why?

The most popular theory of depression today is the biochemical hypothesis, which suggests that depression is a consequence of serotonin deficiencies in the brain. No one, however, has succeeded in squaring this genetic hypothesis with the dramatic increase in the rate of depression. Instead, the best explanations point to some kind of cultural changes that both have been shaped by our hearts and bid to shape our hearts. Sociologists have coined the term “anomie” to characterize societies that become pointless, planless, demoralized, fragmented.

Culture provides an implicit way for us to see ourselves and the world. It emerges whenever people gather together. Therefore, families, schools, and denominations all have particular cultures. Culture provides guidelines for manners, traditions, and relationships: whether or not we have dinner together, how we celebrate our holidays, whether we raise hands in worship or kneel, how we greet each other, and so on.

Infused through culture, however, is what Scripture refers to as the *world*. The world is created by God and is the abode of human beings. As created by God it is good, but as our abode it bears the mark of our sin. Therefore, in the New Testament, the *world* is used to denote the order of things that are alienated from God. In this sense, it is morally corrupt (2 Pet. 1:4), peddling foolishness as wisdom (1 Cor. 1:20), and interpreting God’s wisdom as foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23).

The world can be defined as “corporate flesh,”⁵ as if our sinful tendencies were singing in unison. As such, the world consists of patterns and structures that come from us. *We* are responsible, for example, for the unrestrained sensuality in our culture. But there is also a sense in which the world comes *at* us. Even though we don’t need any assistance in sensual indulgence, the world, having planted the message that unbridled sensuality is good, abets the tendencies of our hearts. The benefit of seeing that the world is outside us is that it heightens our awareness of the spiritual battle that we must fight. Then, not only do we have to fight against our own sin, but we have to fight against certain aspects of the culture that applaud our sinful tendencies rather than rebuke them.

In the short list that follows, I will identify features of our culture that have been linked with depression. I will summarize some features only briefly because a biblical approach to them is well-known, or their development would be outside the scope of an article. For a few, I will supply a brief biblical perspective.

⁵ Richard Lovelace, *Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), p. 86.

A Culture of Decisions. Martin Seligman, a researcher on depression, has suggested this explanation for the increase in depression: “The modern individual is not the peasant of yore with a fixed future yawning ahead. He—and now she, effectively doubling the market—is a battleground of decisions and preferences.”⁶

In previous generations, an implicit caste system kept us in the same jobs as our parents, and most of the major decisions in life were already made before we were born. Even one generation ago, students could go to college without a clear sense of direction, leisurely consider various majors, graduate, then work with one firm until retirement, along the way almost certainly marrying and having two to four children. Now, however, education, career, marriage, and even sexual preference are much more up for grabs.

Parents reserve spots at select elementary schools soon after their children are born, hoping to give their children any advantage possible in a highly competitive world. They try to provide every possible extracurricular experience humanly possible so children can find their strengths and, perhaps, be in a position for a college scholarship. Children feel the pressure to have vocational ideas by the time they enter ninth grade. Teenagers now make course decisions in high school that their parents never had to make in college. And even preteens are exposed to sexual situations and their associated pressures and decisions.⁷ Teens feel like they face weekly choices that could affect the entire course of their lives.

An understandable response to such a hurried and confused culture is withdrawal, paralysis in the face of decisions, fear of making wrong decisions, fatigue, and feeling like you could sleep for days and still be tired. In other words, depression is a fitting response to these cultural pressures. The reason it is important for counselors to be alert to this possible cultural influence is the same reason we want to be alert to salient features of someone’s personal history. That is, it draws our attention to biblical data that would otherwise be neglected. In this situation, counselors can offer instruction in how to make wise decisions.⁸ And, in view of God’s sovereign control, counselors can teach that God will accomplish His purposes in our lives, even when we make decisions that we later regret.

A Culture of the Individual. In 1984, Edward Scheif-

⁶ Buie, p. 18.

⁷ David Elkind describes these sociological changes in a dated but still very relevant book, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1989).

⁸ E.g., James Petty, *Step By Step* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

felin studied a primitive tribe in New Guinea. Among his findings was an absence of despair, hopelessness, depression, or suicide. Studies among the Amish have found similar results. What unites these two cultures is that individuals are part of a larger community. Whereas Western culture is a pseudo-community in which we occasionally cluster in like-minded groups, these cultures have extended families that consist of different people with different interests who learn how to live and work together.

In modern Western culture there is nothing bigger than ourselves. Satisfaction doesn't come from serving others. Instead, we perceive that it comes from con-

*If we idolize happiness, it will
always elude us.*

suming and gratifying personal needs. If a relationship doesn't suit our desires, it is expendable and we can move on to another. "How do I feel?" has been a national obsession.

This exaltation of the individual is a principle that is changing gradually. There have been a number of Christian and secular critiques of the "me decades" lifestyle. The problem, however, is twofold. First, the damage has been done. The aloneness, isolation, and powerlessness of a self-driven life have already taken root. Second, in a mobile society that lacks spiritual empowerment to love and reconcile, there are very few options.

If this feature of the world contributes to depression, the call to arms is first to know the enthroned God. When we go into the courtroom of the King of kings, we are more in awe of Him than aware of ourselves. Our troubles become much smaller in contrast to His beauty and holiness. Then, when we listen to the King, His command to us is simple: love others as you have been loved. Love breaks individualism; love builds new communities out of fragmentation.

A Culture of Self-Indulgence. A corollary of the culture of the individual is the culture of self-indulgence. Whether you look at past slogans of popular culture, such as "if it feels good, do it," popular psychology's "follow your feelings," or the advertising that fuels our economy, we are surrounded by a belief that we can find something outside of ourselves that will fill or satisfy us.

The myth is that "one more" will finally bring satisfaction. The reality is that it just leaves us with a desire for two more, because we know that one didn't satisfy. A law of diminishing returns is always at work when

we let our appetites run amok. For those with stamina, the cycle of cravings and indulging cravings can go on for years, but many people do glimpse the vanity of these pursuits. These are the people who might be prone to depression. Some of them just intuitively see through the promises of self-indulgence. Others have deprived themselves of nothing or reached the zenith of their careers and found it empty.

Although the list of potential satisfiers of our lusts is filled with those that satisfy physical desires (drugs, food, sex), self-indulgence can also serve more psychological appetites. The most common desire has been called the need for self-esteem, the endless quest to feel good about ourselves. Some students of depression have suggested that the increase in depression is due, in part, to the backlash of the self-esteem teaching.

The reasoning is straightforward. What happens when people are raised on a steady diet of "you are great, you can do anything, you deserve it, you are the best, you can get what you want"? Sooner or later they find that they are not great, they can't do everything, they are not the best, and they can't control it all. Depression or denial are the only two options.

A Culture where Happiness is the Greatest Good and Suffering Has No Perceived Benefit. Ever since Aristotle suggested in his *Ethics* that happiness is the greatest good, Western culture has had an ambivalent relationship with hardships. People who have experienced war have learned to accept the trials and sufferings of life. Among many wise, older citizens in American culture, there is no desperate flight from sufferings, but a recognition that it is part of life and can have some benefit. Yet among those in the post-World War II generation, a wisp of happiness is the goal, and suffering should be avoided at all costs. If there are hardships in a relationship, end it. If there is an unpleasant emotion, medicate it. As a result, this is a generation that perceives no value to any hardship. Like a child who never grew through trials, we lack the skill of growing through our trials. If we idolize happiness, it will always elude us.

A Culture of Entertainment, Thus a Culture of Boredom. One other related feature of modern culture that has been linked with depression has been our quest for the new and exciting, which, for many, is a frantic flight from boredom. "Amuse me," is the theme. And if we are not amused, we have the dreadful quiet to fill. As Pascal astutely noted, "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."⁹

⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* 136, tr. by A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966).

Boredom is a malaise that hangs over the younger generations. Perhaps it is because they have compressed sex, drugs, and money into a shorter period of time, and found them unsatisfying. Now there is nothing new to entertain them. Perhaps it is the amount of leisure they have or the extended time in which they can live off the money of their parents. Whatever the reason, many people have discovered that life can't be found in worldly pursuits. Without any particular purpose, their goal is to tolerate and survive a boring, goalless existence.

The antidote for any depression that has elements of boredom is joy. Joy can be distinguished from gratitude and from mere pleasure or satisfaction. In gratitude, I am thankful for what I received. There is self-involvement in gratitude in that I have been given some benefit. In pleasure, the emphasis is on a good feeling that may coexist with joy but it is more superficial. Unlike pleasure, joy can coexist with suffering, persecution, or pain.

Augustine rightly identified the ultimate object of joy as God. "True happiness is to rejoice in the truth, for to rejoice in the truth is to rejoice in you, O God, who are the truth... Those who think that there is another kind of happiness look for joy elsewhere, but theirs is not true joy."¹⁰ According to Augustine, true joy is the delight in that supreme beauty, goodness, and truth which are the attributes of God, of which traces may be found in the good and beautiful things of this world.

C. S. Lewis also gave considerable thought to the experience of joy. He found it in small, good things such as apples, fresh air, seasons, and music. He spoke of "reading" the hand of God in our little pleasures. Also like Augustine, Lewis wanted to make it clear that joy could not rest in those things, however good.

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust in them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through was a longing...

For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.¹¹

This longing is joy. It is a longing for glory, heaven and, especially, God himself.

Both Augustine and Lewis echo Paul's exhortation to the church at Philippi where he tells them to meditate on those things that are true, noble, pure, and lovely (Phil. 4:8). This exhortation resides in a letter that is

uniquely committed to teaching the church how to have joy in the midst of suffering.

3. Suffering Points to Our Hearts

When we first talk with someone who is depressed, we find that the misery is consuming. It doesn't point anywhere or say anything. It just is. But as we get to know and understand the person, depression will likely point to possible inciting circumstances. It will point

Unlike pleasure, joy can coexist with suffering, persecution, or pain.

to loss, rejection, or other events that happened to the person. It may also point to identifiable physiological problems. Yet, depression says even more. As we learn of the trying circumstances that shape depression, we are ultimately directed to our religious core, the heart—what comes *out* of the person.

Having briefly looked at circumstances that might be connected to depression, it was impossible to avoid short forays into our hearts' responses to those circumstances. As such, we have already touched on some heart issues. Now I want to consider them in more detail.

Basic Assumptions

When we consider the human heart, everyone begins with some basic assumptions. For those who would counsel biblically, these assumptions should emerge from biblical reflection. Yet, they will also be enriched by biblically-informed personal experiences, and swayed by cultural and denominational distinctives. Since these assumptions direct the course of ministry, we should, at least, be self-conscious and clear about them so they can be evaluated by Scripture. Here are several core propositions about the heart and depression.

1. Emotions come from us, they reveal our hearts.

Whether it is fear, sadness, or anger, our first instinct with almost any emotion is to think that they happen to us. They come over us; they seize us. When we get angry, we feel like something "made" us angry. When we get depressed, we feel like we *get* depression, we feel like something overcomes us. But depression is something we "do."

It is true that emotions are almost always incited by events outside of us, but that is not the entire story. If we listen carefully, emotions also say something about

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 22.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 7.

us, about our own hearts. They come *from* us rather than come over us. They are judgments we make that are initially rendered in a language different than speech. Therefore, when we try to read or interpret our emotions, the most basic question is, "What does this emotion reveal about *me*?" Or, "What am *I* really saying and doing by way of this emotion?"

*Suffering invariably reveals
the allegiances of our hearts.*

Painful times, in particular, reveal our hearts. During times when everything is going well, it is not always natural to examine our hearts. Times of trouble, however, whatever the causes, tend to reveal divided allegiances and false beliefs, and they are always divine opportunities to grow in faith, the knowledge of God, sound doctrine, hope, obedience, and repentance.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Deut. 8:2)

It may seem easy to be loyal to Christ when things are going well, but will we remain loyal when temporal blessings are removed? This is the question that everyone faces in times of trial. Suffering invariably reveals the allegiances of our hearts. It shows how we trusted in our God, but it also shows how we trusted in people, comfort, pleasure, work, or our ability to control our environment. These exposed loyalties are not necessarily the cause of depression, although they can be. Rather, they are just a natural part of the process of spiritual growth in that, as we persevere in suffering, we will encounter "sin that so easily entangles" (Heb. 12:1).

This may sound harsh to someone who already feels like a bruised reed, and it *can* be harsh when counselors make finding sin a higher priority than seeking Christ, or fail to search for remnant sin in the light of Christ's grace and mercy. But biblical self-examination strengthens us. Done correctly, tested faith and personal repentance lead to a greater appreciation for the cross and heaven, a greater confidence that there is no condemnation, and a confidence that we, indeed, are children of the living God. For depressed people, confession and a knowledge of cleansing might become the first inkling of joy that they've not previously known.

Since most of us think that emotions happen to us rather than proceed from us, sometimes we must *invite* depressed people to look at their hearts. Though suffer-

ing is an opportune and ordained time for us to say, "Lord, search me," spiritual self-examination is rarely natural. Very few people consistently ask the Lord to reveal their spiritual allegiances and whom they serve. Those who are depressed tend to be preoccupied with their feeling of depression and their circumstances. Their own hearts might be the *last* place they look. The reality, however, is that depression most likely says something, and it says something about us.

This simple proposition is radical and hopeful for the person who is depressed. It means that depression is not just a black cloud that spontaneously appears over us on an otherwise beautiful day. Instead, it means that we can do something about it. But don't expect this to leave depressed people jumping for joy. They feel powerless, fatigued, and unable to put up the battle that it might take to leave the depression behind. For some people, change is even more difficult because depression serves a purpose in their lives and they are reluctant to leave it.

2. Depression is often caused, and almost always intensified, by spiritual problems. This second proposition is more controversial, but it is consistent with Scripture, with my own experience, and with the experience of my colleagues. The vast majority of depressed people we have known have had significant spiritual roots to their depression. Usually, these spiritual roots are the cause of depression; almost always they intensify depression.

This is where Scripture gets slammed as being simplistic and irrelevant to biological theories. This proposition, however, is actually not as out of step with current thinking as it first appears. While it is true that a few extreme biological theories deem personal motivation as irrelevant to depression, and other theories of depression, in an effort to boost self-esteem, shun any hint of personal blame, most secular clinicians have adopted some version of cognitive theories which propose that personal beliefs play a significant role in depression. A biblical position goes deeper and indicates that personal beliefs come out of our hearts.

At first glance, this appears to violate the earlier principle that we should not assume a sin-depression connection. In truth, the last thing we want to do is approach a depressed person and immediately think that he or she has some secret, causative sin. So a few clarifications about the nature of spiritual problems are important.

Spiritual problems, as used here, are broader than personal, intentional sin. "Spiritual" refers to faith, obedience to Christ, repentance from intentional sin, repentance from unintentional sin, unbiblical interpretations

of life, understanding the implications of the death and resurrection of Christ, educating the conscience, and learning biblical doctrine. I do not assume that all spiritual causes are self-conscious rebellion against God.

The basic idea is this. When we struggle and are willing to say, "Lord, search me and teach me," the Lord will reveal our hearts and teach us, and His instruction will have both an eternal and temporal benefit. Put this way, the proposition does not sound as jolting.

But does this mean that the experience of depression can be *eradicated* by "taking the soul to task" and growing in the knowledge of Christ? Not always, and not always quickly, but depression can be alleviated by spiritual means much more often than we think. Before the era of biological reductionism, it was axiomatic that strong emotions revealed the heart and were treated spiritually. Consider the biblical examples of Elijah, David, Jonah, Jeremiah, Peter, and Judas. Their despondency had clear spiritual roots. Also consider your own experience. Don't strong emotions often have their initial impetus in your own heart?

What about possible biological or genetic contributions? Can't they provoke depression even when spiritual problems are absent? Yes, as many people who have had depressive side effects from medication know, biological problems can induce symptoms that feel like depression. But, even in these cases, spiritual growth limits the severity of the depressive symptoms. A key biblical passage is 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, where the Apostle Paul teaches that our troubles become "light and momentary" when contrasted with what is to come. This passage is especially relevant to the discussion about depression, because Paul is writing about physical suffering. Therefore, even if there is a physical contribution to depression, we can be confident that spiritual growth and change will lessen the perceived intensity of the pain.

Scripture certainly recognizes physical contributions to the experience of depression. Usually, however, physical preconditions must be combined with a susceptible heart.

Consider this illustration. In order to wash your car, you must have water, a bucket, an old cloth rag, and cooperative weather. These conditions, however, will not wash the car by themselves. They are *necessary* for washing the car, but they are not sufficient in themselves to complete the job. They need a person who is motivated to do the job.

Similarly, in depression, biological preconditions (water and buckets) may be necessary, but spiritual preconditions are usually primary. This has several implications. One is that, in most cases of depression, if you only treat the biological preconditions you have

not really addressed the roots of a person's depression. You have artificially manipulated a physical state, but you have not dealt with the cause. A second implication is that if two people have precisely the same spiritual profile (sins, faith, knowledge of God, and doctrine), it is possible that one could be depressed and the other not. The spiritual problems may be present, but the physical preconditions or ability to experience depression may be absent in the person who is not depressed.

For depressed people, confession and a knowledge of cleansing might become the first inkling of joy that they've not previously known.

3. *A Model: Any spiritual problem, left unattended, can slide into depression.* Here is a working theory of depression. Any spiritual problem has the potential to be expressed eventually as depression. Possible roots include guilt, an unbiblical response to victimization, fear, fear of man, anger, and so on. When they are ignored, nurtured, or unattended to biblically, depression can result, especially in those who have a biological ability to experience depression. The formula is this:
spiritual problems + time + a biological ability to experience depression = depression

Occasionally, a biological ability to experience depression will be the prominent cause. But, at this point, there is no definitive way of knowing whether or not there is an underlying biological problem; there is no medical test that can demonstrate a chemical imbalance. At first glance, this might make biblical counselors more tentative in approaching depression, because we don't want to mistake spiritual and physical problems, but this lack of diagnostic insight is actually not a handicap. As long as we allow our focus to be the same as Scripture's, it is not essential that we know the specifics of our biological circumstances. Scripture guides us into spiritual growth even when the body is wasting away.

The Language of the Heart

Given the prominence of spiritual factors in depression, a very important question is: What is the depressed heart really saying? Depression is much more eloquent than we might think. It can remain silent at times, in which case wise friends continue to offer everything that God offers to those who suffer. But the depressed heart usually speaks about one or more spir-

itual struggles.

If you have read the earlier descriptions of depression, some statements are especially obvious. For example, consider Robert Burton's classic description from his book, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. "They are in great pain and horror of mind, distraction of soul, full of continual fears, cares, torments, anxieties, they can neither drink, eat, nor sleep." In this description, "neither drink, eat, nor sleep" does not register as a complaint of the heart. It is certainly a difficult problem, but it doesn't have a distinctly moral or spiritual cast to it. Most

The working theory of depression is that it can result from any spiritual problem that has been given an opportunity to ferment.

likely, what captures your attention from Burton's timeless phrase are fears and anxieties.

Depression says, "I am afraid." Fear puts people on edge. Fearful people are hypervigilant; the adrenaline is flowing. This certainly does not sound like depression. Depression is lethargy, a fuzzy brain, feeling down rather than active. But there are ways in which depression is a suitable expression of fear. First, notice the motionless, frozen nature of depression. Depression is the deer in front of the headlights. Out of intense fear, you do nothing. Any choice or movement may compound the danger.

Second, persistent fear takes a physical toll. It is almost impossible for the body to maintain the physical demands of fear for very long. Depression can be fear that has grown fatigued. Third, depression is a complex experience. It can be simultaneously described as "agitated" and lethargic.

For many people, depression says "I am terrified."

Terrified to make a wrong decision
 fail
 be exposed
 lose a loved one
 be abandoned and alone
 not have control
 be diagnosed with a disabling
 disease
 die

Depression says, "I am guilty," or "I am shamed."

Perhaps the second most frequent meaning of depression is, "I am guilty and I must pay back for my sins." Or, "I am guilty and I can never pay back for what I have done." Guilt gives way to shame in Western cul-

ture in that we are more concerned by people seeing our weaknesses and faults than we are about God seeing our sins. But depression could be saying either.

When you look at depressed people, they actually appear weighed down, as if they carry an oppressive burden. The burden may be from

their own sin
not measuring up to their *own* law rather than God's
not being approved of by people whose opinions have been exalted to God-like proportions
living as if they had to do penance for their own sin
self-imposed judgments that come from incomplete or misinterpreted data (e.g., taking responsibility for sins done against you)

The answer is clear: "in the gospel a righteousness from God has been revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Rom. 1:17). The difficulty is that we tend to insist on adding our own works to the righteousness of God that has been given us in Christ.¹²

Depression says, "I lost something." The emptiness of depression often speaks about loss, such as the loss of loved ones through death or divorce, loss of competencies through sickness, loss of a valued job (Ps. 42:4), or loss of responsibilities with aging. The sense of loss could be related to any object or activity: job, health, money, sports. What unites this group of lost possessions is that, before they were lost, they most likely had grown to idolatrous proportions. Depression, therefore, is not the same as bereavement. If depression is related to bereavement, the cause is bereavement that has been unchecked by God's Word.

Depression says, "I need something." The sense of loss and emptiness also extends to psychological desires. The fundamental belief is that I need psychological sustenance from others: love, significance, admiration, approval, and so on. The eventual consequence of this belief is a sense of pervasive emptiness. You want to be filled, but it is never enough.

That love and community are an integral part of human existence is beyond dispute. We all want them. The problem arises when this desire becomes a need. At that point, need is a euphemism for lust, and lust always wants more. It is never satisfied. It always feels empty.

Depression says, "I AM ANGRY." If we feel like we need something from other people in order to live, then we believe that we have a right to the thing we need. If I need love, I have a right to it, and you owe me love. In other words, there are two ways we say "I need." One

¹² Ed Welch, "Is Biblical-Nouthetic Counseling Legalistic? Reexamination of a Biblical Theme," *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 11:1 (1992), pp. 4-19.

cries out from a sense of emptiness, the other demands and judges those who don't give us what we need. They both have the same root, and you will often find them together.

The working theory of depression is that it can result from any spiritual problem that has been given an opportunity to ferment. Anger can be one of those spiritual problems. When anger and arrogant judgment toward others is not followed by repentance, it gradually might be expressed through depression.

How does depression say that we are angry? Initially, it usually doesn't. For some people, depression is a substitute for anger. It is preferable because it is more socially acceptable. Whereas depression won't bother our conscience, anger might. Anger and rage seem very wrong, depression feels more victimized. If anger is part of a person's depression, it might first speak by complaining and grumbling. Unfortunately, even to trained ears, complaining and grumbling are not recognized as part of the anger spectrum. But they all have the same root: they express our judgment of God and against God (Ex. 16:8). When we complain or grumble, we are saying that we are not satisfied with God's love. What has He done for us *today*?

Depression says, "I must avoid this." (Depression has a purpose.) For some, depression is a strategy of avoidance. It can be an avoidance of a person, the past, financial difficulties, or responsibilities that carry the possibility of failure. Have you ever had to attend to something very difficult, and your first reaction was to either run away and ignore it or else go to sleep? If so, you have a glimpse into one of the purposes of depression. The mental fog helps us to avoid thinking about a particularly troubling event or person, and the physical fatigue helps us from difficult situations.

Depression says, "Woe is me." Some writers have noted that depression speaks the language of self-pity.¹³ Tim LaHaye goes so far as suggest that unless depressed people confront self-pity, change is impossible.¹⁴ This seems severe, but it makes sense. Depression restricts our vision to the point where it is difficult to see beyond ourselves and our problems. Like most pain, left unchecked, it naturally abets egocentrism.

Self-pity is focused on ourselves. *We* are the ones who are misunderstood, always wronged, and forgotten. Our identity comes from our pain and troubles. We see ourselves as martyrs. Anger is usually just barely camouflaged as we stew over how we didn't get what we need or deserve.

¹³ E.g., Herbert Carson, *Depression in the Christian Family* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994).

¹⁴ Tim LaHaye, *How to Win Over Depression* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

It is not easy to confront self-pity, but LaHaye is right. If we take a passive stance, the depressed person will have secured an isolated, miserable existence. Therefore, if we know the depressed person well, and the relationship has been characterized by love and friendship, this is a time when "wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Pr. 27:6).

If depressed people see only their own misery and

*Depression restricts our vision
to the point where it is difficult to see
beyond ourselves and our problems.*

have lost sight of the bigger workings of God's plan, the most apparent biblical strategy is a simple question. Best known is God's question to Jonah, "Have you any right to be angry?" In this situation we would expect God to give a lecture, but we get a question that encourages us to consider ourselves accurately, from God's perspective.

A second strategy is akin to a visit to a pediatric oncology unit. That is, when we perceive the suffering of others as more intense than our own, our eyes move off ourselves. As Christians, this means that we fix our eyes on Jesus, who was the consummate sufferer. In fact, since all of us have been God's enemies, guilty apart from Christ, Jesus is the only truly victimized person. He was the only one whose suffering was undeserved. "What happens to the sinful creatures of God, however tragic, is less monstrous than what happened to the son of God."¹⁵

Depression says, "I have no hope." A universal cry of the depressed heart is, "I have no hope." Hopelessness is almost diagnostic of depression. And it is here that we would expect Scripture to have its most notable effects.

We rejoice in the glory of God. Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Rom. 5:2-5)

The problem is that for the last thirty years, the church has focused on how our lives can go better *now*. We are

¹⁵ P. J. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1948).

still at the tail end of the self-help era. As a result, clear biblical teaching on how to grow in hope is rarely a significant part of a Christian diet.

We are an impatient people. We are quick to look to medications to relieve depression and other psychological difficulties. In some ways we avoid hope, because hope implies that we can't have it now. But in God's wisdom He has determined that the spiritual skill of waiting and hoping would be prized possessions that

Although depressed people feel absolutely alone, they are part of a huge heaven-bound procession.

have value for all eternity. Those who are depressed might be reluctant to practice waiting and hoping, but they at least know that they have very little skill in them. Therefore, they might be able to imagine that these are great gifts that can bring contentment regardless of the situation or experience.

Waiting and hope do not demand quite as much patience as we might think. Hope is grounded in the return of Christ. It anticipates the final wedding when we will see Jesus face to face, be thoroughly freed from sin, and truly love our triune God with our whole hearts. But hope can legitimately anticipate tomorrow as well as eternity, because tomorrow, having been a little more sanctified by the incessant work of the Holy Spirit, we will share even more in His holiness. We will know more of heavenly righteousness and peace when we are trained by hardship than when we remain depressed and hopeless when our hardships persist (Heb. 12:10-12).

How do we do it? "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb. 12:3). When we take our eyes off of Jesus, the road is endless. We know we will not have the stamina for it. But when we see that Jesus—the Knower of hearts—has traveled this road before us, then we can be confident that the Spirit is with us and will give us strength to walk in humble faith and obedience.

And it hasn't been Jesus alone who has walked the path of hope, anticipating the glories that were right around the bend, just barely out of sight. As Hebrews 11 indicates, the path is well worn by saints past and present. Although depressed people feel absolutely alone, they are part of a huge heaven-bound procession.

There are no tricks to mastering waiting and hop-

ing. It is a skill that develops with practice and daily reminders. Rarely is it accomplished in isolation from the church, the community of heaven. Instead, since it is so easy to become fatigued because of the cares of the world, we should have a group of committed wait-ers and hope-ers around us so that at least one of them can keep us focused on things unseen when the rest of us are struck with tunnel vision.

How do we know when we are growing in hope? As we consider heaven, it changes the way we live on earth. Not only will the fruit of hope be joy (Phil. 4:4, 5), it will also be a greater urgency "to live at peace with all men" (Heb. 12:14), and a desire to put the axe to any bitter root in our lives (Heb. 12:15).

Depression can say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). We will often find entangling sin when we listen closely to depression, but sin and other spiritual problems are not the only roots of depression. Depression can also reveal a heart of faith. When trials and testings come, we have two choices: to trust unswerving in the God who is loving and powerful, or trust in ourselves, our interpretations, or our rights. There are certainly those who experience depression who maintain an unswerving trust in the living God in the midst of depression. There are unsung heroes of the church who experience the "slough of despond," yet faithfully follow Christ. They are like those who have been in difficult marriages where loyalty was tested but they remain faithful. Instead of complaining and grumbling, they faithfully trust and follow Christ and serve others with the strength that God gives them. In this, they are examples who lead the way for all Christians who have struggled with depression. Even more, they are examples for all of us.

Summary

This way of thinking about depression moves gradually from listening to and loving the depressed person to considering the unique meaning of depression. The model that guides it is flexible. It provides a general outline that leaves the specifics to be worked out in our relationship with the depressed person. This forces us to listen, be thoughtful in our counsel, and avoid jumping to premature conclusions. Yet, this approach is not so flexible that it leaves us rudderless. Instead, it provides immediate guidelines for counseling. We don't have to wait for all the data to come in before we are able to offer substantive help. Right away, the broad biblical teaching on suffering establishes an agenda. This teaching is gradually narrowed and refined as our knowledge of the depressed person grows.

Helping Those Who Are Depressed

Since depression can have various root causes, the actual help we give varies. Some people are comforted, others confronted. Some need to be taught, others must act on what they already know. As a result of this diversity, many books on depression—and articles such as this one—rightly become a hodgepodge of suggestions. Yet, there are some general guidelines and suggestions that are relevant to nearly everyone. These can be organized according to common challenges that you encounter when helping depressed people and common strategies that actually help.

Challenges

The first challenge is the result of *our* problem. It is our tendency to make every case of depression fit one particular cause. All of us bring our pet theories to depression. They come from our reading of Scripture, our study of depression through case studies and other research, popular theories in the culture, and what has worked for us or a close friend. Our temptation is to avoid the complexities of the heart and have one size that fits all. Instead, what Scripture provides is a basic outline for understanding depression. While some problems can be addressed by following a series of highly specific steps, depression demands flexibility and a willingness to consider various connections and causes.

Passivity and Lack of Motivation

Perhaps the most obvious challenge posed by depressed people is their apparent lack of passion or enthusiasm for anything.

Depression is an “illness of passivity.” For close friends and family, this is difficult because our passions are one of the features of humanness that make us recognizable and unique to those around us. A passionless person seems different to other people. “He isn’t himself.” “I don’t feel like I know the person I married anymore.”

Not only is a passionless person different, they are also without any intrinsic motivation. There is no feeling that urges them to work or love. Unless they have unusual faith, they seem chronically stuck. No amount of persuading, cajoling, encouraging, manipulating, or screaming will get them moving. As a result, friends and counselors are willing to try any proposed treatment for depression, and when the treatments are exhausted, they tend to give up and gradually withdraw from the depressed person.

Is the depressed person unable to act? Or is he or she unwilling to act? Our answers will dramatically affect our approach. If you ask family members, they will say that the depressed person is unwilling. If you ask those who are depressed, they will say that they are unable. What we can be certain of is that depressed people are in a battle. In the battle, we can partner with them and even fight on their behalf at times, but the depressed person must be willing to engage in the battle. We don’t expect him or her to fight in the same way that we do, but we must join with the depressed person and develop a mutually agreed upon strategy to engage the battle.

“Do you want to get well?” This might

seem like a foolish question. Of course depressed people want to get well. But, for some depressed people, we should ask it often because the answer is more complicated than a simple “yes.” It is a place to begin in enlisting their participation.

- Many depressed people don’t even entertain the thought that they can get well. For them, depression

*As unbelievable as it might sound,
some people prefer their depression.*

is not just a feeling, it is an identity. They *are* depression. The question, “Do you want to get well?” helps them to take a step back from the depression and actually think about it as something that can be changed.

- If depressed people have belief systems that have led to depression, they tend to be very loyal to those systems. As such, they want to get rid of depression *but* they don’t want to give up their entrenched, sub-biblical, or unbiblical system of interpretation. For example, they may find personal identity in being the martyr, the guilty one, the oppressed one, or the one whom God has abandoned.
- Many depressed people say they want to get well, *but* they reject every way out. “It doesn’t work.” “You don’t understand.” At some point, their actions must be brought into question. That is, even though they say that they want to get well, their actions say that something within the depression is better than the alternatives. For example, they may want to get rid of depression, but they want to hold onto their anger. They may want to get rid of their depression, but they don’t want to forgive. They may want to get rid of their depression, but they find that it gives them attention or influence.
- Depression can be a strategy to avoid. People may want to avoid financial crisis, work, difficult relationships, confessing sin to someone, or the responsibilities of life. To give up depression means that avoidance is no longer possible.
- As unbelievable as it might sound, some people prefer their depression. Even though depression is inconvenient and “a hassle,” it is at least known and somewhat comfortable. Like a woman who marries someone like her mean, hard-drinking father, it’s not so much that you like it, but it is familiar. It feels like home.

When I’m depressed, pain is my friend. I walk in pain. It’s what I am familiar with. I’ll tell

you that I hate my pain and that there is nothing good about it, but I still hold onto it. I’m so dead inside, so empty of any enthusiasm or hope. My pain reminds me that I’m alive. It allows me to be angry.¹

If these tensions exist within the depressed person, to point them out can be a first step toward developing some spiritual momentum. At least, it suggests to those who are depressed that their passivity might be more purposeful than they thought. But people who are depressed need more than reasons why they are seemingly stuck. They also need reasons why they should act. Why should they get out of bed? Why should they go to work? Why shouldn’t they kill themselves?

“*What is your purpose for living?*” If you ask a group of depressed people for their reason for living, the majority will have no idea. They are hopeless, and hopeless people have no sustainable purpose. If you try to give action steps to depressed people who have no purpose statement, their meager effort will eventually collapse.

A few depressed people can use their children as an incentive. But usually the incentive is little more than “I don’t want my children to live with the knowledge that their parent died by suicide.” Other than children, there is rarely anything that motivates. Spouses don’t motivate because depressed people feel like their spouses would be better off without them. Work and financial gain certainly don’t motivate.

Can you hear the clear thinking in this? It is incomplete, but it is very insightful. In their ennui, depressed people echo the preacher of Ecclesiastes, saying “vanity of vanity.” They are absolutely correct, there is nothing in this world that can motivate us. If they avoid suicide, it is because even suicide is vanity. Whereas many of us can drag ourselves through life without considering our larger purpose, but we do it because there is a routine through which we sleepwalk, those who are depressed must have a purpose.

The true purpose is obvious: glorify God and enjoy Him forever. But if you say this, it will sound like a cliché. Then what?

- Say it again. Say it better. Say it more clearly. Illustrate it.
- Read specific Scripture to them on our purpose for living.
- Tell the story of Scripture and include the depressed person in the story.
- Ask them to tell you what “glorify God” looks like.

¹ Julia Thorne, *You Are Not Alone* (New York: Harper, 1993), p. 30.

- Ask them to teach *you* about the purpose of life so they can have the privilege of saying it, rather than just hearing it.

Then solicit counsel from other brothers and sisters on how you can say it more concretely, more beautifully.

To glorify God means to make His name famous. His honor and His reputation become more important than our own. It is equivalent to the following well-known purpose statements.

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart

To the degree that depression is, in fact, a form of suffering, then we have no biblical guarantee that it will be eradicated from our lives.

and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4).

“Love the Lord your God...Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:3, 39).

“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2).

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6).

“Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19).

Every command in Scripture is essentially a purpose statement. For example, one older, wise counselor challenges his depressed counselees: “Fight the spiritual battles that accompany depression so that you can love other people.”

We are servants of the Living God. When our Lord speaks to us and tells us what to do, that becomes our purpose. Therefore, although our purpose is presented in grand fashion—to glorify God—it is carried out in small, sometimes private steps of faith and obedience.

Remembering the Things that are Most Important

Another challenge posed by depression is that we desperately want to make the person well, but we can easily lose sight of true biblical wellness. To the degree that depression is, in fact, a form of suffering, then we have no biblical guarantee that it will be eradicated from our lives. We *do* have something close to a biblical promise that suffering, and therefore depression, will be lightened as we grow in Christ, but lightened does not mean depression-free.

For biblical counselors, this could weaken their con-

fidence in Scripture because it seems as if Scripture cannot offer enough to the depressed person. God’s Word, however, does promise a deeper wellness that is available to every Christian. For counselors, this means that we always maintain a desire to alleviate suffering, but as in all suffering, the deepest comfort we can offer consists of the present benefits of the gospel and the eternal joy of being in the presence of Christ.

The present benefits of the gospel are many. Forgiveness of sins, adoption as God’s children, the constant presence of God by the Spirit, growth in holiness or Christ-likeness, these and more are the benefits that God gives to His people now. The future benefits are even greater.

One way to apply this with depressed people is to ask them, “What is ‘better’?” “What is ‘well’?” Usually, the answers will be vague. Sometimes, they can’t even be articulated: “I don’t know, I just want to feel better.” It is difficult to walk with a person when the destination is unclear.

Strategies

Many of the strategies for helping have already been alluded to: loving; persevering; speaking as with a friend, rather than treating the person as a diagnosis; and being willing to say hard things. These strategies are general features of all helping relationships. There are, however, specific applications of these strategies that deserve special mention.

Enter In, Call Them Out

Biblical ministry is incarnational. We enter into the world of another. We want to know what they experience. We want to know them from their perspective more than our own. We want to see the world through their eyes. But as we come to understand the depressed person, the metaphor begins to change. No longer do we just enter into their world, but we call them out. We still partner with them, and we will help them fight to get out, but depression is usually a system that engages the depressed person’s entire heart, skewing almost every interpretation. As a result, those who are depressed need to leave their dark interpretations behind and enter into the radical, sometimes upside down perspectives that God gives in Scripture. For example, who could anticipate a world where there are proclamations such as “Blessed are those who mourn”?

On their way out of depression, they must do what you have tried to do: they must step into the world of another person. They must enter into the world of Jesus Christ, seeing the world and themselves as He does, and adopting His view as their own. And then they must learn to enter the world of other people.

Don't Jump Around to Different Issues. Understand What is Important and Stay with It.

A counseling colleague once told me about a time in his life when he was especially busy. As he was driving home one late summer afternoon, he remembered that he had planted some lovely rosebushes on the side of his house that he hadn't even looked at since they were planted. (His wife had been tending them.) That evening he decided that he would enjoy them. His plan was to sit among the rosebushes, surrounded by the colors and scents, until he was moved by them in some way.

This is the literal version of "stop and smell the roses." It parallels the experience of a Christian artist whose drawings and photography capture ordinary facets of creation, through which she asks us to consider these sometimes unnoticed evidences of God's handiwork. Both my colleague who smells roses and the artist are saying, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Ps. 19:1). They are agreeing with God that what He created is, indeed, good.

This goodness is a trace of the attributes of God that can be found in the things of this world. As C. S. Lewis suggests, they are shafts of glory.² As we learn to consider these, and then transpose their beauty into a higher, heavenly key that points to the triune God, we get inklings of joy.

At first it might sound behavioristic to encourage a depressed person to develop the skill of seeing the good and cultivating joy. It seems like a case of tricking the mind into thinking that things are not as bad as they seem. But this is part of training our minds to think God's thoughts (Rom. 12:2). It is saying "Amen" to God's evaluation of the works of His hands.

If boredom is part of depression, this is the antidote. Boredom is "the declaration that nothing possesses sufficient interest to be worthy of attention."³ Everything is flat and in shades of blue and gray. Christian joy, however, becomes a student of the good and true and goes looking for it. It says that God and His creation are worthy of our attention. In this way, by delighting in the good, true, and beautiful, joy brings glory to God.

When we think of creation, our minds tend to wander toward a beautiful meadow or majestic mountain. But our first thought should be toward other people. It was after God created man and woman that He deemed His work "very good." As such, when

depressed people complain about a spouse and obviously free-fall into ever further despair, we might interrupt the litany of complaints and ask them to consider looking for the good.

This doesn't mean that we always "look on the bright side." Studying the good does not mean ignoring the evil. There is certainly a time for naming evil and learning how to think biblically about it. The pursuit of Christian joy is neither blind nor superficial. Rather, it

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demands better eyesight—eyes of faith—and it must probe deeper in order to recognize what is true and good.

Provide Structure

To practice the skills necessary to combat depression, especially the skills of hope and joy, those who minister to depressed people should provide clear structure. Structure refers to boundaries, guidelines, accountability, reminders, and organized plans. The principle is this: the more painful and disabling the depression, the more important it is for counselors and friends to provide structure.

Structure could include the following.

- Get to bed and out of bed at the same time each day.
- Eat at appointed times.
- Exercise at appointed times.
- Have a schedule for the day.
- Write down one thing you agree to work on every day.
- Follow through on the agreements you made with other people. Let your "yes" be "yes."

This structure is not simply imposed on an unwilling victim. It is a partnership among brothers and sisters in Christ. Also, it is surrounded by times of considering "why?" That is, counselors continually remember and review God's purposes, and it *must* be mutually understood that the present training—though perhaps wearisome and seemingly too hard—has eternal benefit (1 Tim. 4:8).

There are two ways we err when helping depressed people bring wise structure into their lives. One is to

² C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), p. 90.

³ Patricia Spacks, *Boredom: A Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1995), p. 229.

impose a pace that is beyond their reach. Instead, the pace must be adaptable. Most counselors choose to start low, helping people set very basic expectations initially, and then working together to gradually increase the amount of tasks and goals in a day. The other way counselors err is by not having frequent times of accountability. Many counselors have a weekly meeting with the counselee in which they set goals and review progress. With depressed people, a shorter interval between times of accountability is more helpful. A few times a day is best. To accomplish this task, which may have to continue for months, those who minister must develop a practical and wise pace for themselves, being willing to serve but also being alert to their other responsibilities.

Interrupt as Needed

Throughout these strategies, you should sense that as we grow to know and love the depressed person we will be increasingly active. Part of that activity is to interrupt the flow of despair, self-pity, and complaints that only serve to reinforce the less than biblical interpretations of God and ourselves. To do this too early in your relationship with depressed people, or anyone, communicates that you don't really want to understand. It can silence people. But when the strategy is explained, it can then be interpreted easily as an expression of love.

I'm going to stop you for a second. Can you hear what's happening? The more you talk, the more you despair. I can see it in you. In fact, I can feel it in myself. Here is a plan. From now on, when I see the wave of depressive and, actually, unbiblical interpretations of life crashing down on you, I am going to point it out and try to run from it with you.

Use Questions

Counselors are notorious for using questions. In fact, even when a counselee asks a straightforward question to a counselor, counselors have been known to answer a question with another question.

Counselee [after counselor tripped]: "Are you OK?"
Counselor: "So why do you ask, 'Are you OK?'"

Certainly this can get maddening when taken to an extreme. If friends or counselors just ask questions, then there is no mutuality, giving and taking, in the relationship. Actually, there is no relationship. This is *not* an appropriate strategy.

The model is taken from how God asks questions. For example, God greeted Elijah with a simple question as he was fleeing from Jezebel and ran for his life: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" When Elijah didn't

get the answer right, the Lord revealed Himself to Elijah, then asked the question again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

In Eden, instead of an extended lecture, the Lord begins with a rhetorical question, "Where are you?" To Cain, the Lord asked, "Why are you so angry? Why is your face downcast?" These questions are intended to cause God's people to reflect on their hearts, and to consider the purpose of their behaviors. They are delivered with great patience, and they pointedly search out what is really going on.

Best known of the triune God's questions are His three questions to Peter, "Do you love me?" Once again, lectures and extended teachings were replaced by simple yet essential questions to cause God's beloved people to pause and reflect.

One thing to keep in mind is that you don't have to say everything all the time. Furthermore, an economy of words is most useful if you want someone to give serious consideration to an issue of which they already have some knowledge (cf., Proverbs). Many of God's questions appeal to our active but suppressed consciences. They appeal to us to search for information about ourselves of which we already have some inkling.

Considering some of the possible causes of depression, here are some examples of questions counselors can ask.

Are you angry? Do you have a right to be angry?
Why are you so downcast?
Where is your treasure?
What have you lost?
Are you especially worried about something?
Why are you so afraid?
For what are you so guilty? What do you feel like you must cover up?
Do you love Jesus?

Ideas

For those who don't mind thinking on their feet, one of the pleasures of counseling is that it demands flexibility and creativity. Each person is different. A story that clicked for one person might be incomprehensible to the next. Therefore, the following lists of ideas are intended to prime the pump rather than to provide assignments that you indiscriminately dump on every depressed person. They are ideas that have helped other depressed people.

The first list comes from asking people who were once depressed to finish this sentence: "I saw changes in my experience of depression when..."

1. I began to talk to myself rather than listen to myself.
I began to speak different Scriptures to myself

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- rather than listen to my own voices of hopelessness.
2. I stopped saying, "It doesn't work." I was always looking for the magic bullet. I would pray (trying to make deals with God), look at my own heart (for a minute or two), or briefly try some other seemingly spiritual activity, and when they didn't work, I would quit. Now I believe that it does "work."
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*Too often, counselors throw out ideas
and don't follow through.*

There is contentment and even joy in long-term, small steps of faith and obedience.

3. I had a friend and a pastor who kept the bigger picture of God's kingdom in front of me. Depression made my world so small; when I saw that God was on the move, I began to have hope.
4. My daughter became very sick. It forced me to see outside of my own world.
5. A friend didn't give up on me. She was always loving me and pointing me to the truth, even when I didn't want to hear about Jesus.
6. A friend let me "borrow" her faith. My faith was so weak, but I always knew that she was confident of God's presence and love, for the church and even for me.
7. I forgave my father and entrusted him to God.
8. I saw that it was 90% pride. I felt like I deserved certain things from certain people.
9. I began to believe that I was in a battle and realized that I had to fight.
10. I saw that I was doing things rather than just having things done to me. For example, I was *doing* anger, I was doing big time complaining. In my heart, I was doing what I wanted.
11. I began to know about God's grace. I began to see that my wallowing in guilt amounted more to works-righteousness than to godly sorrow.
12. Once I saw that it was a good thing to see my sin—it was evidence of God's love and the Spirit working in my life—I began to say to myself, "When in doubt, repent."

The following list contains some homework assignments and more specific strategies that have been helpful for some people.

1. Take one biblical story, read it every day, and write down 10 (or more) applications of it.
The basic idea with this assignment, and some of

the others that follow, is that you want depressed people to meditate on something. Otherwise, their minds will drift into further despondency and you might try to throw every rope you can think of rather than stick with one thing until the person does it. If a depressed person can see the merit in this battle strategy, and he or she is willing to do it, stay with the assignment until it is done. Too often, counselors throw out ideas and don't follow through.

2. Find ten features of a friend that are good. Write them down and send them to the friend.
3. Write out your purpose for living. Allow it to be revised by others. Then memorize it.
4. Become an expert in what God says to those who suffer. Consider starting with Hebrews 10–12.
5. Write down teachings or applications from the Sunday sermon that are good, important, and true.
6. Each day, speak or write something that edifies others.
7. Take one aspect of creation (e.g., grass, a shrub, a squirrel, a leaf) and consider it until you can say that it is good.
8. Each day, listen to God's Word, music that points you to Christ, or another person who has spiritual wisdom. Be able to summarize what you heard. Practice listening.
9. Keep a sharp eye out for grumbling and complaining. Like gossip, these are sins that are acceptable in our culture, so we don't see their ugly roots. What does the grumbling or complaining really say?
10. Consider these questions. In this culture, have we forgotten the benefits of hardships? What are the possible benefits to suffering? (Ps 119:67, 71; 2 Cor. 1:8-10; Heb. 5:8; James 1:3)
11. Since the label "depression" cannot capture the complexity of your experience, what are other words, especially words that can be keyed to Scripture, that more concretely capture what is going on in your heart?
12. Get help. Ask a few people to pray for you and speak the truth to you. When you ask for prayer, ask for more than just the alleviation of depression. Use this as an opportunity to pray big prayers. Find some of the prayers in Scripture and pray them. For example, pray that you would know the love of Christ (Eph. 3), that you would look more like Jesus (Rom. 8:29), that you would love others, and that you would discern what it means today to bring glory to God.
13. Find Christ in Scripture. Then, as you grow in the knowledge of Christ, share it with others.
14. Review what you believe are your God-given

responsibilities and, one at a time, begin working on them. This put-one-foot-in-front-of-the-other approach may not seem like an effective strategy to counter depression, but, as we work as unto the Lord, this is praiseworthy faithfulness. Viewed through the lens of Scripture, it is much more profound than it first appears.

If you have ever lived with a depressed person, you know that depression affects the entire family. Therefore, if you are a pastor, counselor or friend, you must attend to the family members as well. Some of what you offer are the basics of how to think biblically about depression. Here are some suggestions.

1. Family members will want to pull the person out of depression. They hate to see a loved one suffer. However, when they are unsuccessful, they can get discouraged or even angry. Review with them the difference between what God calls them to do and

what they would like to see happen; responsibilities versus concerns.

2. Family members can vacillate between anger and guilt. Make sure there is someone to take the time to really understand how they are doing.
3. Family members should continue using a wise biblical strategy, whether they see success or not. If they take their evaluate the appropriateness of their ministry by deciphering the depressed person's responses, they will try something different every day.
4. The natural response that most people have to those who are depressed is to treat them as if they are fragile. Family members are afraid to be direct for fear that the depressed person will get worse or even commit suicide. Family members, however, should learn how to be loving and direct. They should treat the person like a normal family member, rather than an invalid or patient.