

DEPRESSION: PURSUING JOY IN THE MIDST OF TRIAL

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THE EXPERIENCE OF DEPRESSION

Depression feels dark. It feels hopeless. It feels as though life is no longer worthy of living. Purpose, dreams, relationships, and enjoyment disappear as a vapor in the wind. Daily responsibilities emerge as impossible feats beyond one's ability to perform. Simple, typically mundane, tasks like taking a shower or going to work seem beyond the scope of possibility. The relentless gnawing of anxiety and fear deep within the pit of the stomach reinforce confusion and misery. It will simply take too much energy to get going. Or maybe, there just seems no good reason to get out of bed. The solution? Sleep. Eat. Starve. Cut. Drink. Smoke. Avoid. In one word: escape. The feelings of helplessness coupled with the demands of responsibility serve as the perfect storm in which the depressed person longs for nothing more than to just forget.

As with any form of suffering (whether it be self-imposed or circumstantial), depression creates a context in which a person becomes quite susceptible to profound self-focus. Since the feelings of sadness, fear, and confusion are often so intense, the preoccupation with finding some form of relief can easily usurp the greater purpose for which individuals have been created. It is in the moment of such suffering that Christians can easily fall prey to fleshly desires, and

therefore ignore the great honor and call God has placed upon them: to love Him and others. The craving for some form of peace can be so powerful that it becomes the desire that dictates and shapes all of life. In essence, such desires become idols (Ephesians 5:5). Former ways of living, in which God was not the primary object of love, creep in, and the darkness of the old begins to taint all of reality. The pattern of the former overtakes the vibrancy of living as a new creation in Jesus. The apostle Paul describes the old this way: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires...The mind of the sinful man is death..." (Romans 8:5-6). So the question bears asking: On what do your counselees have their minds set upon as they struggle through depression? Certainly, the challenges created by depressive emotions create the temptation to live for personal peace above all things, but to do this only creates more death and darkness. Counselees should ask: "Has locking myself away or sleeping all day ever taken away my depression for good?" "Has eating excessively truly made me feel more at peace?" "Has drinking alcohol or using drugs promoted spiritual growth and maturity in the midst of my trial?" "Has living for peace and relief brought me closer to or taken me further away from God?" If these questions are answered honestly, then the resounding

answer to each is: NO! So then, what are the solutions to which counselees can be pointed?

DIRECT THEM TO ASSESS THEIR GOALS AND AGENDAS

James 1:2-4 exhorts the sufferer, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." People who struggle with depression usually have as their primary aim the escape from such feelings. When this becomes the focal point, the magnificence of God's divine plan becomes overshadowed by the lust to "make it all go away". While wanting relief is not in and of itself wrong, if consumed by such desires, a biblical understanding of struggle is all but lost and meaningless. Remind counselees that when they suffer (as a Christian), the Bible declares that the Almighty God of the universe is at work in them. Depression is a form of suffering, and God will even use this painful experience to develop in counselees the very nature and character of Jesus Christ. So, instead of counselees constantly ruminating on "How can I make this go away", they should ask, "What is God trying to show me about my own heart as I persevere through this season of suffering?" Is He revealing their lack of trust and faith in Him? Is He revealing their tendency to be self-reliant, therefore showing them through their depression a need for Him? Is He revealing idols such as acceptance, approval, or significance

that tend to reign within them? Is he showing them their selfishness in that not getting what they want has consumed them with self-pity and bitterness? Is he revealing their irresponsible choices of living? Whatever the case, help them reorient their goals from: "I must find a way out of this" to "I want to learn more of God and myself as I persevere through this."

A TRANSFORMED AGENDA

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-38, NIV). As you help counselees reassess their hearts and agendas, seek to move beyond their perceived "need" (i.e., peace, love, acceptance, approval, control, etc.), and support them in living to love God and others. Remind them that depression cannot stop them from extending kindness and love to those around them. This is what they are called to do, and it is what reflects the character of Jesus as nothing else. It's worth them getting up today or tomorrow, or the next day so that they may simply bless someone else in need. How? Extend a kind handshake, give a compliment, share the Gospel, offer unsolicited assistance, or go to a homeless shelter. As they daily focus on the needs of others, by God's grace their own perceived needs (which once ruled their hearts) will give way to the glory of what God created them to do: worship Him. For, it is in the extending of love to another that they ultimately extend love to God. Its

not that He needs their love: He unequivocally deserves it. Help them to understand what it means to live for Him today, even if the clouds of depression futilely attempt to blind them from this high and most honorable call.

PRAYER FOR DEPRESSION

"Holy Father, your power and presence offer an immeasurable peace in times of turmoil and suffering. It is in such times that our hearts are tempted to pursue relief and escape over and above all. Help us, by your Spirit, to discipline our minds in such a way that we focus upon you, the Prince of Peace over and above peace itself. Remind us that of your sovereign hand working in and through us as we experience both joys and pains. Help us glorify you in both. We pray this in Jesus' holy and honorable name. Amen.

COUNSELOR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **If counselees are depressed** it is very important for them to engage in **regular exercise**. Begin by formulating a workable exercise schedule. Remember, this schedule does not have to be extravagant. Make it realistic and doable. Aim for two to four times per week.
2. **Consult a physician** in order to rule out potential **organic causes** of depression (i.e. thyroid, etc.). During their visit, they should discuss with their doctor any potential restrictions that may need to be implemented as it pertains to their exercise schedule.
3. During their doctor visit **prepare them with appropriate questions regarding medication**.
4. **Read James 1:1-2**. How might this passage reshape your counselees views regarding their current "trial" with depression? What does this passage reveal that God accomplishes during difficult times?
5. **Read Matthew 22:37-38**. Help them make a list of several people they will commit to loving today. Do this as a gesture of love to God realizing that loving others in essence provides the context to love God as cited in this passage. Be practical.
6. **Resist temptations to be the "super Christian"**. Believers are called to function within community, therefore it will be very important to encourage them to share their situation with and seek support from others close to them (i.e., pastor, friend, Sunday school teacher, family member, spouse, etc.).
7. **Assist them in learning the process of worshipping God through difficulty** rather than fixating on ridding themselves of all difficulty. What is God seeking to reveal about Himself through their struggle? What is their struggle revealing about their own hearts?