

Dealing with depression

The world is filled with miserable, empty, depressed people. Suicide is prevalent in every age group and social class, but occurs more frequently in the upper-income brackets than in any other social stratum. Clearly, satisfaction cannot be guaranteed by money, prestige, fame, or even youth.

The shifting sands of popular opinion will never provide inner stability. If your whole idea of satisfaction and happiness in this troubled world was linked to your performance (or whatever your given role in the world), this type of criticism could send you into an emotional tailspin. It happens all the time. It accounts in part, researchers tell us, for the growing rate of suicides among businessmen and women. Suicide among artists and writers is quite common, and executive suicides are on the increase. Dentists lead all professions in killing themselves, followed closely by psychiatrists. Doctors are also becoming suicidal with increasing frequency.

As a person reaches the crest of life, after age 35 or so, he / she begins to struggle with the inevitability of his / her own death. He / she has to revise his / her life goals in terms of what is still possible to do. The person has to be more realistic and may have to settle for a little less than he / she had hoped to achieve. For the person who is not reaching the goals he / she has set himself, the efforts can be unsettling or even devastating.

Intensely driven individuals are often very ambitious and have immense ego ideal aspirations. Oftentimes they find it difficult to relax and may have an almost total lack of a sense of humour. Living under this driving pressure to succeed, they have little optimism and easily despair.

Why is depression such a pervasive force in contemporary society? Why do so many who seem to have all they could want choose to end their own lives? Why is it that with all the technological advances of the past generation, depression and dissatisfaction continue to rule the hearts and minds of the vast majority?

The answer is clear: the source of real satisfaction and overcoming depression is a strong, abiding, personal relationship with a loving and merciful heavenly Father. No technology ever developed, no amount of money, no amount of recognition or prestige, no device or drug designed by man can ever take the place of knowing God. Much of the depression among people in our society is directly traceable to a deep spiritual void in their lives; a void that only the Lord himself can fill. The philosopher Pascal called it "a God-shaped vacuum in every man."

How to receive your heart's desires

Psalm 37 is a rich passage of Scripture, written by David during a time when he was struggling with depression.

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He wrote: "Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass."

Contained in those short phrases is the answer to depression: "Delight thyself...in the Lord." They also reveal a wonderful promise that deals with the challenge of dissatisfaction: "He shall give thee the desires of thine heart."

What does it mean to delight yourself in the Lord? Simply to turn your focus away from yourself, or, in the words of the apostle Paul: "Set your affection of things above, not on things on the earth." (Colossians 3:2). It means to make your relationship with God the central issue in your life; to desire to know Him, fellowship with Him, and live for His glory more than anything else.

There is a dual meaning to the promise that God will give us our hearts' desires. First, it means that He will fulfill our deepest longings - not the desires we have for things, but our desire for spiritual wholeness. Every human being, whether he is aware of it or not, has deep spiritual needs, and only God can satisfy them. He does that for those who delight themselves in Him.

The promise also means that God will place new desires and aspirations in our hearts. When He makes us spiritually whole, He gives us new priorities, new values and new desires. He gives us holy desires, desires for spiritual blessings, desires that only He can fulfill, and He delights in fulfilling them.

Sometimes, an experience is so dramatic and poignant that one is reminded anew of how amazing God's love for us really is, and how wonderfully timely His grace is to those who need it most. To illustrate: one night, at a church meeting in the U.S.A, a congregation member was on the platform prior to the service getting the music ready. Suddenly, he noticed that one of their counselors was motioning that he would like to speak to him. The counselor seemed to have something urgent to say, so the man started a tape of background music and turned his attention to him.

"My wife and I were on our way to the service, when we saw a young woman jump from the bridge near the auditorium," he told me breathlessly. "We rushed to the edge of the river and saw that she was struggling to get out of the water."

My heart was pounding as I listened. He continued, "She made her way up to the shore, and my wife held her in her arms while I ran and phoned for an ambulance. By the time I had returned, my wife had told her about God's love for her and Jesus' death on the Cross for people just like her." The man told me that there, beside what could have been her watery grave; she found everlasting life by trusting Christ.

God's timing was perfect. Not only did that couple arrive at the bridge just in time to save the woman's life, but according to God's perfect plan, they were able to give her something to live for as well. The salvation she received that night was not only salvation from a watery grave, but also salvation from an eternity apart from God.

Depression and dissatisfaction are not necessarily limited to those who do not know the Lord or who are walking out of His will. Interestingly, the great prophet Elijah also encountered this problem. Even more amazing is the fact that Elijah's depression hit him just after a great spiritual victory. In 1 Kings 18, we see Elijah winning a great contest against the Pagan prophets of Baal. God was vindicated, and the false prophets were destroyed. Yet in chapter 19, just days after this victory, we find Elijah pleading with God to take his life.

Part of Elijah's problem, I'm sure, was that he was physically and emotionally exhausted. Therefore, the first thing God did was allow him to eat, sleep, and regain his strength (verses 4-9). Then, God spoke to him, listened to his complaints, encouraged him, and sent him right back to work! We can learn much from Elijah's battle with depression.

Physical causes of depression

First, depression may have a physical cause. Beware, because Satan loves to take advantage of us when we become physically exhausted. Therefore, we should take time daily to exercise, rest, and guard our health by eating properly. The relationship between good physical health and good mental and emotional health is very important. God has equipped our bodies with a wonderful healing system capable of handling almost any condition, provided it is given the nutritional support it needs. The state of our nutrition directly influences our bio-chemistry and immunological system. There are many misunderstood health problems that go misdiagnosed because a lot of medical people still refuse to recognize the correlation between nutrition and health.

Exercise regularly, and remember that the stress and wear and tear on our bodies caused by the kind of lives most of us lead today necessitates that we eat properly. Also, be aware of all the contaminants in the environment and in the foods you consume. When we take care of our bodies we are cooperating with the Creator. There is much said in the Bible on this important subject.

Spiritual causes of depression

Second, you may be attempting to wage the battle of life totally in the flesh, leaving God, His providence, and His power out of the picture. All of us must guard against running counter to or ahead of the Lord.

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Draw comfort from the blessed promise contained in Proverbs 3:5, 6: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

Yes, we must allow Him to do the leading, and as we follow, refusing to be discouraged by fear or failure, we will find we can handle the stressful situations that come into our lives that might otherwise leave us depressed and overwhelmed.

Those who know the Lord should be the most satisfied in all the world. This isn't always the case, however, and sadly, is a poor commentary on our relationship with the very One who provides help and hope. We don't want to admit that these 'black nights of the soul' do come to us, and when they do we fail to turn to the Lord, committing our way to Him, trusting Him, and acknowledging that we need His help and direction.

Ask God for help

Third, and finally, once you have recognized that you have a problem, don't give up and simply drown in your depression. Realize that you need help, consider the causes, and then begin looking for answers.

If the problem is physical, get medical help immediately.

If it is spiritual, take it to the Lord. Remember His compassionate invitation in Matthew 11:28, given to everyone: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” If personal counseling is required, start with your pastor / minister. Or if the problem seems to be unusually deep-seated, see a Christian psychologist or psychiatrist.

Above all, don't make the mistake of taking comfort / wallowing in self-pity, of thinking that you are alone. Elijah did. He said: “I, even I only, am left.” (1 Kings 19:10). But he was not really alone. God was on his side. Furthermore, God reminded him that there were seven thousand faithful people in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, and they all were looking to Elijah for leadership! What an encouraging motivation to overcome disillusionment and depression.

Remember, somebody needs your leadership, help and encouragement too. Don't wallow in self-pity and depression. Look beyond yourself, past your problems, to God who is greater than them all. When you feel you've 'reached the end of your tether' as the saying goes, that is where God only begins in terms of His awesome capacity and power! His love for you is deep and unending, and if you trust Him completely, if you delight yourself in Him, He will give you the desires of your heart, and more. He will exceed your expectations. That is His unfaltering promise.
