



## DEPRESSION: PURSUING JOY IN THE MIDST OF TRIAL

BY: JEREMY LELEK

*counsel • self-study • teaching • cell group • life*

### 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 you have your mind set upon as you 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. Ask yourself: "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 is the solution?



### REASSESS YOUR GOALS AND AGENDA

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. Remember, when you suffer (as a Christian), the Bible declares that the Almighty God of the universe is at work in you. Depression is a form of suffering, and God will even use this painful experience to develop in you the very nature and character of Jesus Christ. So, instead of constantly ruminating on "How can I make this go away", ask yourself, "What is God trying to show me about my own heart as I persevere through this season of suffering?" Is He revealing your lack of trust and faith in Him? Is He revealing your tendency to be self-reliant, therefore showing you through your depression your need for Him? Is He revealing idols such as acceptance, approval, or significance that tend to reign within you? Is he showing you your selfishness in that not getting what you want has consumed you with self-pity and bitterness? Is he revealing your irresponsible choices of

living? Whatever the case, reorient your 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."

### DAILY LOVE GOD AND YOUR NEIGHBOR (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 reassess your heart and agenda, seek to move beyond your perceived "need" (i.e., peace, love, acceptance, approval, control, etc.), and live to love God and others. Depression cannot stop you from extending kindness and love to those around you. This is what you are called to do, and it is what reflects the character of Jesus as nothing else. It's worth getting up today or tomorrow, or the next day so that you 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 you daily focus on the needs of others, by God's grace your own perceived needs (which once ruled your life) will give way to the glory of what God created you to do: worship Him. For, it is in the extending of love to another that you ultimately extend love to God. It's not that He needs your love: He unequivocally deserves it. Live for Him today, even if the clouds of depression futilely attempt to blind you from this high and most honorable call.



## PRAYER FOR DEPRESSION

Holy God and King. Help me to live for nothing other than You. While feeling better may be a desire, keep it from ruling my life. May I be ruled by a constant hunger to share with others the love You have given me. Forgive me for only being concerned with my own wellbeing while I have ignored the hardships and needs of those around me. I ask that you reorient my heart to live for what Your Spirit desires, and that my mind would never again be ruled by deceitful desires again. Teach me the spiritual beauty that may come from my current suffering. And when you have shown me all that I need to see through this season, I humbly ask that you offer relief from that which I now experience. Where there is fear, bring peace, but peace in You not my relief. Where there is confusion, bring clarity, as can only come as Your Word illuminates my pathway. Help me to wake up in the morning, singing prayers of thanksgiving that You have revealed Yourself to me, even though I am so undeserving of such love. May you be glorified in me from this day forward. I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## DEPRESSION QUICK LIST:

1. **If you are depressed** it is very important for you 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 your visit, discuss with your doctor any potential restrictions that may need to be implemented as it pertains to your exercise schedule.
3. During your doctor visit **be prepared with appropriate questions regarding medication** (i.e., side effects, effectiveness, alternatives, etc.) (See Fitzpatrick and Hendrickson, 2006 below).
4. **Read James 1:1-2**. How might this passage reshape your views regarding your current "trial" with depression? What does this passage reveal that God accomplishes during difficult times?
5. **Read Matthew 22:37-38**. Make a list of several people you 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 share your situation with and seek support from others close to you (i.e., pastor, friend, Sunday school teacher, family member, spouse, etc.).
7. **Avoid isolation**. While it might feel more comfortable to close yourself away from others, this is actually the worst thing you can do. Make an effort to be around others.
8. **Learn the process of worshipping God through difficulty** rather than fixating on ridding yourself of all difficulty. What is God seeking to reveal about Himself through your struggle. What is your struggling revealing about your own heart?



## DEPRESSION RESOURCES: BOOKS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES

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Schwab, G. (1998). The book of Job and counsel in the whirlwind. *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 17(1), 31-43.

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