

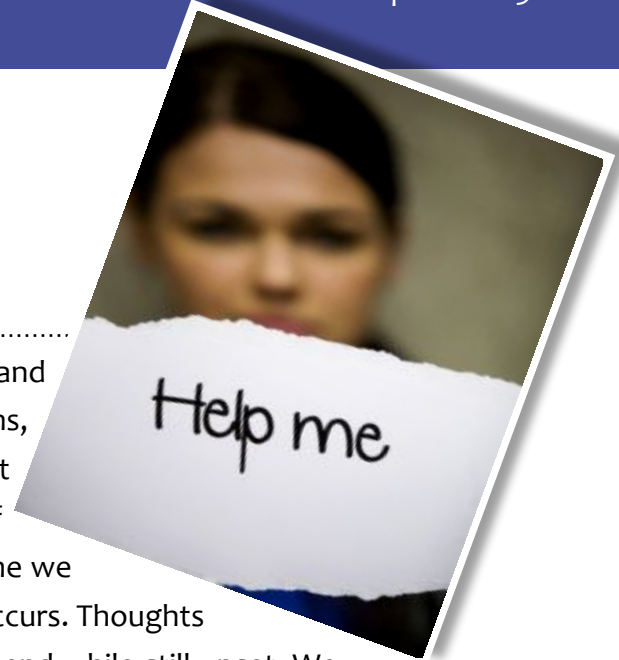
“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.” Ephesians 3:20

Biblical Help for Depression

Theme: The Lord's counsel for dealing with depression.

Review of Lesson 20

The mind is primarily responsible for stress levels; our thoughts and emotions tend to control our stress level. Life is full of problems, hurtful experiences, and disappointments; however, we cannot let our thoughts about these things control our minds. Memories of negative events (whether true or not) can be deadly, and each time we "fret" about a past hurtful event, the quicker our stress reaction occurs. Thoughts and emotions can eat us up; that is why we are to not let the day end while still upset. We have to get the event behind us and not allow ourselves to think of it. It is really our own attitude/response, more than what others do, that upsets us. We are responsible for our own attitudes and can't blame them on others; they are our choice. We should not give our health away by harboring hate and bitterness—ask the Lord for help in letting them go. God will give us the correct desires in life if we follow His Word.



Bible Truth

Introduction

Depression is a condition in which a person feels a dark, heavy cloud of gloom and misery. It is normal to have short-term moods of sadness and grief. When such moods dominate our lives for over one month, then it may be a medical condition. We learn that when we become a child of God through faith, we are blessed with all spiritual blessing in Heaven and have a bright eternity in the future. However, while we live on this earth, we struggle with earthly feelings. A depressed Christian generally knows he/she has eternal and heavenly blessings but feels trapped now by unexplainable moods of despair. Depression is a debilitating condition in which nothing brings pleasure in life.

Depression can get so bad that there is no relief. It leads to feelings of being alone, worthless, hopeless, and helpless. It can lead to suicidal thoughts and actions. Depression is

not an issue of facts or realities; it is a practical matter of how a person feels. How a person feels can be totally out of touch with reality (what a person believes and knows is true). A depressed believer can know logically that he/she is God's precious child, has a purpose in life, and has a hope that cannot be destroyed, but those truths do not replace the terrible feelings depression brings. That is the dilemma of depression.

Here is how depression feels: *"I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, here would be not one cheerful face on earth.... To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me."* (See discussion below)

Discussion: The person quoted above was a believer and had an important job, but his depression robbed him of all

joy and he could hardly continue in this life. Discuss. (Person's name at end of lesson.)

Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is not to diagnose or prescribe any specific course of action for those who are depressed. It is designed to explain depression and provide information that may be beneficial to anyone that is depressed. The lesson is also designed to give insights for the friends and family of those suffering depression. Depression presents an opportunity for believers to show love and understanding.

What is Depression

Depression occurs in people of all ages and very often teens. Most people have times when they feel sad or "down" because of events in their lives. However, the temporary feelings of gloom can linger long after the event that caused them. Depression results in:

- an overwhelmingly sad mood
- a change in appetite
- a feeling life has no joy or hope
- problems with sleep (too much or not enough)
- fatigue and exhaustion
- problems concentrating
- being easily irritated, anger, hostility
- substance abuse
- self loathing and suicidal thoughts
- crying very easily

Causes

Christians often think depression is caused by sin. However, Christians get depression just like non-Christians and both respond to medical treatment. If sin were the primary cause, why would a non-Christian respond to medical treatment (since sin issues were not addressed)? The truth is that depression can have various causes:

- Most often depression is the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain; such an imbalance is no more a sin than having diabetes or acne. Generally the chemical imbalance can be treated by a health care professional, and anyone with depression is encouraged to seek such help. Chemical imbalances in the brain are caused by poor nutrition, drug abuse, imbalance in body chemistry, low blood sugar, allergies, medical conditions (like thyroid or adrenal problems, stress overload), etc.¹

- Depression can also be caused by our minds—how we think and how we feel about things. So it is important to learn how to think properly and how to avoid negative thoughts (Lessons 19 & 20). Negative thoughts can include things that are true (sexual abuse, bullying), but since they hurt us so deeply, we have to do something other than think about them.

- Sometimes depression may be caused by a spiritual problem; for example, if a sin captures a person's mind and the person tries to keep it a secret. Sometimes sin captures the mind and the person just can't seem to regain control (even after confessing it to God and asking for help).

Depressed Characters: Although no one is specifically said to have depression in the Bible, many characters seem to have suffered from temporary depression: David (Psa. 61:2, 77:2-3, 143:4), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:6-19), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), and Paul (2 Cor. 1:8; 7:5-6).

King David poured-out his heart and soul to God saying, **"For the enemy has persecuted my soul; He has crushed my life to the ground; He has made me dwell in darkness, Like those who have long been dead. Therefore my spirit is overwhelmed within me; My heart within me is distressed. I remember the days of old; I meditate on all Your works; ... My soul longs for You like a thirsty land"** (Psa. 143:3-6). David seems to be depressed because events in his life, many of which he had no control over,

¹Considering chemical imbalances--serotonin is a chemical used in the brain's message carrying system (called a neurotransmitter). It transmits electrical messages across small synapses (gaps) in the brain's nervous system. The synapses are part of God's design and serve a purpose. However, if there is not enough serotonin, the messages related to mood do not get transferred adequately resulting in a depressed mood. Serotonin is made in the body from tryptophan which is an amino acid (amino acids are the building blocks of proteins). Tryptophan generally comes from foods we eat (foods high in tryptophan: red meats, poultry, fish, soy products, dairy, eggs, and nuts--especially almonds). It is not a sin to have low serotonin. Nor is it a sin to lack the enzyme needed to convert tryptophan into serotonin. Interestingly, serotonin is converted into melatonin, which helps a person sleep--so low serotonin can lead to sleep related problems.

would not give him a break. It does not seem to be caused by sin. Events were severe and had beaten him to the ground. He recalled the good old days and meditated on God's goodness as many depressed people still do today—yet they suffer. Depression robs a person of all joy and hope. In God's time (after much prayer, reading the Word, and meditation) David was brought back to a correct mood.

Nutrition: Our nutritional status influences the functioning of our brains and minds. Christian or not, all humans react to foods according to God's design. A study of civilizations with long, healthy lives shows they ate much like in the Bible. Biblical eating patterns reveal that best health is gained by not eating too much and eating primarily whole foods (foods with nothing added or taken out) like vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. People in the Bible generally ate small amounts of sweets, animal fats, and meat (feasts were special events, not every day). They ate and drank items as close as possible to the way they were

created (whole; raw [not meat]; unaltered by humans; no preservatives, colorings, antibiotics; etc.).

Taking care of our bodies is important. The Scripture says, **"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him"** (1 Cor. 3:16-17a). Unfortunately, altered foods taste good; so as the healthy cultures noted above moved from a simple diet and started eating modern (but altered) foods, the "diseases of civilization" followed—including depression. A well-balanced diet will help your body produce the correct chemicals in the right amounts. This is important.

Discussion: Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. How can we defile them (make impure)? (Answer: sin, poor diet, street drugs, negative thoughts, or anything that does not lead to good health. These things pollute and destroy us by means of His natural laws; not by zapping us dead.)

Life Applications

Physical Health

A deficiency in certain vitamins or nutrients can cause depression. That is why these lessons strongly recommend a good diet (things you eat) and lifestyle. Regular exercise and adequate sleep are also essential to combat depression. The Scripture agrees **"for bodily exercise profits a little . . ."** (1 Tim. 4:8a). This verse means exercise profits us in this life (for a little time), but it has nothing to do with our eternal life. Exercise at least 30 minutes four times a week to the point a good sweat is raised—this increases serotonin. Walking, biking, swimming, hard work, various sports, work-out programs, jogging, etc., are good forms of exercise. Getting adequate sunlight is also helpful (especially in winter).

The Lord has made special provisions for us. Psalms 104:14b says **"and vegetation for the service of man"** which means the vegetation the Lord has created has a

special service for humans, often called His medicine. Consuming natural foods (as designed by God) is the best way to promote good long-term health. There may be times when a person needs special help from God's pharmacy (herbal remedies) or from a pharmaceutical drug. It is sometimes necessary to get professional health care for depression, but be careful not to follow the advice of a friend or those untrained in mental health.

Mental Health

Lessons 19 and 20 dealt with stress and how it impacts health. Stress can lead to depression and the two are very much related. Stress and depression are related to negative thinking and not getting our thoughts under control. Does low serotonin lead to negative thinking and harmful emotions, or do negative thoughts and emotions lead to low serotonin? Arguments can be made either way, and countless examples can be quoted for each side.

Certainly negative thoughts and emotions can set you up for a state of depression. On the other hand, if you lack needed nutrients or do not have the needed enzyme to produce serotonin, negative thinking does not cause it. So, diet, exercise, sunlight, supplements, proper thoughts, etc., may be helpful in preventing depression. However, once a person has it, they may need professional medical help (just like for a broken bone).

Depression is a Feeling

The thing to remember is that depression is how you feel—not what is real or true. You can know and love the Lord, walk in His truth, and yet feel like all joy has been lost. You can try your best not to worry, be confident that if you die you will go to Heaven, do all the right things, go to bed feeling all is well, but wake up in the morning with a feeling of overwhelming dread. So depression is not the lack of understanding the Lord, or His provisions, or His grace, it is how one feels, and those feelings often have nothing to do with reality. That is because they can be due to a chemical imbalance; for example, serotonin.

If a person's body does not produce enough insulin, they will have diabetes. The person will get sick unless they eat correctly and take needed medicine (regardless if they trust in the Lord or not); this is also how depression works. What makes depression so miserable for a Christian (or anyone) is they do not want to feel this way, and yet they do. How a person feels (mood) is not necessarily a function of what a person believes; it is generally a chemical imbalance just like diabetes. Depression is a very lonely and scary place; a place where Christians have to learn to be of help.

Discussion: Can a person love the Lord, have no hidden sin, have good thought patterns, and still have a headache? (Answer: Of course!) Now consider that the same holds true for depression.

Double Whammy

When a person feels emotionally down (depressed) and another person hurts them even more, that is a double whammy (see Lesson 15, *Being Misunderstood—Adding Insult to Injury [part 2]*). The common “double whammy” is telling a depressed person that the problem is due to hidden sin (this happens too often in writing and from the pulpit). The depressed person is in mental anguish and needs help from another, only to receive nothing but more pain in the form of criticism, put-downs, accusations, etc.

"Let food be your medicine and medicine your food."

Hippocrates, Greek physician, considered the father of modern medicine, 460-377 BC.

Certainly, we can all find some sin in another and we can see bad choices in life. Guess what? We all have those issues, but we are not all depressed. Instead of adding insult to injury, Christians have to learn how to comfort and encourage those with depression.

What You Can Do

Here are some things you can do that may be of some help to those suffering from depression:

- Comfort them, confirm their worth, tell them you love them, let them know they can get through this. Your instructions are **"therefore if there is any consolation (encouragement) in Christ, if any comfort of love, ... fulfill my joy by being like-minded"** (Phil. 2:1a-2a, parenthesis added).
- Suggest reading the Bible together; do not pick-out verses you think they need (this would be you trying to preach to them). Instead, read a chapter(s) or whole book with them like Philippians or Colossians (this allows the Lord to speak to them through the Word). **"Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation (to urge on)"** (1 Tim. 4:13a, parenthesis added).
- Pray with them. Hearing another person pray for you is very encouraging and gives hope.
- Saying "be happy" or "all things work together for good" are hurtful and of little value. It would be like telling a drowning person to swim. Instead, ask how you can help, (Eccl. 4:10).
- It is not your duty to judge another or to try to solve their problems. So do not accuse the person of sin, wrong

behavior, etc. Just be there with/for them and let them talk. If his/her talk is constantly negative (how they have been wronged), subtly change the subject. You may have to be the one to show how to have a positive outlook and to model correct behavior—walk the talk.

- If a person is in a presumed hopeless situation (like an abusive relationship with no way out), discuss ways to get professional help or seek a trusted adult who has experience in this matter.
- Think of a time when you were down. What did you learn that would help others? (2 Cor. 1:4-5).

Take 2 Heart

Summary

Depression is a dark cloud of gloom that will not go away and dominates a person's life. Depression is a mood, a feeling of unexplainable sadness now (it can exist even if a person believes in a bright, heavenly future). The causes of depression can come from our body, mind, or spirit. Generally it is caused by some type of chemical imbalance, and it is no sin to have an imbalance in body chemistry. Since our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, we are advised to take care of it. It is good to get a lot of exercise and to have a diet that concentrates on foods as close as possible to how God created them. It is good to get professional help to deal with depression. Each of us has to make sure we do not cause additional pain to a depressed person by judging or accusing them of sin. Instead, offer true comfort, pray together, read the Bible together, be there for them and listen, advise seeking professional help for situations beyond your understanding, and believe no situation is hopeless with the Lord.

Gospel

"For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous

man (person) will one die; yet perhaps for a good man (person) someone would dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6-8, parentheses added).

Encouragement

"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Eph. 3:20). Our struggles in life are given perspective when we realize that God can (and does) do things beyond our expectations and surpassing what we think even possible. For those suffering from depression, may the Lord provide for you in this manner. For those not suffering from depression, may the Lord enable you to be a person who can help in unknown ways. Praise the Lord for you! May His peace overwhelm you and provide a comfort beyond words.

(Answer to quote on page 1: Abraham Lincoln.)