

Applying Scripture to Life

Topic 12 – Depression

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Disclaimer

I am not a medical doctor. I have no medical training beyond wilderness first aid and CPR. No one should independently change the course of medical treatment based on what I share today or in this course. No one should start taking unprescribed medication, stop taking prescribed medication, or alter the dosage of prescribed medication based on what I say today. You should always talk to the medical doctor who prescribed any medication before changing the course of treatment.

Introduction

Life is difficult. The Scriptures tell us, and experience demonstrates that diverse people in diverse life situations with diverse life experiences will undergo trouble in their lives (Job 5:7; 14:1). Difficulty, or loss, can bring sadness into our lives.

Even though difficulty is unpleasant, you can have hope because God works ALL things for His glory and your sanctifying good (Rom 8:28-29). Additionally, suffering believers have an incredible opportunity to present the truth of the gospel to the world (to prove their faith): Jesus Christ is true, and He has done a supernatural work in your heart.

Today we will look at depression, some of its causes, and responding Biblically to sadness. Remember our axiom: “Never call anything a disease that the Bible calls sin. Never call anything sin the Bible does not clearly identify as sin.”

Depression Defined

There are many definitions for depression. Some deal with the person’s mood, feeling, or attitude of sorrow, hopelessness, despair, joylessness, loneliness, emptiness, doom, etc. Some focus on the debilitating (or weakening) nature of depression as the cause of not handling daily responsibilities.

One definition is: a debilitating mood, feeling, or attitude of hopelessness, which become a person’s reason for not handling the most important issues of life. Depression is feeling oriented, and those feelings often become the basis for actions.

A simplistic way to define depression is to use the term “sadness”. There are two kinds of sadness: “normal” and “disordered”.

Normal sadness has three characteristics (adapted from Horwitz and Wakefield in their book “The Loss of Sadness”).

1. The sadness is context specific. It occurs when we lose something we value. There is an occurring trigger (e.g., loss of a life, loss of a job, loss of an opportunity, loss of a relationship, etc.). The loss can be real or imagined, from within or without, or based on truth or lies.
2. The intensity or the sadness corresponds to the size and duration of loss.
3. The sadness ends when there is no longer a loss, or the loss is adapted to.

All Scripture are from the NASB '95 Update unless noted.

Most word studies are from preceptaustin.org, blueletterbible.org, and biblehub.com

The big question: “Is sadness sin?” Let’s look at some examples from the life of Jesus.

Jesus was prophesied to experience sorrow and grief.

³He was despised and forsaken of men, **A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;** And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. (Isa 53:3)

Jesus was grieved at the Pharisees’ hardness of heart.

¹He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered.

²They were watching Him *to see* if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. ³He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”

⁴And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. ⁵**After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart,** He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. (Mark 3:1-5)

Jesus was grieved at the Pharisees’ unbelief.

¹¹The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. ¹²**Sighing deeply in His spirit,** He said, “Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” ¹³Leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side. (Mark 8:11-13)

Jesus was grieved at the death of Lazarus and Mary and Martha’s grief.

³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. ³¹Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her *also* weeping, **He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,** ³⁴and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵**Jesus wept.** ³⁶So the Jews were saying, “See how He loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?” (John 11:30-37)

Jesus was grieved upon foretelling His impending sacrifice for sin.

²⁷**“Now My soul has become troubled;** and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” (John 12:27-28)

Jesus was grieved at Jerusalem’s rejection of her King.

⁴¹When He approached *Jerusalem*, He saw the city **and wept over it,** ⁴²saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. (Luke 19:41-42)

Jesus grieved in the garden of Gethsemane at His impending sacrifice.

³⁶Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and **began to be grieved and distressed**. ³⁸Then He said to them, “**My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death**; remain here and keep watch with Me.” ³⁹And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” (Matt 26:36-39)

This is not an exhaustive list from the life of Jesus and obviously if Jesus experienced sadness, then others in the Bible did as well. We could look at David, the Psalmist, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Paul to name a few.

Clearly, we can see that Jesus was sad, grieved, and distressed. He experienced these emotions at a point in time, triggered by events and proportional to the trigger. So, did Jesus sin? We answer that question with a resounding “NO!”

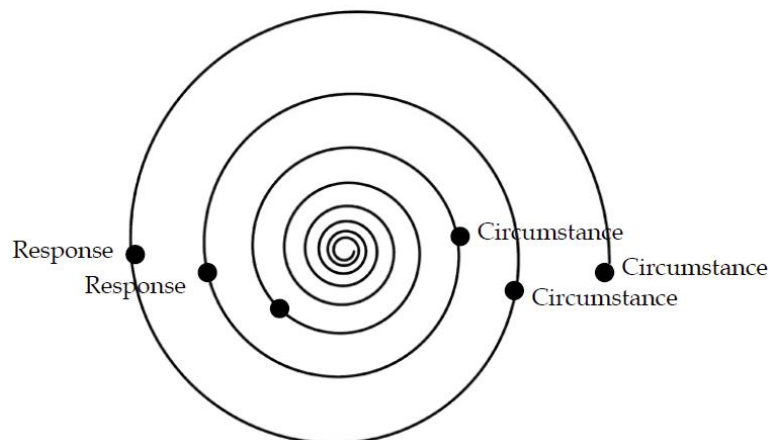
¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but **One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin**. ¹⁶Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)

We can conclude that being sad or grieved or distressed is an emotion common to being human. In each of these cases Jesus experienced the emotion, but He did not respond sinfully. He always responded righteously. While the emotion is not sin, the response can be.

Similarly, Jesus did not have sinful thoughts regarding circumstances that drove Him to be sad. Obviously, this is different than us. We can have sinful thoughts or heart motives that can drive us to feel sadness – things like selfishness, coveting, lust (flesh or eyes), pride, etc.

❖ What are some sinful responses to sadness due to loss?

The figure below shows how the responses to circumstances of normal sadness can spiral into the depths of depression. Depression begins when a person chooses to sit in sadness. Depression develops through a downward spiral caused by a person choosing to make a series of unbiblical decisions.



From Dr. Scott Mehl’s message “Understanding Depression” given at the 2014 ACBC Annual Conference.

Someone who has gone down this spiral may be described as: filled with gloom and pessimism (Psa 32:3), apathetic and fatigued (Psa 32:4), hopeless (Psa 38:2-4, 10), having physical pain (Psa 38:5-8), withdrawn from relationships (Psa 38:11; 55:6-8), having feelings of guilt (Psa 51:3), having sleep difficulties (Psa 42:2, 3), having a loss of productivity (1 Kings 19:3-5), and having thoughts of death or suicide (1 Kings 19:4).

The farther a person goes down the spiral the more extreme their feelings; the more they despair; the more they are hopeless and empty; the more debilitating (or weakening) the sadness becomes. Such a person may partially shut down, ceasing to function in certain areas. They may want to be inactive or sleep all the time. They may stop handling the responsibilities of life.

According to Dr. Charles Hodges' research, normal sadness accounts for ~90% of what the medical community calls depression.

Disordered sadness, unlike normal sadness, has no apparent trigger of loss or context for the sadness. There is no explanation for the intense feelings of sadness. These feelings are prolonged with no apparent end in sight.

There are cases in which depression can be a symptom of physiological issues. Some examples can be found in Charles Hodge's "Good Mood Bad Mood" Appendix B. Hodges breaks the medical issues into groupings:

- Metabolic and endocrine diseases (e.g., thyroid and pituitary diseases)
- Infectious diseases (e.g., TB, Mono, HIV, and influenza)
- Neurological diseases (e.g., Alzheimer's, MS, Parkinson's, tumors, strokes, or traumatic brain injuries)
- General diseases or conditions (e.g., cancer, lupus or other auto-immune diseases, sleep deprivation, diet, hormone swings)
- Medication (individually or interactions) and illegal drugs

In a lecture at the 2014 ACBC annual conference, Hodges mentioned that these medical issues may account for another ~5% of those who are labeled depressed by the medical community. The reason for the sad mood of the remaining ~5% is unknown.

Regardless of the cause, all those who are sad/depressed can be cared for with hope from the resources found in a relationship with Christ.

Note

There are some people who have continued in the spiral of depression who may be a danger to themselves. For these hurting people, it is important that they be protected from harm. This may include admittance to a medical institution. Also, some hurting people may have so deeply progressed in their depression that they are incapacitated in regard to accepting truth and moving towards thoughts and behavior that glorifies God. In these cases, a medical doctor may prescribe medication.

Purpose of Sadness

As we have seen, Jesus experienced normal sadness or grief or despair. So, if this experience is common to people, what is its purpose?

- That believers would recall God’s attributes to their minds and have hope.

¹⁹Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. ²⁰Surely my soul remembers And is bowed down within me. ²¹This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. ²²The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. ²⁴“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.” ²⁵The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, To the person who seeks Him. (Lam 3:19-25)

❖ **Do the difficulties of life drive you to remember God’s attributes?**

- That believers would trust in God and not themselves.

⁸For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that **we despaired even of life**; ⁹indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves **so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead**; ¹⁰who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, **He on whom we have set our hope**. And He will yet deliver us, (2 Cor 1:8-11)

⁵Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? **Hope in God**, for I shall again praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God. (Psa 43:5; see also Psa 42)

❖ **Do the difficulties of life move you to trust God?**

- That believers would repent from their sin.

¹How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! ²How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit! ³When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. ⁶Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him. ⁷You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance. (Psa 32:1-7; see also Psa 38 and 51)

❖ **Do the difficulties of life move you to turn from your sin?**

Hope for the Depressed

Those who are struggling with sadness and have progressed down the spiral of depression are dear souls for whom Christ died. Here are some Biblical principles that bring hope to those struggling with sadness/depression.

1. Purpose to glorify God.

Make a conscience choice to do whatever it takes to glorify God; to show His character in your motives, thoughts, words, and deeds. This must be your greatest desire, your highest purpose, more important than anything.

²⁷“Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” (John 12:27-28)

³⁶Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, **and began to be grieved and distressed.** ³⁸Then He said to them, **“My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”** ³⁹And He went a little beyond *them*, and **fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”** (Matt 26:36-39)

Jesus’s purpose was to glorify the Father even though He was troubled at what He would suffer on the cross. Glorifying God was His defining purpose in life.

❖ **What is your defining purpose?**

2. Walk in the Spirit

¹⁶But I say, **walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.** ... ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Gal 5:16, 22-23)

A believer who is walking in the Spirit will respond with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to the circumstances of life, including emotions of sadness.

❖ **When you consider your days, how do you walk, in the flesh or Spirit?**

3. Be actively involved in a local body

This will allow you to receive care (love, edification, encouragement, admonition, comfort, etc.) from those who have the resources to bring care to you.

❖ **Are you involved with other believers (at all ranges of maturity) at a level that care can be brought to you?**

4. Determine the trigger for your sadness

Is the trigger due to a loss that is real? Is it due to an imagined loss? Is the feeling based on sinful thoughts or lies? Answering these questions allows you to determine your course of action.

For example, if the sadness comes from sinful thoughts, then repentance is warranted; if the sadness comes from the death of a loved one, then focus on truth about God’s comfort.

5. Remember God's purposes for difficult times (see topic 8, "Trials and Suffering"):

- To test the strength of our faith (Ex 16:4; 1 Pet 1:6-8)
- To humble us (2 Cor 12:7)
- To teach us to trust God and not in ourselves (2 Cor 1:8-9)
- To remind us of our future glory (Rom 8:18)
- To develop godly character and strength (2 Cor 12:10)
- To enable us to better help others in their trials (2 Cor 1:3-4)
- To allow us to receive help in time of need (Heb 4:16)
- To cause us to learn more of God's Word (Psa 119:71)
- To give us opportunities for service (Phil 1:12-19)

❖ **Do you consider the difficulties of life a joy (James 1:2)?**

6. Know that God has given you the resources to choose to respond righteously to sadness.

¹²Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. ¹³No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. (1 Cor 10:12-13)

⁸Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:8-10)

¹³I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:13)

❖ **How do you respond to sadness? Do you believe these promises?**

7. Spend time meditating on God's Word.

⁷The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. ⁸The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. ⁹The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. ¹⁰They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. ¹¹Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward. ¹²Who can discern *his* errors? Acquit me of hidden *faults*. ¹³Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous *sins*; Let them not rule over me; Then I will be blameless, And I shall be acquitted of great transgression. ¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer. (Psa 19:7-14)

❖ **Do you spend consistent time with God in His Word?**

8. Make choices to act righteously when sad.

People are generally feelings-driven. We do things because we feel like it. We need to change so that our motive for doing things is to glorify God. The problem for sad or depressed people is that they are acting on their feelings. You need to do right regardless of your feelings. God's instruction to Cain is great hope for those struggling with sadness.

³So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground.⁴Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; ⁵but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. ⁶Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? ⁷**If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.**"

⁸Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. (Gen 4:3-8)

❖ When you are sad, do you choose to "do well"?

9. Get control of your thoughts.

If the response to sadness is a self-focus, then the thoughts continue to be centered on the emotion of sadness and not on those things which are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, or worthy of praise. You must control your thoughts and stop ruminating on the triggers and feelings of sadness.

³For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵**We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,** (2 Cor 10:3-5)

⁸Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. (Phil 4:8)

These things to dwell on in Philippians 4:8 have their ultimate focus as God and His Word.

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. (John 17:17)

⁶Jesus *said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. (John 14:6)

❖ On what do your thoughts dwell?

Apply It

Yourselves #1: You had an important job and oversaw many people and a large budget. Due to down-sizing, your company let you go. Ever since, you have been spiraling into the depths of depression. You have a hard time getting out of bed in the morning and fulfilling your responsibilities. What truths from today's study be an encouragement for you?

Yourself #2: You have never struggled with prolonged sadness. To be sure you have been sad, but not for prolonged periods. Recently, you were diagnosed with high blood pressure and started taking medication. Now you are in the dumps all the time. Your doctor wants to put you on an antidepressant. What are some things you might consider?

Someone Else #1: Your friend at church confides in you that she has been down recently. She is embarrassed because she knows she should not be depressed. There has not been any recent loss in her life that might explain her sadness. What might you share with your friend? What might you suggest for her next step?

Someone Else #2: Your friend's mother recently passed away. She was your friend's best friend and confidant, and she has been down ever since. In fact, her blues are just getting worse. In thinking about bringing Biblical care to your hurting friend, what is the first thing you need to know? What is important to know about her depression? What are some things you can share with her? What are some ways you can encourage her? What other ways might you care for her?

Concluding Thoughts

Believers must be careful to never call anything a disease that the Bible calls sin and to never call anything sin the Bible does not clearly identify as sin. Labeling sin as disease offers no hope and could tend to influence God's children to avoid responsibility for their sin.

Jesus experienced sadness, yet without sin. He responded righteously to the emotion of sadness. Similarly, believers need to respond Biblically to sadness. The Bible offers much hope to those experiencing sadness or who have spiraled into depression.

Additional Study

Read Hebrews 13:15

What should be your response to the circumstances of life?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Has God given you what you need today to glorify Him?

Read Psalm 32

How does David describe God?

How does David describe himself?

What does David call the reader to do?

Read Psalm 38

How does David describe God?

How does David describe himself?

What does David call the reader to do?

Read Psalm 62

How does David describe God?

How does David describe himself?

What does David call the reader to do?