



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Does anyone actually care?

Part 4: Climbing up from depression

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29 September 2013

Psalm 42:11

“Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.”

At some time in our lives, many of us will experience depression. We feel down on life and on ourselves. Everything seems hopeless. We wonder whether things will ever get better. Depression saps our energy and casts gloom over every aspect of our lives. Each day can feel like a sorry burden.

There are different kinds of depression. John related how in January he was very troubled because his sister was going through a very difficult divorce. In March he found out his father's illness was terminal. In April his wife miscarried a child who he felt was going to replace his father ... and later, on Father's Day, his dad died. John's depression was quite clearly connected with these situations.

We experience this kind of depression especially at times of loss, or at significant moments in our lives. It can come with apparent failure, at difficult transition moments ... and depression may well be part of that process through which we must journey.

If you have journeyed down the pathway of depression, then I hope addressing it together in the atmosphere of faith will be helpful to you. If you are one of those rare people who never seem to experience this part of life, then perhaps it will help you to help others, or it may serve as a preparation for when depression might strike you.

- It is more than a low mood
- It makes people struggle to function
- It has serious impact if its presence is denied.

It is important for us to recognise that the experience of depression is nothing to be ashamed of. We may have misapprehensions about the causes, but we can be certain that it will do many people good to know that depression is not to be seen as sinful—but an experience many people share.

Most people who have a rumbling appendix turn to a surgeon for help; a broken leg is so obvious ... but depression can be hidden from view and, as such, difficult to see how it can be addressed.

Text: Psalm 42:11

“Why, my soul, are you downcast?
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Psalms 42 and 43 were probably originally one, with a shared theme, style and even a common refrain. The poet is despondent and the psalm begins with the beautiful comparison of the soul's thirst for God with that of a fallow deer in a desert drought, panting for water. The experience of depression can lead us to desire something which seems inaccessible to us.

Before I look at the psalm, let us examine the experience of depression ... which could be considered to be the result of an internal conflict. A person may not be consciously aware of the roots of the conflict, though its general nature and manifestation can be discerned by what is going on in the conscious mind.

- It may produce indecisiveness
- It often results in low self-esteem
- It invariably brings an overwhelming feeling of worthlessness and guilt.

A great deal of energy is expended by people who experience internal mental conflict, and the only way to deal with the unacceptable urges rebelling against each other is to put them down with repressive force—which means there is hardly any vitality or energy left. It becomes impossible to carry on normal behaviour and the sufferer can feel alienated from those on whom they depend, and personal relationships can be lost. It puts a great strain upon families and friends who deal with such a situation.

David may have been a King who was Israel's sweetest singer ... yet he had periods of deep depression. He had been betrayed and hunted by his handsome, unscrupulous son, Absalom. His enemies had loudly scoffed at his religion as futile. He temporarily lost his throne and was debarred from temple worship. He struggled with many doubts and fears. Yet, with the grace of God, he climbed out of despair and depression and, in Psalm 42, we see he built a ladder with three rungs.

David's experience and those of many others lead us to the knowledge that some of the finest people have experienced depression. J B Phillips, the Bible scholar, comes immediately to mind. Depression is not unique to anyone.

The 'pull yourself together' brigade would not have found much headway with Winston Churchill, or the countless other men and women in history who have held great office with attendant responsibilities ... and yet were people who have known what it is to experience bouts of depression.

It can be slight as to be hardly worthy of the name—just a passing mood which will be gone tomorrow. It can be a feeling of persistent dreariness which takes the sparkle out of life, or it can be so painful as to totally paralyse action.

Let us then look at the rungs on the ladder—which may help us, with God's grace, climb out of our experience of depression:

The rung of self-examination and self-communion

This is important in life, no matter how busy we may seem. A former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, once indicated that, in spite of his renown, his life seemed empty. It is hard to think that a man with such responsibility, living in public life, could ever feel that life was empty—but he did. Eventually he told of how new commitments allowed him to find hope again.

Our text is really calling us to self-examination, and a frank self-appraisal can be helpful. To search for the cause of our sorrow is often the best surgery for it. The interior cause may be one of many: health, temperament, failure, boredom, self-pity, cowardice, imbalance—and my concern this evening is not to focus on one in particular, but to suggest that the scriptures teach that there is a self-communion, which God the Holy Spirit permits, that is healthy for us.

Dr Frank Lake in Nottingham, England, published his immense work on Clinical Theology and tells of how in 1950 he spent a day with the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, who was visiting the Christian Medical College at Vellore. Frank had been given the task of compiling the Bible Study Course for the Fifth Year Medical Students at the college.

The subject was to be “The inter-relation of the Christian faith and medical practice”. It seemed evident that in the study which most closely bordered on theology within the medical territory, namely psychiatry, there was a lack of precise models of normality which could be used. Dr Brunner pointed to John’s Gospel and to a long and repeated study of Christ himself.

For Jesus Christ, spiritual wellbeing arises from the relationship with the Father, who attends with love, mediated by the Holy Spirit, given to him without measure and the Son responds to the Father by the same Spirit. Acceptance is found in this relationship. The Son, alone in prayer, has instant access to the Father.

Jesus Christ has about him an immediate “wellbeing” and this is a result of who he is and his abiding in the Father.

There is a dynamic outflow of wellbeing as Jesus works amongst men and women. He who is full of “grace and truth” works amongst people with the motivation of love.

We best examine our wellbeing in relation to him who alone can sustain us. Self-examination can be very positive and leads us to a place where we grasp a firm hold on God.

Philip Hyatt wrote, “Our religion should make us daily critical of ourselves and not just of others.” We need never fear laying open our lives to God because he knows anyway:

- We may have unconscious fears that we will not be able to stand such examination
- This may be true, but we know faith can strengthen us.

This process of self-examination is important—but with a realisation that forgiveness and grace are what sustains us. However, there are many examples of unhelpful self-criticism.

Romano Gardini wrote, “God gives man a ‘new heart’ and a ‘new life’, but he does not render undone what has been done.” Too many are expecting the impossible of people ... and only forgiveness can release.

When we judge people, it is the ‘asking the impossible’ which often prevails. Judging ourselves must always be in the orbit of God’s faithfulness and care for us.

The rung of helpful memory

Verse 4 in Psalm 42 refers to calling things to mind. There are times when we need to turn our minds to the choice experiences of the past, so that in the midst of despair and depression we can think positively of healthful days.

I would like to think none of us is so impoverished as not to possess positive memories. Dealt with in the proper way, these can provide inspiration and power.

To take charge of our future, we have to be aware of our past. Too many people live as though they were the ping-pong ball in table tennis. We need to take charge of our lives in Christ and not just be battered back and forth like the little white plastic ball ... either by others or in our own minds.

There can be no helping of the depressed in any deep and permanent way without taking seriously the person's history. If there is a pattern of help, it would be:

- Giving the opportunity to ventilate resentment
- Helping a person to see the futility of reproach
- Allowing a person to realise that this affects today
- Encouraging a person to find spiritual resources to rise above a regressive or petulant state of mind.

A depressed person can be fatigued beyond all ordinary weariness. He or she feels heavy-leaden with external burdens. There can be an almost impenetrable shadow in the mind and a sense of guilt which denies absolution. The open invitation needs to be given to look back and, in doing so, remember the Lord who can refresh our lives and lift the heavy burdens.

Some things in life are so painful to remember that, even when we do, we quickly push them back and reject their significance for now. Despair can have its origins in the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting established early in life.

Apart from the rich, until the latter part of the last century people dealt with these things with high railings, locked gates and padded cells. Such things speak of the opposite to openness and freedom. We can be free from the painful memories of the past and find the liberating power of God.

How many people of a past generation went to the pharmacist to ask for a bottle of tonic? Some anaemia might well be dealt with in that way, but generally we need something a little more complex than a bottle of tonic!

When we sing Scriven's great hymn of prayer, for me the line "Everything to God in prayer" involves the past also ... not just present and future concerns. When understood this way, the hymn can bring healing.

In the psalm, 'remembering' is not accidental recollection, but deliberate calling to mind past events—and pouring out the soul gives expression to all the pent-up feelings. Although the psalmist is separated from the temple and all the ritual that was important to him, he can remember God's salvation.

Terry Waite, the Church of England's envoy in the Lebanon, was held captive for four years. He was physically separated from the worshipping life of the church ... but he was not, as he remembered and recalled the good things of God.

I am told that when he visited the Parish Church near RAF Lyneham, he wrote in the visitors' book, "It is good to be back." That is true, but there is a sense in which he had never been away! We recall the victory of God and we find it strengthens us.

The rung of communion with God

In the ninth verse of the psalm, the psalmist cries out to God, "I will say to God ..." When a man or woman is discouraged, we need a focus of power outside ourselves ... One with whom we can commune and One who will relate to us.

God understands our every need, enters into our every pain, is sympathetic to our every aspiration, rejoices in our every success, and feels our every failure. He loved us in the beginning, he loves us now and he will love us to the end.

It is very difficult for any of us to see ourselves without someone holding a mirror up for us. Jesus Christ can allow us to have communion with God and discover ourselves.

Growth takes time, and does not happen overnight. We once had a green plant at home which soon got thirsty. When it wilted, I watered it ... and it didn't seem too long before it responded and brimmed with life once again. I often thought I would stand and watch it come back to life, but I never saw it move once! It took time, even when things seemed to be relatively quick.

Our faith offers the resource of prayer and strength, which allows life to grow in maturity in response to Christ. The Apostle Paul talked about God's power "being made perfect in weakness". Despite the uncertainty, loneliness, physical pain and suffering he endured, he knew the strength of God.

Walter Russell Bowie wrote, "And when the other moments come, the moments of depression when you wonder whether there is any use in keeping on trying to be a Christian, and when the part of you that reflected something of the beauty of Jesus seems to die, remember that it can never die. As death could not hold him in Jerusalem, it cannot hold him now. His life in you is mightier than any tomb of discouragement or seeming defeat. And you, you in your own place and in what you might think your common duties, may dare repeat for your own soul the deathless words, 'Henceforth I live, yet not I; but Christ lives in me.'"

God has empowered us, even in depression, to take steps—some small steps—on the ladder up from depression.

- The step of self-examination and self-communion
- The step of helpful memory
- The pathway of communion with God.

It is good to know that depression, anxiety and related orders are treatable. With a helpful doctor and, for the Christian, a positive take on faith ... most people recover. This can lead to finding new ways to live with and tackle the changes and challenges of life.

In his commentary on the Psalms, Gerald H Wilson tells how this psalm contains an acknowledgement that 'his soul is downcast within him' but immediately the refrain flows into 'a new terrain of hope'.