

Christ our Refuge: Life in the Minor Key: Is Depression Sin? Psalm 142

Most of the Bible is in the major key. Saints fearlessly witnessing, churches valiantly serving against all odds—and what a joy those sections are to our souls. But side-by-side with all that is the minor key. God's Word contains true glimpses into the weaknesses and frailties that God understands and shows us in the lives of some of His greatest saints. These are men and women who were sad, discouraged, and depressed—yet the Lord does not correct them and tell them they are in sin. He just encourages them and helps them go on.

Life in the minor key—is it always sin that makes us depressed? Is it always a sin to be depressed? No is the answer from God's Word.

We have come to Psalm 142, and as you open there with me we enter into David struggling with depression. In verse seven he asks the Lord to bring his soul out of prison. The cave, the pursuit of Saul, the men and all their troubles had locked him down emotionally—it was keeping him from the joy of his walk with the Lord he loved.

Psalm 142:7 Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Your name; the righteous shall surround me, for You shall deal bountifully with me.”(NKJV)

Psalm 142:7 Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me. (NIV)

Psalm 142:7 "Bring my soul out of prison, So that I may give thanks to Thy name; the righteous will surround me, for Thou wilt deal bountifully with me.” (NASB)

A SHARED STRUGGLE

What do Paul, Ezra, Hezekiah, Job, Elijah, Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah and

David all share in common with us today? They were all spirit filled servants of the Lord, and they all struggled with negative emotions.

Our question to answer this morning from God's Word is--can believers struggle with emotional problems and still be spirit filled servants of the Lord?

I looked up depression in the Webster's dictionary and found it fascinating:

1. a state of feeling sad; a disorder marked especially by sadness, inactivity, difficulty in thinking and concentration, a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent sleeping, feelings of dejection and hopelessness, and sometimes suicidal tendencies
2. A reduction in activity, amount, quality, or force; a lowering of vitality or functional activity

We must be careful to not say that anxiety, depression, discouragement and other negative emotions are in themselves sinful. This is because we see these same emotions in God's servants. In Christ we see anger that is not sin, deep emotional distress, grief, and anguish all of which were perfectly displayed. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he "began to be very distressed and troubled. And He said to them, 'My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death' "(Mark 14:33-34). Jesus, in coming to earth, took upon himself the form of a human with all its frailties, yet he did not sin.

The key is not to call each occurrence of a negative emotion sin—the key is to not stay there. That is what David explains to us. "The Christian who remains in sadness and depression really breaks a commandment: in some direction or other he mistrusts God—His power, providence, forgiveness"¹

As we open God's Word, look how these key servants of the Lord all suffered from crippling and sometimes even paralyzing depression.

1. **Moses:** *Numbers 11:14-15* ***I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. 15 If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!***

¹ A.J. Mason, "The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians," in *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 8, p. 145.

2. **Elijah:** *1 Kings 19:4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he **prayed that he might die**, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, **take my life**, for I am no better than my fathers!"*
3. **Hezekiah:** *2 Kings 20:2-3 Then **he turned his face toward the wall**, and prayed to the Lord, saying, ³ "Remember now, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what was good in Your sight." And **Hezekiah wept bitterly**.*
4. **Job:** *Job 3:11 "**Why did I not die at birth?** Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?"*
5. **Ezra:** *Psalm 119:25 **My soul clings to the dust**; revive me according to Your word.*
6. **David:** *Psalm 142:7 **Bring my soul out of prison**, that I may praise Your name; the righteous shall surround me, for You shall deal bountifully with me."*
7. **Jeremiah:** *Lamentations 1:20 "See, O Lord, that **I am in distress; my soul is troubled; my heart is overturned within me**, for I have been very rebellious. Outside the sword bereaves, at home it is like death.*
8. **Jonah:** *Jonah 4:8 And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "**It is better for me to die than to live.**"*
9. **Paul:** *2 Corinthians 7:5-6 For even when we came into Macedonia **our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.** 6 But God, who **comforts the depressed**, comforted us by the coming of Titus; (NASB)*

Have God's servants fared any better than these from the Bible over the past centuries? Let listen to a few of the best know saints:

The great hymn we all love to sing, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* was penned by the great 16th-century reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546)—during his darkest days of depression. It was a testimony to God's power to lift him out of the prison of his soul, back to hope and strength.

As a devoted pastor, he sought to bring spiritual counsel to struggling souls. His compassion for those souls shines in numerous places, including his sermons, lectures, Bible commentaries and table talks².

² See Preserved Smith, *Luther's Table Talk*, New York: Ames Press, 1907, for a critical study of the table talks.

Besides observing mental difficulties in others, Luther had a greater reason to affirm their reality--Luther himself endured many periods of depression.

TEMPTATION AND STRUGGLES WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ARE NOT SIN

Luther described his personal experience in varied terms: melancholy, heaviness, depression, dejection of spirit; downcast, sad, and downhearted. He suffered in this area for much of his life and often revealed these struggles in his works. Evidently he did not think it a shameful problem to be hidden.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), who lit the fires of the nineteenth-century revival movement, struggled so severely with depression that he was forced to be absent from his pulpit for two to three months a year. In 1866 he told his congregation of his struggle:

“I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to.”

Those words were spoken in a sermon by Charles Haddon Spurgeon whose marvelous ministry in London made him perhaps the greatest preacher England ever produced.

The next great man of God after Spurgeon was also called in his day “The Greatest Preacher in the English-speaking World”—Dr. John Henry Jowett (1864-1923). He pastored leading churches, preached to huge congregations, and wrote books that were bestsellers. In a message he also confessed:

“You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky.”

I could go on and on through the “Who’s Who” of ministry and find countless other testimonies that say the same. So the answer to our question is a definite yes: Spirit-filled Christians can experience emotional problems. And some godly believers will always struggle with being “down”.

In many cases as we look back on history we can conclude that many of these saints suffered because of physical conditions that prompted depression. One Christian medical doctor who has spent his lifetime helping people writes this:

“Consider this thought experiment. Give me the most saintly person you know. If I were to administer certain medications of the right dosage, such as thyroid hormone, or insulin, I could virtually guarantee that I could make this saint anxious with at least one of these agents. Would such chemically induced anxiety be explained as a spiritual sin? What if the person's own body had an abnormal amount of thyroid hormone or insulin and produced nervousness?”³

We as believers should never condone willful sin, but we must learn to accept that some fellow believers may suffer from emotional symptoms that are not the result of personal unconfessed sin.

It is possible to feel horrible and be in great emotional anguish and still be obedient to the Lord. As we saw, listen again to what Job cried out in the midst of his suffering.

"I cannot eat for sighing; my groans pour out like water.... My life flies by—day after hopeless day....I hate my life.... For God has ground me down, and taken away my family.... But I search in vain. I seek him here; I seek him there, and cannot find him.... My heart is broken. Depression haunts my days. My weary nights are filled with pain.... I cry to you, O God, but you don't answer me" (3:23-24; 7:6, 16; 16:7; 23:8; 30:16-17, 20, LB).

Notice that even with his depression, the Bible says, "In all this Job did not sin" (1:22). Moreover, God reproves Job's friends for accusing Job of sin and for their "failure to speak rightly concerning my servant Job" (42:7-8).

PAUL SHARED HIS STRUGGLES

There are only ten basic words for suffering in the Greek language, and Paul uses five of them in this letter of Second Corinthians. Most frequently he uses ***thlipsis***. This word means “narrow, confined, under

³ Exposing the Myth that Christians Should Not Have Emotional Problems, Dwight L. Carlson, M.D., is the author of several books, including *Why Do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?* (IVP), from which this article has been adapted. He lives with his wife in Torrance, California.

pressure." In 2 Corinthians it is translated *affliction* (2 Corinthians 2:4; 4:17), *tribulation* (2 Corinthians 1:4), and *trouble* (2 Corinthians 1:4, 8). Paul's emotions responded to his circumstances. He felt hemmed in by difficulties, and the only way he could look was up. And that is exactly the lesson David had learned a thousand years before Paul, in Psalm 142.

As believers our joy is internal, and like our hope is from above. Look at Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:8. Even though Paul was discouraged by his circumstances, he still had spiritual joy. Discouragement is no respecter of persons. In fact, discouragement seems to attack the successful far more than the unsuccessful; for the higher we climb, the farther down we can fall.

2 Corinthians 1:8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.

We are not surprised then when we read that the great Apostle Paul was "pressed out of measure" and "despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8). Great as Paul was in all of his spiritual maturity, he was still human just like the rest of us.

When Paul did an inventory of his emotional state he described his emotions as battered as if besieged on a battlefield—with no possible earthly escape.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed (surrounded but not cut off); we are perplexed, but not in despair ((pressed at every side but never abandoned by God); 9 persecuted, but not forsaken (end of way out but not end of hope); struck down, but not destroyed (knocked down but not knocked out)—

Paul also in another book said that he experienced "great sorrow and unceasing grief" (Rom. 9:2) over the plight of unbelieving Israel. But no matter what his emotional state, or his circumstances, Paul knew that God is in control.

Later he wrote, "We were afflicted on every side; conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (2 Corinthians 7:5-6 NASV).

So the mighty Paul was depressed. Paul did not deny the way he felt, nor does God want us to deny our emotions. Because of this spiritual transparency and honesty--Paul was never ashamed to ask Christians to pray for him.

In at least seven of his letters, he mentioned his great need for prayer support (Rom. 15:30–32; Eph. 6:18–19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Philemon 22). Paul and the believers in Corinth were helping each other by prayer.

THEY SHARED STRUGGLES, THEY SHARED PRAYERS

Difficulties should draw us closer to other Christians as we share our burdens. Difficulties can be used to glorify God. So, when you find yourself in the trials of life, remember what God has promised us, and what He has commanded us to do. Look at 2 Corinthians 1:11.

*2 Corinthians 1:11 "you also **helping together in** prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many."*

The word **sunopourgeo** translated "helping together" is used only here in the Greek New Testament and is composed of three words: 'with, under, work'. It is a picture of laborers under the burden, working together to get the job accomplished. Paul enlists the help of other believers holding him up in his emotional, physical, and spiritual struggles. This was in addition to the promise we have that the Holy Spirit also assists us in our praying and helps to carry the load (Rom. 8:26).

Turn back to I Thessalonians 5. In this chapter there are at least more imperative commands than any other paragraph in God's Word. It is one of the clearest descriptions of the basic duties of a believer in Christ's church. We must take seriously Paul's fifth, sixth, and seventh command to "encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

1 Thessalonians 5:11-26

1. v.11a Therefore **comfort each other** and
2. v. 11b **edify one another**, just as you also are doing. 12 And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake.
3. v. 13b **Be at peace** among yourselves.

4. v. 14a Now we exhort you, brethren, **warn** those who are unruly,
5. v. 14b **comfort** the fainthearted,
6. v. 14c **uphold** the weak,
7. v. 14d **be patient** with all.
8. v. 15a **See that no one renders evil** for evil to anyone,
9. v. 15b but **always pursue** what is good both for yourselves and for all.
10. v. 16 **Rejoice** always,
11. v. 17 **pray** without ceasing,
12. v. 18 **in everything give thanks**; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
13. v. 19 **Do not quench** the Spirit.
14. v. 20 **Do not despise** prophecies.
15. v. 21a **Test** all things;
16. v. 21b **hold fast** what is good.
17. v. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.
18. v. 25 Brethren, **pray** for us.
19. v. 26 **Greet** all the brethren with a holy kiss.

Now, go back three thousand years ago, into the harsh conditions of the cave of Adullam we can start to see the emotional and physical furnace of adversity and affliction that David had entered.

This morning as we open to Psalm 142 we find David's testimony that explains how he kept from being sidelined and paralyzed by depression. This is a divine insight into something as James said that we are all "subject to like passions".

David wrote down how God helped him to not get his life and emotions dragged down by those around him. As we read these verses note the emotional condition of everyone that joined up with David. They were a very needy group. And in all their need, they invaded the life of someone just coming out of the pits. It was just the right recipe for a relapse by David into despair and a return into the pits. But the good news is—that didn't happen, and the reason why is just what we are going to learn from God's Word.

What did this tough crowd around David do to him? They depressed him! How did David, so prone to doubt, discouragement and

depression—overcome this hard, troublesome time? Psalm 142 holds the key!

Trapped in a cave David baby sat four hundred fellow fugitives. That's his address in Psalm 142. From the cave of Adullam he looks up and discovers some great truths about God. So can we.

Please listen to David's cry from the cave in Psalm 142:1-7:

I cry out to the Lord with my voice; with my voice to the Lord I make my supplication. 2 I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare before Him my trouble. 3 When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, Then You knew my path. In the way in which I walk They have secretly set a snare for me. 4 Look on my right hand and see, For there is no one who acknowledges me; Refuge has failed me; No one cares for my soul. 5 I cried out to You, O Lord: I said, "You are my refuge, My portion in the land of the living. 6 Attend to my cry, For I am brought very low; Deliver me from my persecutors, For they are stronger than I. 7 Bring my soul out of prison, That I may praise Your name; The righteous shall surround me, For You shall deal bountifully with me."

What simple lessons can we find in cave times? **Use lonely times to grow.** One of the greatest truths we can discover is that lonely times usually accomplish great discoveries about God. David is at the depth of loneliness. He has been on the run for years and now he is hiding in a desolate cave in a crowd of malcontents, feeling very much alone. He has two choices. Stay in the cave of loneliness, descend into self-pity and sin or look up and use the time alone to grow.

And that is what we will do this evening.

But this morning, what can depression, discouragement and faintheartedness do for us? If we cry out to the Lord—it can inspire us to some of the deepest and greatest discoveries about God we can ever make.

In perhaps his deepest depression he wrote one of Christendom's greatest hymns. The Reformer who penned "*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*," Martin Luther, in 1527 wrote:

"For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost."

And here is Luther's testimony about the great discoveries he made about God while he was, as he described the experience of much of his life as being: in melancholy, heaviness, depression, dejection of spirit; downcast, sad, and downhearted. (Hymn #26)

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own
choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth is His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo
us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through
us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us
sideth:
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.