

Part 4: When I Feel Depressed

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I wonder how many of us are aware that the Bible has passages just like the one just read for us? Did you know that God's word includes such seemingly dark and hopeless passages at Psalm 88? What's interesting about this specific passage is that it's not only part of God's inerrant and inspired word for our good—but take a look at the prescript of what was just read for us: **Psalm 88:1a**.

What was just read for us was not just a passage or scripture, but a corporate worship song. Someone sat down, and wrote this song, composed music to it and handed it to the choir master. It's called a maskil, and notice some of the other maskils recorded in scripture: Psalm 45:1, "My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe."

This song seems more fitting for corporate worship. But consider the maskil of David in Psalm 55: "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me and horror overwhelms me." Or Psalm 142: "In the path where I walk, they have hidden a trap for me. Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul."

I want to read for us again a portion of the song of Psalm 88 for you this morning: **Psalm 88:3-9a**.

As we finish our series titled, "Talking to Yourself," we are going to address how we talk to ourselves in the midst of depression, sorrow and distress. Living life means all of us to some degree experience aspects of sorrow and depression. When Adam and Eve sinned, sorrow, death and brokenness became our reality. We will have moments where we all encounter the pain that things are not how they should be and our response to that should be sadness.

But one thing that is common for all who experience depression either casually or chronically, is that there always seems to come with it a crushing experience of aloneness. If you noticed in Psalm 88, this theme is everywhere. The experience of the Psalmist is that the Lord himself has turned away, his acquaintances are the dead, displeasure lay heavy upon him, his companions shun him and are ashamed to be with him, he feels he is only a burden of death to his beloved, and darkness itself—intangible and consuming—seems to be his only friend.

This Psalm itself is incredibly unique because it is one of the few which has no optimistic resolve. It ends in isolation and darkness. But this is why this Psalm is so helpful for us today as we consider how to deal with depression and how to care for those who are themselves in seasons of sorrow. While the words of this Psalm don't necessarily ring with hope, the posture of this Psalm is the silent hope and proper response each of us needs to see.

In the midst of fear and frustration towards the God who has seemingly afflicted him, in the trials of despair, in the regions deep and dark what does the author teach us to do? **Psalm 88:1-2, 9b, 13**.

For many who wrestle with depression, or for those who follow only the world's advice regarding our sorrow, we may believe the lie that the Lord has nothing for you. That the Christian experience is only

for the healthy, the strong and the satisfied. But here, this God has preserved for all time by his Holy Spirit a Psalm that speaks to your experience and powerfully promotes your hope even when it seems darkness is our only end.

Today, my goal is the silent proof of this Psalm—to show all who wrestle with depression that you are not alone. Throughout church history we have seen men and women who loved Jesus wrestle with common and chronic sorrow. From David and Paul in scripture to historic figures in church history like Charles Spurgeon, “The Prince of Preachers,” who wrestled with a depression so severe he called it a “bottomless pit...” where our souls, “can bleed in then thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour.” You have had elders and members here in this church who have tasted circumstantial and sever bouts of depression. God’s word shows concern for the sorrowful soul, God’s people show concern for the sorrowful soul, but more than that consider the savior who bends his knee to care for you in **Isaiah 53:3**.

Jesus cares for the experience of those who are overwhelmed with sorrow, for Jesus knows what it’s like to feel alone. He knows the grief of rejection, and the weight of humanities brokenness. But this God speaks to us in our need and for our good so that we might orient our minds, and find the strength needed to obey him even if our obedience sounds like Psalm 88.

What we are going to see today is this: **All depression is at its heart a temporary experience of an eternal reality resolved in the gospel of Jesus Christ**. We are going to look at this through the lens of scripture and notice three things. First, we are going to examine **Biblical Causes for Depression and Sorrow**, then we are going to look beneath the causes at the **Biblical Realities behind Depression and Sorrow**, and then lastly we are going to examine **Biblical Responses to Depression and Sorrow**.

But first I want to speak to the multifaceted issues of depression in the same way we did with anxiety. As we will see in the causes portion, there are all sorts of reasons we can be depressed. Some of these are common and ordinary, some of these are unique, and physiological. But as we’ve seen through this whole series we are neither body or soul, but body and soul. Our sicknesses in our flesh impact our spirit and vice a versa.

Timothy Rogers was a Puritan Pastor who himself was severely afflicted by depression in a biological way. He summarized this tension of body and soul care so well that I want to quote him at length: **"If a man troubled in conscience comes to a minister, it may be that the minister will look entirely to the soul, and nothing to the body; if he comes to a physician, he considers the body and neglects the soul. For my part, I would never have the physicians' counsel despised, nor the labor of the minister neglected, because soul and body dwell together, it is convenient that, as the soul should be cured by the word, prayer, fasting, or by comforting, so the body must be brought into some temper by medicine, and diet, by harmless diversions, and similar ways—providing always that it is done in the fear of God, so as not to think to quite smother or evade our troubles by these ordinary means, but to use them as preparatives by which our souls may be made more capable of the spiritual methods that are to follow afterwards."**

What is helpful about his pastoral advice here? That it is no shame, and part of the human experience to subject ourselves to our own human physicians to the end that it helps us obey the good physician.

Rogers spoke of medical care as a “preparative” for spiritual obedience. What does he mean by that? Just as a surgically repaired ACL does not make a woman a distance runner, the surgery is a helpful

preparative to grow in her fitness. So too, medicine, when needful is helpful to prepare you to run the race of obedience. There are times where medical intervention is needed to provide the space we need to gather ourselves and begin again the race of following Jesus. As your pastor we would love to help those who are processing these decisions along with your medical doctors.

So with that said, what does the Bible say about why we might feel depression? Biological issues and disposition are sometimes one of the causes, but now let's examine our first point today to see some more: **Biblical Causes for Depression and Sorrow.**

A couple weeks ago I mentioned that anxiety bubbles up with anxious energy, but depression pulls us down into a pit with weighted despair. I'm going to walk us through ten causes the Bible says may cause that quicksand effect of despair and depression in our lives and the lives of others.

Being able to locate the cause of our despair or depression is actually really helpful because it helps the sufferer to locate themselves. It's like an emergency GPS beacon that helps us know where we are, and gives us a vantage point from which we can return for help. But it also helps those who are suffering, and those who are trying to help, to understand that the gospel provides multifaceted solutions to multifaceted sorrow. There's no cookie cutter solution, but instead we learn how the gospel might help specifically by attempting to understand the situation we are currently in.

For the sake of time, I'm going to progress through these fairly quickly but I will have a handout listing all these points available at the info desk for those who are note takers. I'd encourage you to listen now and write later.

The first is one that all of us have at some point experienced: **Real Sorrows in the World.**

Consider with me Jesus' own response when his friend Lazarus had died: **John 11:32-35.** What do we see here? Jesus wept, he cried. Why? Because death is sad. This world hurts. Luke's gospel tells us twice, for the sake of emphasize, that on the night before his death Jesus was sorrowful and troubled.

I use Jesus as an example here because it is no sin to be sad. To lose your job, to break up with your boyfriend, to bury a loved one is a sorrowful experience because sin has brought death and pain into our world. To tell someone who is genuinely experiencing the painful effects of evil in this world, "Don't be sad," is to chastise Jesus himself. It's actually on account of the sorrows in this world that Jesus came to die and to belittle the pain of life in this world is to belittle the cross itself. So we first understand that there are reasonable seasons for any of us to have experiences with sorrow and depression.

A second cause for depression and sorrow is: **Afflictions in the Flesh.** What do I mean when I say that? I mean that our bodies, apart from any weakness or will or ongoing sin in our hearts, may be prone to distress. Paul says this in **2 Corinthians 12:7-9a.**

We aren't sure what this specific thorn was, was it an illness, was it a strained relationship? But what we do know is that God gave it to him, not because Paul was sinful, not because Paul had a weak will, but actually that Paul might wrestle well with it. This is where we realize we aren't God, and sometimes the bodies and the circumstances that God gives us are beyond our control. We can pursue medical help, counsel, and assistance in the midst of it, but sometimes there is no specific cure beyond God's gracious removal of it—but in the midst of the struggle, God gives strength.

Third, we see the sorrow of **Relational Isolation**. Consider the cry of **Psalm 102:6-7**. There are times where in isolation from other people, whether it is beyond our control or something we are pursuing ourselves, that feelings of aloneness can creep and morph into sorrow. God actually made us for community, and when that is inhibited by our will or not, we may grow increasingly distressed. David Brainerd was a missionary to the 18th century Native Americans and his depression was compounded by the isolation he experienced in the New England wilderness.

A fourth cause is **Physical Opposition**. Look at David in **Psalm 43:2**. Whether it was David at the hands of Saul, John Bunyan when thrown in prison for preaching the gospel, or John Perkins arrested for being a black pastor in the south, enemies, fears and threats will cause us to find the safety of dark and deep places even though the cost is high. Whether by your sin, or by their sin, opposition and enemies can wear away at our emotional state at an extremely high rate.

The first few causes focus primarily on external factors, the following deal primarily with internal factors. Fifth we see the sorrow of **Conscious Unbelief**. Remember the experience of those who tried to process life apart from God's wisdom in **Isaiah 8:20-22**.

This was the experience of Augustine where despite his privilege and success, joy seemed to evade him at every turn because his heart was blinded to God's word. Life apart from the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is an uncomfortable life. It looks up at the heavens only to express displeasure and confirm there is no God, while simultaneously looking back to the darkness of the world hoping to find light.

A sixth biblical cause for sorrow is **Conviction of Sin**. Look at this man in **Luke 18:13**. Here we see a man who is distressed. He's not distressed because he's done something specific, but he's distressed because he knows that he is sinful, that there's something in him that's not how it should be. For many of us our road to Jesus begins with a creeping despair that something is wrong inside of us, and we have no idea what to do with it until we see the relief of the gospel. Just like how your stomach reminds you of foul food, often times our hearts ache to inform us that we are unholy and stand apart from a holy God.

Seventh, we see **Functional Unbelief** as a cause of depression and sorrow. Look at what Paul says to those who are grieving in **1 Thessalonians 4:13-14**. If you'll notice Paul doesn't say, "Don't grieve." Instead he says, "Don't grieve like those who have no hope." In other words many of us may claim to have faith in the gospel, but functionally we fail to believe all that is true in it and this compounds our despair.

The physician turned pastor, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, described this cause in this way: "**It is a terrible thing when a man reaches that point when he knows that he must die, and the gospel which he has argued about and reasoned about and even 'defended' does not seem to help him because it has never gripped him. It was just an intellectual hobby.**" The gospel as an intellectual hobby and not true faith lead us to increasing despair in the face of life's hardships as we pick and choose which hope we find most palatable.

Eighth we see the sorrow of **Sinful Desires**. Look at Paul's battle in **Romans 7:22-24**. How many times are we burdened not because we looked at porn, but because we still after years, wrestle with lust. How many times are we frustrated when we've not yelled at our co-workers lately, but the impulse of anger still burns in our hearts? This causes an affliction of despair in our bodies.

Ninth, we learn of the sorrow of **Sinful Actions**. Look at Judas after he betrayed his Lord: **Matthew 27:3-5**. Having committed sin, Judas was gripped with guilt, and standing apart from the hope of repentance the guilt tormented him even unto death. Sometimes our sorrow is because we have a sin or have acted in foolish ways and unless we recognize and repent, the burden remains fixed to our backs.

And lastly, the ultimate cause of depression and despair is **Eternal Damnation**. Consider Jesus own warning in **Matthew 25:41,45-46**.

To not know Jesus by faith, to not repent of your sin and give your life to him, is not to make a bad decision. It is not to miss out on life. It is not to be wrong. It is to die justly on account of your sin, sins in which each of us has walked, and to face eternal punishment forever.

Look at how Jesus speaks of this torment in **Luke 16:22-26**.

Do you realize that to trifle with the gospel is not to mess around with competing worldviews, weekend schedules or debates about the competing good? Instead, each and every one of us must understand that the wages of our unrepentant unbelief and sin, has earned us eternal punishment.

And in the experience of the Rich man we see what awaits us. Forever we will thirst without any water, forever we will hunger without any food, forever we will suffer without any end. And once we have suffered for a million years, more still awaits.

The heart of this experience is given by Jesus in Matthew 25: Depart from me.

Hell is a place of present pain eternally and always because hell is the place where the Lord hides his face.

This is our second point this morning: **Biblical Realities Behind our Depression and Suffering**.

Every experience of depression we encounter here on the earth, any one picked off that list, is simply a foretaste of the true reality that will endlessly be our experience if God stands against us in our sin.

Our fear of crushing darkness, our fear of the endless pit of despair, or fear of isolation and displeasure are God's gracious safety mechanism in our life to cause each of us to fear the wages of sin and the eternal punishment that awaits all of us apart from Jesus.

Truly, behind all of our experience of sorrow is a reminder of the reality of being isolated from God forever. Which is why it is often the most depressed person in scripture who understands most clearly his experience. Consider again the closing portion of **Psalms 88:13-18**.

What is the Psalmist's greatest fear? That the Lord would cast him away forever. Behind all the circumstantial issues he sings, this is the greatest fear. We face the shadows of sorrow at every corner on this planet so that we might be mindful of the substance of sorrow that hangs over our heads: our isolation from God himself.

But this is where this Psalm is beautiful. Though it includes no resolution, its inclusion in God's word is the resolution. Its mere existence reminds the singers of Israel and us today, that God will not forsake the one who cries out to him.

One day, those who cry out in despair will be too late. The Rich Man was too late. The men in Matthew 25 were too late. But today, you are not. Today you can cry out to God and he will hear you, and he will answer you.

Where will he answer you? Consider Jesus' dying words on the cross in the book of Mark: **Mark 15:33-34.**

Who knew darkness, who knew rejection? Jesus did. Jesus knew the pit of despair because he tasted the ultimate rejection of God in your place. Jesus took the punishment of eternal damnation you deserved so that you might know for certain that though you cry out, "Why do you hide your face from me!?"-- this will not always be your cry!

Look again at the hope of **Isaiah 53:4-6.**

Jesus has come to bear your grief and your sorrow. He has come to relieve the burden behind all burdens. If we repent of our sin, and if we take Jesus' sacrifice in our place, we are transferred from darkness to light, from the displeasure of God into the promise of his peace. Jesus was isolated for us so that the promise of God's presence might be our daily hope. The only comfort we have in the midst of our depression is the promise that God will not always be far from us. The only comfort we have in the midst of our sorrow is that one day what is broken will be put back in place.

You see if we reconcile ourselves first and foremost with Jesus, we can begin to work our way back through that list finding confidence in the midst of our experience. If God has removed eternal damnation, then there is forgiveness for those who sin. If God has promised new life, then there is the hope that one day our desires will be fully aligned with God's will. If God has saved us in Jesus, then he will strengthen our weak faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, one day we will no longer see in part, but in full. If God has promised judgement for the wicked, then all who afflict and harm apart from the gospel will be locked away forever causing no harm to his beloved. If Jesus rose from the dead, then we too will rise with bodies perfected and creation restored.

Here's why we need to start our process of response here. If Jesus has delivered us from the greatest experience of sorrow and depression, we can find a little bit of clarity, a sand-bar in the midst of the rapids, to assess everything else from. Working our way back through that list in light of our understanding of the gospel is a really helpful way to open up the oxygen valve a little in our hearts.

But as we do that, the feelings of depression and our limitations of depression might not go away. It might take longer than we want them to. But here is where we can begin to talk to ourselves in ways that are helpful. Here's our final point this morning: **Biblical Responses to Depression and Sorrow.**

Our first response when we are in the midst of depression is to **Speak back to your soul and look back at God's faithfulness.**

When Timothy Rogers talked about his own depression he talked about how afflicted his mind was and how hard it was to not think. His mind was always consumed with his thoughts. If the mind were stilled he wouldn't be depressed. So the solution wasn't so much to stop thinking but instead to try and reframe thoughts.

We see this pattern in **Psalm 43:5**. When our world and our heart bear down against us, we have the privilege of doing the hard work of saying, "Hold on, you've talked for quite enough, now you dear self, listen to me." We begin to ask ourselves, "Why are we downcast? Why are we in turmoil?"

Perhaps we work our way back through that list, but even if we can put our finger on our depression (which often we can't) we not only speak back to ourselves, but we ask ourselves to look back. "Do you remember your baptism?" "Do you remember when a crowd of believers celebrated your profession of faith and rejoiced that you belonged body and soul to Jesus Christ?" "Do you remember when God was faithful to you then? Do you remember when you felt his nearness?" That God has not changed. Even though your experience might be different, if you cling to Christ, then his favor is still there behind the veil of what you now experience.

If you're one who suffers from depression, consider keeping a journal. On days, or in seasons where the darkness is lifted, record it for your own hope later. Remind yourself that your experience of God's displeasure and perceived lack of care passed away even here on earth, and that you know full well it will pass away forever in heaven.

I love how Psalm 43 ends, by preaching hope to himself, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." Despite the sorrow the Psalmist felt, he knew that God would not abandon him, he knew that praise would again fill his lungs.

Look at Paul's similar hope in **2 Corinthians 1:9-10**. Paul with a similar hope said, "I despaired life, but God delivered us and he'll do it again."

But did you notice what else he said? He said that his confidence and hope was in the God who raises the dead. Isn't that interesting? Here is hope for those who wrestle with deep depression and despair--as Christians our comfort is not in a God who spares the living, but in a God who raises the dead.

Even if our despair on earth takes us to the grave, even if we die feeling in regions dark and deep, if our faith is in Christ, God raises the dead. Jesus himself died expressing the reality of rejection, but rose in the comfort of intimacy restored.

Any who wrestle with Christ, faithfully, the ones who wrestle with the reality of Psalm 88 but still habitually bring it to God, even for them their hope is in the resurrected life where all things are finally made right.

This is the last response: **Look and move forward towards God's faithfulness.**

One day, on account of Jesus' blood in your place, all the feelings of despair, all the false accusations of a sinful heart, all the experiences which seek to undermine the hope of the gospel in your soul will go away. Though you may feel alone now even as you preach the hope of the gospel to yourself, one day you will never even feel alone.

God's face will shine on you with the freshness of mercy and your skin will feel forever what it feared losing here on earth. Jesus' blood, Jesus' grief, Jesus' companionship has bought this for you.

William Cowper came to faith in an asylum where he was being treated for depression. For decades he wrestled with depression even inside of his faith, surviving multiple attempts at suicide, and supported through thick and thin by his friend, and writer of "Amazing Grace," John Newton.

As he neared his death, Cowper turned to hymn writing to distract him from what he called "the fatal dream." Consider his hope and his words this morning: "Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood, shall never lose its power; Till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more. E're since, by faith, I saw the stream, Thy flowing wounds supply, redeeming love has been my theme and shall be till I die."

When we fear darkness is our only friend we remember we have a friend closer than a brother. One who has removed the burden of damnation and promised a life of intimacy and nearness. You are not alone. You will not be alone.