

HOPE for depression and hopelessness

The word depression can be used to express different levels of emotion. We can say “I’m depressed” when we wake up feeling a little under the weather or “blue”. We say “This is depressing” when we are sad. Depression can be extensive and can describe a depth of sadness that goes beyond the normal sadness people experience. There is no one cause for depression—physical, circumstantial, and spiritual factors contribute to it – it can be hormonal, it can be related to medication or sickness, and many other things. God’s Word addresses depression....it not only addresses it, but it gives many accounts of godly people who have found themselves depressed. The Scripture often tells us how they got there, and the Scriptures often tell us how they were able to move on from it. Scripture uses various wording to talk about or describe depression including “suffering”, “downcast”, “affliction”, “despair”, “sadness”, “emptiness”, and “brokenness”. The Scriptures also indicate that periods of circumstantial sadness can actually co-exist with spiritual joy. And yet, many Christians hide their depression, thinking it is somehow wrong to be sad, or feeling embarrassed to seek help when they are unable to pull up out of the feeling of depression.

Question for thought: Why might Christians assume that maybe they should hide their feelings of depression? Is that a reasonable assumption? Why or why not?

All in all, depression is a ‘feeling’ of hopelessness, and the cure for hopelessness is hope!

God is the author and source of hope, and the Bible reveals hope. We all need hope whether we find ourselves in a depressing mood, find ourselves depressed for long periods of time, or find ourselves trying to help someone else who is struggling, we all need hope. We can find hope and help in the Scriptures both for ourselves and for others.

This study begins in Psalm 88. This Psalm sheds light on what depression feels like. It gives us really good insight into what a person is feeling and thinking when they are depressed. It is a very bleak Psalm, but it teaches us quite a bit about depression and despair.

Psalm 88 – Identifying Depression

In this Psalm we see many of the “classic” signs of what we would consider “depression”.

- The Psalmist has become fixated on death and dying
- The Psalmist feels he has failed
- The Psalmist feels guilty
- The Psalmist feels completely alone. When we’re depressed, we feel utterly alone. We are unable—and don’t want to—connect with those around us.
- The Psalmist has lost perspective. His eyes are dim with grief and have become blind to the good things in life and all of his memories are of suffering and despair.

This is what it feels like to be deeply depressed. This is the saddest and bleakest Psalm of Lament. It is considered the most troublesome Psalm because it’s the only one that does not resolve. It ends in darkness, with no hope and no answer that we can see. The other Psalms of lament have a “turn around” point where the Psalmist turns His thinking towards God, His attitude changes, and we see joy and hope in the end. This Psalm ends in despair. You might think “what can I possibly learn from this”? How can I find any hope after reading this Psalm?

The Bible tells us that ALL Scripture is PROFITABLE in II Timothy 3:16. All Scripture is profitable and useful. Every single word of this book will either teach us something, rebuke our sin, help us change, or train us to live for God. So what can we learn from Psalm 88 and is there *any* hope to be found here?

Psalm 88 – Identifying hope in the darkness

1. PRAYER – The first hopeful truth about this Psalm is the fact that it is a prayer. At least the Psalmist is talking to God. This is hopeful! No matter what depths of despair you are experiencing, God is still there and you can talk to Him about everything that is in your heart no matter how bleak. This Psalm is full of crisis and sorrow but the writer bares everything to God. God is always on 'speaking terms' with His children and has an excellent listening ear, which leads to the second hopeful truth in this Psalm. It has an incredible emphasis on listening.
2. GOD LISTENS - Psalm 88 reminds us that sometimes all that is needed is a listening ear. God listens. Nothing else is offered in this Psalm – no advice, no rebuke, nothing. God simply listens to the entire prayer.
3. PROVOKED TO SEEK AN ANSWER - Since no resolve or answer is offered, it really provokes the reader to seek an answer. This Psalm “begs” for resolution and answers which causes the reader to think, search, and ask. It fails to deliver an ending, but that causes us to search for what seems to be missing. That search inevitably leads to Christ and the hope He provides.
4. POINTS TO CHRIST – This Psalm drives us to think about suffering and Christ experienced the greatest suffering of all in His humanity. He too was abandoned, suffering, facing death, grieving, sad, and alone. The HOPE in that fact is that He can sympathize with us in our suffering.

Hebrews 4:15-16 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are —yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”:

When we are in despair we get a small glimpse of the utter darkness that Christ endured in order to give us eternal life. Because of this, we know that He can empathize with us in our suffering. This Psalm is a strong reminder of that truth.

This Psalm also points to Christ because what the Psalmist sought is most certainly answered in Jesus. He came to fulfill the deepest need of our heart, which is forgiveness and restoration. Because of Him, one day all tears will be wiped away from those who belong to Christ and we will live eternally free of all sadness and despair. It is such a great comfort to know that some day, those who know Jesus Christ will be free from even the smallest bout of depression or sadness – it will no longer be part of our “human condition” and we will live in perfection.

Sometimes it is a source of great hope just to know that something is temporary, even if it seems impossible to bear. We know there will be an end to it. For those who know Christ it's a glorious end! But in the meantime, we live in a broken world where we all have to make our way. This Psalm reminds us of these truths.

5. EMPATHY - Psalm 88 is an authentic expression of suffering. It should drive us to have empathy for one another – to see into each other's hurting hearts and to care deeply and to pull together in community, helping and supporting each other. This is how God designed the church to function, there is real help and support to be found in God through His people, and there is great hope in that.
6. NOT ALONE - By God's mercy, He shows us in this Psalm that nobody is alone in their depression and despair. He chose to put this in the Bible, in all of it's darkness. It shows us that feelings of depression, sadness, and despair, are “common to man” and are part of the human condition while we live in this world.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 tells us that there is nothing new under the sun.

I Corinthians 10:13 – Tells us that trials and difficulties are common to man. (The word temptation literally means “trial, testing, temptation, and affliction”. Both the ideas of temptation and trial can apply, and can even apply simultaneously).

The comfort and hope in a “common plight” is that there is a common solution and a common source of help!

We are not alone in our experiences and struggles, even when there seems to be no resolve and no end. People who struggle with depression can read this Psalm and identify with it and say “this is me! This is what I feel! God understands me! Psalm 88 recognizes this dark feeling as a genuine feature of a human being's life to varying degrees for each of us. This provides much hope because it is a reminder that others have gone through it, there is a common source of help, God understands, and He has provided people and “community” so that we can help and support each other. He says He will use our struggles to allow us to comfort other people, giving purpose to our most difficult times in life.

II Corinthians 1:3-4 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God”.

Psalm 88 reminds us that when we are feeling dark and bleak (like this Psalm), there is always great hope to be found.

What next?

Once we identify depression, and see that there is hope, where do we go from there? What real help can we find from God's Word that will put us on the right path in dealing with feelings of depression so that we can continue to live and to serve in a way that would please God?

As noted earlier, the Scriptures are full of examples of godly people who struggled with depression and how they experienced victory by God's grace. One very real example is Elijah, a prophet of God. The story of Elijah's bout with depression is found in I Kings 19.

Background on Elijah – Elijah was a prophet of God and just prior to this passage, he had what many of us would consider a “mountain top”, amazing experience. He had just been mightily used by God to call fire down from heaven to burn up a water logged sacrifice in front of all the people as a demonstration of God's power, he defeated the prophets of Baal, and then he had the opportunity to call rain down from heaven. He had seen God work in amazing ways, displayed among many. Many people recognized God as the One True God because of the wonders performed by Elijah that day. However, when Jezebel heard what Elijah had done, she threatened his life (and she had been known for killing off God's prophets). Elijah becomes afraid and flees...it started out as fear and running, however it is obvious how his thinking became more and more depressed in I Kings 19.

Perhaps he began to think, “I've done all these great things for you Lord, I've been faithful, how could you allow this to happen to me? Its not fair”. As he falls into depression this passage shows us that God ministered to Him, showed great compassion towards him, and lays out a beautiful plan of care. Following is an abbreviated account of I Kings 19.

4 But he (Elijah) went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life...”

5 Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” 6 Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came back the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat... 8 So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went ... as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.

9 And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

10 So he said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”

Then He said, “Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

13 So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

14 And he said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”

15 Then the Lord said to him: “Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. 16 Also you shall anoint Jehu as king over Israel. 19. So he departed from there...”

I Kings 19 Depression Identified

Elijah is depressed – There are many of the classic signs of depression here...many of which were also seen in Psalm 88.

- Isolation - He runs away from his life and isolates Himself, which we tend to do when we're depressed.
- Disruption in Sleeping and Eating Patterns - We see an emphasis on sleeping patterns and eating patterns. Depressed people either sleep too much or too little and often eat their sorrows away or stop eating. Elijah clearly needed to be encouraged to get up several times and needed encouragement to eat and drink.
- Elijah had a depressed mood. A depressed person feels sad, helpless, and hopeless. Elijah believed his situation was hopeless.
- Elijah lost interest in normal daily activities. Depressed people feel no interest or pleasure in activities they used to enjoy. For Elijah, he desired to stop being a prophet; he ran away from what he was doing. in life.
- Elijah had thoughts of death and wanted God to end his life. Depressed people have a persistent negative view of themselves and the future. They may have thoughts of death, dying, or suicide. We saw this in Psalm 88.
- Elijah felt he was the only one...not only in his problems, but Elijah believed that he was the only one in Israel who was faithful and spiritual and that everyone was against him. Depressed people feel that they are the only ones facing problems, that they are left alone in a cruel world. This is how Elijah felt.

Maybe some of you can identify. But the remarkable thing about this particular passage is the compassionate help that God gives to Elijah in his depression. This is the best part of this whole story because it shows us who God is. He is tender and compassionate. In addition, the care that God shows to Elijah during this time of despair shows us how we can effectively minister to someone else who is struggling with depression. God's “plan of care” also shows us how we can begin to have victory ourselves when we are struggling.

God's Plan of Care for Elijah

- *Talk about it!* God gave Elijah multiple opportunities to talk about what he was thinking. While he sat in a cave feeling sorry for himself, God asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God is always asking questions for which He already knows the answers. God's question gets Elijah to talk to Him and God's question shows Elijah the compassion and mercy of His God. It shows that God desires for us to be in communication with Him no matter what we're feeling. He wants to listen. Tell me all about it. When we are struggling, it's vital that we remember to cry out to God, even if it's dark and bleak like Psalm 88.

If we are helping someone else in their struggles, we can certainly follow God's loving example and draw people to talk about their struggles. We can ask questions. Proverbs 20:5 says The plan (or purpose or motive or intentions) of a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding or insight will draw it out. Sometimes asking the right, simple question is the wisest thing we can do for someone, even if we think we know the answer, because it will draw out what's in their heart and will give them an opportunity to talk it out. We can be good listeners just like God.

- *Refreshment!* God is so kind. He lets Elijah rest, reminds him a few times to get up, and reminds him to eat and drink for strength and he even provides a cake! Refreshment, Food and Drink. Sometimes people need basic needs such as rest and refreshment, and we can help them get it with gentle encouragement. God does this for Elijah so that he is able to keep up his strength. This is the compassion of God.
- *Encounter God!* A personal relationship with God gives great hope in depression. We have the completed Word of God to encounter Him everyday! But God gave Elijah a special encounter in verses 10-13. He told Elijah to go outside and stand on the mountain, and He gave Elijah a personal experience that would reveal the heart of God. God wasn't in the wind or the earthquake. Instead, the Lord came to him as "a still small voice." We again, see God's patience and love in this whole demonstration because God coaxes Elijah to come out of the cave and to stand on the mountain but Elijah doesn't come to the mouth of the cave until He hears the still small voice. He stays hidden in the cave during the stormy demonstration. This is a significant lesson...sometimes people who are really hurting will respond to the quiet humble gentle spirit, rather than a powerful, pushy, or forceful demonstration. God's work is often quiet, and is sometimes an inner, unseen work of the heart. I'm here, I'm working, but it's not always a big dramatic, earth moving experience. This experience also tells us more about God and His grace. Even though He is Almighty, All Powerful, and a God who can move mountains and shake the earth, He chooses to work gently and with compassion within the hearts of people.
- *Patience!* The remarkable thing is that even after all this, after God gives Elijah this encounter and comes to Him in the still small voice, Elijah is still satisfied with his own answer and doesn't let up. But God continues to listen and to minister to Him. God is so incredibly patient. This has gone on for over a month and God walked with Elijah and cared for Elijah the entire time. God is so kind. The Scriptures tell us that it's this kindness of God that truly changes a person's heart and leads them to turn around. Romans 2:4 tells us this, and it's ultimately displayed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Commentary Quote: "The drought and famine and sword have their work to do, even as the tempest and the earthquake have theirs; but it is by the voice of mercy and love that the hearts of men are turned back again. Not in the strong east wind that parted the Red Sea, or the fire that swept the top of Sinai, or the earthquake that shook down the walls of Jericho would God be brought so near to man as in the still small voice of the child of Bethlehem"

- *Purpose!* The Lord gave Elijah a job to do and a purpose: One of the most helpful things we can do when we are struggling with depression (or helping someone who is struggling) is to remember to keep on living and to once again find our purpose. Our ultimate purpose is to please God with our lives, and God was prompting Elijah to do just that. He gives Elijah a goal to accomplish. He encourages Elijah to keep living, and He gives Elijah someone else to serve. God is so good!

Why does God give Elijah a "goal"? Proverbs 13:19 says that a goal accomplished is sweet to the soul.

Even if we give ourselves small goals, accomplishing those goals will give us purpose and will encourage our souls. Small goals can give us great hope because even in the smallest things we can please God – even in the smallest of things such as eating and drinking. If we accomplish small goals, it is a "first step". To know that you are fulfilling God's purpose brings the greatest hope and fulfillment to the soul, because this is what we were designed to do. We were not designed to hide in a cave.

- *Keep Living!* By giving Elijah a job to do, God is encouraging Elijah to keep on living. We see God giving this same help to His people in Jeremiah when they were carried off into exile. God wants us to keep on living wherever we are, even in the most difficult or depressing circumstances!

Jeremiah 29:4-7 "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive...Build houses and dwell *in them*; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters...that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city..."

God was helping these people by prompting them to make the best of their current situation which looked quite bleak. They were to continue living through this dark, scary time of their lives. If they were restless or looking backwards and not moving forward, they would rapidly fall into despair. But living obediently to God and continuing in purposeful routine and normalcy in difficult times helps us avoid complete despair. God in His loving kindness encouraged them to keep living even though things looked bleak. They are even told to seek peace in the city and to pray for the city right where they are, despite the fact that they didn't want to be there.

- *Serve!* Why does God give Elijah someone to serve? What does serving others do?
 1. It gets our attention off of our own problems.
 2. It gives us companionship.
 3. It gives purpose and reveals that God is using us.
 4. It tends to bring joy to the heart

5. It shows that we aren't the only one with problems.
6. We often receive help ourselves as we help others.

God gives Elijah people to serve – He gives him two people to go out and anoint, and then later in the passage He gives him a successor to mentor. This is God's kindness in helping Elijah move on with purpose.

Isaiah 58:6-11 provides a wonderful explanation of how God gives us hope in times of darkness and despair when we choose to serve others.

“Is this not the fast which I choose...Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth;...And if you give yourself to the hungry And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness And your gloom will become like midday. And the LORD will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.”

As you help others, God's hope and joy will flow into your life. The original language that is translated 'recovery' in this verse speaks of the healing of one's scars. The Bible is telling us that as we labor to help others, God heals our own scars. It really does not matter what the conditions are around you. This is a promise that as you serve, He will strengthen you and water you and you will become a fountain of hope for those around you.

Concluding Thoughts

God greatly encourages Elijah and compassionately ministers to him in his depression. He lets Elijah talk it out, He listens, He reminds him to get up and eat and drink to keep up his strength and even provides it, he lets him rest, He gives him a personal encounter, and he encourages him to keep living and to serve as he gives him a job to do. After all of this kind counsel and care from God, we see that Elijah does indeed continue living and working as God's prophet and he goes on to mentor His successor. Later, we see God graciously taking Elijah up to heaven without seeing death. We see Him playing a significant role in the future of God's plan. We see Him standing in glory with Moses at the Transfiguration of Jesus. God has a glorious plan for Elijah, Elijah belongs to God, but yes he struggled, he got depressed, he got upset, he had to walk through hard times just like us. And God ministered to Him through those times in the most compassionate way!

It should give us such great hope when we are down, that the God of the Universe would care with this much kindness! It should motivate us to be more compassionate and patient with others. The entire encounter is as if God is saying “I see where you are. I am here. I am a place where you can find rest for your soul”. Might we be that for each other and might we enter that rest and cling to that hope when we are despairing!

There is always hope – and that hope is always found in our amazing God!

“CONQUER”

Confront loss and pain with honest emotion. Give yourself time to mourn, grieve, or heal.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 (Take it all to God as in Psalm 88)

If you are the comforter, be a good listener! Give people opportunity to talk and express. Ask questions, hear what they're saying, hear their sadness and their struggles. Offer them support, comfort, encouragement, prayer, and direction when appropriate. James 1:19 (be a good listener)

Offer your heart to God and confess any sin | John 1:8-9

How might failure to confess our sins result in depression?

If we do confess our sin, how can we handle the guilt that may continue to plague us even though we have been forgiven (Romans 8:1) ?

How can we set our hearts at rest in his presence (1 John 3:19)?

What does it mean that God is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20)?

Nurture thoughts that focus on God's great love and goodness towards you. Jeremiah 31:3

Nurture community with other believers. If you are the comforter, walk with the person, be an accountability partner, and do not abandon them, but have patience and gentleness. Build community for them so they are not isolated. Ecclesiastes 4:9

We must find authentic community in the face of depression. Our impulse when we're sad is to isolate ourselves, but it's at that moment that we need others most. Romans 12:15. Real community comes when we're willing to hurt with each other and rejoice with each other. God created his church to be an authentic community where all of us are helping each other as we go through different seasons of life.

How can you counteract the desire to withdraw from people when you are depressed or sad? What do you think authentic community is like?

Quit negative thinking and negative talk | Philippians 4:8, Ephesians 4:29

If you are the comforter, verbally encourage them sincerely, and often. Encourage them as a person, encourage them spiritually, and encourage them to live life. Help them find their purpose in God. | 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Understand that God has an eternal purpose for loss, pain, and heartache. Romans 8:28

Exchange your hurt, anger, or despair for gratitude.

Choose to give thanks even if you don't feel thankful. Count your blessings.
| 1 Thessalonians 5:18

If you are the comforter, be encouraging.
Hebrews 3:13, Hebrews 10:25

Bring laughter into their lives (or your own!). Make them smile be an instrument of gratitude. Proverbs 17:22

Remember that God is sovereign over your life. He promises hope for your future even if it feels bleak.

Psalm 71:3

Jeremiah 29:11