

DEPRESSION: Medical Problem, Mental Problem, or Me Problem?

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“We now know that depression is a medical problem.”

“Depression stems from an inability to love oneself.”

“Depression always has a lack of self-esteem in the background.”

“Depression is a result of irrational belief in self-defeating lies.”

“Depression often results from demonic activity that oppresses our spirit.”

“Depression comes from unresolved anger, hurt, loss, rejection, deprivation ...”

I don't know about you but I'm confused and frustrated by the cacophony of voices in the public square (TV, doctor's office, Joe counselor, church foyer, magazines, even sermons) which claim to understand and solve the apparently insoluble problem of depression. Neuroscience and psychology offer many theories but few facts.

Depression is not simply a medical problem or a mental problem, it is a being human problem. And, depression is not a mere emotional problem; it is a problematic emotion with very significant spiritual components. Martin Luther, no stranger to mood swings, said that “the content of the depressions was always the same, the loss of faith that God is good and that He is good to me.”¹

What does the Bible say about depression? Proverbs 12.25 is the only verse that mentions it directly, “Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad.” (NKJV) That's a good place to begin. In this little couplet the Wonderful Counselor, via the wisdom of Solomon, provides both diagnosis and prescription. A heart full of anxiety is the culprit. A good word is the cure.

The Good Word Himself said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” Like John, our Baptist brother, we must say to depressed people, “Behold-the Lamb!”

In broad strokes, the Christ-ian cure for depression is

- *Realization of hope in God*, who says, “Call on Me in the day of trouble and I will rescue you.”² Hopelessness is the hallmark symptom of depression. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is the sum of all hope.³ St. Paul, a man who had more than his share of tribulation and suffering, proclaimed, “On Him we have set out hope that He will deliver us again.”⁴
- *Restoration of the joy of salvation*. We live in a fallen world, wherein all good things come to an end. The tragic dimension of life will be present until Kingdom comes. The joy of salvation comes from realizing, again and again, that our sins have been forgiven and that we will live forever with the eternally happy God, who desires that we would share in His joy. We should never “get over” the Gospel. “This is happiness, to be joyful in Thee and for Thee and because of Thee.”⁵

- *Active love for God and others* is essential because depressed people are sucked into a vortex of morbid self-involvement, which keeps them from following the Great Prescription given by the Great Physician, the medicine that they need above all else.⁶ When a depressed counselee begins to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love others, their depression inevitably begins to evaporate.

Following are some practical strategies for counseling the depressed.

1. Ask them to describe in vivid detail their depression. People are different and depression comes in many shapes and sizes.
2. Invite the counselee to examine their own heart with this question: “If your depression could speak, what would it say? What does it say about you? To others? To God?” Depression is an active experience and can result from many sources: guilt due to unconfessed sin, false guilt, misplaced shame, ungodly fears of various flavors, suppressed bitterness or hatred, hopeless grieving, unbiblical expectations, etc. *Depression is not just something we have, it is something we do.*
3. Ask them to study Psalm 42-43. How does the psalmist address God? What does he preach to himself?
4. Explain that the road out of depression is often “by faith” for the first few weeks. The counselee must accept the challenge of faithful obedience, even though they do not feel like it and are skeptical that anything will make a difference. Also, explain that progress out of the pit is step-by-step, bit-by-bit. Small, practical, consistent faith-based change occurs in the details.
5. Evaluate and provide recommendations for lifestyle problems, i.e., overworking, lack of exercise, sleep difficulties, procrastination, unresolved stressors, absence of spiritual disciplines.
6. Deal with troubled relationships, past or present.
7. Assign active loving tasks performed for the benefit of others, which extricate them from introversion and self-pity.
8. Refer to a physician to rule out medical causes, especially those on multiple medications, or with serious medical conditions, or the elderly.

Robust faith, living hope, and wholehearted love will literally decimate depression.

¹ Bainton, Roland, *Here I Stand*

² Psalm 50.15

³ Colossians 1.5-6, 23, 27; I Timothy 1.1

⁴ 2 Corinthians 1.10b

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions*

⁶ Matthew 22.36-40