

Defeating Depression Through God

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Introduction.

- A. "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I can not tell; I awfully forebode that I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me." This poignant quote from the 19th century describes the feelings associated with the illness of depression. Every year, nearly 21 million Americans suffer from depression, and the toll it takes on their lives is incalculable.
- B. Depression can cause a number of different symptoms in its victims' lives. These symptoms include things like a persistently sad mood; feelings of pessimism, guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness; a change in sleeping patterns; apathy; and difficulty concentrating and performing the most mundane tasks. If these symptoms continue for more than a few weeks, they are likely caused by depression. When they begin to prevent the depressed person from living a normal fulfilled life, doctors describe the illness as major depression.
- C. Unlike the "blue moods" that all of us deal with from time to time, depression is not something that people can just "snap out of." Numerous studies have shown that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Some of these chemicals, called neurotransmitters, regulate our moods, and when they fail to function properly, depression can be the result. This imbalance can result from a number of different factors. Depression can be genetic in nature, which is why some families appear predisposed to depression. Sometimes, depression follows serious physical illnesses, like heart disease or thyroid disorders. In other instances, depression is provoked by stressful life changes, like a financial reverse or difficulties in an important relationship. Even things like low self-esteem can lead to full-blown depression. Nor are these things mutually exclusive. Depression can result from a combination of many or all of these circumstances.
- D. Worse still, depression is often self-reinforcing. The feelings of hopelessness that depression generates often cause the depressed to withdraw from their families and friends, which only intensifies the hopeless feelings. This vicious cycle of hopelessness can wreck the lives of the afflicted.
- E. For this reason, it's essential that depression sufferers recognize their condition and seek professional help. If you're depressed, it's not your fault, and you shouldn't feel guilty or weak for seeking medical assistance in dealing with it. If someone says, "Well, I'm pretty sure I just had a heart attack, but I think I'm going to tough it out on my own," we recognize just how unwise that is. It's every bit as unwise to try to "tough out" depression. Depression is an illness just like a heart attack is, and just like we go to see a doctor if we think we've had a heart attack, so too we should see a doctor when we're wrestling with depression.
- F. However, as important as doctors and medications are to the treatment of depression, we also need to recognize their limits. As many as 70% of those who take prescription anti-depressants continue to suffer from depressive symptoms. Too often, depression sufferers assume that their medication will do all the work for them, so they shy away from the mental effort that a true recovery from depression also requires. Here's why: depression is like knocking a hole in the side of a boat. Anti-depressants help bail the water out, but they don't fix the hole, and as long as the hole remains, so does the depression.
- G. Thankfully, in the Christian's battle against depression, he has help that the unbeliever does not. He can rely on strength and guidance from God and His word. When we open the pages of Scripture, we learn that depression is not a new problem. Many of God's people in Bible times had to face what we would call depression today. One of the most striking examples of this in Scripture is the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Let's turn to his story today to learn how we can defeat depression through God.

I. Elijah's Situation.

- A. To really grasp what's going on in this story, though, we need to spend some time looking at Elijah's situation. At this time, the current king of Israel is a man named Ahab, who is described in the Bible as one of the wickedest kings Israel ever had. His wife, Jezebel, is even worse, and Elijah's job is to fight them.
- B. Here's what Elijah has done: with God's help, he has caused a drought throughout the land of Israel, so that the people will basically be starved into submission to God. Elijah has challenged 850 prophets of the false gods of Baal and Asherah to a prophetic duel on Mount Carmel in front of the whole nation, to prove whose god is stronger. Elijah wins this contest spectacularly, all of the people confess that the Lord is God, and he takes all the false prophets and executes them. To top it all off, Elijah even miraculously ends the drought.
- C. So now everything's going to be great, right? Wrong. We see what actually happens in 1 Kings 19:1-4. The wicked queen Jezebel, far from being convinced by Elijah's miracles, tells him instead that she's going to kill him. None of these supposedly repentant Israelites are willing to lift a finger to protect him, and so he has to run for his life. At this point in time, we start to get a glimmer of how badly this has disappointed Elijah, and it

makes sense that he would be disappointed. Elijah has done everything right. And what has all of this done for God and for Elijah? Not a thing. Israel continues to reject God, and Elijah has to flee.

- D. 1 Kings 19:4 shows us, though, that Elijah has fallen prey to depression. Elijah doesn't go off into the desert to escape; he goes off into the desert to die. Indeed, he even prays that God will kill him. Why? Because he thinks that he's worthless. He thinks that he's failed God. Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of history, has become convinced that he's useless and that he deserves to die, because he's fallen prey to depression.

II. Elijah's Solution.

- A. However, Elijah's despair here leads not to death but to renewal. Let's look at how he did it. According to this story, the first thing that Elijah did right was to **KEEP GOING**. This is what we see in 1 Kings 19:5-8. Even though he wants to die at this point, Elijah continues to live. He eats what the angel offers him and travels to Mount Horeb, which is also called Mount Sinai, the place to which God has summoned him.
- B. This attitude of keeping going, of refusing to quit even when we feel that we should quit, is also critical to us in our struggles with depression. There are many ways that the devil tempts us to quit: by ending our own lives, by surrendering to drugs or alcohol, or even just by curling up in a ball and telling the world to go away forever. Friends, even when quitting seems reasonable, even when it seems like the path of least resistance, we can't. Quitting is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We quit because we think that there's no point in living, but the act of quitting itself is actually what makes our lives pointless. I know it's hard sometimes. I know it hurts sometimes, but we have to keep fighting, because if we do, sooner or later, things will get better.
- C. In addition to keeping going, even when we don't want to, in our struggles with depression, we need to **TALK TO SOMEBODY**. This is what Elijah does in 1 Kings 19:9-10. Elijah doesn't keep his problems bottled up. Instead, he shares his disappointment and his loneliness with God.
- D. This is a principle that we as Christians can apply in several different ways:
 - 1. First, just like Elijah did, we can talk to God. Even when we are depressed, we can pour out our hearts to Him in prayer. It's essential that we do this, because no matter how down or alone we may feel, we can be sure that we always have God. Look with me at Isaiah 49:14-15. God never forgets us.
 - 2. Second, we should also look for opportunities to talk to our brethren. This is important because of depression's vicious cycle. It's easy for us to start believing that we're worthless because we don't have any friends, and then let our feelings of worthlessness keep us from being around the people who are our friends. Instead, we need to remember that every Christian who worships here has a churchful of brothers and sisters in Christ, and those aren't just words. This church cares about its members, and whenever we feel like no one cares, we need to remember that someone at Margaret St. does.
- E. Once we've resolved to keep going and talked to someone, we need to take the next step. We need to **LISTEN TO GOOD ADVICE**. We see Elijah doing this in 1 Kings 19:15-18. Here's the point of what God says to him: Things aren't as bad as you think they are. Sure, there are a lot of people in Israel who worship Baal, but there are a lot who don't. Also, God says, just because this step of My plan didn't succeed as you wanted doesn't mean it has failed. I'm going to have to do it the hard way, but the evil are still going to get punished and the good are going to be rewarded, and you, Elijah, are going to be a part of making that happen.
- F. Once again, this is true in two ways:
 - 1. First, once we're through praying to God, we need to listen to God talking back. We need to hear His voice in His word. This is important because the Bible tells us something very different about ourselves than we believe when we are in the grip of depression. Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 10:29-31. Every Christian is valuable to God. We're worth more to Him than we can imagine, and our worth comes from two things: our intrinsic value as human beings, and our usefulness in His kingdom. All of us have been given some gift from God that He wants to see us use for His glory. We might just be ordinary people, but we aren't worthless, because God has given ordinary people like us the greatest tasks of all.
 - 2. Second, we also need to listen to what our brethren are telling us. One of the primary things we need to recognize about our depression is that the bad things we believe about ourselves are illusion. What we feel is not the truth about who we are. We are not worthless. We are not friendless. We are not hopeless. We are blessed both in this life and in the life to come. We have friends here. We have abilities here. We have hope here. We might not be able to see these things, but our friends can, and we need to listen to them instead of our depression.
- G. Finally, we need to **TAKE ACTION** ourselves. Elijah does this in 1 Kings 19:19-21. He obeys God and sets in motion the next stage of God's plan for defeating Baal. He recruits Elisha, the prophet-to-be, to God's side.
- H. Today, we can follow in Elijah's footsteps. Working for God when we're struggling with depression is difficult, but it is also necessary, because that kind of focused activity is the best thing to lift us out of our depression. We can certainly do this kind of work in a church setting—every local work has things to do—but this is also something we can do everywhere in our lives. There's an old saying that goes, "The best way to feel better about your own problems is to help someone else with theirs," and it's certainly true of depression.

Conclusion. God's help in depression, as in all things, is only for His people. If you have not served Him, begin now.