

BATTLING DEPRESSION AND DESPAIR

Happy Mother's Day! Today we're talking about depression lol Now, formally speaking, depression is a clinical category. According to the DSM 5, it refers to a period of at least two weeks where an individual experiences almost unceasingly depressed mood to the point that they are no longer interested in normal activities. Often times this is accompanied by changes in diet, difficulty sleeping, loss of energy, weight gain, diminished cognitive ability. And in this sense 9.5% of the population experience depression.

But I want to talk about depression in its more colloquial usage—the way it's used in common language and in the Bible. Depression—extended season sadness and lack of joy. Despair—hopelessness. And far more than 6% of people have struggled or will struggle with these feelings and these seasons of deep sadness can be caused by any number of things. Situational: We lose a loved one, our marriage is in shambles, we don't have friends, we're lonely, our health isn't improving. Biological: Our brain is up-taking too much serotonin. In many cases it's more than one and often times we don't know which one or ones it is. We can't pinpoint the problem which makes finding a solution even more difficult and leads to grater despair.

I've had two bouts of intense depression in my life that I've spoken of those pretty openly from this pulpit. My goal for us today is to learn from the Bible, not my life experiences, but because it is so close to my memory I'll be speaking out of my experience by way of application. If you're struggling there's hope. Different kind of series.

Two Truths

(1) Godly people get depressed.

Depression is not a sign of spiritual immaturity. Like if you only knew and trusted God more this wouldn't happen. No! Even a cursory glance at the Psalms reveals that. We've got prayer after prayer of people saying things like this, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" This isn't one bad day. This is a long time. This is an extended period of darkness. His soul is sick his circumstances are horrible and he's crying out—how long? This is king David, the guy who wrote the Lord is my shepherd and Ps. 16. Adoniram Judson "God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not." Brainerd "I live in the most lonely melancholy desert....My soul was weary of life. I longed for death, beyond measure." Spurgeon, "I could not bear to see my child suffer as Thou makest me suffer; and if I saw him tormented as I am now, I would do what I could to help him, and put my arms under him to sustain him. Wilt thou hide thy face from me, my father? Wilt thou still lay on me thy heavy hand, and not give me a smile from thy countenance?" C.S. Lewis, "There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me." Godly people get depressed.

(2) Depression is journey, not a home.

There are a variety of ways—both healthy and unhealthy—that people deal with depression. Some people numb, distract, we're going to talk about a better way today, but a third way people deal with depression is they sort of make it their home. They give up fighting it and make it their identity. The wounded person.

A constant narrative of injury. This is not ok. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit—just like self-control or kindness. Imagine someone saying, “I’m just not self-controlled or kind”. Need to cultivate it. In the same way, joy isn’t in our immediate control but it must be fought for—cultivated. You aren’t responsible for being depressed but you are responsible for how you respond to it. You need a plan. And let me say just upfront and someone who walked this road a few times: hope is not a plan (i.e. hope I lose weight). You need a plan. Gonna take more than asking God to make you happy and putting the footprints poem on your refrigerator. I’m going to try and give you a plan today. Back and forth between counselor and pastor.
Pray.

Four Prescriptions For Fighting Depression and Despair

God’s promises. When I was depressed, I came across this verse, “This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.” (Ps. 119:50) I didn’t know those promises. Studied and got some answers (Spirit, use me, forgive me etc.) But what about joy? Any promises for joy in *this* life (not just heaven!) “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” “I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (Ps. 27:13). Also joy is a fruit of the Spirit and God doesn’t command that which he’s not willing to empower. So, these verses took away my despair. Abundant life and seeing God’s goodness is offered to me. You have to believe that otherwise you’ll live in it!

One more piece. When it comes to abundant life, it means the promise of joy in suffering not the promise of joy *instead* of suffering. 2 Cor. 6:10, Paul’s provides an interesting commentary on his mindset when it comes to enduring hardship 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.” I think this is what we can expect—joy in suffering. Our hope in the Gospel in this life isn’t that we trade suffering for joy. When we can have a deep-seated joy that suffering and circumstances can’t take away. A joy that the thief can’t kill steal or destroy. That even though the storm persists, God will give us the power to dance in the rain. That’s one huge promise.

So we’re promised joy and we’re promised that the suffering we’re going through isn’t pointless. Now it may seem utterly pointless from our perspective, but from God’s it’s not. It’s productive and he’s using it for our good and his glory, Js. 1 “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” I would never want to repeat those seasons nothing in my life has produced more spiritual growth and stability, than those times. People say there isn’t a shortcut to sanctification I disagree I think there’s one—suffering. In God’s grace—suffering is always productive.

So, he’s forms you and molds you and he also shatter our illusions of self-sufficiency and strength. God often shows us that he is all we need by placing us in a situation where he is all we have. That’s what Paul says. “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” (2 Cor. 2:8-9) So in our depression and sadness, we can know not only that abundant life is a this-life promise and but that for believers, every moment we suffer is overseen and used productively by a sovereign God working all things together for our good and his ultimate glory. Which also means don’t waste your suffering! Fight depression with God’s promises...

God's presence. Some people want a special word. New circumstances. I wanted answers in my suffering. None of those are solutions. When you suffer, the most meaningful thing is people's presence (i.e. when someone dies)! It's not in answers, but presence. "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." His presence, his closeness. The most precious powerful thing God could ever give you in depression is himself. Isa 43:2 "When you pass through the waters I will be with you." Ps. 23:4 "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear for you are with me." And of course, for believers we experience God's presence in a unique way—not tabernacle or temple—but through the Promised Holy Spirit—which is what Paul calls him in Eph. 1:13. God's presence is a promise in suffering.

All believers have the Holy Spirit objectively, it's a fact. But in order to experience that presence it's going to take work; practice. Effort. God's comfort in His presence doesn't come to us like the sunshine when we walk outside. Jn 4:8 "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." There's effort involved in subjectively experiencing the objective presence of God in me; the power and intimacy and joy. It's what Brother Lawrence—17th century monk—called practicing the presence of God. And if you don't do this—depression or not—you won't powerfully experience God's presence. So, what do we do to practice God's presence? **Trying to be practical.**

(1) Spend time in prayer and the word. Ps 19:7-8 "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" Also use this to Lament. Shocks me how many folks don't do this. I don't really have time! How serious are you about not being depressed? We can walk with you but we cannot walk for you! Escaping depression is like walking with God up mountain *not* like getting a helicopter ride to the top.

(2) Preach to yourself. From the moment you wake up, you will be tempted to believe lies. And you can't afford to listen to yourself—you have to preach—instruct-exhort yourself. Ps. 42, we see a picture of an individual who is in darkness—he says he pants for God like a deer pants for water that tears have been his food day and night, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation⁶ and my God." In his famous work on Spiritual Depression Martyn Lloyd-Jones commenting on this passage says, "The main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression...is this: that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self." Look at what he's doing—he's preaching to himself! Counselor hat: How will you? Put it on your mirror? Ceiling (I did)? Dashboard?

(3) Obedience, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 Jn 1:7)

(4) Listen to and sing God-exalting music. It is astonishing to me how often music is associated with joy in the Bible. Sing, shout, rejoice, life my voice, instruments. "He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." (Ps. 40:2-3) Book of Psalms: On their worst days and best days, their singing. Music makes you feel things. Luther agrees: "I have no use for cranks who despise music because it is a gift of God...Next after theology, I give music the highest place and greatest honor. I would not exchange what little I know of music for something great. Experience proves that, next to the Word of God, only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feeling of the human heart. We know that to the devil music is distasteful and insufferable. My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music which so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues." Martin Luther

God's people. I mentioned Ps 42 where a man is having a season of darkness and preaches to himself. Before he preaches to himself, in the midst of his agony, he reminds himself of something. And in 42:4 he says, "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival." He remembers a corporate worship service—the procession and the multitude. Life among the worshipping community. Now for a lot of us especially introverts, our tendency in depression is to withdraw from community. And you may spend more time by yourself but you have to be around people—a specifically God's people. (Mt. 26:36-38) "Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." 37 And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." We need believers' presence—to watch with us pray with us in our darkness and grief. Even if you don't want it. Just like reading, you do it. Too many people just take their ball and go home and wonder why things aren't getting better. We need believers' presence and encouragement. We need to be reminded of what's true and pointed to Christ. Certainly, it's more difficult during COVID. Small groups. Midweek. Events. Our worship services.

We need to serve people. And this is crucial because in depression our world tends to shrink around us. Acts 20:35 tells Jesus said, "It's more blessed to give than receive." It's not *just* treasure in heaven. It's actual benefit now. In 2013 a team of doctors and psychologists studied 846 people in the Detroit area noting their stress levels and whether they helped people. Interestingly, stress affected the death rates of people who reported not serving others, but stress did no affect the mortality rates of those who reported serving others conclusion, "Helping others predicted reduced mortality specifically by buffering the association between stress and mortality." In the Scientific American two social psychologists confirmed what is called the "Helpers High":

Recently, a burgeoning field of research has helped resolve this happiness paradox by showing that prosocial behavior—voluntary behavior intended to benefit another—can boost happiness. Although acts of kindness directly benefit the well-being of the recipient, they also create a pleasurable "helper's high" that benefits the giver. For instance, volunteer

So serve people—find a way. **Promises, Presence, People...**

God's Creation. God gives us all kinds of grace in and through his creation—common or natural grace—and this is available to believer and unbelievers alike. Things like rain and sunshine, technology, intelligence, moral capacity. These are blessings that in many cases offer help in our depression despair. (1) Exercise 1 Tim 4:8 says that bodily training is valuable. Research shows exercise is linked to endorphins. (2) Medicine—perfectly valid eventual step, poor first step. (3) Professional Counseling. Again we can walk with you, but not for you. Failing to avail yourself.

Make sure you're using common grace! Some people only have common grace—not only do you to have God's presence, but you'll spend eternity apart from it. God's promises are for his children. God's presence is for his children.

Dear Suffering,

I certainly wouldn't have chosen you for myself. I didn't think I was ready for you. I didn't want the sleepless nights and tears. I didn't want the misery and the hopelessness. You took my joy from me suffering. You hurt me. You left me in shambles. But God knew something that I didn't when he introduced us. He knew that if He brought you into my life I would be forced to let go of everything else that I held on to for joy and hope. He knew that I'd be forced to depend on him and be desperate for him every moment of the day in ways that I never could had I never met you. He knew that the only way to answer my prayers for his unrivaled rule in my

heart was to take away all of his competitors. You made me weak, suffering, but God showed himself strong. You made me doubt, suffering, but God showed himself faithful. In your attempt to steal my joy, you actually helped me find it in ways I could have never imagined. You forced me to stop snacking from the table of the world and feast exclusively on the banquet of Christ himself. You thought you'd get the best of me suffering, but I got the best of you. Now I'm stronger, bolder, wiser, and the bliss of eternity will be even sweeter because of you and for this I'm thankful. I know that there many things that God has yet to teach me about his grace and his sufficiency and even if that means walking through your dark corridors I will not be scared of you suffering. I will not be scared because I've forged unshakable hope in your furnaces and relentless hope in your tauntings. I'm not scared of you because Christ's presence and faithfulness have proved time and again to be a sure source of comfort and hope. So do your best suffering, but know that you will lose. You will lose because my Savior has already won on my behalf. I will learn. I will fight. And I will be victorious. So long for now, suffering. I'll trust we'll meet again. You're old friend, Chase