FINDING HOPE IN GOD’S WORD AND HIS SOVEREIGNTY IN DEPRESSION

by

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ABSTRACT
Finding Hope in God’s Word and His Sovereignty
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 Millions of Americans struggle with depression each year. They often find themselves in the depths of despair and have little hope. A proper theology of both God’s Word and His sovereignty can offer tremendous hope to people with reactive depression. The Scriptures are full of examples of godly men and women who struggled with bouts of depression. By examining Biblical portraits of such men and women, the person with depression is able to recognize that they are not alone and they are also reminded that God has not forsaken them.

When someone is overcome with depression, they often feel as if life is spinning out of control. It helps to remember that God is in control and that His purposes are good and perfect. The depression is not without purpose. While the sufferer may not understand the reason for his hardships, he can find peace in knowing that God is in control. Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah all dealt with forms of reactive depression. Their recovery began when they recognized and submitted to God’s sovereignty. When they were reminded that God was in control, they became hopeful. While reading God’s Word and trusting in His sovereignty may not alleviate the symptoms of depression, it can offer tremendous hope.
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INTRODUCTION

“If you will only let God guide you,
And hope in Him, thro’ all your ways,
Whatever comes, He’ll stand beside you,
To bear you thro’ the evil days;
Who trusts in God’s unchanging love
Builds on the Rock that cannot move.”

Depression is not a recent calamity. History is filled with examples of men and women who have wrestled this debilitating problem. Napoleon Bonaparte, Julius Caesar, Karl Marx, Vincent Van Gogh and Edgar Allen Poe all faced bouts of depression. “Sir Winston Churchill described his depression as a ‘black dog’ which hounded him and almost devoured him during his life.” Both Martin Luther and Samuel Logan Brengle, the great saint of the Salvation Army, faced constant battles of low self-esteem and depression. More recently, Rosie O’Donnell, Rosemary Clooney, Tipper Gore and Janet Jackson have suffered from this affliction.

How should people respond to the blackness and dismal nature of depression? Is there hope that the pain will go away? What does the Bible have to say about living with depression? Can a Christian be depressed? To answer the above query, Christians can and do get depressed. Seamands says, “Understanding that salvation does not give instant

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5Jackson-Triche, 17.
emotional health offers us an important insight into the doctrine of sanctification.”

Depression causes many people to struggle not only physically and mentally but also spiritually. Many Christians suffer from chronic depression; they are ashamed of their depression and feel that there must be something wrong with them spiritually, or else they would be enjoying the “abundant life.” LaHaye claims that there are ten causes for depression: disappointment, lack of self-esteem, unfair comparisons, ambivalence, sickness, biological malfunction, postpartum depression, hyper mental activity, rejection and/or inadequate goals. Regardless of the cause, there are times when God allows Christians to struggle in depression and the continual pain leaves many disillusioned. Paul’s thorn in the flesh is a good example of this and will later be examined in more depth.

The Christian life is not struggle free. Jesus warned in John 16:33, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world.” People should not be surprised by life’s struggles but often when trials arise, men and women look for somewhere to place blame. Job’s friends thought that a life of obedience would be blessed and would not face hardship. They continually accused Job of sinning against God. To be sure, there are times when life is corrupted by sin, but to say that all unhappiness is a result of sin is taking this idea too far.

The Scriptures are full of examples of godly men and women who struggled with hard times. They were not all suffering due to personal sin. In John 9, Jesus and His disciples saw a blind man. The disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind? Jesus answered, ‘It was neither that this man sinned nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

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6David A. Seamands, Healing for Damaged Emotions. (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2004), 12.

7 Tim LaHaye, How to Win Over Depression. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 49-58.

8 John 9:2-3.
blind so that God could show others His greatness. Consider the stories of men and women in the Bible and be encouraged that no labor and no suffering in the path of Christian obedience is ever in vain.\(^9\)

Christians are commanded to take up their cross daily and follow Him. Carrying a cross is hard work. For millions of people, that cross is depression. Many are carrying this heavy weight while others are being overwhelmed by it. How can Christians who struggle with depression carry this cross without being crushed? Jesus calls them to come unto Him and to find rest. “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”\(^10\)

Sometimes depressed believers struggle to understand why God would allow the hopelessness of depression to overtake them in spite of their faith. Depression can be a spiritual blessing, although an unpleasant one to experience. Depression often forces people to cry out to God. Millions are pleading with God to take away their depression, and at times, God refuses. How can those who are depressed find hope to endure? According to Paul, “tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”\(^11\) God’s sovereignty and His Word offer hope to believers who are affected by depression.

### Definition of Depression

Depression is a growing problem for many Americans. “Depressive disorders affect approximately 18.8 million American adults or about 9.5% of the U.S. population age 18 and


\(^10\)Matthew 11:29-30.

\(^11\)Romans 5:3-4.
older in a given year.”12 What is depression? This term can mean different things to different people. Many say, “I feel depressed,” when what they are feeling is actually sadness. Sadness is a natural reaction to certain life circumstances. It is primarily an emotional state triggered by loss of something important to an individual’s well-being.13 Sadness is a healthy response to situations that represent loss or disappointment. Sadness comes and goes; it is not permanent and does not necessarily lead to a feeling of despair or hopelessness.14

What is the root cause of depression? Is it a medical or a spiritual condition? Is it a negative response to circumstances? There are various opinions on this issue. Basically, “depression can be seen as three things: a symptom, a disease and a reaction.”15 Studies have shown that very few people snap out of a depression without treatment.16 All types of depression need treatment, but the treatments vary according to the source of the depression. But, no matter what the cause, the depressed person needs understanding and empathy, not condemnation.

The first category views depression as a symptom, more specifically a direct consequence of sin. “A concrete, specific feeling of guilt which can be related to a particular, precise act or attitude is generally a true and reliable feeling of guilt. And the emotions that follow can be real guilt and real depression for a real transgression.”17 The depression that Jonah experienced after God showed mercy to Ninevah is a prime example of


16 Seamands, 114.
this. God’s compassion “greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.”  

18 Jonah was extremely selfish; he wallowed in self-pity which led him to despair. The answer to depression that is a symptom of sin is repentance. The Psalmist praised God saying, “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.’”  

19 In many cases sinful behavior wreaks havoc in a person’s life and causes a separation in their fellowship with God and this separation can cause depression. In such cases, the person needs to repent and allow God to restore him. The Psalmist said that when he kept silent, his bones wasted away and God’s hand was heavy upon him. When he acknowledged his sin to God, he found forgiveness and deliverance.  

20 If the depression is a symptom of sin, once that sin has been confessed, often the depression will lift. In such instances, the depression is a physical manifestation of a spiritual problem. “When depression is a result of sin it alerts that something is wrong and acts as a motivator to repentance and forgiveness, so depression is more a gateway to health than a punishment for sin.”  

21 Hart states, “However, since so many people experience depression as a consequence of other factors, many of them legitimate psychological factors for which we cannot really use the concept of sin, we mustn’t overemphasize this too much.”  

22 All of life’s suffering is a direct result of the Fall, but not all suffering is a direct result of an individual’s own personal sin. Thus, Hart’s second category views depression as a disease. “Clinical depression refers to a constellation of signs and symptoms that
significantly affect a person’s functioning and last for a substantial amount of time.” 23 The emotional symptoms of depression include a loss of affection, sadness, weeping, hostility, irritability, anxiety, fear, worry and hopelessness. 24 Most psychiatrists use the DSM-IV-TR as criteria for diagnosing Major Depressive Disorder. In order to be diagnosed as clinically depressed, a person must have a depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day and/or anhedonia. 25 The patient must also have four of the following symptoms:

1. Significant weight loss when not dieting or significant weight gain, or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day.
2. Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep or sleeping too much nearly every day.
3. Being either restless or slowed down more than usual nearly every day.
4. Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
5. Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day.
6. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day.
7. Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideas, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide. 26

“The two-week period during which the symptoms exist must represent a change from the person’s previous functioning and cause significant distress or impairment in social or occupational functioning.” 27

In fact, “depression is the single most common psychiatric disorder, caused by biological and/or psychological factors; approximately fifteen percent of cases result in

23 Rosen and Amador 19.
24 La Haye 30-31.
25 Epstein and Amador 23.
26 Ibid., 24.
27 Ibid.
suicide."28 "One in twenty Americans currently suffers from depression severe enough to require medical treatment."29 Depression is a very real threat to many people and it must not be ignored. In the opinion of many researchers, more human suffering results from depression than from any other disease affecting mankind.30 Fortunately, "of all the psychiatric illnesses, depression is the most responsive to treatment. When properly treated, 80 to 90 percent of people with depression can be cured."31 If depression is endogenous or biologically based, "you can trust that God has some purpose in creating you with a physiology or biochemistry that is faulty and accept that as God’s will for you."32

A third category of depression is reactive depression. The focus of this thesis will be on this third type of depression. Reactive depression occurs when a person’s life circumstances have caused a person tremendous loss, suffering or pain. Often the pain seems unbearable and the person may become depressed. La Haye suggests that while organic or psychological changes in the human body are often blamed for depression, they are often the result of a person’s reaction to an insult, disappointment or rejection.33 Medication is not very helpful in the treatment of the ordinary, run-of-the mill reactive depressions that most people experience.34 Dealing with reactive depressions are often difficult because it involves changing one’s perception while their circumstances remain the same. Hart asserts, “We could avoid most reactive depressions if we trusted God fully.”35


29 Wemhoff 15.

30 LaHaye 16.

31 Rosen and Amador 21.

32 Hart 23.

33 La Haye 88.

34 Hart 42.
Grief is an example of reactive depression. When a person experiences loss, he or she may experience a period of depression. This is a normal, but painful reaction to life circumstances. However, when this type of grief is prolonged, the depression can become sinful behavior. An example of this would be a woman who likes the attention she gets from sharing her depressive thoughts with others. Instead of working through her grief, she wallows in it and uses it as a means to gain attention. However, in normal circumstances, grief is reactive and the life of Naomi will be examined as a Biblical example of a grieving person.

How can a depressed person find hope in the midst of bleakness? How does one find light in the midst of the blackest darkness? Where is hope when life’s circumstances seem hopeless? God’s sovereignty and His Word offer hope to believers who are affected by reactive depression as they try to understand why God would allow the hopelessness of depression to ensnare them in spite of their faith. Likewise, a proper theology of God’s sovereignty helps Christians to find hope in times of suffering.

There are numerous Biblical examples of men and women that struggled with times of despair. Many of these are great illustrations of depressions that are reactions to life circumstances. There are profound insights for modern believers who face depression that can be found by examining the responses of these men and women. By examining several Biblical portraits, depressed Christians can find hope to endure their own personal circumstances.

35Ibid.
REVIEW OF BIBLICAL CHARACTERS

“Come, ye disconsolate, where’er ye languish,
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel;
Here bring your wounded hearts,
Here tell your anguish:
Earth has no sorrow that heav’n cannot heal.”

Moses’ Wilderness Journey

Throughout the book of Exodus, the persistent theme seems to be “Is the LORD among us or not?”

So often when trials abound, people tend to cry out and wonder where is God. “When we find ourselves prey to that which is in fact an inevitable, plaguing accompaniment of existence, we are prone to say as Israel is remembered to have said, ‘The Lord has deserted us!’” There were times in Moses’ life when his relationship to God appeared to be nothing more than master-servant, with no tangible demonstration of God’s presence with him. Numerous times the Israelites cried out to Moses in the wilderness asking where God was, and Moses, in turn, brought the same queries to God the Father. Moses felt overwhelmed and inadequate in the midst of his circumstances.

When depression attacks a Christian, the believer may face periods of unbelief. He may doubt that God really cares and question all that he has been taught about the character of God. Eighty percent of depressed patients express self-dislike and low self-esteem, much of which is related to a sense of failure to be the type person that they felt they ought to be. This is especially true of religious people, and this discontentment naturally leads to doubt

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3 Ibid.
and unbelief. This unbelief is normal; Moses, one of the great patriarchs, questioned God, yet look how God chose to use Moses in spite of his unbelief. How did Moses deal with his unbelief? He took it to the Lord in prayer.

In Moses’ story, God had delivered the Israelites from captivity, yet they grumbled and complained because they were hungry for meat. Moses had heard enough and he came before the Lord crying out for help. Moses knew his personal limitations, and he was frustrated. He had no meat to feed these people. What was he to do? Moses was lonely and his burden seemed too heavy to carry. He despaired to the point of death. He said, “So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness.”

Moses was tired and longed for deliverance, even if that meant death.

This passage is considered Moses’ lament. “The lament begins with Moses asking God why he has brought calamity on him and ends with him begging the Lord not to let him see the full extent of his calamity.” Moses had experienced many supernatural things as God’s servant. He was the leader of a nation; he even saw the glory of the Lord. How could someone so close to the Lord go through a period of depression?

Depression can be used to serve God’s purposes. “To use a biblical metaphor, depression can be conceived as a wilderness journey – the experience of being lost in a desert place, lonely, without the water of life, and in great danger from thorns and beasts. Yet it is a place where angels can minister and where distraught persons have found transformation, new identity, direction and hope.” The periods of doubt in Moses’ life ultimately strengthened his faith. “If it is accurate to say that hard times often lead to emotional and

\[5\text{Numbers 11:15.} \]
\[6\text{Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger, III. Zondervan NIV Commentary. Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 197.} \]
\[7\text{Hunter 1106.} \]
physical toughness, then the opposite must also be valid. Easy living and abundance often produce a certain underlying weakness.”\(^8\) God allowed the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for a purpose – He wanted to strengthen their faith and trust in Him. God could have sent them directly into the Promised Land without the desert experience, but He knew that the Israelites would grow weak and apathetic. He wanted His children to cling to Him. Sometimes God allows calamity so that His children will trust Him with all of life. “Just how tough is your faith? How secure is mine? Will we permit the Lord to use our weakness, our disability, our disappointment, our inadequacy to accomplish His purposes?”\(^9\)

Moses was not only a God follower, but also a leader for God’s children. Yet, he struggled. In an ideal world, Christians would always know there is hope and know that they can turn to Christ, but in reality, there are times when life seems so hopeless that even Christians struggle to endure. Moses’ response in prayer is a positive model for Christians to follow when they are overcome with despair. Despite his feelings, Moses knew that hope would be found in the Father. God had proven faithful to Moses time and again. Moses needed to meditate on the character of God and on His mighty works; by remembering God’s past faithfulness, Moses would find hope to trust God with his future.

**Isolation: A Look at Elijah**

James said that “Elijah was a man just like us.”\(^10\) He faced the same problems as other men and in this case, Elijah had a problem with depression. His pride was shattered and he became a broken and depressed man. King Ahab had witnessed God’s power in famine, in the consuming of Elijah’s sacrifice before the prophets of Baal, and the sending of

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\(^9\) Dobson 175.

\(^10\) James 5:17.
rain. However, in the presence of Jezebel he attributed it all to Elijah, even the death of the prophets of Baal. As a result, Jezebel sent word to Elijah that he had twenty-four hours to leave Jezreel or be killed. Elijah fled into the desert wasteland, symbolic of a wasted life. Elijah had expected the kingdom to turn to the one true God as a result of his endeavors and was appalled that Jezebel would seek his life.

Elijah had a traumatic experience when he stood before the altar and prayed to God for the fire from heaven to fall. He was no doubt physically and emotionally exhausted. “He was worn out after the arduous task of standing for God in the face of such opposition.” There was a physical cause for Elijah’s depression. In the midst of his depression and fear, Elijah exaggerated the negative. Jezebel sent a messenger to threaten Elijah. If Elijah had only stopped to think he would have realized that if Jezebel really intended to kill him, she would not send him warning. “She just wanted to make him look like a coward in front of the nation.” Depression causes people to exaggerate the negative.

Elijah sent away his servant so that he could be alone. This behavior is characteristic of someone experiencing depression. Depression causes people to isolate themselves. Satan uses feelings of inferiority and inadequacy to cause people to isolate and to pull within themselves, to have as little contact with others as possible. When a person rejects himself, he finds it difficult to enjoy other people. The depressed person’s view of himself and the

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11 Barker and Kohlenberger 530.


13 Ibid 292.


world has been tainted because of feelings of emptiness, the loss of energy and the desire to give up. “Because one accomplishes so little, self-hatred is aggravated, resulting in further isolation and incapacitation.”

Baker describes how isolation increases self-pity, which worsens the depression.

“Solitude produces melancholy. When we are alone the worst and saddest things come to mind. We reflect in detail upon all sorts of evil. And if we have encountered adversity in our lives, we dwell upon it as much as possible, magnify it, think that no one is so unhappy as we are, and imagine the worst possible consequences. In short, when we are alone, we think of one thing and another, we leap to conclusions, and we interpret everything in the worst light. On the other hand, we imagine that other people are very happy, and it distresses us that things go well with them and evil with us.”

Despite what the depressed person may communicate, he or she needs the help of others. Depressed people need the presence of those who care.

Sometimes Christians do not want to reveal their depression because they fear rejection. However, research studies have shown that people with fewer close relationships, a smaller social network, and less supportive relationships are more likely to become depressed.

Man was created for relationships with both God and others. At creation, God created Eve because it was not good for man to be alone. The same is true today. People need the support of others. “The most important thing you can do for a depressed person, humanly speaking, is to be present when he needs you.”

Spending time with loved ones who are depressed affords them the reassurance that someone really loves them and cares about them.

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17 Hunter 1105.
20 LaHaye 223.
Elijah fled to the desert and took refuge under the shade of a juniper tree and prayed for death. “Ironically, this is the opposite desire to what he expressed by fleeing into the desert in the first place.” Overcome by emotion, Elijah ceased to think rationally. Elijah exhibited symptoms of depression, wishing for death, together with loss of appetite, an inability to manage and with excessive self-pity. He was unmoved by visitors, even a visit from God and visions. The most common spiritual symptom of depression is to pull away from God – to feel that God is rejecting you. This sense of rejection is often a natural response to anger. When it is difficult to see God’s purpose in suffering, man often demands that God bring restoration and if God does not, the tendency is to turn away from God. Elijah is angry; after all, he has just shown the prophets the power of the one true God. He was once strong; now he is weak, and as a result he assumes that God has deserted him.

Scripture teaches that Elijah not only ran for his life, but also that he journeyed into the wilderness for a full day before he sat down beneath the juniper tree. Exhausted from his journey, Elijah begs for death. Extreme fatigue has undoubtedly overtaken him at this point. When a person is exhausted physically, his mental clarity is blurred. Elijah’s depression is likely a reaction to his physical exhaustion. Doctors acknowledge that patients who are physically weak may also be depressed. It is imperative that people who struggle with depression do not neglect their physical and emotional needs. Elijah finds much needed rest under the juniper tree. “There is little doubt that some – perhaps many – of the spiritual and

21LaHaye 227.
26Rosen and Amador 20.
emotional and nervous problems which servants of God face would be at least much improved by more adequate food, rest and sleep.”

Lack of sleep and poor nutrition will cause the depression to worsen.

Elijah’s depression has caused him to pray rashly, to complain, to be suicidal and react with many other sinful acts. Given Elijah’s attitude, a divine rebuke is expected. The amazing thing is that there is not one. Elijah is not rebuked for his weakness. “Rather, Elijah is accepted as he is and is merely called back to his ministry: ‘Go, return your way!’ God does not let him go simply because he is burned out and depressed.”

God’s compassion is magnified in his response to Elijah’s depression.

God’s love is tender enough to sense man’s ordinary physical needs. At long last, God sent an angel to Elijah -- not once, but twice and the angel told him to “Arise and eat.”

The most important reason for someone who is depressed to get out of bed is that some energy, some activity is important in helping the person to recover.

Getting out of bed is a major ordeal for those who are depressed. Elijah was so distraught that apart from the divine messenger, he would not have gotten up from his slumber, not even to eat. After Elijah rested and ate, he found both the physical and emotional strength to travel forty days and forty nights to Horeb.

Elijah was ready to give up. He had dealt with a conglomerate of fatigue, disappointment, anger and sadness. But God did not give up on Elijah. In a cave, the Lord came to Elijah and encouraged him. Elijah complained that he was the only faithful follower

27 Baker 3.


30 I Kings 19:5,7.

31 Hart 103.
left. This is another example of Elijah’s self-pity, the “I-only-am-left syndrome.”\textsuperscript{32} He not only felt fear and despondency, but Elijah felt lonely. God responds to him, “Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.”\textsuperscript{33} It is astounding to imagine that Elijah knew none of the 7000 people that the Lord noted. Had he become so caught up in himself that he failed to recognize the other believers around him? Such self-absorption is another symptom of depression. Finally, Elijah discovers that he is not alone at all and that his comrades are more numerous than he could have imagined. “In such fellowship he will find strength and courage and further healing for his depression of mind and heart.”\textsuperscript{34}

God was not finished using Elijah; He had a plan and a purpose for his life. “Many plans are in a man’s heart but the counsel of the LORD will stand.”\textsuperscript{35} “The realization that there was work to do and that he could still be of use no doubt helped Elijah himself to recover from his breakdown.”\textsuperscript{36} Being given a task to do can help to steady a man’s faith and to deliver him from despondency.\textsuperscript{37}

Nothing is told about a change in Elijah’s psychological state. God chose to give Elijah a task to change his focus from his depression to his call. “Doubts will cease and misgivings vanish when God puts him to work.”\textsuperscript{38} Elijah had to get up and eat so that his body would have the physical sustenance it needed to carry on with life. His feelings did not

\textsuperscript{32}Baker 3.
\textsuperscript{33}I Kings 19:18.
\textsuperscript{34}Wallace 51.
\textsuperscript{35}Proverbs 19:21.
\textsuperscript{36}Wallace 50.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.
change, but his actions did. He made a conscious decision to do something. Physical activity and helping others can go a long way in restoring joy in the lives of the depressed. Jesus said, “Lose your life to find it.”39 Focusing on the needs of others can help alleviate self-pity and can help a person to climb out of the depths of depression.

Just as Elijah’s depression was a response to his circumstances, many people today fight reactive depression. The person may not be responsible for their initial problem (e.g., physical illness or bad turn in his financial affairs), but he is responsible for handling the initial problem biblically.40 When a person fails to react biblically, and instead reacts sinfully to the problem (e.g., neglecting duties and chores, becoming resentful, complaining in self-pity), he may become depressed.41 By disciplining himself to resume daily activities, despite his feelings, the struggling man is able to break sinful patterns and as a result, hope is reborn.42

**Jonah’s Despair**

The life of Jonah parallels that of Elijah in many ways. Both flee. Both are faced with death. Both experience feelings of loneliness and betrayal. Both fall into a deep sleep; both sit under a tree and ask to die. Both are associated with a forty-day activity. God used both of these men for His glory, yet both of these men suffered depression so severe that they pleaded with God to take their lives. Being a child of God does not make one immune to periods of disappointment and feelings of depression. Jonah reacted selfishly to God’s mercy on the Ninevites. His response led him into a period of reactive depression.

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39Matthew 16:25.


41Ibid.

42Ibid 45.
The Lord commanded Jonah to go to the city of Ninevah and to warn the people there of the coming judgment, but instead Jonah fled to Tarshish. A terrible storm arose, and his shipmates threw Jonah overboard. The Lord sent a big fish to swallow Jonah; after the fish vomited him out, Jonah did as he was commanded. As a result, the Ninevites repented of their wicked ways. God had mercy on them and Jonah was outraged. How presumptuous of Jonah to think that he knew how God would react with the Ninevites! Jonah’s hatred for the Assyrians had convinced him that the Ninevites would never repent and that they would face the judgment of God. On the contrary, there was repentance; as a result, Jonah became overwhelmed by feelings of depression. Jonah went out from the city and made himself a shelter so that he could watch and see what would happen to the city. It is probable that Jonah was expecting something to happen that would explain God’s ways with humankind a little more clearly to him.  

Based on the teachings of Deuteronomy 18:21-22, Jonah would be regarded as a false prophet. “Not grasping the message of God’s sovereignty and care, Jonah’s depression deepened as he felt that his entire life had been wrong.” In Jonah 4:3 and 4:8, Jonah pleaded with God to take his life: “Therefore now O LORD, please take my life from me for death is better to me than life.” Jonah did not wish to live any longer because God had not carried out Ninevah’s judgment. Ninevah’s redemption had depressed him. Jonah failed to recognize God’s sovereignty and selfishly clung to his idea of justice.

Jonah’s lament in chapter four is commendable in that he cried out to God, but it stands in stark contrast with his cries in chapters one and two. “As he fled from the Lord in chapter 2 he praised God for saving his life only to pray in chapter 4 for God to take his

43 Barker and Kohlenberger. 1465.
In the light of his earlier experience, it is ironic that Jonah later desired to die on account of God’s compassion and grace. Jonah’s reprehensible behavior was a result of his anger. He was deceived by his emotions and did not see the incongruity of his own prayers.

If at all possible, major decisions should not be made during extremely emotional periods of life. Jonah reacted out of anger by disobeying God and fleeing to Tarshish. He was forced to the belly of the whale because of his disobedience. After Jonah’s obedience, he still remained emotional. He was deeply angered by God’s forgiveness of the Assyrians and by continuing to feel sorry for his current circumstances, his depression deepened. Many times, people who are depressed focus on present circumstances. It is important to remember how God has worked in the past to find hope for the future.

Just as Jonah did not understand why God was allowing him to suffer, many today continue to wrestle with the same question. “Why or why me?” From another perspective, one could ask of God, “Why You?” Why would God sustain His children during times of hardship? “Why not me?” is perhaps a better question. No one deserves the “easy” life. The ultimate question that the Lord tries to forcefully drive home to Jonah is “Who are you [Jonah] to question me?” The author of Ecclesiastes expresses this same thought. “Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.” The focus often is on the temporal but Scripture teaches that Christians are aliens in this world and will one day go home to a place where they will suffer no more.

Amidst Jonah’s depression, God sent a vine to grow over him and to shade him from the heat. Through this vine, Jonah experienced God’s blessing and His care. At dawn the

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46 Ibid 278.

47 Wiseman 127.

48 Smith and Page 282.

49 Ecclesiastes 11:5 NAS.
next day, God appointed a worm to attack the plant and caused it to wither. Jonah became infuriated with God. Why would God show mercy to the Ninevites and not his prophet? Was he not more righteous than they? “Jonah wanted to negate the compassionate act of God’s grace toward Ninevah, so that is how God treated him.”

God showed grace to both the Ninevites and Jonah, but God sovereignly removed his instrument of grace from Jonah – thus the parasite devoured the plant.

God may use many different means of comfort to help alleviate the symptoms of depression. These blessings are from God’s gracious character. Too often in suffering, God is expected to act because He somehow owes it to His children. “A major concern is that many believers apparently feel God owes them smooth sailing or at least a full explanation (and perhaps an apology) for the hardships they encounter.” However, grace is undeserved. Those moments of respite are to be celebrated and not to be expected any more that Jonah deserved the vine to shade him from the harsh elements. In times of suffering, God’s presence should cause gratitude.

In his distress, Jonah cried out to the Lord. In Luke 18, Jesus tells a parable about a judge who tires of a woman’s constant begging for his assistance. In response to this Jesus says, “Now will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.”

In the midst of depression, people should cry out to the Lord and day and night seek Him. Christians should pray like Jonah, who carried his questions and complaints directly to God. It is important not to let life’s pitfalls hinder faith. “If your spiritual walk is dependent on the


51 Hill and Walton 498.

52 Dobson 41.
ebb and flow of emotion, your confidence as a believer will pitch and roll like a ship on a stormy sea.”

Anger blinds clarity. Jonah was infuriated over the grace God had given to the Ninevites. Perhaps this anger fueled his depression. LaHaye says that depression “always involves a component of anger whether visible or invisible, conscious or unconscious.” American culture tends to encourage people to suppress their anger and to present a picture of perfection. The Scriptures make it clear that God is big enough to handle man’s anger. Men and women need to cry out to God in prayer and express their anger. Burying it will only cause it to resurface later.

Jonah’s anger expressed not only a lack of understanding but also a lack of trust. Jonah’s perception of God’s character was challenged and he struggled with unbelief. How could he trust a God who would grant forgiveness to the wicked? “If God must act so perversely, then Jonah sees no point in continuing to live; he would be better off dead.” At that moment, Jonah failed to see his own iniquity and to remember God’s sovereignty. God’s ways are not man’s ways. According to R. T. Kendall, the senior minister of Westminster Chapel in London, “One hundred percent of believers will eventually go through a period when God lets them down.” But even when understanding is lacking, God is worthy of trust. People who are depressed can trust in the sovereignty of God and there find hope.

The sovereignty of God is the major theme in the book of Jonah. “The repeated use of the verb ‘appointed’ of the fish, the vine, the worm, and the wind stresses the divine

53Ibid 122.
54LaHaye 88.
56Dobson 26.
God is the initiator of crises in human experience and it is God who resolves them. God appointed the elements of nature to be used in the education of his prophet. God has purpose in all that He does, even if He does not make that purpose known. Failing to recognize God’s sovereign plan, Jonah missed the joy of serving God. Much like Elijah, Jonah sank into a selfish state of mind. Wise counsel for Jonah would have encouraged him to confess his selfishness and judgmental attitudes to the Lord. If he had only confessed, God would have been faithful and just to forgive his sins.

**Jeremiah’s Bitterness and Loss of Hope**

Planning to serve as a priest, Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet. He was to warn Jerusalem of the Lord’s coming wrath. Jeremiah had not anticipated that suffering could also accompany service for God. Jeremiah suffered greatly as he sought to fulfill this task. His lament was so great that he cursed the day he was born. “Cursed be the day when I was born; Let the day not be blessed when my mother bore me! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, ‘A baby boy has been born to you. Why did I ever come forth from the womb to look on trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?’” This verse seems to be in sudden contrast to the strength of Jeremiah found earlier in the book. However, “the transition and contrast are psychologically understandable in view of the constant pressures on Jeremiah.” He was subjected to the sort of doubts that

57 Barker and Kohlenberger 1466
59 Smith and Page 272.
60 1 John 1:9.
seem often to plague the greatest of religious leaders. Despite his despair, this same man later penned the words of 29:11: “For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” How could Jeremiah experience such utter despair and, later, such incredible hope when nothing about his circumstances had changed? Why? Because behind the pain of human calamity is the faithful presence of God.

In Lamentations, a glimpse is given into the very heart of Jeremiah. He felt as though God had besieged him with bitterness and hardship. He felt forgotten; “the intensity of the suffering is compared to the darkness of the abode of the forgotten departed dead.” Jeremiah felt as though he were chained in some dungeon where God would not answer his cries for help. Not only that, but the prophet found the path beset with danger (for the bear and the lion). His soul had rejected peace and he had forgotten happiness. “The sufferings were so deeply impressed in the heart of the victim that he found himself constantly thinking about them. His memory left him depressed and despondent.”

“When we feel unsuccessful, discouraged, misunderstood and ill-treated, we should remember Jeremiah and realize that the Lord does not call all of us to a life filled with human applause and earthly reward.”

63Barker and Kohlenberger 1199.
66Lamentations 3:5.
67Huey 471.
68Ibid.
69Ibid 472.
70Swindoll 6.
By Jeremiah’s own understanding, the affliction he experienced was imposed by the rod of God’s judgment. “There was no relief from the constant awareness that God had ‘turned his hand against’ the afflicted one.” 71 He considered himself as alienated from God’s favor. How often are Christians told that their depression is a result of falling from God’s favor? Was this true in Jeremiah’s case? Certainly not! Therefore, not all depression is punishment from God. “God doesn’t send depression our way as a form of punishment – He has taken away all our punishment on the Cross.” 72 God does however, allow the consequences of sin. If there is no known unrepented sin that separates the believer from God, then it can be deduced that the depression is not the consequence of known, personal sin.

The “weeping prophet” is a perfect example of someone who was obedient to God and yet, still suffered greatly. Jeremiah’s misery was a result of sin, but not his personal sin. Jeremiah suffered because of the unfaithfulness of a nation. Ultimately, all suffering is a result of sin. As a result of the Fall, God cursed the earth and caused man to face sweat and toil because of sin. In this sense, depression is a result of sin --universal sin. Jeremiah begged the people of Jerusalem to repent, but he personally was walking in obedience. His obedience, however, did not spare him from his despair. “The experience of Jeremiah at this time shows how difficult the task of God’s servants can be and how readily available the grace of God is to sustain them in their darkest hours.” 73

When Jeremiah meditated on his circumstances, he grieved. In Lamentations, he cried, “My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the LORD.” 74 When people suffer loss, it is only natural for them to grieve. It is normal to focus for a time on the grief

71Huey 470.
72Hart 22.
73Barker and Kohlenberger 1199.
74Lamentations 3:18.
and misery. “However, if our attention continues to be directed inward, we will eventually lose our perspective and our hope.”75 This is what happened to Jeremiah. In time, God spoke to Jeremiah, and his focus shifted from his present circumstances to the power of the Almighty. Nothing about his circumstances had changed, only his focus. In order for a person to overcome depression, “attention must be on success. If it is on how much you want to get rid of your pain, then the attention is on the pain.”76 Jeremiah ceased to dwell on his circumstances and began to trust God with the outcome.

Dr. James Dobson wrote of a pastor whose daughter had just lost her leg due to an amputation. The pastor was extremely angry at God and what he believed theologically was in turmoil. The pastor finally came to realize that he had two choices. “One was to continue in my anger at God and follow the path of despair I was on. The other choice was to let God be God and somehow say, ‘I have chosen to accept the fact that You are God and I’m the servant, instead of the other way around’.”77 Allowing God to be God in our lives without explanation may not lift the depression but it certainly makes it more bearable.

“Even in the midst of great suffering and unceasing tears, Jeremiah [found] hope in God’s mercy: ‘The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,/For His compassions never fail./They are new every morning;/Great is Thy faithfulness./The Lord is my portion, says my soul,/Therefore I have hope in Him./The Lord is good to those who wait for Him,/To the person who seeks Him’.”78 These truths gave Jeremiah the assurance he needed to endure tremendous suffering and overcome deep despair. “While we are on earth, we may never see the purpose of our suffering. But we know that God will keep his promises to us.”79

75Swindoll 27.
77Dobson 88.
78Swindoll 13.
79Dobson 38.
If God is always loving toward his children, why does He often seem so silent and aloof when his people cry out to him? C.S. Lewis answers this, saying:

“I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can’t give it: you are like the drowning man who can’t be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.”

When sorrow is deep, how can the ability to receive God’s love be regained? “Jeremiah gives the answer: Wait patiently . . . wait silently . . . submit willingly.”

Once Jeremiah’s attention shifted from his current situation to God’s promises, a remarkable transition seemed to take place in his attitude. “In the midst of chaos and depression, the poet revealed a deep faith in the trustworthiness of God: ‘Great is your faithfulness’.” No more complaints are recorded in Jeremiah after chapter twenty, yet the prophet’s troubles only increased. Jeremiah was even thrown into a cistern to die, but nothing is recorded about his mental state of mind at this time. God mightily used Jeremiah, even during those dark days when Jeremiah wished he had never been born.

“Jeremiah is the penultimate example for the incarnation of lament, of lament in-fleshed and lived out.” Jeremiah is brutally honest in his prayers to God. This type of prayer is an act of cleansing. “It purges sin, dissolves misunderstanding about God, removes doubt about God’s actions, and washes out all the deceitfulness that sin has created within us.”

[References]

80 Swindoll, 30.
81 Ibid 30.
82 Huey 473.
despair than when he stands before Israel confident that he is the bearer of Yahweh’s word.” Just as Jeremiah had to shift his focus away from his circumstances, those struggling with depression must turn their focus to the Lord. Focusing on the depression empowers it. Meditating on the sovereignty of God offers the sufferer hope. Jeremiah encourages believers to patiently endure their painful experience and to learn whatever God wishes them to as a result of their trial.”

By remembering how Jeremiah meditated on the unfailing love of God while feeling abandoned, oppressed, humiliated and bitter, those struggling with depression can find hope and encouragement during times of distress. “Through struggles like these, through persecutions, loneliness, exhaustion and disappointment Jeremiah tested God and found Him true.”

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**Depression vs. Grief: Naomi**

Death had taken her husband and her two sons, leaving Naomi with no other choice than to return to her homeland, Judah. Naomi believed in God’s sovereignty and thus ascribed responsibility for what had befallen her to no one but Him. In Ruth 1:13, Naomi told her daughters-in-law that “the hand of the LORD has gone forth me.” Naomi discouraged the girls traveling with her; after all, she saw Yahweh as her enemy.

Despite Naomi’s words, Ruth solemnly swore to follow her anyway. Once they reached Bethlehem, Naomi changed her name to Mara because the Almighty had dealt bitterly with her. Naomi means “pleasant” whereas Mara means “bitter.” Naomi was

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85 Harrelson 268.
86 Swindoll 29-30
88 Ruth 1:20.
89 Wiseman 262.
sure that her God was over all, so the explanation for the bitter things she had experienced must be with him.  

When a person experiences great loss, grief is a very healthy and normal reaction. There are times when grief can trigger depression. Six common events that can trigger depression are the death of a loved one, forced separation from people who one cares about, serious illness in one’s own life or in the life of a loved one, divorce or marital problems, financial problems, and/or losing a job. If there has not been a great loss, or a specific cause for the sadness cannot be found, the person may need to find help. However, when the sadness is severe enough to disrupt a person’s life, it becomes depression and would be considered a mental illness. “When the person begins to cry easily and feels the situation is hopeless, the individual needs professional help.” Talking to a trusted pastor can help a person to discern whether his or her sadness is normal or if depression is beginning to take root in their life. “Pastors need to listen carefully to how sad a person thinks and talks of herself or himself in order to make the distinction between sadness and depression.”

Naomi is an excellent example of someone who could have been overcome with ongoing depression because of life’s circumstances but did not. While Naomi experienced true hardship and sadness, she did not despair. She made a plan to return to Bethlehem. She was uncertain what she would find there, but she knew God was with the people there. While living in Moab, she had seen what the gods could do, and she knew that any hope she would find would come from the one true God. She may have known her hope would come

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90Ibid 263.


92Hart 6.

93Ibid 17

94Hunter 1103.
from the Lord, but she also blamed Him for her current troubles. She blamed God for emptying her life and making her bitter. “She [did] indeed ascribe sovereignty to God, but this is a sovereignty without grace, an omnipotent power without compassion, a judicial will without mercy.” By the end of the book of Ruth, Naomi came to see the merciful side of her Creator, but in the midst of her suffering she could only see his wrath. God had a plan to not only take care of Naomi, but also to use Ruth in the lineage of the Messiah. Had Naomi’s sons not died, Obed would never have been born.

Job: A Man of Sorrows

Job found himself in the pit of despair after having suffered tremendous loss. Perhaps the most perplexing loss was the closeness he had once felt with his Creator. Where had God gone? “What he wanted most was God, the restoration of fellowship with God. He was not saying that he would get this—indeed, he despaired of it the next instant. But the ravishing thought was destined to reappear.” Job wanted God to cross-examine him and answer his questions. Why was God absent? In 13:24, Job cried out, “Why do You hide Your face and consider me Your enemy?” This man who felt abandoned by everyone, including God, lamented that even a tree when it is blown over will send up fresh, green shoots on the scattered stump, whereas Job believed himself utterly without a future.

Job is not the only one who has experienced God’s silence. In 119:82, the Psalmist asked the Lord, “When will You comfort me?” He felt deserted by God. Isaiah described God as “a God who hides Himself.” In Isaiah 55:8 the LORD said, “In an outburst of anger

96James 527.
98Isaiah 45:15.
I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you.” In this passage God admits that there are times when He hides His face, times when His people do not experience Him.

It is easy to trust God when His blessings are being poured out. It is another issue altogether to trust Him when all seems hopeless and His answers seem elusive. “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”⁹⁹ Man’s failure to hear God’s voice does not negate His presence. As the Proverb suggests, man should seek God with all his heart. Job appealed to God for answers and poured out a bitter recitation of his innocence and frustration.¹⁰⁰ God did not give answers to Job. Instead He gave Job His Presence. Job’s laments led him to recognize the presence of God.

“Lament is the path that takes us to the place where we discover that there is no complete answer to pain and suffering, only Presence.”¹⁰¹ Throughout scripture, God exhorts His followers not to be afraid because He is with them. God’s presence is “dangerous, disturbing and comforting and is the source of all hope.”¹⁰² The world’s present-day Jobs are also promised God’s sufficiency. “He wants us to represent His presence to each other and to those who are afflicted in any way.”¹⁰³ When Christians rest in His presence they will find the peace that surpasses all understanding in the midst of their tumultuous conflict.

When calamity attacked Job, his friends all accused him of harboring unrepentant sin in his life. They insisted that Job’s dilemma was God’s punishment for his sin. Eliphaz reasoned based on the preconception that God blesses the good man, but does not bless the

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⁹⁹ Proverbs 25:2.
¹⁰⁰ Barker 83.
¹⁰¹ Card 129.
¹⁰² Ibid 129.
¹⁰³ Barker 85.
bad.104 This assumption negates common grace. Job also thought that if God were just then “prosperity would follow goodness and calamity overtake sin.”105 Job’s theology collided with his life. He knew of no unconfessed sin in his life and could not imagine why God would allow such sufferings in his life. In agony Job asked, “What has gone wrong between God and me? What kind of God is God to allow these things to befall me?”106

Job was hurt, confused and angered at his friends’ assertions that piety pays off and suffering is a sign of sin. His friends thought they were helping Job, but in essence they were all accusing Job. What Job needed from his friends was their support; if they had just come and stood with him during this time that would have been better than what happened when they opened their mouths. When confronted by circumstances that are not easily understood, it is better to comfort without words than to try and explain that which cannot be explained. It is far better to be silent than to pretend to know the mind of God. “The biggest thing you can do for those who are suffering is not to talk platitudes, not to ask questions, but to get into contact with God and the ‘greater works’ will be done by prayer.”107

God was not punishing Job for sin, but was merely permitting Satan to test Job’s sincerity.108 “The Satan figure (the prosecuting attorney in the heavenly council) asserts that Job [was] righteous because he [was] blessed; God [countered] with the insistence that Job [had] been blessed because he [was] righteous.”109 Satan believed that if God withdrew His blessings, then Job would curse God and die. Job’s friends put forward Satan’s case, while


105James 530.


107Ibid 34.

108James 519.

109Dumbrell 255.
Job argued the divine case. In the end, his friends stood condemned and Job was commended.\textsuperscript{110} Obviously, God did not doubt Job so He agreed to Satan’s challenge to test Job.

God saw the complete picture whereas Job’s vision was limited to the temporal. John Piper wrote a beautiful poem in which he penned the words:

\begin{quote}
“Would you be willing, Job, to part
With all your children, if I my
Deep counsel I should judge that by
Such severing more good would be
And you would know far more of me?”\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

Perhaps Job would have responded differently had he known that he was being tested. However, God did not explain Himself to Job, and He is under no obligation to explain His actions today. In present sufferings, God is in control and has a purpose for suffering, even when He chooses not to reveal that purpose. God did not want Job to confess sin that he did not see; this would be dishonest. God wanted Job to be honest with him. God can handle the fluctuating emotions of man. He wants men and women to be real with Him; He sees through the masks.

Suffering was not for “Job’s chastening or his perfecting, but for an ulterior purpose which he did not know, but his intuition made him stick to the fact that the only One could explain the sublimities of Nature was the One who could explain what he was going through.”\textsuperscript{112} Job was not afraid to question God. He fired question after question to God and was discouraged when he received no answer. When at long last God did answer, it was not the answer Job had expected – or wanted. Job wanted the encounter with God so that he could question God, but it was God who questioned Job.\textsuperscript{113} Through a storm, God revealed

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110}Ibid 255. \\
\textsuperscript{111}Piper, \textit{The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God}, 18. \\
\textsuperscript{112}Chambers, \textit{Baffled to Fight Better: Talks on the Book of Job}, 80-81.
\end{flushright}
Himself and “in the magnificent assertion of creative power that follows, God [said], indirectly, that he does not choose that human beings should know all the factors operating in this present world.”

Job was not treated as a sinner in God’s response but as one whose horizons need to be expanded. Out of the revelation of God’s majesty and power, Job came to recognize God’s providential care.

Job acknowledged that he did not and could not know the all the purposes of God, and, therefore, he must trust God with his life and its issues. Job had been reminded that God cares. Job still did not know the why, but he seemed to accept the how because he knew the Who. “Knowing the Who without knowing the why leaves room for faith.”

Knowing God brings security even without answers. Job’s experience of knowing God and finding contentment came before the restoration of his possessions. His faith in God stood in spite of his lack of understanding.

The book of Job is an illustration of the truth found in Romans 8:28, that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose. This verse is often said as a platitude to those who are hurting, but God meant it as a promise. “When all forty-two chapters of the book of Job are said and done, the inspired author leaves us with an unshakable – undoubted fact: God governs all things for his good purposes.”

God may not always reveal His divine intention, but the nature of such intentions are known by Him.

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113 Hulme 141.
114 Dumbrell 258.
115 Ibid.
116 Hulme 146.
117 Ibid.
119 Dumbrell 261.
Paul’s Cry for Deliverance

Many people teach that suffering is a weakness that results from a lack of faith. Thankfully, the Bible teaches otherwise. Paul, a great man of God, struggled with a thorn in his flesh and he pleaded with God three times to remove it. Scripture is unclear as to the details of the thorn in Paul’s life. According to Kistemaker, “Most scholars agree that this term must be interpreted literally. That is, Paul endured physical pain.”120 Twelve common suggestions for the thorn are that it represented epilepsy, hysteria, neuralgia, depression, eye problems, malaria, temptation, personal enemies and punishment by a demon.121 On the grounds of historical analysis, however, the truth is that there is not enough unambiguous information to allow more than mere speculation as to the nature of Paul’s thorn.122 Whatever Paul’s physical ailment may have been, it was of long duration. Regardless of what the thorn represents, it stands as representative of suffering and the person with depression can relate to Paul’s struggle for relief.

Pleading for help, Paul most certainly expected God to supply. Paul had experienced great miracles of God and had experienced the power of God in a mighty way at his conversion experience. He had no reason to think that God would do anything but heal him. He probably believed that “the stake miraculously would be taken away and Paul could live triumphantly, free of any nagging afflictions.”123 This is the hope of most people who are struggling with any type of affliction. Why did Paul pray three times? “After the second

121 Kistemaker 416.
bout of praying for relief, Paul asked himself if he had prayed long enough or hard enough. It seemed to Paul that his faith was as weak as his body. The thought depressed him.**124**

Can someone pray their way out of a depression? It depends on what is causing the depression. If the depression is caused by unrepentant sin, then yes. However, as Hart states, “I don’t want to give the impression that every time you are depressed, you can just pray and it will go away. It’s not that easy. But prayer can always be a part of what it takes to deal with depression.”**125** Depression is a thorn in many people’s lives, and there are times when God refuses to remove it.

God definitely has the power to heal, but there are times when He chooses not to do so. In Paul’s case, the request was denied. This denial had absolutely nothing to do with Paul’s faith; it had to do with God’s sovereignty. Dobson writes, “I believe it is a ploy of Satan to undermine the faith of the vulnerable. And it begins with a theological distortion that promises a stress-free life and a God who always does what He is told.”**126** Many modern-day evangelists teach a gospel of universal health and prosperity. They teach that if a person has enough faith and is living by God’s laws, they will receive God’s blessings abundantly. Martin Lloyd Jones puts it this way:

“If you find yourself in this position of trial and testing, take it as a wonderful opportunity of proving your faith, of showing your faith, of manifesting your faith and bringing glory to His great and Holy Name. But if you should fail to do that, if you should apparently be too weak to apply your faith, if you are being so besieged and attacked by the devil and by hell and by the world, well, then I say, just fly to Him at once and He will receive you and will bless you; He will give you deliverance.”**127**

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124Barker, William 145.
125Hart 83.
126Dobson 110-111.
Jones is correct in saying that God “will receive you” but will He grant deliverance? The answer is not always a resounding “Yes!” To say that God’s decision not to heal is based on the maturity of a person’s faith is not credible. Paul was a man of remarkable faith, yet God did not bring him deliverance. Dobson says, “It is unconscionable to tell such hurting people that they lack the faith to be as good as new.”

This theology is much like that of Job’s friends.

Teachings like Jones’ establish a level of expectations that will eventually wound and weaken unstable Christians. In times of crisis, vision is blurred, and the crisis becomes the focal point. God alone sees the big picture and knows what is best. As in the case of Paul, there are times when God does not answer man’s demands in spite of the convincing reasons presented. Paul had to be content with Christ’s power to endure his suffering.

The one thing denied to Paul which is exactly what most people demand above all was the ability to control his own destiny. People fear depression because it is seen as being out of control or losing control; this fear is exaggerated in Christian circles because of the emphasis placed on perfection. However, Jesus is the only man who lived a life of perfection. For someone to continually berate himself or herself for not being perfect is absurd, yet that is exactly what happens in depression. There are times when relief does not come, and this lack or relief brings many to a crisis of belief. They become bitter and angry at God and focus on what God is not doing (by not healing), rather than on what He is doing (offering grace to sustain).

God knew that Paul would need His strength to endure and that is precisely what God told Paul in II Corinthians 12:9. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made

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128 Dobson 108.
129 Barker 146.
130 Barnett 574.
131 Hart 12.
perfect in weakness.” Grace is more than unmerited favor that brings salvation but it is also a force that sustains Christians throughout life.\textsuperscript{132} The apostle was able to endure the pain of his affliction because of the relief that God extended to him.\textsuperscript{133} God granted Paul grace – just not healing. Paul received more than grace to bear a vexing affliction; he received the power of Christ.\textsuperscript{134} Instead of enabling Paul to escape his tribulation, God enabled Paul to endure it.

The thorn was not some type of punishment for sin in Paul’s life; it forced Paul to remain dependent on the Father. It served as a constant reminder of not only his own inadequacy, but also on the total adequacy of Christ.\textsuperscript{135} God “seeks to advance our spiritual well-being, which in Paul’s case was humility brought about by the messenger of Satan.”\textsuperscript{136} God is more concerned with man’s relationship with Him than He is with man’s comfort. “One can rejoice in tribulation because a scene of human weakness is the best possible stage for the display of divine power.”\textsuperscript{137} Like Paul, man is most powerful, when he is the least reliant on his own resources. If Paul had boasted in his own strength, thinking that by himself he was equal to any task or any calamity, he would have cancelled out the power of God in his life.\textsuperscript{138}

Through his cycle of pain and disappointment, Paul discovered not only how vain, weak and finite he was but also how mighty, strong and omnipotent God is.\textsuperscript{139} He came to

\textsuperscript{132}Garland 524.
\textsuperscript{133}Kistemaker 419.
\textsuperscript{134}Garland 523.
\textsuperscript{136}Kistemaker 419.
\textsuperscript{138}Garland 525.
\textsuperscript{139}Barker, William 148.
know himself better and to know God in a deeper way. Initially, Paul feared the thorn would be a handicap to the effectiveness of his ministry, but, instead, it gave his self-esteem “a knock out blow” and kept him constantly dependent on the divine enabling. The thorn, in this respect, proved to be a help. “If his ministry was so effective despite the physical weakness, then the transcendent power was manifestly God’s, not his own.” As Paul came to understand this, he made an unexpected turn and even boasted of his weaknesses. He said, “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” As Garland points out, “Stakes in the flesh are not good, but they are also not bad because they may convey a word from God if we are attuned to hear it.” There is purpose in suffering.

**Jesus: A Man of Suffering**

In the quest for perfection, only one man has ever attained it. Jesus Christ is the only man to have ever walked the earth and to have lived a perfectly sinless life. Did this God-man ever get discouraged? Was life always happy for Him? The answer, of course, is a negative one. Jesus was a man of suffering. He descended from His home in glory to come to earth and to live among a sinful people. There were many instances where Jesus was discouraged. He became discouraged by the disciples’ lack of faith. He became outraged at the corruption surrounding the temple. He was completely human and thus experienced the many emotions of man. Before anyone laid a hand on Him, Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane to reconcile His will with the Father’s. Jesus proclaimed, “My soul is

140 Bruce 35.
141 Ibid 136.
142 II Corinthians 12:10.
143 Garland 521.
overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”

His anguish here should not be passed over lightly; Jesus prayed three times in deep emotional distress. He went to the Father in prayer, knowing that the Father’s will was for Him to die not only a physical death, but a spiritual death in the place of His people; the pain was so great that He longed for death itself. Jesus’ cry reflects the words of the Psalmist’s refrain in chapters forty-two and forty-three: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” The Deceiver was most likely present and perhaps tempted Him saying that Jesus had been perfectly good, should God not bless Him for it?

Jesus responded with prayer. Kneeling in prayer was not customary in Jesus’ time yet this is exactly what He did in the Garden. Matthew and Mark say that Jesus fell to the ground, thus showing the intensity of His emotional strain. He did not want to face the cross; distress was so great that His sweat fell to the ground like drops of blood.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus wept. Likewise, people who are in the depths of depression should feel no shame over their tears. Jesus not only sympathizes with them, but He also holds them in the palm of His hands. “Because of the Incarnation, in Jesus’ eyes the tears of God and those of the people mingled and flowed together as well.” Along with Him, the Man of Sorrows, people who are hurting are invited to weep. “He holds them together, both the truth and the tears, through lament.”

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144 Matthew 26:38.
145 Barker and Kohlenberger 121.
146 Card 118.
147 Barker and Kohlenberger 279.
148 Matthew 26:39 and Mark 14:35.
149 Card 120.
150 Ibid 122.
Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane shows that anxiety is equally God’s will and part of human destiny. The perfect Man experienced it. Jesus’ anxiety was not sinful for He was a sinless man. Therefore, anxiety can be a natural response to circumstances. Like Jesus, people are created to be emotional and to experience a multitude of emotions throughout life. These emotions are not sinful, but can lead to sinful behavior. Lewis writes, “I do not doubt that whatever misery He permits will be for our ultimate good unless by rebellious will we convert it to evil. But I get no further than Gethsemane: and am daily thankful that that scene of all others in our Lord’s life did not go unrecorded.”

In His worst crisis, Jesus longed for His Father’s will over His own. He willingly surrendered control unto His Father’s hands. Despite His emotional turmoil and its physical manifestations, Jesus trusted His Father. He cried out from the depths of His heart to the Father; He was very real and intense in His petitions. He set the perfect example for those suffering today. Jesus pleaded with the Father, yet the Father refused to remove the cup. Was this due to a lack of faith? Hardly. Jesus’ pleading supports the truth that God’s will is supreme, and that although man is encouraged to cry out to the Father for help, he should understand that the help may not come in the form that is hoped for or expected.

Not only does Jesus’ example encourage people to trust the Father in times of difficulty but His obedience to face death on the cross, despite of His own desires, equips those who believe in Him with the very power of God. Lewis asserts that “there was One who walked its sands who was called ‘a man of sorrows.’ Barnett described Him as the “risen powerful Lord - - who Himself was once utterly ‘weak,’ ‘sin-laden,’ and ‘poor’ in achieving reconciliation with God – who is now strong in resurrected power to give His grace and power to the one who calls out to Him.”

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152 Ibid 214.
sorrow to the cross, and because He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, He can now succor all those who come into Him with their troubled hearts and minds. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, Christians have the very power of God at work from within, which gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. “We are living in this short time, a time, indeed, full of sadness and sorrow. To live this short time in the spirit of Jesus Christ means to reach out from the midst of our pains and to let them be turned into joy by the love of him who came within our reach.”

The Messiah is described in Isaiah 53:3 as “despised and forsaken of men, a man acquainted with sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Jesus is often called the Suffering Servant. The King of Kings bore suffering on earth so that mankind would not have to face eternal suffering. “The Servant’s wisdom was deeply self-denying, for it meant accepting the ends determined by God and willingly shouldering a burden of untold suffering to make them possible.” Man’s wisdom does not willingly choose suffering, yet here the God-man sought to please the Father so much that He willingly endured whatever the Father deemed possible.

Post-resurrection, it is now clear why Jesus willingly submitted to the cross. At the time, people did not understand. Even His followers were confused and denied Him. People considered Him stricken and smitten of God. As Barker and Kohlenberger point out, “God’s way of doing things often does not seem to make sense to human beings.”

153 Barnett 577.
156 Isaiah 53:3.
157 Barker and Kohlenberger 1130.
158 Isaiah 53:4.
159 Barker and Kohlenberger 1131.
same way, many times people do not understand why circumstances are the way they are. Man is full of queries and theories as to the reasons for suffering, but there are times that suffering just does not make sense. In light of the resurrection, the meaning of Isaiah 53:5 has been made plain. Jesus endured the shame of the cross “for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.” In time, the purpose for Jesus’ suffering was revealed. Perhaps in time, God will reveal the reason for present sufferings but God is not obliged to do so.

People are always looking to God for answers. “God’s answer to Job’s loss is not getting his dead children back. Indeed he never gets them back. The answer, God’s answer, is that Job gets God back.”\textsuperscript{160} The same can be said for Jeremiah and for many today. When the Messiah came, people did not recognize Him because He was not what they expected. “They wanted someone who would give them answers. Jesus gave them Himself.”\textsuperscript{161} Jesus offers the same today; He may not always give the answers, but He gives Himself.

\textsuperscript{160} Card 127.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid 127.
ROLE OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Scripture is very clear that the war is not with flesh and blood but with principalities. What role does this warfare play in the lives of the depressed? There is such a thing as demon possession, but throughout the centuries, the church has been very careful about declaring a person demon-possessed.\(^1\) Mental illness and demon possession are not synonymous. Many people have been left utterly disillusioned and devastated because immature Christians tried to cast imaginary demons out of them.\(^2\) “The Bible does not portray moral evil – however heinous or devilish – as a demonization to be cast out.”\(^3\) To blame depression on demonic activity can drive the depressed person into further despair.

Satan does however wreak havoc in the lives of the depressed. “Satan’s greatest psychological weapon is a gut-level feeling of inferiority, inadequacy and low self-worth.”\(^4\) He is a liar, the accuser and the one who blinds the mind.\(^5\) Satan is aware of man’s weaknesses. When a person is in the depths of despair, Satan will lie, accuse and distort the truth in an effort to prevent the person from recovering from the depression.

No one is immune to the wiles of Satan. Wallace reminds that “the battle with the powers of evil is not one in which we can gain a victory and then have a rest, imagining that it will take the enemy time to recover.”\(^6\) When Elijah was physically exhausted from his battle with the prophets of Baal, Satan tempted him to doubt and distrust the love, and word

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\(^2\)Seamonds 13.


\(^4\)Ibid 48.

\(^5\)Ibid 69.

and promises of God.\textsuperscript{7} Wallace further notes that “Satan often attacks with such power that he seems able to make us fail in the hour of our victory.”\textsuperscript{8} At first this appears to be the case with Elijah. However, God in His providence did not desert Elijah despite Satan’s attacks. If God’s invisible arms had not held Elijah, especially when he was least aware of it, the temptation of despair would have swallowed him up.\textsuperscript{9}

Like Elijah, Paul too, suffered from Satan’s attacks. “Many argue that Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment’ him, provides a case for ongoing demon-induced suffering.”\textsuperscript{10} It is important to note that neither Paul nor Elijah reacted ekballistically. While he was attacked by Satan, he was not possessed by Satan. Paul prayed for God’s power to set him free and God said “no.” God was still in control – He had granted temporary power to Satan but ultimate power belonged to God then and is still His today. Too often Satan is given too much credit. He is neither omnipotent nor omniscient and will always be subservient to the Father. Jesus alone “delivers us from the evil one.”\textsuperscript{11}

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\textsuperscript{7}Krummacher 126.
\textsuperscript{8}Wallace 45.
\textsuperscript{9}Krummacher 126.
\textsuperscript{10}Powlison, \textit{Conscience and Convenience}, 108.
\textsuperscript{11}Matthew 6:13.
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FINDING HOPE IN GOD’S WORD

“Sometimes the spark of faith is slight
And does not make the darkness bright.
But keep it lit and you will find:
Far better this than being blind.
One little flame when all is night,
Proves there is such a thing as Light.
Remember now the place and price
Where Jesus promised paradise.
One answered prayer when all is gone,
Will give you hope to wait for dawn.”

The gravest danger for those who are depressed is hopelessness. Without hope, a person becomes overwhelmed with despair. What exactly is hope? The concept of hope in the Lord implies that reality is open-ended, but God always has options for persons that cannot at first be perceived. With God all things are possible, so there is always hope. “There is a gap and a wildness in things and if God does not step in and adjust it, there is no hope; but God has stepped in by the Redemption, and our part is to trust confidently in Him.” Unfortunately, a trend in Western culture is to look within one’s self to find hope. Mainstream psychology has experienced many changes as it has tried to offer solutions to those with reactive depression. Unfortunately, most of mainstream psychology fails to acknowledge the power of God and His Word in offering hope to the depressed. In the late 1800’s, most of the mentally ill were housed in asylums where its superintendents said, “We are coming to the idea that very few people do get well.” In an attempt to change this, there was a movement away from asylums and state hospitals became the norm.

Unfortunately, there was little difference between the two. “Then, beginning in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a profound reaction occurred. Psychiatric reformers set out to explore the causes of insanity through individual history of the patient and his development within the family and community.”

Outpatient clinics became the new mode of helping the depressed. People in the psychiatric community had great hopes for the success of outpatient clinics, but unfortunately, state hospitals continued to receive federal support and the outpatient clinics did not have the proper funding and therefore resorted to referring many of its patients back to the state hospitals. While strides have been made in mainstream psychology, there is not enough evidence of its success to grant the depressed great hope. However, when combined with a proper theology of the sovereignty of God and the comfort of His Word, sufferers can and do find hope.

Reading the thoughts of others who have experienced dark times often soothes the hurting soul and helps loneliness to lift. When the Psalmist wrote, “I am weary with my sighing, every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with tears,” he did so to complain to the Lord, but God, in His awesome power, uses such laments to help others through difficult situations. God often uses His Word to soothe the hurting. “Hope in the Scriptures always is a confident expectation; the Word never carries even the connotation of uncertainty.”

Scripture is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” “The utter simplicity and unsearchable complexity of Scripture enlightens us about God, about ourselves, about good and evil, true and false, grace

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5Ibid 294.
6Ibid 371.
8Hebrews 4:12
and judgment, about the world that surrounds us with its many forms of suffering and beguilement, with its opportunities to shed light into darkness.”

Reading the Word is different from reading any other book because it is alive. There is amazing power in the Word. It is about understanding and helping people. It has power to encourage and empower those who are downcast. Several verses offer hope in times of crisis.

For those who believe in Christ, there is always hope. Paul said it this way: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” While life on earth may be bleak, eternal life has been promised and life in heaven and on the new earth will be a life of joy, with no sorrow. “Evil and pain will not have the last word. The valley of the shadow of death is not our final destination.” No matter how bad things get, they will get better for believers, whether in this life or in the life to come.

Knowing that life after death will be better than life on earth may not be enough to grant hope for life on earth, however. Peter pointed to this truth, writing, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.”

Suffering is part of life and should be expected for Christ followers. In that suffering, Christ is exalted and the person who endures in faith brings glory to the Father.

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10Ibid 2.

11Romans 8:18.


131 Peter 4:12-13.
God does not allow suffering in the lives of his children for no reason. There are times when He divulges His purpose to His creation and times when He does not. One reason for difficulties is found in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” Tribulations not only enable one man to comfort another, they also reveal the power of God in that man’s life. “As the power of God was revealed through the weaknesses of the crucified Lord for the salvation of the world, so the life and power of the risen Christ are being revealed through his weak apostles in the midst of humiliations and afflictions.”

In difficulties, people share in the sufferings of Christ. Modern Christians tend to believe that they should be “happy” at all costs. Because of this misconception, many continue to wear the mask of perfection in order to give the illusion of happiness. But happy people are not always happy. “They are generally happy, meaning their overall feeling about life is extremely positive, but they too, have their own share of emotional fits.” Unfortunately, “the masks remain in place, we tell only parts of our stories; we deal (a bit proudly) with emotion laden struggles that don’t disturb our final commitment to independence; we find ways to connect that don’t require the depths of Christian grace.”

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The world often perceives happiness as the ultimate end. “According to Aristotle, the final cause of all human action – that is, the end toward which we all move – is happiness.” Aristotle believed that a happy life must be a completed or nearly completed life. This is very different from the contemporary notion of happiness as a state of contentment or pleasure that anyone can realize. “The word happiness has its roots in the word happenings.” Happiness depends on circumstances. Westerners have access to many worldly pleasures and according to the contemporary definition of happiness, they should be the happiest people on earth. “Add to this the fact that young people are told by their culture that this is the happiest time of their lives, and it is no wonder that the suicide rate is so high among the young.” Happiness, for the Christian is teleological because of the awareness that God has a unique plan and purpose for His children.

Unlike happiness, joy is a fruit of the Spirit. Happiness is an emotion. Joy is an internal word which has to do with relationships, not circumstances, happenings. “Joy is the inner calm at the eye of the storm; feelings can be stormy, but there can also be an inner sense of rightness to the will of God.” God Himself, works in the lives of Christians to produce joy. Happiness, however, comes and goes. According to Carlson, “In order to be happy, you must first decide to be happy.”

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 David A. Seamands, Healing for Damaged Emotions. (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2004), 108.

21 Danaher 68.

22 Ibid 69.

23 Seamands 108.
whether or not a person feels happy. “The very moment a person drops his negative thought process, that person experiences an immediate shift in the way he feels—for the better.”

The only way for a person to find rich happiness that goes to the core of his being is by discovering and pursuing the end for which he is made.

Because of the failure of Christians to share their burdens with each other, many Christians who are depressed fear that telling others that they are depressed is tantamount to acknowledging that they have some mental deficiency. Instead of finding the much needed support of friends and family, they isolate and the depression deepens. When difficulties arise, people who are hurting often do not want counsel from those whose lives are “perfect.” Instead, they usually turn to others they know who have endured difficult times and can relate to their present suffering. God uses the trials of the past to comfort others in their afflictions. How do these trials offer hope? They serve as reminders that suffering is not in vain. Others have suffered before and still, more will face tribulations in the future. Christians need to be real so that they can both encourage others and themselves to be comforted. When Paul was down, God sent help. Paul found great confidence and joy in his affliction because God, who comforts those who are depressed, comforted him by sending him Titus.

Christians not only idealize others, they also sometimes idealize characters from the Bible. However, as previously established, many Biblical characters faced their own struggles and inadequacies. No one is guaranteed exemption from periods of depression.

24 Carlson 10.
25 Ibid 128.
26 Ibid 71.
28 2 Corinthians 7:4
Great hope comes from knowing that God used imperfect men and women in Biblical times to do great and mighty things for His glory. God does not expect perfection; He expects obedience.

Scripture teaches that God is acutely aware of our grief. The Psalmist writes, “You have taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?”

Because God is timeless, the tears of His children are always before His face. What an incredible thought! God never loses sight of the tears of His people. What tremendous compassion and gentleness has the Father to keep these tears in constant view.

In Psalm 130, the psalmist cried from the depths, begging for mercy. He found that he must wait, and during this time, he put his hope in the Word. He did not understand his calamity, yet he hoped in the Lord. By focusing on the Word, he was reminded of God’s faithfulness in the past, and this knowledge gave him hope for the future. As one contemporary writer noted, “In the depths of the psalmist’s being, there is not only the self-knowledge of inner darkness but the knowledge of God’s mercy and never-ending covenant love manifest throughout Israel’s history. It is from this that the psalmist’s confidence arises.”

It is important to keep in mind that the psalmist did not find peace from seeking self-knowledge. “A discouraged soul would remain forever in the abyss of disappointment if he were to look within himself for light to drive away the gloomy shadows of disappointment.”

Modern approaches to psychotherapy often encourage people to look within to find hope. However, people need to learn to see themselves as they are in God’s

30 Psalm 56:8.


eyes, to recognize His great love for them and to see that they were created with dignity. God’s Word helps people see themselves for who they truly are, a person created in the very image of God! Even though a person may be struggling to recognize his self-worth, God loves him and values him. True hope is found in the Lord and in His Word.

**Longing for Deliverance: Psalm 42 - 43**

The Psalmist who formerly led pilgrims in procession to God’s house had been exiled from Jerusalem and was being tormented by his enemies. He longed for home and for deliverance from his troubles. He missed worshipping in the temple, and longed to experience God’s presence. As Gunkel points out, “He would like to walk there and ‘see YHWH’s face,’ and ‘go to the altar.’” The Psalmist likened his thirst for God to that of a deer for water. Just a deer pants when pursued by a hunter, the Psalmist was in the land of the enemy. He felt surrounded on all sides and longed for refreshment.

The Psalmist does not say he hungered for God, but thirsts for God. Man can go weeks without food but cannot go very long without water. He is seemingly near death and sees God as his only chance of rescue. “It is his soul that pants, his soul that thirsts, which denotes not only the sincerity, but the strength, of his desire.” The Psalmist finds his only hope in the living God and he longs to hear from God.

The Psalmist wept day and night. “He did not think it enough to shed a tear or two at parting from the sanctuary, to weep a farewell prayer when he took his leave, but, as long as he continued under a forced absence from that place of his delight, he never looked up, but

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34 Olsen 328.

The Psalmist’s soul was full of anguish and sorrow as he remembered his past worship in light of his present exile. Remembrance of past joyous experiences only heightened the current anguish in his soul.

The Psalmist wrote in chapter forty-two, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.” The refrain in Psalm 42:5 is repeated in 42:11 and 43:5 and therefore seems noteworthy. Here as the Psalmist pours out his soul before Yahweh, a picture of his suffering and despondence unfolds. Spurgeon called it an “important dialogue between the two aspects of the believer, who is at once a man of convictions and a creature of change.” The Psalmist sought to live in light of eternity, while at the same time, he was forced to live with his present earthly struggles. His faith reasoned with his fears, his hope argued with his sorrows. He expressed his utter despair while retaining hope in God, whom he would forever praise. His sufferings did not shatter his faith.

While the Psalmist’s circumstances did not destroy his faith, they did divert his attention. As Gunkel noted, “It is instructive to observe how in those places where the pious one seeks to rouse himself to trust, the connection to YHWH in the form of the prayer is lost. Then the psalmist speaks of God in the third person.” This shift to third person indicates the longing in the Psalmist’s heart to rekindle the closeness he once felt with Yahweh. He longed for the intimacy they once shared.

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36Ibid 395.
37Gunkel 155.
40Gunkel 172.
In verses 6-11, the Psalmist used poetic metaphor to express the idea that he was near death.\textsuperscript{41} His soul struggled as he expostulated with God concerning his troubles, yet he continually found hope in God. He prayed that God would send out his light and his truth, would lead him to the Temple where, in public worship, he might see God, the joy of his life.\textsuperscript{42} He longed to express his praise in public worship on the lyre.

When people complain to God as the Psalmist did, they show that God is as real as other people. We are able to experience communication with Him. Olsen observed, “When our heart is heavy and our sorrows are burdensome and we do not know where to turn, we should do exactly as the Psalmist did, go into the presence of God and speak to Him. We will soon discover that God has a purpose in the ministry of suffering; that He wants us in His presence, to enjoy His fellowship and He to enjoy ours, so that we may know the wellsprings of joy and understand that the highest and best moments of a man’s life are those in which he has a quiet, undisturbed, intimate fellowship with the eternal God in Christ.”\textsuperscript{43}

This is an extravagant picture of the Psalmist’s struggle with faith and doubt in difficult circumstances. He complained against God, “Why have you forgotten me?” He was clearly not supposing a literal abandonment, because he still articulated his trust in God. Spurgeon comments, “His expression is to be regarded as the language of feeling, not of judgment.”\textsuperscript{44} He felt abandoned by God, yet his mind convinced him otherwise.

This is also a portrait of God’s goodness and grace. Many view God as a judge waiting for people to do wrong so that He can smite them. A different picture is given here of God. Yahweh was gracious with the poet as he complained of his circumstances. God


\textsuperscript{42}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43}Olsen 339-340.

\textsuperscript{44}Spurgeon 287.
wants to restore His creation unto Himself and patiently listened as the Psalmist poured out his heart. God had not forsaken the poet. While the poet did not understand why things were the way they were, he rested in the sovereignty of God. Peace and hope are to be found in knowing that God is sovereign and in control of all.

It is this point, the anticipation of hope for his future, with which the Psalmist concluded his dialogue with God. His hope was in God, and he would praise God in spite of his suffering. Spurgeon said, “Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey towards it, casts the shadow of our burden behind us.” Throughout Psalms 42 and 43, the writer struggled to find answers. In the end he attained hope. Like Jeremiah, his circumstances had not changed, but his perspective had, and the result was his hope in the Lord!

\[45^{\text{Ibid 289.}}\]
A THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL DEPRESSION AND GROWTH

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Control plays a significant role in depression. Some significant factors in patients with depression are feelings of hopelessness, the inability to visualize a future, and a belief that control had passed from the patient’s hands. But who is really in control? Did the patient have complete control of their life until this point? Absolutely not! God is the one in control. In simple terms, control issues are faith issues. This truth is why God reminded Job that it was He who was in charge of all and that Job had no right to question God’s authority.

When things are going well, faith comes easily. But when times grow tough, faith is tested. Suffering is a breeding ground for faith when people begin to recognize that God is at work even in struggles. As Piper asserts, “God has the right and the power to govern all things and He does so all the time without exception.” People must move beyond trusting God because of His blessings to a position of trusting Him for who He is.

God is sovereign in all aspects. He is Absolute. Man is finite. Because of this difference between God and man, God can be apprehended by man, but he cannot be comprehended. If man could comprehend all of God’s ways, God would cease to be God. Bavinck says, “To have a very slight knowledge of God is a great blessing. To comprehend

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1 2 Corinthians 1:3.
3 James 1:2-3.
him is altogether impossible.” It is not humanly possible to comprehend why God wills as He does. The very fact that He is God and that He is omniscient demands trust. As Dobson notes, “If we truly understood the majesty of this Lord and the depth of His love for us, we would certainly accept those times when He defies human logic and sensibilities.” Because of His transcendence, He is always worthy of man’s faith and trust.

One way in which people often struggle to accept God’s sovereignty is when physical or mental illness strikes. God has the power to heal but does not always display that power. God gets glory in sickness in two ways, by healing or by His sustaining grace. This grace can be seen in His refusal to relieve Paul of his thorn. Regardless of what God allows, His sovereignty must be trusted and hope must be placed in the Lord. Either God will bring healing or God will give the sufferer the strength to endure. He granted Paul relief through his all-sufficient grace; the thorn remained but Paul had the ability to endure.

**Battling Suicidal Thoughts**

William Cowper, a Christian poet who struggled for years with depression, seemed to understand this truth. He penned these words:

“Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.”

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6 Ibid 33.
Most people who attempt suicide have been stereotyped as being weak individuals who lack faith. Do the words written by Cowper sound like they came from a weak person? No, they actually sound as though they were written by someone who has experienced God’s mercy and grace while experiencing circumstances which they did not understand. “Among those who know him as a Christian poet, many do not know that William Cowper lived with bleak depression as a steady companion all his life, sometimes immobilized in despair, and repeatedly attempting suicide.”

Moses, Elijah and Jonah all despaired so greatly that they longed for death to free them from their troubles. Even C.S. Lewis found himself wishing that he had never been born. Many people in the bleakest hours of depression long for relief, even to the point of death. This is why so many of the depressed commit suicide. “Three-quarters of those who commit suicide do so while depressed, and suicide is the major cause of premature death in people who are depressed.” By the year 2020, depression will be the second largest killer after heart disease. People who attempt suicide are trying to end unbearable pain. Because of depression and cognitive distortions, the depressed person may believe there is no one to turn to. There are two important questions to ask someone who is talking about wanting to die:

1. Are you thinking about how you would do it?
2. Have you thought about when you would do it?

15Ibid 181.
If the answer is yes to either of these questions, professional help should be sought immediately.

Unfortunately, the worst depression and most suicides happen on the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} of January. “It’s the worst week of the year. The affliction cuts deepest in those who are prone to it: the holidays are painfully unfulfilled, have given way to the bleak reality of the winter that lies ahead.”\footnote{Tim LaHaye, \textit{How to Win Over Depression}. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 33-34.}

The very fact that depressions worsen during a particular time of year supports the idea that some depressions are reactionary. People who have a tendency to be depressed as a result of difficult times need to take extra precautions during this time of year.

Statistics show that one out of seven severely depressed patients who have experienced inpatient treatment will go on to commit suicide.\footnote{Maga Jackson-Triche and Kenneth B. Wells and Katherine Minnium, \textit{Beating Depression: The Journey to Hope}. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 123.} Suicides often occur as the depressed person begins to feel better. “In the depths of depression, they may decide to die and as the depression seems to lift they regain enough initiative to carry out the act.”\footnote{Richard Gillett, \textit{Overcoming Depression}. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1987), 30.} In fact, the highest suicide mortality occurs during the six to eight months after the symptoms have begun to improve.\footnote{Rosen and Amador 181.} Family members and friends should know that the risk for suicide has not disappeared because the depression seems to be improving.

One way to help is to develop and maintain a connection with the depressed person. One of the major symptoms of depression is an increased sense of worthlessness. “Someone who is depressed is prone to interpret the opinions of others negatively. Consequently, when talking about how her depression makes you feel, you need to reassure her that you value
People were created to connect with others; “when we don’t connect we feel empty.” When depressed, people tend to isolate. It is important that those in deep depression are not allowed to remain in isolation. Contact with people who care is an essential aspect of their recovery. John Newton saw Cowper’s bent to melancholy and reclusiveness and drew him into the ministry of visitation as much as he could; Newton stood by him through the repeated suicide attempts, even sacrificing at least one vacation so as not to leave Cowper alone. People tend to recover more often when they have a strong support system. After one of his visits with Newton, Cowper wrote,

“I found those comforts in your visit, which have formerly sweetened all our interviews, in part restored. I knew you for the same shepherd who was sent to lead me out of the wilderness into the pasture where the Chief Shepherd feeds His flock, and felt my sentiments of affectionate friendship for you the same as ever. But one thing was still wanting, and that was the crown of all. I shall find it in God’s time, if it be not lost forever.”

Cowper was not in total despair; he had hope. The reason for this hope is because the shepherd had drawn near again. Newton’s presence offered incredible hope to Cowper during his darkest hours.

Another way to help people with depression is to assist them in understanding and managing guilt. Many depressed persons feel guilty because they fail to live up to their own expectations. Depression causes a lot of doubt and isolation from loved ones, and often causes them to have difficulties at work if they are able to work at all. These factors cause a person to feel great guilt and begin to tear away at his self-worth. Guilt – not being able to

21Ibid 111.
24Ibid 111.
25Ibid.
forgive one’s self -- is a major factor in suicides today. Judas committed suicide for this very reason. He had betrayed the Son of God; what remorse must have seized him! However, it is important to point out that guilt is not of God. The Holy Spirit brings conviction, but not guilt. Conviction leads a person to repentance and change whereas guilt often paralyzes a person. It is very important to help those who are depressed to deal with their guilt so that they are not overwhelmed by its tremendous weight.

It is also important to help the person monitor the fear-ridden internal dialogue and dispute these negative views. Using scripture to combat negative self-talk can be a very effective way to help people remember that they bear the image of God and that God loves them enough to die for them. “If you have begun to slide into despondency, it is extremely important to take a new look at Scripture and recognize that trials and suffering are part of the human condition.” It can also be useful to help people to remember times in the past when he or she did come through hard situations well.

Another strategy for helping depressed people is reminding them of biblical examples of people who battled between fear and hope. Meditating on the Psalms can be of enormous benefit. For example, David speaks in Psalm 40 about his extended misery in the pit of destruction. “I waited patiently for the LORD, and He inclined and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay.” David does not tell how long he “waited patiently.” Hours? Days? Weeks? Months? “The main point here is that people are helped by the testimony of his deliverance – not in spite of, but because of

27 Dobson, 35.
28 Ibid.
29 Psalm 40:1-2
David’s sharing in the miseries they all know.”

Suicide is a grim reality and those who are depressed often need others to help protect them. Depressed people may need help working through guilt and they may need others to help them to see themselves realistically. Negative self-thoughts have skewed their views and they often need to be reminded that they were created in the image of God and that they are deeply loved. When deeply depressed, the person must find hope.

Job’s acceptance of God’s sovereignty gave him the ability to handle the tremendous loss of his children, possessions and health. It even brought him the strength to withstand his wife’s pleas to curse God and die. Job told his wife that both prosperity and adversity are designed for man’s ultimate benefit. He did not feel entitled to God’s blessings. Through his predicament, Job learned to love and trust God for who He is, and not for His blessings. He came to accept His circumstances, but what He could not accept was the apparent abandonment of the Father. This sense of loss pushed Job to continually cry and complain to God. “Times come in our lives when we must learn to accept what is inescapable and then listen for what God is saying to us through it.”

Job did not understand why he had faced so much affliction, but He continued to trust and to listen for the Father’s voice.

Like Job, Joseph felt abandoned by God as his life seemed to be on a continual spiral downward. He was thrown into a pit, rescued and sold into slavery, falsely accused of adultery and thrown into prison. For thirteen years his life was one of misery and apparent abandonment. Where was God in his suffering? God was never against Joseph.

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32 Job 2:10.

Throughout all the misery, God was knitting together His perfect plan to make Joseph second in command over all of Egypt. God not only knew where He was taking Joseph, but He also knew what it would take to get him there. The same is true in the lives of people today. Nothing happens outside of God’s sovereign will. It is much easier to worship a God who is totally in control of all things and who can offer hope in mysterious ways in times of suffering than to worship a God who explains His every move to His Creatures and waits for their approval. God promises in Romans 8:28 to work through tragedy for the good of His children. This is a promise and God is a promise-keeper.

The Creator knows men better than they know themselves. He knows that true happiness lies in Him. C.S. Lewis wrote,

“Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call ‘our own life’ remains agreeable, we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make ‘our own life’ less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible sources of false happiness? It is just here, where God’s providence seems at first to be most cruel, that the Divine humility, the stooping down of the Highest, most deserves praise.”

God will bring good out of suffering; it may not be the way hoped for but it will be the best way. God uses suffering as a means of displaying His power and sustaining grace in the lives of its victims.

**Spiritual Blessing: Psalm 73**

The Biblical figures previously discussed, who struggled with depression, each grew closer to God as a direct result of their trials. In the life of Jeremiah, “we see that God, by separating Jeremiah from all human solaces and surrounding him with enemies, had thrown him wholly upon Himself. The prophet had literally nothing left but God. Thus he obtained

companionship, relief, encouragement, assurance and all he needed to go on.”

Hulme comments, “While admittedly in the realm of conjecture, I would imagine Job saying that no answers can be given to the sufferer apart from the struggle in the sufferer’s own soul.” It was in the struggle that Job came to know God more intimately.

Each person today must persevere in his own struggles in order to find intimacy. There is joy in holding a newborn baby, but it is incomparable to the joy a new mother feels after the travails of childbirth the first time her eyes rest on her new child. She feels a closeness and a connection to the child because of the toils she faced to bring the baby into the world. In the same way, the sufferer will come to a greater understanding of who God is because of his suffering. A.W. Tozer said this about pain and suffering:

“Slowly you will discover God’s love in your suffering. Your heart will begin to approve the whole thing. You will learn . . .what all the schools in the world could not teach you—the healing action of faith without supporting pleasure. You will feel and understand the ministry of the night; its power to purify, to detach, to humble to destroy the fear of death. . . . You will learn that pain can sometimes do what even joy cannot, such as exposing the vanity of earth’s trifles and filling your heart with longing for the peace of heaven.”

In this respect, suffering can be a spiritual blessing.

In Psalm 73, the writer’s beliefs about God collided with his personal experience. He had been taught that God is good to those who are pure in heart, yet he saw many wicked people who seemed to have no struggles and seemed to be blessed. He was a man of with a pure heart. Rice asserts, “It is clear from the psalmist’s testimony that before his experience in the temple he was nurtured on Scripture, regularly participated in worship and knew and


kept the commandments.”38 He was a good man, but he was not equipped to cope with his illness. Like Jonah, he wondered why must he who had endeavored to live a righteous life, suffer while the wicked enjoyed life. This outcome seems an injustice, and the psalmist was tempted to turn his back on all that he had known and learned about God. Day after day this vexed and plagued him. Barker and Kohlenberger state, “The psalmist was deeply affected by envy and anguish. Deep inside he was grieved and embittered, resulting in a state of depression. In this state he was irrational, not ruled by wisdom.”39

However, as the Psalmist wrestled with these apparent inconsistencies, he came to realize that God was all he had. God was his strength and would never forsake him. As he came to recognize God’s presence, the psalmist became assured of God’s protection and guidance. After the resolution of his crisis, the psalmist came to understand the goodness of God in a significantly different sense.40 He came to know God as his Refuge. In times of difficulty, God is a safe place of refuge. All who turn to Him will find Him and experience the peace that comes from resting in His Presence.

Not only had the Psalmist’s relationship with God been renewed, but it had been enriched, deepened and enlarged to the degree that there was a quantum difference.41 In his illness, he thought he had been abandoned by God. Now he knew that God was with him all along, and he continually began to draw near to God. Rice comments, “In this exalted state of awareness and being, he knows also that he has access to God’s counsel to guide him. The blessed state he has achieved does not free him from the adversities and cares of life. But he


40 Rice, 79.

41 Ibid 84.
can now face them with the confidence that comes from the assurance of God’s presence, help and guidance."  

The Psalmist had been blessed with the highest good heaven and earth have to confer – the companionship of the living God.

If depression drives a person to God, is it necessarily a bad thing? No doubt, it is not pleasant, but if it allows its bearer to experience the depths of God’s love in a deeper and more meaningful way, is it possible that it could be a blessing? Could it be that our heavenly Father permits His children to struggle in order to keep them strong? Could that be the case in depression? C.S. Lewis referred to pain as “God’s megaphone.” Chambers writes, “It is a good thing to feel our own powerlessness in the face of destruction; it makes us know how much we depend on God.”

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid 85.
44 Ibid 152.
45 Clinton and Ohlschlager 23.
CONCLUSION

“I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness, because You have seen my affliction; You have known the troubles of my soul.”

Hope is one of the greatest needs for those who are depressed. Hope empowers people to persevere. While the world offers hope in various forms, true hope for those with reactive depression lies in a proper understanding of the sovereignty of God and in the comforts of His Word. There is both freedom and comfort in knowing that God is in control of all things and all things have purpose. Sufferings for Christians are not in vain. While the person who is struggling may not understand the purpose of the pain, there is hope in knowing that purpose exists and that God is at work to perfect His will in his or her life.

Suffering is common to all men; the extent of the suffering varies. Numerous men and women of God have struggled throughout history with depression. As Card writes, “People like Job, David, Jeremiah, and even Jesus reveal to us that prayers of complaint can still be prayers of faith.” Hearing their stories and learning how they coped can help those who are currently struggling to see hope. Piper comments, “The point is, there are stories in the Bible, in history, and in our own lives that do not appear to have happy endings of cheerfulness. These too are not without hope and are designed by God’s sovereign and merciful wisdom for the hope of those who fear they are utterly alone in their misery.”

God will not abandon nor forsake His children. He gives His Presence to enable them to endure life’s difficulties.

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1Psalm 31:7.
2Card 30.
3Piper, The Hidden Smile of God, 117.
Jesus, Himself, relates to man’s sufferings. Suffering often drives believers to their knees in a deeper and more intimate fellowship with the Father than ever before. As Piper writes,

“And now come, broken, to the cross,
Where Christ embraced all human loss,
And let us bow before the throne
Of God, who gives and takes his own,
And promises – whatever toll
He takes – to satisfy our soul.
Come, learn the lesson of the rod:
The treasure that we have in God.
He is not poor nor much enticed
Who loses everything but Christ.”

Jim Elliot said it this way: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” People with depression may feel that the things they have lost are unbearable, but the one thing they cannot lose if they are a believer in Jesus Christ is His Presence. Paul stated,

“Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword. . .For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

God’s presence never leaves His children. James writes, “Whatever my conditions may be at this present moment they are only temporary, they are only passing, and they can never rob me of the joy and the glory that ultimately await me with Christ.”

The more intimate their relationship with Jesus and the more strengthened they are by the Holy Spirit, the more humbly will men and women surrender to God’s will in suffering. No suffering is pleasant at the time, but it has the power to benefit its recipients by driving

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5Romans 8:35-39.
6Jones 284-285.
them to their knees in faith. Suffering can be a blessing, albeit a painful one. James wrote, “We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.”\(^7\) God does not always numb the pain of suffering but He suffers alongside those in woe. Suffering demands endurance, but the sufferer does not face it alone.

“Paul learned to use his illness as a means of learning that the Lord’s strength was powerful enough to see him through every difficulty.”\(^8\) God wants people who are totally dependent on Him. Sometimes suffering is the most effective way to ensure such dependence. Tribulations are not in vain – God used Joseph’s trials not only to show His power to Joseph personally, but to his family and to a nation. God will use both His Word and His sovereignty to give hope to people who are afraid and fearful because of present sufferings.

God is not unaware that at times His children face depression. The depression is not without purpose. While the sufferer may not understand the reason for his hardships, he can find peace in knowing that God is in control. God not only knows the outcome of suffering, but He knows what circumstances it will take to get there. Depression is not a new phenomenon. A depressed person often feels alone and as though no one else could have ever imagined such pain. The Word is full of examples of godly men and women who endured terrible hardships, some even faced depression. Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah all dealt with forms of reactive depression. Their recovery began when they recognized and submitted to God’s sovereignty. When they were reminded that God was in control, they became hopeful. While reading God’s Word and trusting in His sovereignty may not

\(^{7}\)James 5:11.

\(^{8}\)William Barker 146.
alleviate the symptoms of depression, it can offer tremendous hope. “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the LORD.”\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{9}Psalm 31:24.
APPENDIX A

KEY DATES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

1949—Seward Hiltner published his classic treatise *Pastoral Counseling*.

1956—Christian Association of Psychological Studies (CAPS) was begun.

1959—Wayne Oates published *An Introduction to Pastoral Counseling*.

1960—Clyde Narramore published *The Psychology of Counseling*.

1965—Fuller Theological Seminary launched its PhD-level Graduate School of Psychology.

1968—Nouthetic counseling movement began with the establishment of the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation at Westminster Seminary.

1969—Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology was established.

1970—Jay Adams published *Competent to Counsel*.

1972—*Journal of Psychology and Theology* was launched by Rosemead.

1974—Kenneth Hauck started Stephens Ministry.

1975—Larry Crabb published *Basic Principles of Biblical Counseling*; CAPS Bulletin was launched (now *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*).

1976—American Psychological Association (APoA) Division 36 was started for “psychologists interested in religious issues”; Minirth-Meier Clinic was launched.

1979—James Dobson launched Focus on the Family ministries.

1980—Gary Collins’s “big yellow book,” *Christian Counseling*, was published.

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1988—First International Congress on Christian Counseling was held in Atlanta; New Life Treatment Centers were established.

1990—Rapha Hospital and Clinic system was established.

1991—Gary Collins and Tim Clinton assumed leadership of the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC); in five years membership mushroomed from seven hundred to nearly fifteen thousand.

1992—AACC launched its flagship magazine *Christian Counseling Today*; Second International Congress on Counseling was held.

1995—AACC introduced the provisional draft of its *Christian Counseling Code of Ethics*.


1999—AACC World Congress attracted thirty-three hundred attendees, the largest single gathering of Christian counselors to date.

2001—AACC reached over forty thousand members in fifty states and nearly fifty countries and was divided into four major groups: mental health professionals, pastoral counselors, lay helpers, and students; AACC World Conference attracted nearly six thousand attendees.
APPENDIX B

RECENT DATES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

2004--The Clergy Training Project, with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) sponsored a 2 1/2 day training for 80 representatives of regional centers of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) to help pastoral counselors with core knowledge of how to help those affected by alcoholism and other addictions.¹

2005--The Certification Committee of AAPC added recommendations for the AAPC certification of pastoral counselors.²


The Society for Christian Psychology Conference⁴

2007--AAPC Annual Conference on Psychotherapy and Spirituality. "Loss, Resilience and Hope."⁵

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²Ibid.
⁵American Association of Pastoral Counselors.
Bibliography


