

## **DEPRESSION AND THE CHRISTIAN (5)**

### **DEPRESSION: THE CURES**

In our last lecture we looked at some of the causes of depression. Now we will look at some of the cures. However, before we do so, we must ask the depressed person a vital question, "Do you want to be made whole?" This was the question Jesus asked of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda (Jn.5:6). At first glance it may seem like a silly question. Surely every sick person wants to be made whole! However, Christ's question may imply that the man was not making use of all the means available to get better. Or, perhaps he had given up hope of getting better. These are common scenarios with depression. Doctors and pastors are often faced with the frustrating situation of people who need the help they can give, and yet who are not taking the steps required to benefit from this help. Perhaps they have just learned to live with their illness. Perhaps they have given up hope of getting better. Perhaps they lack the will to play their part in the healing process. Perhaps they are frightened of all the responsibilities of life which would come upon them should they be viewed as "well" again. Perhaps they would miss the attention and sympathy which being ill may generate. These are all possibilities. So, if you are depressed, the first searching question you must ask yourself is "Do I want to be made whole?" You have no hope of recovery from depression unless you want to recover and are, therefore, prepared to play your own significant part in the recovery process.

We will look at four measures which should be considered as part of a "package" of healing.

#### **1. Correct your lifestyle**

It is vital to lead a balanced lifestyle in order to reduce the "stretch" that threatens our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. Some of the practical points made here also apply to depressions resulting from stressful life events.

##### **a. Routine**

One of the keys to a balanced lifestyle is regular routine. This is also one of the first things to fall by the wayside when someone becomes depressed. The depressed person often finds it very difficult to resist being guided by their feelings. When a person feels down they will often only do what they feel like doing and avoid what they don't feel like doing. For example, if we don't feel like getting up, we won't. If we don't feel like working, we won't. If we don't feel like doing the ironing, we won't. If we feel we want to drink or eat to excess, we do it. A positive step in recovering from depression is to restore order and discipline in our lives. Regular and orderly sleeping, eating, and working patterns will rebuild a sense of usefulness and healthy self-esteem. It is also glorifying to God who is a God of order, not of confusion (1 Cor.14:33).

##### **b. Relaxation**

We need to build times of relaxation into our lives. This may involve finding a quiet spot at various times throughout the day to simply stop, pause, calm down, and seek the peace of God in our lives. Jesus recognised and provided for this need in his disciples when he took them "apart into a desert place to rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Also, moderate physical exercise helps to expel unhelpful chemicals from our system and stimulates the production of helpful chemicals.

##### **c. Rest**

Regular sleep patterns enable the body and mind to repair and re-charge. The Sabbath Day was graciously made for us (Mark 2:27), partly to ease the tension of our busy overstretched lives.

##### **d. Re-prioritise**

Examine your life and see what you can do to reduce your commitments and obligations. Areas to consider are your family, your work, your church, your neighbours and travel. Once you are better you may be able to pick up some of these activities again. But the priority is to get better.

#### **2. Correct your false thoughts**

As we have noted throughout these lectures, one of the most common contributory factors to depression is wrong and unhelpful thoughts. Many Christians, who wouldn't dream of viewing God's Word in a false way, yet view God's world in a false way. As they view themselves, their situations, and their relationships with others, they tend to dwell on and magnify the negatives and exclude the positives. This distorted view of reality inevitably distorts and depresses their mood.

Christians are obliged to challenge falsehood and distortions of reality, especially when found in themselves. In the appendix to this lecture you will find two questionnaires to help you do this. The first is to help you examine your thoughts, and the second is to help you challenge your false and unhelpful thoughts. Questionnaires such as these are recommended for use by many Christian and non-Christian psychiatrists. They may look a bit strange to you, and you may wonder, "Is this not all just psychological mumbo-jumbo?" However, I would like to show you here how each step is grounded in Biblical Christian experience. In Psalm 77 we have a perfect example of Asaph investigating and challenging his thoughts with God's help, in order to raise his mood and spirits. There are also slightly more abbreviated versions of the same biblical strategy in Psalm 42, Psalm 73, Job 19, Habakkuk 3, etc. So, this is not "psychological mumbo-jumbo", but true Bible-based Christian experience. Let us look at Psalm 77 to prove this.

a. Asaph examines his thoughts

<p><b>1. My life situation.</b> <i>Time? Place? People? Events?</i></p>	<p>The “life situation” is not defined in detail in Psalm 77. Asaph calls it “the day of my trouble” (v2), a deliberately general description which fits many life situations.</p>
<p><b>2. My feelings</b> <i>Sum up your mood in one word if you can. Are you sad, worried, guilty, angry, ashamed, irritated, scared, disappointed, humiliated, insecure, anxious, etc? You may want to rate the intensity of your feelings [%].</i></p>	<p>Troubled (v2,3,4) [100%] Inconsolable (v2) [90%] Overwhelmed (v3) [90%] Cut off from God (v7) [90%] Pessimistic (v7) [95%] Insecure (v2) [80%] Scared (v2) [75%]</p>
<p><b>3. My thoughts</b> <i>What am I thinking of at this time? About myself? Others? The present? The future?</i></p>	<p>My past was all great but the present is all terrible (v5) God has cast me off (v7) The future is bleak and gloomy (v7) God’s promises no longer hold true (v8) God has forgotten how to be gracious (v9) God has shut up his mercies (v9)</p>
<p><b>4. My analysis</b> <i>Identify false or unhelpful thinking patterns? False extremes, false generalisation, false filter, etc. (see lecture 3).</i></p>	<p>The psalmist confesses to wrong and unhelpful thinking when he looks at his thought patterns and says, “This is my infirmity” (v10). His “infirmity” or his distorted thinking includes: False extremes, false generalisation, false mind-reading (of God), false fortune-telling, false feeling-based reasoning (see lecture 3).</p>
<p><b>5. My behaviour</b> <i>Impact of 1-4 on me and my relations with others. Stop helpful activities? Start unhelpful activities? Reduced activity? Hyper-activity?</i></p>	<p>Crying (v1) Complaining (v3) Cannot sleep (v4) Cannot speak to others (v4) Cannot pray to God (v4)</p>

b. Asaph challenges his thoughts

Sometimes simply identifying such false thoughts and their impact on us can itself be a major turning point. However, to complete the process we should go on to formally challenge out false thoughts.

<p><b>6. My reasons</b> <i>Why do I believe the thoughts I listed in (3) are true? What evidence is there to support my conclusion?</i></p>	<p>The Psalmist is not explicit but does imply: This is how I feel This is how things look to me.</p>
<p><b>7. My challenge</b> <i>List evidence and reasons against the thoughts in (3). Think of what God would point to, to show you that your thoughts are not 100% true.</i></p>	<p>God’s past dealings with his people have been similar (v10) God’s powerful providence through the years (v11-20) God sometimes leads his people through deep waters (v19) God sometimes shepherds his people through the wilderness (v20) God will lead his people to the Promised Land (v20)</p>
<p><b>8. My conclusion</b> <i>Come to a balanced conclusion, which will also be truthful and helpful</i></p>	<p>Although I feel cast off and forgotten by God, He is redeeming me and leading me through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Unlike God’s Word and works, my feelings are infirm - inaccurate and unreliable.</p>
<p><b>9. My new feelings</b> <i>Copy some or all of the feelings from (2) and re-rate them.</i></p>	<p>Asaph is not explicit but from his words in verses 13-20 we may reasonably imply that Asaph now feels a degree of confidence, optimism, safety, and comfort. Troubled [30%] Inconsolable [20%] Overwhelmed [15%] Cut off from God [30%] Pessimistic [10%] Insecure [10%] Scared [20%]</p>
<p><b>10. My plan</b> <i>How will I put the balanced conclusion into practice?</i></p>	<p>I will think more about God than myself. I will think more about God’s deeds in the past. I will believe God’s unchanging power and grace I will trust even when in the deep waters or in the wilderness.</p>

### **3. Correct your brain chemistry**

This is not an area I have any expertise in and so I shall keep my comments to a minimum. I would refer you to sympathetic and trained medical personnel for diagnosis and prescription of appropriate medication. Even a low dose of anti-depressants is sometimes enough just to begin to restore depleted brain chemicals and so pick up your mood sufficiently to enable you to begin to take the steps necessary to correct your lifestyle, thoughts, etc. However, more serious depressions sometimes require medication for 2-5 years in order to permanently restore the brain's chemistry and processes. There are a number of myths and false ideas about anti-depressants which have lodged in the public mind. Here are some examples: "If I take anti-depressants I won't be my true self...there will be horrible side-effects...I might get addicted...people will look down on me...it will mean I am crazy." Your doctor should be able to refute these myths and reassure you. However, as mentioned above, anti-depressants don't replace the need for you to identify and work at changing false and unhelpful thinking and harmful behaviour.

### **4. Correct your spiritual life**

#### **a. Correct the spiritual consequences**

We have tried to emphasise that for Christians their depression is usually not caused by spiritual factors. However, there are spiritual consequences in all depressions. There are a number of steps a depressed Christian can take to help reverse at least some of the spiritual consequences. You may find Martyn Lloyd-Jones' book *Spiritual Depression* to be helpful in this regard – although he can be a bit sweeping and dogmatic in his generalisations. Here are some practical things you can do to help address the spiritual consequences of depression.

(i) Accept that being depressed is not a sin and indeed is compatible with Christianity. Many Bible characters and many of the greatest Christians passed through times of depression.

(ii) Try to understand that your loss of spiritual feelings is not the cause of your depression, but rather the depression has caused a general loss of feeling in all parts of your life, your spiritual life included.

(iii) Patiently wait for the corrections in your lifestyle, thinking, or brain chemistry to have an effect on your feelings as a whole and your spiritual life will pick up at the same time also.

(iv) Have a set time for reading your Bible and praying. Depressed Christians may either give up reading and praying, or they may try to read and pray "excessively" in order to try and bring back their spiritual feelings. Both approaches are unhelpful. Instead, set aside a regular time each day to read and pray. If concentration is a problem, keep things short (5-10 minutes) until you feel better. Depression will only be deepened by setting unrealistic spiritual goals.

(v) Bring objective truth to mind (e.g.: the doctrine of justification, or the atonement), especially "positive" verses which set forth God's love, mercy and grace for sinners (e.g.: Rom.8:1; 8:38-39; 1 Jn.4:9-10; 1 Jn.1:9). You may want to write out a verse and carry it around with you. When negative thoughts overwhelm you, bring out the verse and meditate upon it.

(vi) When you pray, tell God exactly how you feel. Be totally honest. Ask God to help you with your doubts and fears and to restore to you the joy of salvation. Thank Him for loving you and being with you even though you do not feel His love or presence. Praying for others who suffer can also help to turn your thoughts away from yourself for a time.

(vii) Keep going to church and seek out the fellowship of one or two sympathetic Christians you can confide in, and ask them to pray with you and for you. Be careful about who you talk to. Sadly, some Christians cannot keep confidences, and others will have little understanding of or sympathy for your condition.

(viii) Remember God loves you as you are, not as you would like to be.

#### **b. Correct the spiritual causes**

In the lecture on the causes of depression, we mentioned the possibility that a Christian's depression may be the result of some specific sin or sins. If having examined your life you find that there is a sin which you are deliberately and stubbornly persisting in, or grave sins which you have never really repented of, it is time to fall on your knees and seek God's pardon for the sin, and God's power over the sin. See Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 for examples of how to do this.

## APPENDIX

### a. Thought Investigation Questionnaire

<b>1. My life situation.</b> <i>Time? Place? People? Events?</i>	
<b>2. My feelings</b> <i>Sum up your mood in one word if you can. Are you sad, worried, guilty, angry, ashamed, irritated, scared, disappointed, humiliated, insecure, anxious, etc? You may want to rate the intensity of your feelings [%]</i>	
<b>3. My thoughts</b> <i>What am I thinking of at this time? About myself? Others? The present? The future?</i>	
<b>4. My analysis</b> <i>Identify false or unhelpful thinking patterns? False extremes, false generalisation, false filter, etc. (see lecture 3).</i>	
<b>5. My behaviour</b> <i>Impact of 1-4 on me and my relations with others. Stop helpful activities? Start unhelpful activities? Reduced activity? Hyper-activity?</i>	

### b. Thought Challenge Questionnaire

<b>6. My reasons</b> <i>Why do I believe the thoughts I listed in (3) are true? What evidence is there to support my conclusion?</i>	
<b>7. My challenge</b> <i>List evidence and reasons against the thoughts in (3). Think of what God would point to, to show you that your thoughts were not 100% true.</i>	
<b>8. My conclusion</b> <i>Come to a balanced conclusion, which will also be truthful and helpful</i>	
<b>9. My new feelings</b> <i>Copy some or all of the feelings from (2) and re-rate them.</i>	
<b>10. My plan</b> <i>How will I put the balanced conclusion into practice?</i>	