

MODULE 5

DEPRESSION

DEFEATING DEPRESSION

Beautiful! Intelligent! Well-adjusted! Those adjectives describe the woman who came to see me for counsel. She told me that although she was quite wealthy and even had a reasonably happy marriage, she was contemplating suicide. She, along with millions of others, was suffering from America's number one emotional disorder: depression.

Perhaps depression is the darkest of all negative emotions. It's been described in various ways. Someone has called it "a dark tunnel with not a ray of light." Another refers to it as the time when "your emotions weigh a ton and you want to die."

No one seems to be immune. One pastor admitted he was so depressed that when he crossed a street, he wished a car would hit him so that he would be free from his emotional misery. A highly respected religious leader says that he experiences times of depression so severe that he finds it difficult to get out of bed in the morning.

Experts vary in their analysis of what causes such emotional blackouts. In some instances the cause could be physical exhaustion and fatigue can trigger depression. Or it can be caused by disappointments in life. Such cases, of course, are usually not too severe, because when circumstances improve, the emotional trauma begins to subside.

Sometimes depression is related to future concerns that weigh heavily upon our minds. Even Jesus Christ, who was sinless, experienced a form of depression in Gethsemane when He was contemplating the horror of becoming identified with the sins of the whole world. Often depression comes about because of immediate circumstances, and release comes when these situations are rectified. Short periods of depression are common to us all.

However, there are those who live with depression despite favorable circumstances and a life relatively free of tragedy. There are those who have experienced depression for twenty or thirty years, often going from one counselor to another, seeking release from their emotional heaviness. Often they are encouraged to take drugs to alleviate the emotional pain they experience. As a result, they never do uncover the root of the problem. The symptoms may disappear; but, the cause is still there.

Many counselors agree that the three chief causes of depression are **guilt**, **rejection**, and the related emotion of **self-pity**. We are aware that not all cases of depression can be reduced to one of these three causes. Depression may be stimulated by physically or medically related conditions. For some it comes without warning and for no apparent reason. We ought not to assume that all who struggle with this emotional burden are out of fellowship with God.

In the majority of instances, depression is caused by tensions that can be eased through prayer and sound spiritual counsel (this includes reading the Bible every day). Depression usually is a sign that our spiritual antenna is plugged into the wrong channel. We are out of tune with God.

Since rejection is so common, we'll consider those feelings in another message. For now, let's concentrate on guilt and self-pity.

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Let's talk first about guilt.

Many people still under-estimate the effect of guilt in a person's life. For example, I've heard people who are living in sexual immorality say, "We've learned to work through our guilt." What they really mean is that they have learned to ignore the guilt or to talk themselves out of it. We forget that the consequences of sin are built into the nature of man and the world. We cannot violate God's commandments without choking our relationship with Him. Disobedience always has its consequences.

Can guilt cause a depression severe enough to lead to suicide? Consider Judas, the man who betrayed Christ. When he saw that Jesus Christ had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests. Of course they were not sympathetic to his half-hearted confession, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." So he threw the silver into the sanctuary and departed, then went and hanged himself (Matt. 27:3-5).

What led to the guilt-ridden remorse that Judas experienced? In a word it was greed, his insatiable desire for money. He was the treasurer of the disciples and apparently had been pilfering all along. Yet, he did not receive enough money to satisfy himself. He needed more. Or it could have been a greed for power by having Jesus, by force, overturn the Romans. And his betrayal of Jesus was just to force His hand. Either way, it was greed. A woman involved in an illicit relationship told me, "I'm going to see that man just one more time." Do you think that was the end of it? Of course not! No one trapped in a sinful habit is satisfied; rather, the impulses to do evil only become stronger.

Judas loved money, silver in particular. He thought that with thirty extra pieces he would get ahead financially. Before he betrayed Christ, his focus was on the money; doubtless, he visualized all that he would be able to purchase with it. But after he had the money in his

hands, he began to think of his sin; the money meant nothing. The satisfaction of having silver was overshadowed by the weight of guilt that he experienced. No doubt if Judas had lived in our time, he could have talked to his psychiatrist and received some drugs to deaden the pain of his deep remorse. But since such help was not open to him, he did what seventy thousand Americans do every year. He committed suicide.

Of course, guilt can cause depression even when we may not be able to pinpoint any specific sin in our lives. There is a woman who was constantly told by her father, “God is going to punish you for your disobedience.” And since every child has moments of disobedience, this woman in later life interpreted every tragedy as a fulfillment of her father’s words. One day when she and her husband were on vacation, had two flat tires, and couldn’t find a place to spend the night, she became so depressed that she wanted to jump out of the car and run away because she felt that she was the cause of the calamity because God was punishing her. Fortunately, she has since learned the cure for such depression.

Today there are many people who are under the condemnation of God, or at least believe they are, who experience uninterrupted depression. With the rise of abortions, divorces, and other sinful behavior patterns, we should not be surprised that depression is rampant in our society. Guilt feelings inflamed by evil spirits who accuse believers before the throne of God day and night provide the combination that fuels the dull flames of emotional heaviness.

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The second major cause for depression is self-pity.

Depression usually follows a definite pattern. It begins with self-protection. You are deeply hurt in some way. Perhaps somebody failed you or maybe some plan that you had collapsed. Perhaps you failed yourself. In some way hurt comes to you and this hurt threatens to rob you of your peace and enjoyment of life. The best thing to do is to face that hurt honestly and deal with it: pray about it, commit it to the Lord, and apply the medicine of God’s Word. But sometimes we hurt so much that we just don’t seem to have the strength to deal with it and this is where self-protection comes in. Because you have been hurt, you pull into yourself and retreat from the realities of life. You feel safe with yourself, you don’t feel safe with others.

In one sense, depression is to your heart what a callous is to your hand: it is a form of emergency protection. It helps to make that hurt area insensitive. This explains why most depressed people have no interest in life around them—their family and friends, their jobs, even their usual enjoyments. The first step is that they isolate themselves because this helps to protect them from being hurt again—self-protection. This brings us to the second step: self-protection leads to self-pity. We feel sorry for ourselves, so we pull into ourselves and retreat from life. We get all wrapped up in our own problems and pains and forget that other people have problems and pains, too.

This leads to the third step, which is self-punishment. You protect yourself by withdrawing; then you pity yourself because you feel so isolated; and then you start punishing yourself for whatever you think you have done. You become judge and jury and condemn yourself to a life of self-inflicted pain to atone for whatever wrongs you imagine you have done. It is here that Satan enters the picture because he is the accuser of the brethren. He likes to remind you of your sins, your mistakes, your failures, even your embarrassing moments. Each of these reminders only makes the wounds in our heart hurt that much more, and then you withdraw even deeper and isolate yourself from reality.

No wonder some people try to take the next step—self-destruction. Satan is the destroyer and he knows how to get a beachhead in your life just where you are the weakest. But there is an answer to this kind of depression. There is no need for you to protect yourself and pity yourself and then punish yourself. Jesus Christ can come to you and meet the need and help you to defeat depression.

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But the step to beware of is self-pity.

A Christian counselor talked to a girl who wanted help to escape from the cycle of suicidal depression. A few of his questions immediately brought deep resentment to the surface. She was angry with her father who had left the family to live with a teenage girl. She was bitter against her friends at church, whom she felt had not accepted her. She was resentful of her mother and brother; her bitterness was deep and vindictive.

Expressions of self-pity almost always surface among those who are depressed. Many hours are spent rehearsing in great detail all the wrongs done against them. Often the depressed person prays but receives no relief, because even the prayer time is used to recount all the wrongs done against him or her. Every insult, whether real or imagined, is meticulously added to the list of reasons why they have a “right” to be bitter.

Let us stress that we must be sensitive to such people. With the breakup of families and the alarming rise of child abuse, many people have indeed been treated unfairly. Our world is filled with injustice. We can readily understand why resentment and self-pity develop. But although we must show compassion, we cannot sympathize with those in such an emotional quandary lest they begin to think that we agree that they have a right to feel the way they do. For unless they give up that right, the depression will never leave.

Many people deeply resent being told they are wallowing in self-pity. Even when it becomes clear that such is the case, they resist the idea that they must give up their right to feel sorry for themselves. Sometimes they walk out of the office and slam the door or hang up the telephone. Yet, by insisting on their right to continue in their present thought patterns, they are closing the door to freedom.

How can we help those who are filled with guilt, self-pity, or the feeling of inferiority that so often accompanies these destructive emotions? Some counselors would tell us that such

a person must become strong so that he or she will learn to cope; he must adjust to the storms of life without being victimized by these emotional hurts. But in becoming strong, the person often becomes bitter, determined never to let any person affect his emotional equilibrium again. Often he withdraws, determined never to risk another friendship lest he be rejected and the hurt become greater. He or she quits. It's kind of like this:

Went to the river, couldn't get across,
Paid five dollars for an old gray hoss.
Hoss wouldn't pull so I traded for a bull.
Bull wouldn't holler so I traded for a dollar.
Dollar wouldn't pass so I threw it on the grass.
Grass wouldn't grow so I traded for a hoe.
Hoe wouldn't dig so I traded for a pig.
Pig wouldn't squeal so I traded for a wheel.
Wheel wouldn't run so I traded for a gun.
Gun wouldn't shoot so I traded for a boot.
Boot wouldn't fit so I thought I'd better quit.
So I quit.

Who hasn't felt like quitting sometimes? Maybe even many times? There are days when, as in the nonsense poem above, everything seems to go wrong. And when those days stretch into weeks, and then months, and maybe years, and disappointment turns into discouragement, then discouragement into depression. When that happens, you're in real trouble.

People generally don't read the Old Testament book of Lamentations too often, especially when they are looking for a pick-me-up. Its title gives it away. It's the writer's lament over the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and over his own distressful life. He has been stricken with afflictions so severe that he feels God himself has driven him away from His presence. He's an emotional and physical wreck.

My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord (Lamentations 3:18).
He sounds like a defeated, depressed man.

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The Source of My Hopelessness

To help us understand depression a little better, we need to take a few moments to think about its sources. There are several, but they have a common characteristic. All of them in one way or another are expressions of personal pride.

I Can't Get What I Want

We have all heard Rodney Dangerfield's famous line: "I get no respect." It's a funny

line—so long as it isn't true. Nothing is more depressing, however, than to feel that nobody respects you. Nobody's pride can stand total rejection.

Maybe it isn't respect that you can't get, however, but something at least as devastating. I was deeply moved in reading Florence Littauer's story of her two boys. Always the optimist, this attractive, intelligent, vivacious woman had married well. The wedding pictures of Florence and her prominent New York banker- groom appeared in *Life* magazine. The young couple prospered in business and at home, being blessed by two beautiful daughters.

Then Florence gave birth to the apple of his father's eye—Frederick Jerome Littaur III. He was all a parent could want in a son, until he was about eight months old. Then something went desperately wrong. He began to scream fitfully. He couldn't sit up. His eyes glazed and he stopped smiling.

After running several tests, the doctor told the Littaur's that their son was hopelessly brain damaged. As kindly as he could, he advised them to put him away and forget about him. They could have another son. They were stunned and unbelieving. Surely somebody somewhere could fix him up. The doctor assured them that this was one problem neither their money nor their will power could do anything about. The baby was hopeless.

Hopeless! That was a new word in Florence Littaur's vocabulary, and she refused to accept it.

They did, however, have a second son, and the mother poured her love out on him. Then, one week after Freddie died at two years of age, she picked up her baby Larry from his nap. To her horror, she saw the same blank look, the same glazed eyes, and the same failure to respond. The doctor struggled for words. "I don't know how to say this, Florence, but I'm afraid he has the same thing."

Another futile round of hospitals and again, there was nothing that could be done.

Florence said that life just stopped for her. She fell into a deep depression. Every thing she had valued before now seemed totally meaningless: money, a twelve-room house, wall-to-wall carpeting, all of it. She couldn't get what she wanted most, the health and life of her sons.

Only much later, and only with the help of the Lord, was Florence able to pick up her life again. Now she has been God's blessing all over America as she shares her story of failed pride, depression, and renewal in the Lord.

"I can't get what I want." Florence wanted the lives of her babies. Nothing could be more admirable than this desperate love of a mother for her handicapped sons, but she still

couldn't have what she wanted. Others plunge into despair because they can't get the job they want or need, or the promotion they think they deserve, or the woman (or man) they dream of, or the thanks they have coming, or even the food they need to eat.

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I Can't Keep What I Don't Want to Lose

This is saying the same thing, but with a difference. It's on my mind because of someone that I heard of that is about to lose his farm. The past few years haven't been kind to farmers. One Iowa man, you probably remember reading about him, went berserk over the prospect of losing the family place. He killed his wife, killed a fellow farmer, then drove to town and killed the bank president. Finally, he shot himself. He couldn't cope with losing what had been his for his entire life.

You have undoubtedly heard of Dr. Thomas Holmes' stress test. As a psychiatrist with the University of Washington School of Medicine, Dr. Holmes developed a scale to measure the relative stress induced by various changes in a person's life. He calculates that if you accumulate more than 200 points on his scale, you are a prime candidate for either physical or emotional illness. Among his items, he includes the following:

- Loss of a spouse—100 points
- Divorce (another kind of loss)—75 points
- Marital separation (also a loss)—65 points
- Jail term (loss of freedom)—63 points
- Death of close family member—63 points
- Fired at work—47 points

Is it any wonder, then, that when you sustain an important loss, you also suffer from a mild (or more severe) form of depression?

Let me add a byword of caution here. Since loss hits us with such force, we need not add the burden of guilt to our already heavy load. Do not lecture yourself with these too-frequent words of condemnation: "After all, I'm a Christian and Christians are always supposed to smile and never get discouraged." Sometimes you feel let down whether you are a Christian or not. You are merely being normal.

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I Have What I Want

Surprisingly, sometimes depression comes because I have what I want. I've reached what I was after. No more goals.

More than one person has discovered that the two greatest tragedies in life are first, not

getting what you want, and secondly, getting it. Back in the 1950s, Robert Young was involved in one of the most bitter proxy fights in our country. It seems that he wanted to own and run a railroad, so he bought one for himself. It was a bitter fight, but in time, he wrested control of the New York Central from its owners. Unfortunately, after he bought it, he found out he was unable to manage it. He couldn't make the trains run on time or within budget. He got what he wanted, but one day in his Palm Beach home, he blew his head away with a twenty-gauge shotgun.

Depression is a subject most people of any age know a little something about. Usually it has to do with the completion of some goal and suddenly having nothing to strive for.

This is the essence of the mid-life crisis, isn't it? Youth has a future; it makes plans, sees visions, and dreams great dreams. Middle age settles down. It has accumulated some possessions, is fairly satisfied, isn't going anywhere, isn't living toward any purpose—and wonders why the joy has gone out of life. If that is where you are, the problem may well be that you've got what you wanted.

Retirees often speak the blues as the reach life's plateau. Retirees, your problem may originate in the fact that you've got what you wanted. For years, you planned for retirement—but not beyond. Now you have what you wanted, and it isn't as good as you thought it would be. So you've given up. You do too much drinking, too much eating; have too much time on your hands and too much recreation. You have no new goals, nothing to sacrifice for, nothing for which to get up early or work late. You feel proud of what you were, but not of what you are.

We all need somebody to need us, a cause to depend on us, to call out the best from us. The alternative is depression.

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I Refuse to Face the Facts

We need to be rather blunt here. Sometimes depression comes because I refuse to face the facts. Crises and losses come to all of us; we cannot make them disappear by refusing to admit that they've happened. Let me use divorce as the example. He's left. She's leaving. What is your immediate reaction? Very often, it is one of denial. "Oh no. it can't be." "This is just temporary." "He's coming back." "She's going to return." "It's going to be as it was before, only better. I'm going to make it better."

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But it doesn't get better.

This happens with dying, doesn't it? You learn you have a terminal illness. "No, it's not happening to me. I won't accept it. I won't tolerate it." But the disease won't be willed away.

You can add more: impending financial disaster, problems with the children, a loved one's addiction. You are too proud to face facts. And depression gets you.

Can you stand to hear about just one more source of depression—without becoming depressed? This is a big one.

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I Haven't Amounted to Much

This also generally afflicts us in the middle and later years, although young people aren't immune. It hits when we take stock and find that huge, gaping chasm between our aspirations and our achievements. It's what Winston Churchill expressed when, as an old man celebrating his birthday, he said to his daughters, "I have achieved a great deal to achieve nothing in the end." Robert Louis Stevenson, author of such popular books as *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, wrote his own epitaph: "Here lies one who meant well, who tried a little, and failed much." Cecil Rhodes, who opened up South Africa to the white man, said as he lay dying, "So little done, so much to do." I felt a touch of this melancholy when at thirty-five I had to face the fact that my time would run out before my dreams would be realized.

Enough of the reasons. We like Philip Toynbee's approach. Having examined his own depression for its causes and ways to get rid of them, he began searching for purposes in it that he could fulfill. He concluded that "depression is often a sign, whether human or divine, that the life of the victim needs to be drastically changed; that acts of genuine contrition are called for...." This call for a change takes us back to Lamentations, where we learn that the writer has found the solution.

