

WHEN THINGS ARE HARD

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Welcome: It's a blessing of the Christian life that we can keep growing all of our years, even the eternal ones. While the outward body diminishes, the inner person with Christ is forever being renewed. So we can grow, for example, in having less anger in our lives. It really is possible. If anger is like a fever, then depression is like the flu. Common but not very fun and sometimes very serious. Can we grow in that area as well? Yes. Let's worship God.

Confession: We're talking about depression today. Some people have it such that a prescription is very helpful. If when we're diabetic, we benefit from medicine, why shouldn't we when our bodily and mental chemistry needs help? Confession is a time when we reach for God's help. He gives it in a multitude of ways but it is all built on Jesus Christ. Let us reach for the help in Jesus Christ.

Sermon: The statistics are that 19 million people are suffering from some form of depression as we speak. Its incidence has tripled since the early 1990's. So its here and we should look at it. It's in the Bible and we should look at it – David, Jeremiah, Jonah, and maybe even Jesus. To look at it, Martin Lloyd Jones preached 24 sermons on depression. I'm going to preach two. So much more could be said but I'm hopeful that our looking at it in the two will help 80% of us 80% of the time.

Let's review what we began last week. A logical way into the topic is to consider symptoms, causes, and cures. When going over symptoms you wouldn't be crazy to ask of some of them whether they are symptoms or

causes. Over-eating because you're depressed by your weight is both a symptom and a cause. This points out that we and the whole world do things that are depressing. And there is that in life which is not right or the way it should be and sane and sensitive people would find them depressing. The bent will and the broken world ultimately are only answered by Jesus Christ. Wholeness and well-being for ourselves, families, and world are all based in Him.

What I just said is how we started and finished the sermon but in between we did get informed through the account about Elijah in I Kings 19 that fatigue is behind a lot of depression. This can be a big project done with. Maybe it was positive but had less than perfect results. Nevertheless, there's a let-down. It can be going too long without sleep, or proper food, or mental rest, or friendship, or kindness, or absolution ... and oddly enough also going too long without any meaningful responsibility or challenge.

If we wrote causes down with crayolas, besides fatigue we would list loss, interpersonal problems, and negative thinking. Loss is loss of a spouse or job or being able to walk or something prized. When I think of interpersonal problems I think of Proverbs 21:9 and how it is better to live on a corner of your roof than with someone who is quarrelsome. Bad relationships that you live with day in and day out take life out of us. Negative thinking is rehearsing the bad and the critical inside your head. More on this as we get into our passage, Psalm 42.

Pray, Read.

What can we learn from this psalm? Broadly two things: One, there is something to be learned. Two, we are to pray and preach.

A psalm is a song or prayer used by Israel and then the church in worship. This psalm has the subtitle: Maskil. That word means instruction. This then is to say that what we do in worship is expressive but also educational. In this particular case the topic is depression. Notice how the author talks about tears, turmoil, and a cast down soul. How this is to be handled then is the topic.

That we can learn how to handle it is an important point to note. Some people think that depression is hereditary or just a given with their personality type. If so, why bring up learning? Just live with it. But that's not the Bible's perspective.

And it is not psychology's perspective either. Counseling helps people get beyond depression. Counseling is, the way I'd put it is, companioning and teaching. The counselor is with us offering personal presence to support but also wisdom and this he or she draws out of us to see or leads us to. We learn our way forward. And if we learn our way out, please note that we probably learned our way in. That the Amish have one fifth to one tenth the rate of depression as the rest of the country, has me thinking that culture and our learning in it, and in our families is real.

The Bible says learn.

So when we look at the Psalm we learn, I submit, two main things. The first is to pray. The psalm itself is a prayer. David, the author, addresses God despite the fact, as we find out, that he doesn't feel like God is near. Now that David doesn't *feel* God is near does not mean that God is *not* near.

Some people say, He should make it so that I can feel him and if he doesn't, I'm done with him. The question is where does that leave you? Now you have no

one to turn to at all. God may be difficult but no God is more difficult. God is in the equation so just as when it is nighttime we do not conclude there is no such thing as a sun and give up on it, so we keep on with God.

So pray. There are two times to pray – when you feel like it and when you don't. Pray.

The second learning for us is to preach, to speak. The psalmist, look, addresses himself, "Why ... O my soul?" And, "Hope in God." And so on. We do a lot of listening to ourselves and that can be okay some of the time but we have to learn how to address ourselves. The self says to us, "I don't want to," and we must preach to ourselves, "Do this."

A problem in depression is that we tend to say I will do it when I feel like it. But it takes doing it to feel like it. So we must speak to our feelings and will. It's helpful for me to remember that loving someone is my willing for their well-being. That may mean, for example, with my children that I do not just respond to their feelings. Their feelings say, "I'm not tired and I want to stay up and eat more and more ice cream." Regardless of their tantrum or sullenness, I must act for their good if I am going to love them. And if I am going to love myself, I must do the same with myself regardless of my sullenness or tantrums.

All of us have inner speech, thoughts. What leads to depression and what is maintained in depression are negative thoughts, negative speech. This is where we especially do better to speak to ourselves than listen to ourselves. Inside it is – that thing I did had a flaw so I am no good, that thing I did well was just luck; not me accomplishing something good, that person doesn't like me and nobody likes me, he's a turkey and I'm a turkey and everybody's a turkey, I didn't get treated fair and I will not

go on or cannot go on if I am not treated fair, those people over there at that table are laughing and they're laughing about me, and on and on. Some of it is self-criticism and some of it is self-pity and some is just thinking so much is about yourself.

If when we started to heat up with anger, we advised, "Slow down and back up," and even to say sharply out loud, "Stop!" to do this slowing down and backing up ... then the same is true here with inner negativity. We might even say out loud, "Stop!" to jump the tracks on this.

And when we preach to ourselves, what do we say besides, "Stop"? Remember in communion we say that as long as you take the bread and cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again? Who are you proclaiming it to? One audience is you. So what are we preaching, saying, proclaiming to us?

First, fight. "Hope in God." That's a fight statement. Jim Collins, author, professor of leadership, like at West Point, told of his wife leading the women marathoners when her legs quit a quarter of a mile from the finish line. She bent over and screamed, and hit her legs, yelling, "Move!" That's this, a firm call from the will to the will. Hope in God. Do it.

Two, remember. Verse 4, 6. He remembers happier times and times when he had different feelings as he worshiped. Today it is harder with God feeling silent. But I know I've worshipped him when he felt close. I have done well and experienced well and will again.

When I personally need peace and feel low, sometimes I travel in my mind to a place on a mountaintop that I've been too. I visit it in my mind and feel the breeze, take in the view, I think of the God of nature. That's remember.

Bishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "To cleanse our spirits of depression ... and other forms of spiritual leprosy, we have to be thankful, appreciative persons." So remember your blessings also. Go ahead and count them. Psychologists have actually found that those who count five blessings a day have a better sense of well-being.

Three, note that deep calls to deep. Someone wrote to me this week saying that God was silent to them and it concerned them. I replied that caring that God was silent was in itself a sign that God was in them. If wasn't, they wouldn't care.

The psalmist speaks of deep calling to deep ... the sound of a waterfall coming across a valley to his soul is like a calling, being called, God to his soul. There's a deep calling in the world, something that makes birds and fish migrate thousands of miles to certain places, drawn along. A deep calling to deep. And there's something in our soul that draws us to God. Note even the languid prayer, even the concern over God's silence, that's God calling to us and us calling back. Let that reassure you.

Four, look out. Quite simply the psalmist registers his own countenance downcast. He is miserable and he looks it. In verse 11 in the KJV he speaks of *his* countenance saying that God is its health. In verse 5 he speaks of the *God's* countenance and what a help it is. In other words, as he looked at God's face v. 5 he got help and his own face got healthier v.11. So don't look at your own sad face in the mirror; that will make you more depressed. Look at God's face and you'll get better. When you feel down, look up ... at Him.

And this is not looking into the something of a face of a religion or an oblique deity like an agnostic. Look at Jesus Christ, the one in the Gospels. As the chorus *Turn*

Your Eyes Upon Jesus goes, look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light
of His glory and grace.

And it's not only look out from self to God, it's
move out in activity like exercise, move out in helpfulness.
Dr. Karl Menninger was asked by a Tucson, AZ newspaper
reporter, "Suppose you think you are heading for a nervous
breakdown. What should you do?" Menninger's reply was
not, "See a psychiatrist." He said, "Go straight to the front
door, turn the knob, cross the tracks and find somebody
who needs you." Look outward to serve.

The psalm ends and is everything the way the
psalmist wants it to be. No, he's a work in progress and life
is dynamic. But here in worship with his psalm and God,
he's worshipped ... and he's taught us to pray.

*If you would like to talk about this message or your
spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor
and elders would welcome your call.*

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