

# Depression

Depression is by far the most common complaint of people who seek counseling. Between 1988 and 1993 office visits for depression doubled—and not only visits to psychiatrists but also to primary care physicians.

Countless books have been written on the topic, and in many cases the Christian counselors' theories are worse than the world's. For example, the following is from the Stephen Ministries training manual:

Anger kept inside and unleashed against oneself causes depression. Loss of psychic energy causes the person to approach a zero balance; finally depression appears when there is no longer sufficient psychic energy to perform.... Don't use the Bible or prayer without first listening to the helpee ... the helpee is not ready to accept passages [of Scripture].

A zero balance of psychic energy? There is a reason the term "psychobabble" has caught on as a common way to describe language such as this. It is meaningless at best and very often in direct opposition to the teaching of Scripture.

## Understanding Depression

### Is there a Chemical Cause?

More and more people today are adopting the opinion that depression must have a physical cause. There are two major reasons for this:

1. People many times are depressed for no apparent reason. Nothing terribly bad happened. They don't want to be depressed, but they are.
2. When people take antidepressants, they often feel better. And some would reason that if a drug can alleviate the problem, it must be a physical problem.

Both of these ideas have major flaws.

First, while there may be no *apparent* emotional reason, that doesn't necessarily mean there isn't one. Not all emotional factors are immediately apparent.

Second, the fact that drugs seem to help does not address the spiritual aspects of the situation. If I commit murder and feel terribly guilty, that guilt is tied to a spiritual issue. If I experiment with drugs that make me feel less guilty, does this mean the guilt was *not* a spiritual issue? Obviously the answer is no; it simply means I have deadened my senses.

In order for an illness to be considered organic, there must be some demonstrable problem with the physical body; i.e., tissue that is damaged or not working properly. But with depression, that is not the case. As far as medical science can tell, the body of a depressed person is working fine. Depression is diagnosed not from observation of the body but from reports of the individual about how he is feeling.

## The chemical imbalance theory

Most people believe depression has been proved to be the result of chemical imbalances in the brain. Schools of psychiatry and drug companies (who have a tremendous financial stake in the matter) have advanced this theory as though it were scientifically verified. It is not.

The truth is, the technology does not exist to measure brain chemicals before and after people become depressed, then again after they have taken medication. This is why the inserts in antidepressant medications consistently use terms such as “presumed,” “believed,” or even “unknown” in describing what a drug actually does. In an article approved for continuing education by the American Psychiatric Association, the author states, “We don’t know how psychotropic medications really work” (Khan, 1999).

Peter Breggin, M.D., was formerly a teaching fellow at Harvard Medical School and a fulltime consultant with the National Institute of Mental Health. Author of *Brain Disabling Treatments in Psychiatry* (1997), he states that “there are no known biochemical imbalances in the brain of typical psychiatric patients” (p. 5b). Dr. William Wirshing, a researcher and professor of psychiatry at UCLA, in 1999 told a room full of psychiatrists, “We have been lying to everyone for years concerning the chemical imbalance model.” No one in the audience challenged him.<sup>3</sup>

Some physical problems, such as an underactive thyroid, can contribute to depression, but in a case like that, when a physical factor is found, it is not called depression; it is called hypothyroidism.

## Does the Bible address clinical depression?

The Integrationists would have us believe that the Bible is sufficient for counseling people who are a little down, but full blown clinical depression requires drugs and professional help. They say Scripture does not address the issue of clinical depression; it is therefore, best left in the hands of the experts.

But in Lamentations 3 we see that Jeremiah, or whoever wrote Lamentations, had many signs of clinical depression. He experienced all of the following:

- Utter despair: “He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead” (v. 6).
- Lethargy, fatigue, lack of energy: “he has weighed me down with chains” (v. 7).
- Hopelessness: “He has walled me in so I cannot escape” (v. 7).
- Isolation: “Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer” (v. 8).
- Frustration: “He has barred my way with blocks of stone” (v. 9).
- Feelings of worthlessness: “He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall. He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, ‘My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD.’ I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me” (vv. 13-20).
- A sense of helplessness and paralysis: “... he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows”(vv. 9-12).
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Sometimes people who are depressed assume you cannot help them because you could never relate to their suffering. Jeremiah *could* relate. Few, if any, of us have been through anything as bad as what the people of Israel went through when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

Jeremiah lived through it, and he said it was worse than what happened to Sodom. People were slaughtered; women and girls were raped; people lay languishing in the streets, wishing they had been killed by the sword. Jeremiah saw babies so thirsty they couldn't swallow, their mothers sitting by so destitute they did not even try to help them. Amazingly, some women cooked their own children and ate them. To make matters worse, the Israelites brought all this suffering on themselves because of their rebellion against God. It was their own fault.

How is it possible to comfort someone in such dire straits? In the next section we will see how Jeremiah recovered from his depression. But first, let's look at some general principles of counseling those who suffer from depression.

## **How to Counsel a Depressed Person**

### **Sympathize**

Depression can be incredibly miserable. You do not want to encourage a person to dwell on his suffering, but you should express sympathy to him.

When someone tells you he is depressed, resist the temptation to fill in your own experience as you seek to understand what he is going through. All of us have ups and downs, but not all of us experience the extremes of depression that others do.

Depression is a strange kind of suffering. People who are depressed talk about experiencing intense pain while at the same time feeling emotionally numb. Psychologist Martha Manning likened her depression to "a room in hell."

In a letter to J. T. Stewart, Abraham Lincoln said, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell; I awfully forebode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better, it appears to me."<sup>4</sup>

Another person who was depressed wrote this: "I have no energy or reason to fight. I am numb and have tried all the things I know to try. I know that I will not be able to function like this much longer. There is no one to talk to. I'm suffocating. I can think the best thoughts all day and I still feel like this. No one knows how badly I want to die. My thoughts are obsessive and will not stop. They keep saying, 'I want to die.'"

Depression can be one of the most agonizing kinds of suffering. If we have the heart of Christ, we will show compassion to those who suffer in this way.

### **Help the person discern what *is* sinful and what *isn't***

Feelings are not sinful, but actions and attitudes can be. Often there is confusion about this. For example, a person may feel guilty about being depressed (which, in itself, is not sin), but he does *not* feel guilty about having a wrong attitude toward suffering or about his unwillingness to actively seek God (both of which *are* sins).

We know that it is possible for a sinless person to be emotionally down, because Jesus was without sin, yet He was extremely distressed in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before His crucifixion.

Paul despaired even of life. In his heart he “felt the sentence of death.” He was “under great pressure, far beyond [his] ability to endure,” and it came not from sin, but from God (2 Cor. 1:89). In 1 Kings 19, we read of Elijah being so depressed that he asked the LORD to take his life. God responded not by rebuking him or telling him he was wrong to feel that way, but by showing great tenderness and meeting his physical needs. He sent an angel, who said to Elijah, “[T]he journey is too much for you.” He gave him food to eat and water to drink, and then let him sleep.

So it is possible to be depressed for reasons unrelated to sin.

On the other hand, Scripture also shows that depression may indeed result from a wrong response to suffering. Cain was rebuked by God for being downcast because of sin.

GENESIS 4:47 The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?”

Rachel wanted to die because she was unable to conceive (Gen. 30:1). Saul became depressed because he was jealous of David. (1 Kings 19:34) Ahab was despondent when he coveted Naboth’s vineyard and couldn’t have it (1 Kings 21:24). Judas was so depressed after betraying Jesus that he killed himself (Matt. 27:5).

All of these examples reflect a wrong response to suffering. Usually people are depressed because they think obsessively about their negative circumstances. And they think about those circumstances not from an eternal perspective but from a perspective of discontent.

## **Help the person correct wrong thought patterns**

### *The conscious thought life*

Show someone who is depressed how to think biblically about his circumstances—especially about suffering. Help him discover where his thinking started to get off track. When you do this, if you have been influenced by psychology, you may be tempted to dredge up some deep insight into the person’s “subconscious” mind. Resist this temptation. Concern yourself instead with conscious thoughts that are accessible and knowable by the person.

Man is always tempted to try to discover things that only God can know. The condition of a person’s heart is one of those things. Scripture teaches us to address the issues of life by thinking properly (Eph. 4:20-24). The solution is not to repair wires that are crossed in someone’s psyche, buried deep inside his unconscious mind. The solution is to help him change his conscious thought patterns.

The depressed man quoted on page 151, who had “no energy or reason to fight,” said he could think the best thoughts all day long and it wouldn’t help. But how does he know that? No one but Christ has ever thought the best thoughts all day long. No matter how good a person’s thought life has been in the past, it can always be better.

### *Thoughts of death*

Depressed people often think about dying. Their thoughts revolve around a desire to end the pain so they no longer have to suffer. Those are not necessarily sinful thoughts—*as long as they are examined from an eternal perspective.*

Paul had thoughts like that. Philippians is a thank-you letter from Paul to a church that had sent him a gift. The letter is primarily about joy and encouragement, yet Paul devotes a significant portion of the first chapter to his desire to die! That may sound like a rather morbid topic to include in a thank-you note, but when you read it, you see that it is anything but morbid.

PHILIPPIANS 1:23 ... I desire to depart (die) and be with Christ, which is better by far;

It would be so much better to be with Christ than to be down here in prison, or on a sinking ship, or under a pile of rocks, or at the business end of a whip. All the suffering would be over, and the pain would end. It would be wonderful. There is nothing wrong with thinking like that.

Paul wanted to die. But in the same verse he says, “I am torn.”

“Why, Paul? Why are you torn? If being with Christ would be so wonderful, what could be appealing enough in this life that you would be torn about whether you want to live or die?”

He was torn because for him, “to live is Christ” (see Phil. 1:21). By reading the first chapter of Philippians we see that Paul’s thoughts were along this line: *This life is my only opportunity to represent Christ and serve Him in this world. It is my only opportunity to bear on my body the marks of Christ and endure suffering for His name. Now is my opportunity to sacrificially serve God’s people in their time of need. Now is my opportunity to fill up in my flesh what was lacking in Christ’s suffering. I desire to die and be with Christ, which would be so much better, but it is more necessary for them that I remain in the body.*

Now that is a tough choice—if you are thinking from an eternal perspective. From a temporal perspective it is the easiest choice in the world. Go for the relief! But from an eternal perspective, both options are incredibly appealing—to go to be with Christ, or to stay on this earth to suffer on His behalf and bring Him great glory. Paul thinks it over, and then one of the two options emerges as being more appealing to him:

PHILIPPIANS 1:25-26 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

It is not wrong to think about dying. Every Christian should long to be with Christ. But it is crucial to think about dying or living from an eternal perspective, which can lead to a genuine desire to actually remain in painful circumstances.

### ***Help the Person Set the Right Goal***

#### ***The wrong goal: feeling better***

Almost every depressed person who asks for counsel has one main goal: to feel better. It is all right for someone to want that, but it is foolish to make that a goal, because he is not in control of whether it happens. In fact, the more the person considers it a priority to feel better, the more likely he is to become even more depressed.

The appropriate goal in life is always to fulfill one’s calling. A person’s goal should never be anything other than to carry out God’s desire for his life. Remember, depression is lack of

hope. Nothing makes someone feel more hopeless than having a goal that is outside of his power to realize.

The more a person walks around thinking *I have to get out of this funk. I have to cheer myself up. Above all—I have to feel better*, the more hopeless and depressed he will be, because he is helpless to achieve this goal.

People who are depressed almost invariably seem to think it is imperative for them to feel better. As Abraham Lincoln said, “To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better.” To remain as they are is not an option they will consider. The biggest favor you can do them is this: Urge them to consider the possibility of *never* feeling better. Help them realize that they do not necessarily have to feel better. It is all right to feel bad. It does not mean something is wrong with them; it is part of the suffering we are told to expect in this life.

God requires a lot of suffering from some people. Immediately after the apostle Paul was converted, God appeared to Ananias and told him to go to Paul (then Saul) with these words:

ACTS 9:1516 “This man is my chosen instrument.... I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

And did he suffer! Time after time he was whipped, imprisoned, beaten with rods. People stoned him, tortured him, persecuted him ... that was how it was for Paul right up to his appointed time to enter the presence of the Lord. It was not because Paul made foolish decisions; it was because it was all part of God’s plan from the start.

If someone suffers from depression, maybe God, on the day of that person’s conversion, said to the angels, “I will show her how much she must suffer for My name. She will have to endure crippling emotions throughout her life.”

Will telling a person this cause her to become even more depressed? No, because it will relieve her of the impossible burden of thinking she must figure out a way to feel better.

Paul’s life, all told, turned out well. He was possibly the most successful Christian who ever lived. Did he accomplish incredibly great things? Yes. Did he advance the kingdom of God around the world? Yes. Are there countless thousands in heaven because of God’s work through the apostle Paul? Yes. Is he enjoying paradise right now? Yes. So what does it matter that, for the relatively short time he was on this earth, he suffered?

The point is, *there is hope outside of feeling better*. Even if the person never feels better, he can fulfill his purpose for existing and achieve great things for the kingdom of God! He can carry out his ministry, he can use his gift, he can glorify God—even more so if he is faithful in the face of suffering.

When counseling a depressed person it is essential to help him come to the point of being willing to suffer if necessary for the rest of his life.

This is where we differ with the world’s way of thinking. The underlying attitude in the secular world is that all suffering is inappropriate, unjustified, unacceptable, and to be avoided if at all possible. But the Christian’s way of thinking should be different:

ROMANS 5:34 ... we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

In my experience, both personally and in counseling others, once people come to a point of willingness to suffer, within days they are no longer depressed (or at least they feel *significantly* better). The reason they feel better is that a willingness to suffer is at the core of contentment. Once a person learns contentment, his life tends to be characterized by joy and gratitude rather than sorrow and despair.

### ***Contentment***

Most people think being content means not wanting anything more. That's not true. You can be content and still strongly desire things you do not have.

The biggest myth about contentment is that it is related to one's circumstances. The deceitfulness of greed in our hearts will cause us to think that we will be content once we get what it is we most desire: *If I could just get a job ... find a spouse ... have my health restored ... then I'd be happy.*

That is a lie; don't fall for it. If you are discontent now, you will not be any happier if you get whatever it is you want, because contentment is unrelated to circumstances.

PHILIPPIANS 4:12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Paul had learned the secret of contentment. Once a person learns that secret, he is content no matter what he has or does not have. If he does not know that secret, he will be discontent no matter what.

What is the secret? It can be found later in this same passage:

PHILIPPIANS 4:19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

For a Christian to think *I'll be happy if my circumstances change* is like a billionaire thinking he will be happy if he just gets one more dollar. Spiritually, as a child of God, my circumstances are incredibly good. What would a new car or new house or new relationship add to the riches I have in Christ?

If I am not satisfied with being an heir to all things, receiving forgiveness of sins, having the Holy Spirit in me, having all the promises of the Bible be "yes" and "amen" to me in Christ, having the hope of heaven, the resurrection, the glories of the coming age ... if I am not satisfied with all that, I will never be satisfied, and *nothing* will make me happy.

On the other hand, if I *am* satisfied with all that I have in Christ, I know nothing on earth can happen to change that, and nothing can take away my contentment.

But is this promise really true? Are there not times when a Christian needs something God does not supply? No. If God puts something out of my reach, that is proof that I do not truly need it.

The promise of Philippians 4:19 is amazing, because if it is true, then whatever happens is what I need. I can trust God to carry out His plan.

### ***The Right Goal: God's plan***

Does this mean it is wrong to have strong desires? Not at all. It just means that those desires are to be eclipsed by the desire for God's perfect plan.

The great example of that is Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He *strongly* desired that the Father would relieve His suffering and allow Him to avoid the cross. That is what He prayed for. But then He added, "Nevertheless not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Those were not just religious words. Jesus genuinely desired God's plan more than He desired what He was requesting.

If you want to teach someone contentment, bring him to the point where he can honestly say to God, "Lord, I do not want anything other than Your plan for me. I strongly desire what I am asking for, but even more, I want Your plan to be carried out."

When he can honestly say this, he will know the secret of contentment. From that time on he will always get what he desires the most, because God is certain to carry out His plan.

That does not mean he will never feel down. He might sweat drops of blood like Jesus or despair even of life like Paul. But his joy in God's sovereign plan will override any suffering.

### ***Urge the Person to Serve***

While we are all called to different *kinds* of service, each individual is called to serve.

Give someone who is struggling with depression the following assignment: "Between now and the next time I see you, I want you to attempt to make someone else happy at least once each day." Completing this assignment will tend to make the person feel better. But now that feeling better is not the goal, there is no pressure. If serving others helps the depressed person feel better, fine. If not, that's fine too. The effort will not be wasted because it will further God's work, which is now the depressed person's highest desire.

Giving and serving, however, usually does help a person feel better. A University of Michigan study, published in *Psychological Science* magazine, found that older people who are helpful to others reduce their risk of dying by nearly 60 percent compared with peers who provide neither practical help nor emotional support to relatives, neighbors, or friends. Those percentages were roughly the same for men as well as women, and for people in poor health as well as in good health. Instead of antidepressants, Dr. Laura, in her private practice, prescribes giving or helping others each day and says she has seen better results from that than from antidepressants.

So giving and serving does help, but it probably will be very difficult for people who are depressed. For them, it may be hard to even move.

One thing that will help is to encourage people suffering from depression to stop making decisions on the basis of how they feel. People who are depressed tend to be governed by their feelings. Help them realize that they do not have to be controlled by their feelings. They can decide to keep moving no matter how depressed they feel. Remind them that whether it helps them feel better or not, it is our responsibility to serve even while we are suffering. Jesus was involved in evangelism, a prayer ministry, teaching, prophecy, counseling, intercession and care for a widow—all while hanging on the cross! It is not a sin to feel depressed, but it is sin to use that as an excuse not to serve.



### *Help the Person Establish a Routine*

Part of the reason people become depressed is that they lose sight of the importance of everything they do, and they quit doing it. Then they are not productive, and being unproductive makes them feel worthless.

The really important things, the truly great things, generally cannot be accomplished in an afternoon. They are done by tiny increments over a long period of time, and none of those increments seems all that significant. Since a depressed person tends to lose his long-term perspective, it becomes especially hard for him to do anything that does not have short-term results.

Some people are like the teenager who wants to look like a bodybuilder, so he goes to the gym and works out for two hours. Then he stands in front of the mirror and flexes, but he looks the same as he did before. To get big muscles, he would have to get into a routine of lifting weights every day for years. And each one of those days would hardly make a noticeable difference. He could even skip working out any one of those days and it would not matter (as long as he didn't skip all the other days).

Some take a similar approach to spiritual things: They read the Bible every day for a week, and then look in the mirror and do not see any spiritual muscles. They start a new ministry and are enthusiastic for a month or two, but when they do not see any fruit, they lose interest.<sup>5</sup>

Since a depressed person has trouble seeing the value of what he is doing, if you can get him into a routine for a period of time, he will later be able to look back and have a sense of accomplishment.

For example, consider the homemaker who is depressed because she thinks she is a terrible wife and mother and cannot stay on top of the housework. What if she developed a routine of taking a twenty-minute segment of time that she is not using for housework right now, and every day she spent that twenty minutes doing chores? Each day it might not seem like much, but over the period of a few weeks, she would start to notice a marked improvement in her productivity and in her ability to manage her home. That, in turn, would help guard her against further hopelessness.

The same goes for debt. Many people have become depressed because of debt; they keep getting deeper in the hole. If you help them set up a budget so they can pay more against the debt than they are incurring in interest, over time the debt will be reduced. Maybe it will not be paid off for fifty years, but the feeling of making progress instead of sinking further into the hole will be encouraging.

If once a week they decided not to stop at McDonald's and put the \$5 they saved in an envelope instead, or put the magazine at the grocery store back in the rack and took those few dollars and put them in an envelope—not every time, just once a week—by the end of the month they could have \$20 or \$30 in the envelope. If they sent in a payment of only \$10 a month on a credit card debt with 18 percent interest, after twenty years they would have \$23,000 less debt. (That's \$10 a month; just \$2.30 per week.)

The point is, a routine will help people chip away at their problems and then, once some time has passed, they will begin to see that they are actually gaining ground instead of hopelessly losing ground.

Another good thing about a routine is it gets a person moving. Proverbs says that the lazier a person is, the harder everything becomes—until he can hardly lift a fork from the plate to his mouth (Prov. 15:19, 19:24). One of the best things for a depressed person, many times, is to sweat. He (or she) needs to be working hard at something. That will not only give him a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment (which go a long way toward restoring hope), but it will also help him sleep soundly, which is important.

### ***Restore Hope***

At the beginning of this chapter we saw the horrible, deep depression of Jeremiah. But as depressed as Jeremiah was, he *did* recover. And the key to his recovery can be summed up in one word: hope.

Lamentations 3:21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope ...

I believe the best biblical definition of depression is lack of hope. Depression is the emotional pain that comes when it seems like there is nothing to look forward to—no good thing on the horizon that can pull you through the present suffering.

Hope is when there is something coming in the future so wonderful that it gives you energy to live today. Hope is what gives you vitality and motivation in life. It is the root of inner joy and contentment. Hope is being so joyful about something coming in the future that you hardly even mind the trials of the present.

Have you ever noticed that the effect trials have on you depends on your view of the future? If you are extremely excited about what is coming tomorrow, the suffering of today is easier to bear. But if you have nothing to look forward to, even the smallest difficulty can seem devastating.

If next week you are going on your dream vacation—or getting married, or some other wonderful thing—and you get a flat tire today, you can laugh it off. That is the effect hope has on the heart.

But if tomorrow and next week and next year all seem to promise nothing but drudgery as far as the eye can see, something as small as stubbing your toe can send you into despair.

Depression is simply a lack of hope. It is not a chemical imbalance; it is a hope imbalance. It's not that your brain is leaking serotonin; it's that your spirit is leaking hope. And it really is like a leak, because it feeds on itself and gets progressively worse.

In the depths of his depression, Jeremiah found hope. How? What specific good thing did he think of that God might do? What light did he see at the end of his long, dark tunnel? And what about you? How can you find hope like he did?

If you *do* see light at the end of the tunnel, of course you will come out of your depression—that's easy. The problem is, what do you do when there is no light at the end of the tunnel? What do you do when even in your wildest dreams you cannot think of anything God might do to make the situation better? What do you do when all your hope is gone?

That is an important lesson we can learn from Jeremiah. For him there was no light at the end of the tunnel. There was no relief he could think of or could see on the horizon. What encouraged him and restored his hope was not that he anticipated relief but, rather, that he called to mind a specific piece of information: "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope...."

This is important to note, because there are many who would say that when people are hurting, that's not the time to try to teach biblical principles. They would say you need to just "be there" for people and offer them

a shoulder to cry on. But Jeremiah was brought from a state of clinical depression to being filled with real hope simply by this one piece of information.

What was it that he called to mind?

Lamentations 3:21-22 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed....

He called to mind something about the amazing character of God: His great love.

When you are suffering, if you begin to think that it is going to be too much for you to bear, you may give in to despair. But if you have a confidence that you will not be tested beyond your ability or without good reason, you can say with Paul, "I am hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8,9).

And the way you know you will not be consumed and overcome is by the fact that God is not only loving, He is by nature *creative* in His love.

Lamentations 3:22b,23 ... for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

God's nature is such that He will think of a way to show you kindness and tenderness—a new way every single morning. This is one reason God made mornings. When God created the solar system, He divided time into days. That gives us all a new beginning every twenty-four hours. God is a God of new beginnings and fresh starts, and He even built that into the creation.

Zephaniah 3:5 The Lord ... is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail....

Jeremiah called to mind the fact that God is creative in the ways He blesses His people. It suddenly occurred to him that God had something in mind right around the corner that was better than anything he could imagine.

Think back to when you were a child. Say you have two uncles, and they each give you a Christmas gift every year. The first uncle often gives you things you do not really care to have. But the second uncle always seems to give you the greatest gifts—even better than the things you thought to put on your list. You get excited every time you see him walk in the door, because you *know* him, and you know that he always manages to come up with something great.

Jeremiah, in the absolute depths of despair, started to think about the fact that God is like that second uncle. God is a giver of good gifts, they are new every day, and He never runs out of ideas. That was the hope that drove the despair out of his soul.

Jeremiah was not comforted by minimizing his suffering. He did not say, "Well, I have some hope because I realize things can't be as bad as they seem. At least this or that didn't happen..." Rather, he was comforted in the midst of great anguish by turning his attention away from his circumstances and to the character of God, from Whom flows an inexhaustible fountain of creative kindness.

Notice his response in verse 24: "I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'" What does that mean? Portion of *what*?

The word *portion*, which means "amount, or share," is a reference to Numbers 18:20. When God brought Israel into the promised-land, He divided it up eleven ways, but there were twelve tribes. When He got to the last tribe—Levi—nothing was left.

Numbers 18:20 The Lord said to Aaron, “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.”

So the priests were given no portion of the land. They owned nothing. Their list of assets was blank, yet they ended up being better off than everyone else. (Eleven tribes gave them a tenth, so they ended up with eleven tenths—one tenth more than any other tribe.)

That is what happens when the Lord is your portion. The only difference is, you can’t see it and you don’t know where it is coming from. God gave an inheritance to all twelve tribes. To eleven He gave an inheritance that could be seen; to the twelfth, the priests, He gave the same inheritance—in fact, bigger—but it could not be seen.

When God says, “I am your portion,” think of it this way: Suppose I took the youth group up into the mountains and gave them each a small survival kit. If my young son Josiah said, “Dad, where is my survival kit?” I would reply, “I am your survival kit—you stay with me.”

Or imagine that the billionaire CEO of the company you work for is your best friend, and when he is setting salaries, he says, “This is your salary, this is yours, this is yours,” etc. When he finally has gone through everyone but you, and you say, “What about me?” he says, “Don’t worry—I’ll take care of all your needs.”

Jeremiah had lost everything. He was depressed and at the end of his rope. He could not even imagine what God might do to make things better. But then the depression lifted and he was filled with hope because he began to think about the nature of God, who is like that second uncle—creative in His love. Jeremiah’s response was to say, “The Lord is my portion. I don’t need or want anything other than what He is pleased to provide.”

His attitude was, Lord, I look around and can’t see provision or blessing. I am like the tribe of Levi—all I have for a blessing is You. But I am confident I will end up with something wonderful—because I know what You are like.

Christians who struggle with depression should spend what little energy they have focusing on the goodness of God. Not only does God have infinite wisdom to guide them in life, infinite resources to provide for them, infinite knowledge to teach them, infinite mercy to care for them, infinite compassion to comfort them, infinite love to restore them, and infinite strength to protect them, He has also given future promises that are wonderful beyond imagination or comprehension.

It is not necessarily easy to hope in those things because they are invisible and intangible. It is much easier to look to the next vacation, that anticipated promotion, or other temporal pleasures, but those things will ultimately disappoint.

God knows this, so He tells us this: “[S]et your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet. 1:13*b*). The solution to depression is to focus on the character of God, on “his very great and precious promises” (see 2 Pet. 1:4) and on the return of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.