

# **DEPRESSION AND THE CHRISTIAN (1)**

## **THE CRISIS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps you clicked on the link to this video out of desperation. Perhaps, like many Christians, you are secretly suffering with a mental illness – maybe depression, or maybe panic attacks – and you have tried many remedies but are growing no better, only worse. Or perhaps someone in your family is suffering in this way and you just don't know how to respond or help. Or, maybe, you are a pastor who feels helpless when confronted with mental illness among the sheep of his flock.

Whatever your reason for clicking, I hope you will find something in this series of addresses which will either help you in your suffering, or which will help you in ministering to the suffering.

In this introductory address we shall consider the question, "Why study depression?" In the second, we will ask "How should we study depression?" Thirdly, we will look at "What is depression?". And, in subsequent addresses we will begin to look in detail at the different approaches to helping people with depression. We will look at what the sufferer can do, what the carers can do, and what the Church can do.

Before we go on, perhaps you are asking yourself what qualifies me to speak on this subject. That is a valid question, which I will answer in four ways.

Firstly, let me make clear that I am not a medical doctor. I have, however, checked all the contents of these addresses with an experienced medical doctor who has first-hand experience in treating many patients with mental illness.

Secondly, I have been a pastor for 11 years in the North West of Scotland, both in Wester Ross and the Outer Hebrides, areas with some of the highest rates of mental illness in the world. While I do not consider myself to be an expert, I have had multiple contacts with people who suffer from mental illnesses. This also means that my motivation in making these videos, and my methodology in producing them, is not academic but is highly practical. I desperately want to help sufferers and those who minister to them.

Thirdly, I have had close and painful experience of depression, anxiety and panic attacks among friends and some of those I love most in this world.

Fourthly, I believe that God has given me a burden to speak on this subject, a burden which I cannot ignore any longer. And, I trust, with the God-given burden will come the God-given wisdom to speak in such a way that will minister to God's suffering people.

### **WHY STUDY DEPRESSION?**

Mental illness is a term that covers a large number of complex conditions. So, before we proceed any further, I would like to state what aspects of mental illness I am going to focus on in this series of addresses. The area I am particularly concerned with is the most common mental illness – depression. As anxiety and panic attacks are also very commonly associated with depression (so much so that doctors are increasingly using the term "depression-anxiety" when referring to depression), we will look at these distressing conditions also.

But firstly, why should we study this subject, depression? Here are eight reasons.

## **1. Because the Bible speaks about it**

There are numerous Bible verses which refer to depression and severe anxiety – its causes, its consequences, and its cures. The Bible does not address every cause, every consequence or provide every cure. But, as we shall see in later addresses, it does have an important role to play in the treatment of Christians who are suffering from depression and anxiety.

It must be admitted that the Bible never states that “Bible Character X had mental illness,” or “Bible Character Y was depressed.” However, it does frequently describe men and women who manifested many of the symptoms of depression and anxiety. In some cases, it is not clear whether these symptoms reflect long-term mental illness or simply a temporary dip in the person’s mental health, which everyone goes through from time to time. For example, symptoms of depression/anxiety can be seen in Moses (Num.11:14), Hannah (1 Sam.1:7,16), and Jeremiah (Jer.20:14-18; Lam.3:1-6). In these cases it is difficult to say whether the symptoms reflect a depression or a dip. Martin Lloyd-Jones argues from biblical evidence that Timothy suffered from near-paralysing anxiety.<sup>1</sup> A more persuasive case for depressive illness can be made for Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-24), Job (Job.6:2-3, 14, 7:11), and various Psalmists (Ps.42:1-3, 9a; Ps.88).

“The Psalms treat depression more realistically than many of today’s popular books on Christianity and psychology. David and other psalmists often found themselves deeply depressed for various reasons. They did not, however, apologize for what they were feeling, nor did they confess it as sin. It was a legitimate part of their relationship with God. They interacted with Him through the context of their depression.”<sup>2</sup>

Another significant verse is Proverbs 18:14, “The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?” The human spirit can help people through all kinds of sickness. However, when the healing mechanism is what needs healing, then even more serious problems arise.

## **2. Because it is so common**

1 in 5 people experience depression, and 1 in 10 experience a panic attack, at one stage in their lives. An estimated 121 million people suffer from depression. 5.8 % of men and 9.5% of women will experience a depressive episode in any given year. Suicide, often the end result of depression, is the leading cause of violent deaths worldwide, accounting for 49.1% of all violent deaths compared with 18.6% in war and 31.3% by homicide.

It is also common in Christians. Indeed, these days there would appear to be an epidemic of depression, anxiety, and panic attacks among Christians – both young and old. This is at least partly because of the depressing state of the Church and of the Nation. Every few days there is discouraging news about Church splits or problems, and Christians backsliding or falling into temptation. Then there is the secular and anti-Christian direction of the Government as it continues to dismantle the Judeo-Christian laws and standards that our civilisation was built upon, and as it attacks and undermines family life. On top of

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<sup>1</sup> M Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1965), 93ff.

<sup>2</sup> S & R Bloem, *Broken Minds* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 204.

this, there is the relentless audio-visual misrepresentation and persecution of Christians through the print and broadcast media. To top it all there seems to be an unceasing diet of bad news on the international stage, with wars, terrorism, and “natural” disasters ever before us.

In these conditions, it is therefore little wonder that Christians react adversely, and get depressed and anxious about themselves, their families, their Church, and the world they live in.

### **3. Because it impacts our spiritual life**

We might say that there are three main elements in our make-up that affect our overall well-being: our body, our soul, and our mind (our thoughts). These are not three water-tight and disconnected entities. There is considerable overlap and connectivity. When our body breaks down, it affects our spiritual life and our thinking processes. When our spiritual life is in poor condition, our thoughts are affected, and often our bodily health and functions also. It is therefore no surprise that when our mental health is poor, when our thinking processes go awry, that there are detrimental physical and spiritual consequences.

The depressed believer cannot concentrate to read or pray. He doesn't want to meet people and so may avoid church and fellowships. He often feels God has abandoned him.

Moreover, it is often the case that faith, instead of being a help, can actually cause extra problems in dealing with depression. There is, for instance, the false guilt associated with the false conclusion, “Real Christians don't get depressed.” There is also the usually mistaken tendency to locate the cause of mental illness in our spiritual life, our relationship with God, which also increases false guilt and feelings of worthlessness.

### **4. Because it may be prevented or mitigated**

Many people have a genetic pre-disposition to depression, perhaps traceable to their parents' genes, which increases the likelihood of suffering it themselves. However, even in these cases, knowledge of some of the other factors which may be involved in causing depression can sometimes help prevent it, or at least mitigate and shorten it.

Others, with no genetic pre-disposition to depression can also fall into it, often as a reaction to traumatic life-events. And, again, having some knowledge of mental health strategies and techniques can be especially useful in preventing or mitigating and shortening the illness.

One great benefit of having some knowledge about depression is that it will prevent the dangerous and damaging misunderstanding which often leads people, especially Christians, to view medication as a rejection of God and His grace, rather than a provision of God and His grace.

### **5. Because it will open doors of usefulness**

Increased understanding of depression will make us more sympathetic and useful to people suffering from it. This is taught by the converse truth in Proverbs 25:20, “As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, *and* as vinegar upon nitre, so *is* he that singeth songs to an heavy heart.” If we saw someone fighting for life in the midst of a freezing

blizzard, the last thing we would do is take his coat away. Such an action would be cruel and heartless, and could easily lead to death. But, says the Bible, similar dangerous heartlessness is displayed by the person who tries to help their depressed friend with superficial humor and insensitive exhortations to “Cheer up!”

In later videos we shall look in more detail at what friends and carers should say and do for those suffering with depression and anxiety. However, the general rule is that those who listen most and speak least will be the most useful to sufferers.

## **6. Because it is so misunderstood**

“Being depressed is bad enough in itself, but being a depressed Christian is worse. And being a depressed Christian in a church full of people who do not understand depression is like a little taste of hell.”<sup>3</sup>

As we all know there is a terrible stigma attached to mental illness. This is the result of widespread misunderstanding about its causes, its symptoms, and the “cures” available. Some of the misunderstanding is understandable. Unlike cancer or heart disease or arthritis, there is no scan or test which can visibly demonstrate the existence of depression/anxiety. It is a largely “invisible” disease. We want to be able to point to something and say, “There’s the problem!” When we can’t, we often wrongly conclude, “There is no problem!” Or, if we are Christians, we may, usually wrongly, conclude, “My spiritual life is the problem!”

This misunderstanding is addressed in the excellent book, *I’m not supposed to feel like this* (a book written by a Christian pastor, a Christian psychiatrist, and a Christian lecturer in psychiatry). Near the beginning of the book, they summarise what they believe and what they do not believe about depression:

“What we believe: We believe that all Christians can experience worry, fear, upset and depression. We also believe that being a Christian does not prevent us or our loved ones from experiencing upsetting and challenging problems such as illness, unemployment, or relationship and other practical difficulties.

What we do not believe; Although at times we all choose to act in ways that are wrong and this can lead to bad consequences for us and for others, we do not see anxiety and depression as always being the result of sin; neither do we believe that mental health problems are the result of a lack of faith.”<sup>4</sup>

It is absolutely vital for Christians to understand and accept that while mental illness usually has serious consequences for our spiritual life, mental illness is rarely caused by problems in our spiritual life.

## **7. Because it is a talent to be invested for God**

Like all affliction in the lives of Christians, mental illness should be viewed as a “talent” (Matt.25:14ff) which can be invested in such a way that it brings benefit to us and others, as well as glory to God.

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<sup>3</sup> J Lockley, *A Practical Workbook for the Depressed Christian* (Bucks: Authentic Media, 1991), 14.

<sup>4</sup> C Williams, P Richards, I Whitton, *I’m not supposed to feel like this*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 10.

Dr James Dobson, the Christian psychologist, observed that “nothing is wasted in God’s economy.” That “nothing” includes mental illness.

*Mind over Mood*, while not written from a Christian perspective, illustrates the possible “benefits” of depression thus:

“An oyster creates a pearl out of a grain of sand. The grain of sand is an irritant to the oyster. In response to the discomfort, the oyster creates a smooth, protective coating that encases the sand and provides relief. The result is a beautiful pearl. For an oyster, an irritant becomes the seed for something new. Similarly, *Mind Over Mood* will help you develop something valuable from your current discomfort. The skills taught in this book will help you feel better and will continue to have value in your life long after your original problems are gone.”<sup>5</sup>

It is usually broken people that God uses most. In *Passion and Purity*, Elisabeth Elliot quoted Ruth Stull of Peru:

“If my life is broken when given to Jesus it is because pieces will feed a multitude, while a loaf will satisfy only a little lad.”<sup>6</sup>

## **8. Because we can all improve our mental health**

Most Christians try to take preventative (and curative) measures to enjoy good physical health and spiritual life. However, there is less consciousness of the similar effort required to maintain or recover mental health. There is much less awareness of the biblical strategies and sound mental techniques that can be used to achieve good mental health, which obviously has beneficial consequences for our bodies and our souls.

I have never been diagnosed with any kind of mental illness. However, like most people, and especially like most ministers, I have had low points in my life. My thinking processes have gone wrong, causing times of mild depression, and anxiety.

What I now know about improving and maintaining mental health, and what I hope to communicate in later addresses, would have greatly helped me in these low periods. What I have learned is helping me on a daily basis to overcome disappointment and handle stressful situations without my mental health suffering as much as before.

As I look around me, and especially as I look around the Church, I can see many people who have not been diagnosed with depression, and who are not disabled with it, but who are experiencing long-term, low-level depression/anxiety which is having its own knock-on effect on their bodily health and the spiritual lives.

I believe that it would not be too difficult for them to learn some sound strategies and techniques which will improve mental health, and consequently their bodily and spiritual health.

In the next video we will consider the attitude and spirit in which we should study depression.

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<sup>5</sup> D Greenberger & C Padesky, *Mind over Mood*, (New York: Guilford, 1995), 1.

<sup>6</sup> E Elliot, *Passion and Purity*, Power Books (Old Tappan, NJ.: Revell, 1984).