

THE CHRISTIAN AND DEPRESSION

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- All of us become discouraged occasionally. That is simply a part of being human. One should not feel that discouragement is intrinsically sinful for it is not.
- That is evidenced by the fact that even our Lord sometimes became discouraged.
- **Even Jesus Was Discouraged**
- The prophet Isaiah represents the coming Messiah as saying,
- *“I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely the justice due to me is with Jehovah, and my recompense with my God” (Is. 49:4).*
- One cannot read **Psalm 22:6-13** without detecting a note of distress in the Savior’s depiction of humanity’s rejection of Him.
- And do you not recall the apostle’s comment at the conclusion of Christ’s great, but difficult, discourse on the bread of life — *“Upon this many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him” (John 6:66).*
- Subsequently, the Lord longingly asked, “Would you also go away?” or as the Greek text literally suggests, *“You won’t leave me too, will you?”* His question aches with discouragement.
- **The Apostles Were Distressed**
- The Master’s men were also discouraged from time to time.
- Following Jesus’ death, and yet before His resurrection, the disciples were distressed,
- for they believed the Lord’s cause had been buried with His body! Their discouragement, however, was soon to be turned into elation!
- Even the usually vibrant Paul could have fitful moments when reflecting upon how far short he fell of the divine ideal (cf. **Romans 7:24**).
- And so, if the Savior and His disciples were not without distress on occasion, surely, we cannot expect to be.
- It is not the fact that one becomes discouraged that is so crucial; rather, **it is how he reacts to and handles the distress that is important.**
- **Discouragement and Depression**
- Exactly what is discouragement? And how does it relate to what we call depression?
- Discouragement might be defined as a **temporary** feeling of disappointment or disheartenment, resulting from a disadvantageous turn of events — either physical, material, social, emotional, or spiritual.

- Note the emphasis upon “temporary.” If one does not address the source of his discouragement, and come to grips with it, his distress may evolve into depression
- By way of contrast, depression may be defined as a **protracted period of despondency** that greatly curtails, or even destroys, one’s ability to function as a healthy and happy person.
- If depression is not properly and urgently addressed by the Christian, with the solutions to one’s problems being sought in the Word of God (whenever possible), the tragic situation can result in spiritual stagnation, overt apostasy from the faith, and sometimes, even suicide.

BIBLICAL CASES OF DEPRESSION

- The Bible contains a number of examples of people who lapsed into the state of spiritual terror that may aptly be described as depression. Let us briefly reflect upon a few of these cases.
- King Saul
- Saul, of Old Testament fame, was a man who started brilliantly as Israel’s first king. He was robust and courageous and hence had the admiration of his subjects.
- Eventually, though, he imbibed the spirit of disobedience, and so was informed by God’s prophet that the kingdom would ultimately be torn from his grasp.
- We are told that *“the Spirit of Jehovah departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from Jehovah troubled [terrified, ASVfn] him” (1 Samuel 16:14).*
- The latter expression simply means that God **allowed Saul to reap the mental consequences of his rebellious disposition.**
- The king was given to fits of prolonged depression wherein he repeatedly attempted to kill David (*cf. 18:9ff*).
- Finally, he took his own life!
- Judas Iscariot
- Judas is another example of a man so immersed in depression as a consequence of his betrayal of the Son of God that he committed suicide (*Matthew 27:3-5*).
- More on the positive side, consider these cases:
- **Job**
- Job’s religious motives were challenged by Satan, and the hateful Deceiver was allowed to inflict the patriarch. Job lost his children, his wealth, and his health, and still he courageously refrained his lips from sinning (*Job 1:13-2:10*).
- When, however, his three friends arrived and sat down, mourning for seven days [thus treating him as one already dead!], it was more than the great patriarch could stand, and he lapsed into a state of deep depression. He wished that he had been born dead, or that he might have died at birth (*Job 3*).
- Happily, though, eventually he was able to climb out of his distress and, after repentance, was restored to the Lord’s favor.
- **Jeremiah, the Weeping Prophet**

- Similarly, the noble Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, because he was so ill-treated by evil Israel, gave way to the pangs of depression and cursed the very day of his birth (**Jeremiah 20:14ff**).
- But he too was able to overcome that depth of grief.
- **CAUSES AND CURES OF DEPRESSION**
- In order to deal with discouragement or depression, one must first be able to correctly diagnose the source of his problem.
- Second, he must be aware of the options available for the remedial solution to his problem, or if there is no immediate solution, he must concentrate his attention upon that Source of strength that will allow him to accept the situation as it is, and even to grow thereby.
- As noted earlier, the causes of depression may be classified under various headings. Let us give our attention to several of these.
- Let me observe initially, however, that this article is not intended to deal with possible **physiological causes** of some forms of depression, e.g., neurological, or chemical imbalance maladies.
- Our aim here is to address those categories of depression that have **spiritual** causes and thus can be remedied with applications from the Scriptures. And these are far more numerous than many are willing to admit. Unfortunately, many people today are looking for the quick fix, “pill” solution.
- Physical injury or illness
- Let us suppose a man is involved in a terrible car accident and he becomes paralyzed from the neck down. How shall he handle this misfortune?
- First, he may need to come face-to-face with the fact that he simply cannot change the situation. Second, he could become a self-pitying, depressed recluse and finally waste away.
- On the other hand, he might summon the courage to be a balanced, productive person, who even by his handicap is able to marvelously glorify God! There are numerous examples in this latter category who have influenced thousands by their courage and determination.
- How should one react if he discovers he has a most serious, possibly fatal, illness? He may, with firm determination, attempt to fight the illness, and perhaps he will win.
- But if he sees that the battle is being lost, he must realistically acknowledge that death eventually claims us all. It is the price we pay for humanity’s involvement in sin (**Romans 5:12**).
- Anger, frustration, and depression (though perhaps initially natural) will not remedy the situation. The believer must fortify his spirit with the fact that those who die “in the Lord” are exceedingly blessed (**Revelation 14:13**), and they will enter a state that is “very far better” (**Philippians 1:23**).
- Financial disaster

- How should one respond who has suffered a severe financial blow? If the treasury of his heart (cf. **Matthew 6:21**) has been filled with materialism, he may not be able to handle the losses. When the stock market crashed in 1929, some were so crushed they committed suicide!
- However, one who trusts in God for all things might (after a brief emotional adjustment) be constrained to say with Paul, “*we brought nothing into the world, for neither can we carry anything out; but having food and covering we shall therewith be content*” (**1 Timothy 6:7-8**).
- Of course it would not be sinful to vigorously work for the restoration of that which was obtained honorably. Hard work is the eraser of “*hard luck*.”
- Too, it is possible that one may have to face the fact that he simply will not always be able to live at the high standard to which many have become accustomed. God has never promised economic luxury to His people; only daily sustenance.
- In any case, depression has never solved a financial woe!
- Love lost
- Many a poor soul has descended into the depths of depression when forsaken by a dear friend. Unrequited love has been the undoing of some.
- How does a young bride-to-be deal with the heartache of being forsaken by her fiancé just hours before the wedding ceremony? Of course, she will be deeply hurt, but she must recognize several things.
- There is One who will never forsake the Christian (cf. **Psalm 118:8; 2 Timothy 4:16-17**).
- The providence of God may be at work. The Lord may have someone better in mind for His young saint.
- In spite of this tragedy, in due time it certainly is possible that this person could live a wonderfully happy and fruitful life — even though single.
- The point is this: one must never give in to depression; the human spirit must fight back.
- Death of a loved one
- How does one cope with the tragic death of a spouse, or a child? Surely such a heart-breaking blow must be almost more than one can bear.
- True, but these things are a part of the world in which we live, and they **will continue to occur** whether we learn to deal with them or not!

In such dark hours of adversity, the child of God may reflect upon several things.

- First, if the loved one was in a state of innocence (e.g., a child) or was faithful to the Lord, we must not sorrow in the way those without hope do (**1 Thessalonians 4:13ff**). There is recognition and association beyond death (cf. **Genesis 25:8; 2 Samuel 12:23; Matthew 8:11; 17:3ff; Luke 16:9,19ff**).
- Second, even if the deceased died outside of Christ, depression will not bring back that loved one! This is a hard fact that must be faced.

- Moreover, we can be comforted by the fact that God is aware of our grief (*Psalm 56:8; 103:13; 2 Kings 20:5*) and He is the God of all comfort (*2 Corinthians 1:3*), who is able to help us bear the burden (*Psalm 55:22*).
- Finally, all of our heartaches will be removed in heaven (*Revelation 21:4*). We must thus take courage and bear up!
- Sin and guilt from past mistakes
- Much of our discouragement and depression is the consequence of our guilt, resulting from sinful conduct or the neglect of spiritual responsibility. This was the problem of Saul and Judas mentioned earlier.
- Some charge that preachers are always trying to make people feel guilty. The fact is, it is the responsibility of God's preaching servants to proclaim the truth — in a loving manner, yes; but forcefully nonetheless. If that burdens some with guilt, so be it. There is a way to take care of that — repent of sin!
- The psalmist described pointedly the grief that can attend the guilty conscience. Listen to him:
- *"Have mercy upon me, O Jehovah; for I am withered away: O Jehovah, heal me; for my bones are troubled. My soul also is sore troubled? I am weary with my groaning; every night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears. My eyes waste away because of my grief"* (*Psalm 6:2-7*).
- The weary soul who is laboring under the intolerable weight of a guilty conscience has a way out. He can repent of his evil (which demands undoing that wrong, as much as humanly possible) and solicit Jehovah's forgiveness.
- The person who is not a Christian may submit to the Lord's saving plan and receive remission of sins (*Acts 2:38*), being assured that his evil has been blotted out (*Acts 3:19*), and hence remembered no more by the Creator (*Hebrews 8:12*).
- The unfaithful child of God may repent and pray, and thus have the same assurance.
- It is true that the consequences of sin may extract a severe price for years to come [an adulterous relationship may have to be severed; imprisonment may be required for a crime committed], but with God's help, such a life need not be enslaved by overwhelming depression.

EFFECTS OF DEPRESSION

- PHYSICAL ILLNESS
- LOW SELF ESTEEM
- SUCCIDE
- UNHAPPINESS AND INEFFICIENCY

PREVENTION

WE CAN SOFTEN THE BLOW OF DEPRESSION BY

- TRUSTING IN GOD
- EXPECT DISCOURAGEMENT
- BE ALERT TO DEPRESSION-PRONE TO SITUATION
- LEARN TO HANDLE GUILT

- CHALLENGE THINKING
- LEARNING COPING TECHNIQUES
- EXCHANGE PHYSICAL FITNESS

CONCLUDING COUNSEL

- If one is to learn how to conquer, or at least control, depression, there are certain attitudes he must learn to identify and avoid — attitudes that have a tendency to nurture the moods in which depression can flourish. Let me mention a few of these matters in brief.
- Think about others
- Too many of us are, to a degree, self-centered.
We are constantly wondering why someone did not speak to us, or we are aggravated because *our* needs are not being addressed by the church. The truth is, if many would get busy with the needs of others, they would not have the time for preoccupation with personal problems. Remember this, even from the cross the Savior was thinking of others!
- Discipline the mind
- What we constantly think about, we tend to become (*cf. Proverbs 23:7; Mark 7:21-23*). Those who focus almost continuously upon the negative — how bad I feel, how hard I have it, woe is me! — tend to dredge themselves deeper into depression.
- We must learn to concentrate upon more positive things, to count our blessings. Pleasant thoughts and words are “sweet to the soul and health to the bones” (*Proverbs 16:24*).
- Avoid trivial distractions
- A preoccupation with the trivial along with a corresponding lack of spiritual activity, can create a void in one’s life that allows depression to move in. An idle mind and life truly are the devil’s workshop.
- No ruminating with others
- Sometimes those who are depressed have a tendency to seek out the companionship of others with similar problems. These persons thus feed upon one another’s distresses, and actually end up destroying each other. When you are troubled, associate with those who can build you up.
- Ignore critics
- Do not be intimidated by the opinions of your critics. You can never live up to the expectations of some people, and you will be under a constant strain if you try. Simply attempt to please God and be aware of the fact He understands your frailties and He will lovingly bear with you as you grow.
- Manage your expectations
- Do not expect instant, magical solutions to your problems. God is not going to perform miracles and make your life on earth a present “heaven.” By following the instructions of the Scriptures, be patient and work to solve your difficulties.

- Trust Jehovah
- Finally, one must leave the unsolvable to God. Trust Him no matter what. Learn to be content no matter how dire your conditions are (*Philippians 4:11-13*).

Recognize the fact that tranquility of mind does not depend upon the external, but upon the internal.

- For his own wellbeing, and to enhance his service to others, the Christian must learn to control his stress. The life of trust is not one of continual fretfulness. With a serene confidence, therefore, let us show the world the true joy of Christianity.