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## DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

Psalms 42 & 43

by

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Psalms: Lesson 11

## DEALING WITH DEPRESSION Psalms 42 & 43

The psychology instructor had just finished a lecture on mental health and was giving an oral quiz. Speaking specifically about manic depression, she asked, "How would you diagnose a patient who walks back and forth screaming at the top of his lungs one minute, then sits in a chair weeping uncontrollably the next?"

A young man in the rear raised his hand and answered, "A basketball coach?"

We laugh, but real depression is a serious problem. "Mild or severe, depression affects more people in our culture than any other emotional disorder," says Harvard psychiatrist, Dr. Armand Nicholi II. According to a *Newsweek* article (5/4/87, p. 48), an estimated 30-40 million Americans, twice as many women as men, will experience depressive illness at least once. The disorder is so common that it is called "the common cold of mental illness."

It should not be surprising that the Bible has much to say about depression. A thorough study would consume many sermons, but Psalms 42 & 43 give us some solid counsel. In some ancient Hebrew manuscripts these companion psalms are a single psalm. Whether two psalms or one, the subject is obviously similar and they are united with the common refrain of 42:5, 11, and 43:5. Many reputable scholars think that David was the author, in which case the title, "of the sons of Korah" indicates a group of Levites in charge of temple worship to whom he presented the psalm.

We cannot say for sure who wrote it, but we do know that the author found himself exiled from Israel and from the worship festivals of God's people. He was being taunted by enemies who said, "Where is your God?" (42:3, 10). Their oppression (42:9; 43:2) had plunged the psalmist into deep depression. But he

doesn't stay depressed. He grabs himself by the shoulders, takes stock of his situation, confronts his depression, and seeks God with renewed intensity. He shows us how to pull ourselves out of the nosedive of depression:

When you're depressed, rouse yourself to seek God as your hope and help, no matter how despairing your circumstances.

I see three steps in these psalms for dealing with depression:

1. When you're depressed, recognize it and begin to confront yourself as to why you're depressed.

The first step to conquering depression is to admit it. The psalmist readily admits, both to himself and to God, that he is in despair (42:5, 6, 11; 43:5). The Hebrew verb means to be bowed down or prostrated; we might say, "Laid low," or "in the pits." If you don't recognize your emotional condition, either because you don't know the symptoms or you don't want to appear unspiritual or whatever, you can't deal with it.

Various *symptoms* in varying degrees point to depression. Note the psalmist's description of himself: He mentions his countenance (42:11; 43:5). A depressed person looks sad or down. A loss of appetite and frequent crying are often present (42:3). He describes his anguish as "pouring out" his soul (42:4); he felt emotionally drained. He felt as if he were in the deep, being overwhelmed by the waves (42:7). (Jonah quoted this verse when he was inside the great fish [Jon. 2:3].) Often depressed people feel overwhelmed by circumstances to such an extent that they are immobilized. They don't know how to cope or where to begin.

The enemy's relentless taunts felt like a shattering of the psalmist's bones (42:10). Often physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain accompany severe depression. He repeatedly describes himself as being in

despair (hopeless) and disturbed (anxious; 42:5, 6, 11; 43:5). The psalmist feels abandoned, even rejected by God, and he's confused by it (42:9; 43:2). Feelings of guilt and rejection are common symptoms of depressed people. In addition are often fatigue, a loss of motivation to do anything, difficulty in concentrating, sleep disturbances (either insomnia or excessive sleep), and thoughts of suicide.

There are a number of *causes* of depression. Once you recognize the symptoms, you've got to do as the psalmist does here, and begin to confront yourself as to why you're depressed (42:5, 11; 43:5). Depression is like the red warning lights on the dashboard of your car. They tell you that there's a problem under the hood. If you keep driving and ignore the warning light, you could cause a lot of damage to your engine. So you'd better pull over and figure out what's wrong.

Depression may be due to physiological causes. We're complex creatures. Our emotions are not separate from our bodies. Some people are more prone to depression due to their physical makeup (glands, hormones, etc.). Many women struggle with depression related to their menstrual cycle, to having a baby, or to menopause. Certain changes in the aging process can make us prone to depression. Perhaps we've pushed too hard or have been under unusual stress and we're just exhausted and need some rest and a change of pace. If you're depressed, get a medical checkup if you haven't had one for a while.

Depression can hit when we come down from a spiritually enriching experience. Perhaps the excitement of the early days of our faith wears off or is dulled by our trials. The psalmist here fondly recalls the earlier times when he enjoyed going to God's house in procession with other believers (42:4). Sometimes I've gotten depressed when I suffered a disappointment that I didn't process mentally before the Lord. I had hoped and prayed for something, but it didn't happen. If I don't consciously submit my disappointment to the Lord,

I can end up feeling depressed, but not knowing exactly why until I think it through. Self-pity is another common cause of depression. And, depression is a common reaction when we suffer a loss of any kind, especially the loss of a loved one through death.

It's important to know yourself. If your depression is just a minor mood swing, like a pilot flying in minor turbulence, you make a slight adjustment and don't get too concerned. But if you're in a nosedive, you need to take some drastic action to avoid a crash. The psalmist is doing that here: He grabs himself by the shoulders, talks to himself about what he knows to be true in spite of his feelings to the contrary, and eventually pulls himself out of it.

It takes the psalmist a while to get on top of his depression. There are four cycles of lament and hope in these two psalms:

<u>Lament</u>	>	<u>Hope</u>
42:1-4	>	42:5
42:6-7	>	42:8
42:9-10	>	42:11
43:1-2	>	43:3-5

It may take you a few cycles of up and down before you pull out of your nosedive. But the crucial thing is that you are aggressively dealing with it and not just drifting with the circumstances. Even if you feel depressed, you are responsible to please the Lord by living in obedience to His Word.

We need to be very careful at this point! We live in a feeling-oriented culture. We hear that "feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are." So we need to get in touch with and accept our feelings. If we defy our feelings or seek to conquer them by going against them, we're "in denial." But we need to develop a biblical theology of emotions and weigh the world's counsel by the Scriptures. Many believers are defeated by depression and other negative emotions because they have not sought a

biblical approach to dealing with these problems.

The Bible says that we must discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). Discipline, by definition, means going against my feelings. I may not feel like exercising, but if I'm disciplined, I do it anyway. I may feel like spending money impulsively, but if I'm disciplined, I go against my feelings because I have decided to live by a budget.

While even the most mature believers are susceptible to depression (Elijah, 1 Kings 19:1-4; John the Baptist, Matt. 11:2-3; Peter, Matt. 26:69-75), the Bible is clear that we should be marked by joy in the Lord, even in some of the most difficult circumstances (John 15:11; Acts 5:41; 16:25; Gal. 5:22; Phil 4:4). A consistently depressed Christian is a lousy advertisement for the Lord and His salvation. And so we must confront our depression and bring it under the control of the Holy Spirit. When we think rightly and act rightly, our depression will be replaced by genuine joy in the Lord. So the first step when you're depressed is, recognize it and begin to confront yourself as to the reasons why.

2. If your depression stems from overwhelming circumstances, think biblically about those circumstances.

Learning to respond biblically to trials is one of the most crucial lessons you can learn as a Christian. God has given us the resources to be overwhelming conquerors in even the most desperate situations, including torture and martyrdom (Rom. 8:35-37). Living by faith means choosing to believe God and His Word rather than circumstances. So we need to answer several questions when we are overwhelmed by circumstances, as the psalmist was:

(1) Are my circumstances due to any known sin on my part? In Psalms 32, 38, and 51, David's depression was due to his sin. If we're aware of disobedience to the Lord, we need to

confess it, turn from it, and appropriate His cleansing and forgiveness. If we're not aware of any sin, then we need to be careful to continue walking uprightly before the Lord, and not give in to the temptation to rail against God in our time of trial. There's a difference between complaining to the Lord in a submissive manner and shaking your fist in His face.

The psalmist here doesn't mention any sin on his part. He is confused and he feels as if God has rejected him, and he tells God those feelings. But it's also clear that he had taken a stand by testifying to his enemies that the Lord was his God. They were throwing it back in his face, asking, "Where is your God?" This added to his despair, because he didn't want to bring reproach to the name of the Lord. The psalmist wants to follow God's light and truth (43:3). He wasn't suffering due to sin.

(2) Does God want me to do anything to change my circumstances, or am I shut up until He acts? Sometimes the Lord wants us to take steps to get out of our troubles: write a resume, call for the job interview, etc. I remember once when I was single and feeling as if I'd never get a godly wife. At the time I was meeting with a few Christians in a house church where there weren't any candidates for a wife. There was a commercial on TV for Hertz Rent-a-Car which showed a person flying through the air and into the seat of a convertible while the announcer said, "Let Hertz put you in the driver's seat." As I was praying for a wife, the Lord brought that commercial to my mind and said, "I'm not going to bring your wife floating through the window while you pray! If you want me to bring you a wife, put yourself in some places where you might meet a likely candidate!" It was shortly after that that I was introduced to Marla.

The psalmist seemed to be shut up in his overwhelming circumstances, with no where to go except to pray fervently. If that's where you're at, then pray fervently! As long as we have access to God in prayer, there's hope! God can change

things drastically and quickly when He's ready (see Gen. 39-41, Joseph in prison in Egypt).

(3) If I can't change my circumstances, how does God want me to change my attitude? The psalmist here is aggressive in confronting himself (three times) to deal with his despair so that he can regain a sense of God's presence. He can't change his circumstances, but he can change his focus from himself and his overwhelming situation to God. By the end of the psalm, his circumstances haven't changed, but his attitude has, because he has deliberately focused on the Lord. We are commanded in the Bible to rejoice in the Lord always (Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16). The only way to obey that command sincerely is to change my attitude by changing my focus from self to God.

(4) Is God in sovereign control of this situation or not? If so, what is He trying to teach me? Obviously, God is sovereign even over the evil and sinful things going on in this world. No one can thwart His purpose (Eph. 1:11; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). But it's easy to doubt or forget that fact when you're overwhelmed by a trial. So you have to affirm God's sovereignty in the midst of your trial. The psalmist does that here when he calls the waves that were crashing over him "Your breakers and Your waves" (42:7). It was evil men who were oppressing him, but the psalmist knows that God has them on His leash, as it were, and that He has sent this trial for His purpose.

I hear some Christians say that God didn't cause a trial, He just "allowed" it, as if that somehow gets Him off the hook! Or, they blame Satan for a trial, as if he sneaked up and did it when God was asleep! But the Bible is clear that trials come from the Lord for our benefit (Ps. 66:10-12; Rom. 5:3-5; Heb. 12:1-13; James 1:2-4)! You may think, "How can God be good and bring a catastrophe into the lives of His children?" Our problem is, we underestimate the strength of our flesh. We are blind to the extent of our pride. We are dull as to how

much we love this wicked world. So the Lord in love sends overwhelming trials to teach us not to trust in ourselves, but in Him alone (2 Cor. 1:8-9). That leads to the third step in dealing with depression:

3. When you're depressed, your main need is to seek God Himself, not just relief.

When we're in emotional pain, we should see it as an opportunity to seek God and grow in Him, not just try for quick relief. Though the psalmist was in pain, he realized that his real need was God (42:1-2, 5-6, 11; 43:4-5). In fact, he begins this psalm by recognizing that above all else, his need was for God and God alone. I love the way Matthew Henry ([Revell], 3:394) comments on 42:1: "casting anchor thus at first, he rides out the storm." The first place you need to cast your anchor when the storms of depression hit is pray, "O God, my soul pants and thirsts for You, the living God!"

(1) Seek the person of God. The psalmist's thirst for God seems to grow in intensity, not slacken. Matthew Henry puts it (3:394) that the psalmist thirsts "for nothing more than God, but still for more and more of him." Depression can either whet or dull our thirst for God. God allows suffering to drive us closer in dependence upon Him. The need for the depressed person is reality with the living God. We are to hope in Him; He is our help.

The psalmist knew God personally before this trial hit. Note how he calls God "my God" (42:6, 11; 43:4, 5); "the God of my life" (42:8); "my rock" (42:9); "the God of my strength" (43:2); "God my exceeding joy" (43:4). This tells us that the godly can feel depressed. But it also tells us that the time to prepare for crises is before they hit. He had spent time with God before and knew God as his God. Therefore he had a refuge, a familiar relationship to turn to in his time of despair.

(2) Seek the presence of God. The psalmist wanted to appear

before God (42:2), to know the help of His presence (42:5). That sounds good on the surface, but when you think about it, to appear in the presence of God can be a terrifying thing, even to the godly. If there is sin in your life, the light of God's presence shines on it and brings it into the open. So the only person who can truly desire the presence of God is the one who is willing to confess and forsake sin. God sometimes shows us our need for Him by depriving us of the sense of His presence and help, so that we will all the more seek Him. The thirst for God when He is absent is a sure sign that we are His children.

(3) Seek the praise of God (42:8; 43:4). When you're depressed, the last thing you feel like doing is praising the Lord. But, praise is a command, not a feeling. If we obey, we often feel better. The song drives the darkness away. To praise God is to focus on His attributes and actions. As we deliberately direct our thoughts to God's saving grace toward us in Christ, that He, by His mercy, drew us out of a horrible pit, our spirits will be lifted.

(4) Seek the precepts of God (43:3). God's light and truth from His Word will show us the way back. Again, even if you don't feel like it when you're depressed, read God's Word and ask His Holy Spirit to shine His light into your darkened heart. God's light and truth are threatening to the soul who does not want to confront his own sin and self-focus, but God's truth will lead you to His dwelling place where you will find God Himself to be your exceeding joy (43:3-4).

(5) Seek God with the people of God (42:4; 43:3-4). The psalmist seems isolated in his depression, which is often the case. But he realizes that the place of joy where the need of his soul would be met is in corporate worship with God's people. When you're depressed, you often want to avoid people, especially gathering with God's people. But that's what you need. Go against your feelings and force yourself to gather with God's people to seek Him. There is something

about corporate worship that cannot be experienced in individual worship.

### Conclusion

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his solid book, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* ([Eerdmans], pp. 20-21), comments,

Have you not realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself....

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down'--what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God'--instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: "I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God".

Is God Himself "your exceeding joy" today (43:4)? If not, don't rest until it is true. Your need is not happiness; your need is not relief from your pain; your need is God! Thirst after God! Rouse yourself to seek Him as your only source of hope and help, no

matter how despairing your circumstances. Hope in God! You shall again praise Him, the help of your countenance and your God!

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Will going against your feelings create long-term psychological damage? Support your answer with Scripture.
2. Should Christians take medication for depression? Does this differ from taking aspirin for a headache?
3. Is there a difference between God "allowing" trials and "sending" them? What Scriptures show that He sends them? Do any verses support the view that Satan sends trials?
4. Is there any biblical support that a depressed person needs to build his self-esteem? How should a depressed person view himself?

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