

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The relevance of God in 2008: Christianity and Depression

Today we come to the third of a series of talks on "The relevance of God in 2008". Our subject is "Christianity and depression". It will be helpful if we first spend some time speaking generally about depression. We will look at:

1. What is depression?
2. What are its symptoms?
3. What triggers it?
4. How can it be helped?

What is depression?

Most people experience ups and downs in life. Depression is more than this. With depression there is persistent low mood such that coping with everyday life is difficult and some may even feel suicidal. A report published earlier this year suggests that at least one person in three at some time in their life will experience depression. This makes it highly likely that, either as a sufferer or as someone trying to help a sufferer, many of us will have to face it at some time. The World Health Organisation estimates that by 2020, major depression will be the second biggest cause of death and disability in the world. It is, therefore, important that as Christians we are as well informed about the subject as we can be.

What are its symptoms?

There are many symptoms. Some common ones are:

- tiredness and fatigue
- loss of enjoyment and interest in life
- sleeping problems
- appetite disturbance, leading to either weight loss or gain
- feelings of worthlessness, so that some Christians may even doubt their salvation
- recurrent thoughts of death.

What triggers it?

Working out what causes depression is complex. Recent medical research suggests there may be changes in the chemicals in the brain. This may occur spontaneously or may be triggered by life events such as bereavement, work problems, illness, childbirth and relationship difficulties.

How can it be helped?

It is important to seek medical help. Doctors may use medication, counselling or other talking therapies. None of these are quick fixes and may require time and persistence to be effective. Some independent charities are able to offer emotional and practical support both for the sufferer and for the carer. Other factors that can help include:

- regular exercise
- eating a balanced healthy diet
- reducing alcohol to the recommended limit
- getting sufficient rest and relaxation
- talking through one's feelings and problems with a trusted friend.

It should be emphasised that, in the majority of cases, depression can be successfully treated. Many people who have made outstanding contributions to society have received successful treatment for depression, for example: Winston Churchill, Buzz Aldrin (one of the first two men to walk on the moon), and Charles Haddon Spurgeon (a noted preacher of the Gospel in the 19th Century).

So far, we have spoken about depression in a fairly general way. It is time now to look more closely at our subject, "Christianity and depression". Some Christians believe that to admit to depression is somehow letting the Lord down. After all, hasn't He promised to be with us and to help us whatever the difficulties in life? That is wonderfully true, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us: "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'. So we may boldly say, 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me? ... Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever'" (Hebrews 13:5-8).

As we have seen, the causes of depression are complex. It may be caused by an imbalance in brain chemistry. Believers are not immune to this happening any more than they are immune to the common cold. In other situations, depression may be triggered when life's problems are so severe that they are overwhelming. Only the Lord knows the full picture and each of His servants is accountable only to Him (Romans 14:4).

It will be helpful if we now consider some of the characters in the Bible who would seem to have suffered from depression. We will look at Elijah, Jonah and Job. In each case, it is important to see that God did not abandon these servants because they had let Him down but rather worked with them for their blessing and recovery.

Elijah

In 1 Kings 18, we read how Elijah summoned the nation of Israel to Mount Carmel. There were gathered there the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. Against these overwhelming odds, Elijah stood there fearlessly by himself and challenged the nation to return to God. After these false prophets had called in vain to their idol gods to burn up their sacrifice, God marvellously vindicated His servant by sending down fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice, even though Elijah had dared to soak the sacrifice in water! Elijah won a mighty victory for God that day and the false prophets with their idols were destroyed.

But now Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, a worshipper of Baal, in her fury had threatened to kill Elijah, who runs away to the wilderness in fear of his life. In chapter 19 we read, "And [Elijah] prayed that he might die, and said, 'It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!'" Here Elijah displays the classic features of depression, triggered by the stress of his challenge to the nation on Mount Carmel. We can see his wish to die and his feelings of inadequacy. But would God abandon His servant? Not a bit of it! We read, "Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, 'Arise and eat'. 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" (verses 5-6). In our introduction, we noted the benefits of proper rest and eating. God saw to it that His servant had these!

But God was not finished with His servant yet! In succession, God causes Elijah to experience a strong wind, an earthquake and a fire, but God was not in these. Finally, there comes a still, small voice which Elijah recognises as the voice of God, who says to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So 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 my life.' Then the LORD said to Him, 'Go...anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha...you shall anoint as prophet in your place...Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal'" (verses 11-18).

God still had work for His servant to do. Kings were to be anointed and, very importantly, Elisha was to be anointed as Elijah's successor. God's work would still go on. Moreover, things were not really so bad as Elijah had imagined them. He was not alone! God still had 7,000 followers in Israel. Hearing God's voice transformed Elijah!

Jonah

The story of Jonah is well known. God had commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh, the last capital of Assyria, and cry against it for its wickedness. Jonah tried to run away from God and took passage in a boat going in the opposite direction. But God's hand was still upon His disobedient servant. Jonah ended up inside a big fish. There he learned that salvation is of the LORD.

Commanded by God a second time to go to Nineveh, this time Jonah obeys even though it probably meant many days of arduous walking for Jonah to get there. As a result of that, Jonah was probably worn out before he arrived there. Having arrived there, it took Jonah three days of walking to go from one end of the city to the other. It is not difficult to imagine how Jonah's Jewish feelings would have suffered seeing this great Gentile city given over to idolatry and knowing the unwelcome message he must bring. Yet throughout that time, Jonah's message was fearless and uncompromising: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The whole city, from the king down to the least of his subjects, turned to God in repentance and judgment was averted.

The stress of his visit, together with what he felt was the shame of the fact that what he, a prophet, had said would happen didn't happen, was too much for Jonah. In his anger, he rails against God. We read, "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!' Then the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city.' There God caused a plant to grow up and shelter Jonah from the sun's heat. But the next day, the plant withered, leaving Jonah exposed to the sun. We read, 'Then [Jonah] wished death for himself and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live ... But the LORD said, You have had pity on the plant for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh?'" (Jonah 4:1-11).

God would not give up on His servant. Rather through the circumstances, God would teach Jonah something of what was in God's great heart of love for mankind!

Job

We will touch only briefly on the life of Job. In a short space of time, Job lost his family, his possessions and his health (see Job 1 and 2). We can scarcely begin to imagine his grief and desolation. Job experienced several of the classic triggers of depression: bereavement, loss of fortune, illness. Job's lament in chapter 7 indicates several of the classic symptoms of depression: "Like a servant who earnestly desires the shade, and like a hired man who eagerly looks for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and wearisome nights have been appointed to me. When I lie down, I say, 'When shall I arise, and the night be ended?' For I have had my fill of tossing till dawn. My flesh is caked with worms and dust, my skin is cracked and breaks out afresh. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope. Oh, remember that my life is a breath! My eye will never again see good." (verses 2-7).

Whether Job actually suffered clinical depression is not clear. Certainly, God carried him through this difficult period of his life, right through to the end. Then he was able to say to God, "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You ... I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:1-6).

We should say again that current thinking indicates that depression may result from chemical imbalance in the brain and may be triggered by a variety of causes. Some 3,000 years ago, with his limited knowledge of the human body, the psalmist David could declare, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). Modern medical science should serve only to increase that sense of awe and wonder. In view of all the complex interactions and interdependencies in the body, it is surely a miracle that it works so well for most of us for most of the time! It is not letting God down to seek medical help when suffering from depression. He can work through and alongside that medical help.

In the introduction, we looked at some of the medical suggestions for helping depression. There are two important spiritual aids to depression: God's word and praying friends. The psalmist cried, "From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For You have been a shelter for me...When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then You knew my path" (Psalms 61:2 and 3; 142:3). It is important for every Christian while they are well, and particularly when they are young, to store up in their heart and mind Scriptures like these and others. Then in times of depression or other illness, when prayer is difficult and reading God's word seems too much effort, the Spirit of God is able to bring God's word to remembrance. Corrie ten Boom and her sister, Betsie, were interned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Before Betsie died there, she left with her sister a message that, after the war, Corrie carried around the world: "Tell them that there is no pit so deep but that God's love is deeper still."

It is also important for the sufferer to be able to share his or her feelings and problems with close family and/or close, trusted Christian friends who will then be able to support in prayer. Then, even when the sufferer feels unable to pray, he or she has the assurance that they are being carried by the prayers of others who care. Visits from friends are useful. Christian friends who feel that they might be able to help in these situations should persist, even though initially there may be little response from the sufferer.

But while those caught up in depression have their own special needs, those who have to live with them, particularly their spouses or parents or children, have special needs also. They should not be forgotten. Life for them can be especially difficult. Carers can reach the stage when they wonder, "When will it all end?" There may seem to be little or no light at the end of the tunnel. Only faith in God and love for the sufferer keeps them going.

The two resources mentioned above, God's word and the support of praying friends, are equally valuable in this situation. God's promise is still true: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The support of Christian friends in prayer, but also in providing some relief from the burden of caring even if only for a little while, is vital. It is not for nothing that Paul writes, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). That law of Christ is, of course, His command to love one another (John 13:34). Providing an opportunity for the carer to get away from the house, with all the responsibilities of caring that that entails, is an important service for the Lord. The carer needs to have some time just to be with family or friends. There should be no sense of guilt in availing oneself of such times.

The process of recovery may be slow and seemingly a long time in coming but when, in the goodness of the Lord, that time comes, the sufferer, the carer, and those who have tried to help, each in their own way should remember to give thanks to the Lord.

The problem of depression is one that looks like increasing rather than decreasing as the years go by. It is important, therefore, that every Christian be acquainted with the problem so that they may be helped or be a help as occasion requires it. May the Lord give us each one the grace for this!

IMPORTANT NOTE: Dr. Hughes is **not** a medical doctor.

Please Note:

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