

David's Life in the Minor Key: Is Depression Sin? I Samuel 22:1-4/Psalm 142

If you've ever felt trapped, imprisoned, or helplessly caught by life, then you share the emotions of David in the midst of life in the Cave of Adullam.

Things had gotten so bad that David makes a confession that is packed with meaning to us today. In the form of an urgent prayer offered to God, and captured for us on paper, David explains that his soul is in prison. The setting is so graphic, look at it with me in I Samuel 22.

David is in the midst of his life on the run, under immense stress in verses 1-4:

*¹ David therefore departed from there and escaped to **the cave of Adullam**. So when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. ² And **everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him**. So he became captain over them. And there were about four hundred men with him. ³ Then David went from there to Mizpah of Moab; and he said to the king of Moab, "Please let my father and mother come here with you, till I know what God will do for me." ⁴ So he brought them before the king of Moab, and they dwelt with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.*

David describes this time as when he felt trapped, with nowhere to escape in Psalm 142. Here in this Psalm written from a cave, David reflects on the circumstances all around him that made him have:

Imprisoned Emotions

Look down and find the seventh verse. Listen to the insight David gives us about what is going on inside of him at this hard time in his life. This description is so powerful.

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

A more understandable expression of "soul in prison" would be depression. David wanted to get out of depression's prison because it kept him from praising the Lord.

When we get depressed, life really does feel like an endless pursuit of nothingness. Such

daily struggles are a far cry from the expectations of those who heard this type promise before they became a Christian: "Just get saved and everything will be great from then on!" But that's not always true, is it?

Even saved people can go through emotionally imprisoning cave times like David experienced. Trigger that can start a slide downward emotionally are:

family conflicts; losing a job; losing a home; moving to a new location under duress; working with a tough crowd; being betrayed by friends; being wronged in a business deal; suffering the sudden loss of a family member, friend, or finances, and so forth.

Suffering from depression is a very common malady. In fact, although most of the Bible is in **the major key** (saints fearlessly witnessing as churches valiantly serve against all odds), side-by-side with all those wonderful testimonies is **the minor key** where God's Word contains true glimpses into the weaknesses and frailties of some of His greatest saints. If you look closely you find that they with us today had:

A SHARED STRUGGLE

What did Moses, Elijah, Hezekiah, Job, Ezra, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Paul all share in common with David as well as us today?

They were all spirit-filled servants of the Lord who struggled with negative emotions. In light of this, we must be careful to never say that anxiety, depression, discouragement, and other negative emotions are in themselves sinful because we see these same emotions in some of God's greatest servants. Even Jesus experienced negative emotions:

In Christ we see **anger** that is not sin, plus **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 get out of 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

Webster's definition of "depression" gives us a fascinating insight into ways this negative emotion can also affect believers:

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.

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

Famous People who Struggled with Depression

Each of the following servants of the Lord suffered from crippling and sometimes even paralyzing depression:

- **Moses** (Numbers 11:14-15): "***I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. 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!***"

Moses was confessing that he could not humanly do what had to be done. But this state of mind was actually a blessing because when he felt squashed and depressed by his work, he came to an end of self-reliance and learned to trust the Lord more fully.

- **Elijah** (1 Kings 19:4): He stood alone against an entire nation, an entire army. He also stood alone against the most heinous and wicked of all the corrupt religious people of the day, including Jezebel, whose name is synonymous with sin, the occult, and wickedness. But after all that life in the major key, after his greatest time of victory Elijah slid into depression:

*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 ...!**"*

This despondency followed having 850 angry prophets of Baal destroyed on Mount Carmel and then outrunning a chariot! This took supernatural courage, strength, and faith. But when he heard the rumor that Jezebel wanted to kill him, he became dejected.

In spite of his great victories, Elijah wasn't perfect; when wearied and drained emotionally, he was subject to being overcome by complete discouragement. However, God didn't rebuke him for that negative emotion; He first dealt with the physical causes of Elijah's depression before teaching the spiritual lesson he needed to learn.

Then remember that James 5 says that Elijah was subject to the same struggles as we all face.

- **Hezekiah** (2 Kings 20:2-3): When facing a terminal illness, ... **he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying, "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.**

Turning his face to the wall was an act of desperation, but God Lord didn't say his bitter weeping was wrong. Instead, He responded to Hezekiah's prayer with patience and gentleness and added fifteen years to his life.

- **Job: "Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?"** (Job 3:11). Job felt like he couldn't go on any longer! So he poured out his woes to the Lord: *"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**"* (Job 3:23-24; 7:6, 16; 16:7; 23:8; 30:16-17, 20, LB).

In his depression over losing his property and children, the Bible said that ... *Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong* (Job 1:22). As he suffered through trial after trial, feeling abandoned by even God, Job was never rebuked for having negative feelings. However, the Lord did reprove his three friends for accusing him of sin and for failing to speak what was right about God, as Job had (Job 42:7-8).²

- **Ezra:** His was a stellar personality! Tradition records that he memorized the entire Old Testament, wrote an entire book by his name plus another incredible, longest of all chapters in the Bible (Psalm 119)³. But look at his testimony in Psalm 119:25: **My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to Your word.** Note that he didn't say: "In my wicked sinfulness I'm clinging to the dust." No, he simply said, "That's how life is!"

If you study Psalm 119 closely, it is filled with Ezra's constant struggles with both people and his emotions. He also made a wonderful prayer request—*"revive me"*—because he knew the Lord was his only hope and source of strength to get through his struggles.⁴

² **Jonah:** This incredibly empowered prophet of the Lord, whom the Lord rescued from death in the midst of the sea, probably saw the single greatest evangelistic impact that anyone has ever had—Nineveh's hundreds of thousands of people who all turned to the Lord and repented. But after that amazing ministry, he crashed emotionally: *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"* (Jonah 4:8).

³ After much research, and forty years of reading Psalm 119, I am persuaded that Psalm 119 is Ezra's personal testimony as well as the probable content of his teaching and preaching to the exiles who came home to Jerusalem to seek the Lord.

⁴ **Jeremiah:** Look at his painful declaration: *"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* (Lamentations 1:20). What was he talking about? Jeremiah didn't like what he saw happening to Jerusalem! He was rather like a CNN on-the-spot news correspondent watching Nebuchadnezzar destroy the city and butcher the people. Thus, as he wrote about the smoke rising and the carcasses being piled up, he cried out to

- **Paul:** His comments on troubled times are insightful: ... *When we came into Macedonia our flesh **had no rest**, but we were **afflicted** on every side: **conflicts** without, **fears** within* (1 Corinthians 7:5 NASB).

What was Paul going through here? He was depressed. Was that a sin? No, it was a common result of his having "*had no rest.*" He was in the most Roman of the Roman Empire, just coming from Asia Minor where the pagan idolatry and emperor worship was very strong. Like David, Paul was constantly pursued, so he eventually became weary and fearful for his life. But, as he wrote Timothy, he understood that fear is always the realm of Satan: ... *God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind* (1Timothy 1:7). Although Satan buffeted a vulnerable Paul with conflicts and fears until depression set in, he refused to remain in that state.

How did this mature saint, who had mastered much of the Old Testament and wrote books for the New Testament, find comfort in his distress? Through the ministry of another believer! He testified: ... *God, who **comforts the depressed**, comforted us **by the coming of Titus** ...*" (1 Corinthians 7:6 NASB). By this, we can conclude that the Lord is grieved if we find fault with a brother or sister in Christ who is feeling "down." The God of All Comfort wants us to be *encouragers* of His suffering children—not discouragers!

In later centuries, have God's servants fared any better than these from the Bible? Let's look at three of the world's best known saints:

- **Martin Luther** (1483-1546): In perhaps his deepest depression, this Reformer wrote one of Christendom's greatest hymns—"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Like other great saints, he recognized the spiritual warfare involved in his struggles. In 1527 he 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." In his journal he said that at this point he picked up his ink well and threw it at the devil! Satan was so vivid to him that he not only felt his presence in the room but could also see him. If you go to Lutherstadt in Wittenberg, the ink's black stain is still visible on the wall of Luther's study.

Here is Luther's testimony of the great discoveries he made about God while he described himself as being: in melancholy, heaviness, depression, dejection of spirit—downcast, sad, and downhearted:

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;*

the Lord, "I don't like what's going on!" Being "*rebellious*" didn't mean that Jeremiah was fighting against the Lord; he was just struggling greatly with acceptance of what the Lord was allowing in Jerusalem. In his heartbreak, he was freely expressing that grief to God.

*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.*

For nineteen years after Luther wrote that hymn he still battled with persistent melancholy, discouragement, and depression. But his hope was always in the Lord. He shared his struggles with negative emotions so that believers could come beside him and encourage him. That's what his life was—a testimony—not hidden in a cloistered cell of anguish, but a saint sharing with other saints his need for their compassion and help.

- **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** (1834-1892): This famous preacher lit the fires of the nineteenth-century revival movement. His poor health caused Spurgeon to struggle so severely with depression that he was forced to be absent from his pulpit for two to three months a year. In 1866, at the age of 32, 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."

Spurgeon's marvelous ministry in London made him perhaps the greatest preacher England ever produced. Having a unique photographic mind, he knew the Bible inside and out plus the contents of all 25,000 volumes in his library. I've been in his church and seen his library, which has been enshrined. And this God-hearted servant left a legacy of inspired writings that still blesses us today!

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

If you've likewise felt "murky," you can empathize with God's stellar luminaries who led the way in doctrine and preaching after refinement periods that prompted struggles with negative emotions. The "Who's Who of Ministry" is chock-full of such testimonies.

As we look back on history, many of these saints, like Spurgeon, suffered because their physical conditions led to 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?⁵

So let's go back in our minds to three thousand years ago and the harsh conditions of the cave of Adullam to see what else God was teaching David in his Cave of Troubles.

David's Testimony on How to Overcome Depression

At this point, David was at the depth of loneliness. He had been on the run for years and was now hiding in a desolate cave in the midst of a crowd of malcontents—feeling very much alone. He had two choices: (1) stay in the cave of loneliness and descend into self-pity and sin, or (2) look up to God and use this time alone to grow in the Lord.

David—a man so prone to doubt, discouragement, and depression—chose to look up to God for strength to overcome his battles with negative emotions. Psalm 142 reveals what kept him from being sidelined and paralyzed by depression in the cave of Adullam.

Psalm 142

A Contemplation of David. A Prayer when he was in the cave.

- ¹ *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,*

⁵ Dwight L. Carlson, M.D., *Exposing the Myth that Christians Should Not Have Emotional Problems*. Dr. Carlson 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.

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."*

As we look there, why don't you take a moment and mark these for someone else who may need them someday. Or even for you if you ever feel the twinge of loneliness in your life. Look now and find:

- When depressed I learn that You alone are my true REFUGE. Psalm 142:5a: *I cried out to You, O LORD: I said, "You are my refuge, **imprisoned emotions mean it's time to flee to your Refuge.***
I will believe Your promise and turn to You as my Refuge right now.
- When depressed I learn that You alone are my true PORTION. Psalm 142:5b: *My portion in the land of the living. **imprisoned emotions mean it's time to feed on your Portion.***
I will believe Your promise to be all I need in this hard time.
- When depressed I learn that You alone are my true LISTENER. Psalm 142:6 'Give heed my cry': ***imprisoned emotions mean it's time to speak to your Master.***
I will believe Your promise and pour out all my troubles to You who care for me.
- When depressed I learn that You alone are my true DELIVERER Psalm 142:7a: "bring" ***imprisoned emotions mean it's time to trust in your Redeemer.***
I will believe Your promise and let You rescue me now.
- When depressed I learn that You alone are my true OBJECT OF WORSHIP Psalm 142:7b: *That I may praise Your name; **imprisoned emotions mean it's time to adore your Lord.***
I will believe Your promise and worship You even when I don't feel like it.
- When depressed I learn that You alone are my true PROVIDER "surround" Psalm 142:7c: ***imprisoned emotions mean it's time to rest in His Sufficient Provision.***
I will believe Your promise and let You surround me now with everything I need.

If you've ever felt trapped, imprisoned, or helplessly caught by life, then you share the emotions of David in the midst of life in the Cave of Adullam.

And when that happens, make the same urgent call to Heaven that David did, and allow the Lord to set you free from the prison of depression.