

The River of Life Flows Through the Slough of Despond

by David Powlison

Our emotions express all that we are as human beings. Emotions operate in our bodies: sensory-motor, glandular, cardiovascular. They express our souls: cognitive, feeling, acting, believing, wanting, remembering, anticipating, choosing, evaluating. They function in every sphere of human activity: social, productive, aesthetic, religious, and so forth. They register both the image of God and the image of the devil, that we are damnable but redeemable, that we are changeable from shame to glory, and from glory to glory, and from faith to faith. Emotions are more than propositional. They present themselves in colors, sensations, pictures, anecdotes, metaphors, tempo, and key. They are evoked, and they evoke. So pain sears like a branding iron or gnaws relentlessly from the inside. You see red when you are angry: seething, plotting, acting, exploding. Sorrow and loss feel like *largo* in B-minor, not *allegro* in C. The iced grip of fear captures you in an exceedingly unwelcome embrace. Joy gushes forth with song, frolic, and laughter: "Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice, Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell."

And depression? Depression is the blues, tinged a dull, rainy-day gray. Or dirty brown smog settled over the soul. Or blackest, relentless darkness. Melancholy is the unhappiest of the emotions that don't feel

good, that cause us trouble, that register our troubles, that make us troublesome to those around us. Feeling very, very down expresses something fundamental about broken people in a broken world. It's part of what unremedied suffering feels like. It's an emotional taste of what hell feels like: falling forever into bottomless darkness, empty wailing, gnashing of teeth, chewing on gravel. The loss of all hopes. The frustration of all desires. The full realization of all fears. Futility becomes flesh and dwells inside us. Why are you cast down, O my soul?

Job's servants were butchered by marauders who stole his wealth and sustenance. His ten children were crushed when a building collapsed during a windstorm. Agonizing boils afflicted his body. His wife urged him to give up and die. His three friends blamed him for his problems. He tasted hell, the torturer's lash. In response to losing all earthly good, Job's inner being overflowed with despair. Darkness. Torment. Grief. Turmoil. Anguish upon anguish. He frankly wished himself obliterated. That's depression in its essence: agitated and razor-edged misery, not yet anesthetized and paralyzed. Job also demonstrates deep melancholy in perhaps its rarest mode: suffused with faith. "For I know that my Redeemer lives...I shall see God" (19:25f). Commendable, admirable faith can

feel bad—as Job, Naomi, Hannah, many psalms, Jeremiah, and Jesus demonstrate. Many other saints have known dark days: Luther, Bunyan, Spurgeon. And you, too? Giant despair and the slough of despond beset many travelers along that slender path that will find life and joy in the city of God. There will be no more mourning, crying, or pain—someday. But all travelers who take the wide road will come, sooner or later, to a dead end in the swamps of endless melancholy.

So depression is far more than a medical problem. It is a being-human problem.

For many reasons, depression poses tough problems for counseling theory and practice. First, it feels so bad, bleak, and miserable. And it can seem intractable, even proving deadly if despair gets the final word. And even when intertwined with faith, what are our expectations for change? Depression is a serious problem that needs serious, realistic answers.

Second, depression baffles us, because so many factors play out to a greater or lesser extent. The futilities and disabilities of the human condition. Physical illness, hormonal flux, allergies. The tendencies of a person's temperament. Losses and disappointments of many sorts. Willful, high-handed sins and unremedied guilt. Subtle, pervasive distortions of belief, conscience, desire, and aspiration that arise from endemic sinfulness. Honest assessment of bitter realities that arises from a redeemed conscience. Side effects of medicine. Garden-variety grumbling and self-pity. The complaints and laments of faith. The experience of brutalities, betrayals, and traumas. The cycle of seasons and variations in weather. Depression is a complex problem that needs careful, balanced answers.

Third, contemporary secular culture suggests a never ending succession of reasons and cures for melancholy. Most of the ideas have some degree of commonsense plausibility. Most of the cures provide some degree of symptomatic relief. But both the ideas and the aids are shallow. And none of them suggest that only a real person, Christ Jesus, can save us from the depths and lengths of real-time misery and sin. Depression is a perennially debated problem that needs discerning, penetrating answers.

Fourth, the mind of the church is unsettled about how to understand and help depressed people. In the past, the evangelical subculture often settled for pat answers and quick fixes—referring out the failures to the secular mental health system. That's less true now, perhaps. But one still encounters those who simply exhort depressed people to just have their quiet time more regularly, or those who seek to bind and cast out demons of melancholy, or those who push pills. The interpretation and treatment of depression is a battle

zone, a test case for theories of human nature and counseling. Some debates recapitulate currents and tensions in the surrounding medical-psychiatric-psychological culture. Some debates reflect differences within the biblical counseling movement. Depression is a practical theology problem that needs true, substantial answers.

This issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* is dedicated to understanding depression and to enabling both strugglers and helpers to proceed constructively. May our Father lead each of us to drink and to give

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drink from the water of life. You will notice in the Table of Contents that Ed Welch has contributed a great deal. He has served us all well as our guest editor, assembling, assigning, editing, and writing what it contains. I heartily thank him for his labors. He has worked to counsel the very people about whom he writes, and to put into print some of what he has learned.

Every issue of this journal comes with an awareness of the fallibility and finitude of both writers and what is written. Perhaps that fundamental humility is not always obvious. But only a fool would think that he or she has spoken the final word, especially on matters so intrinsic to the troubles of the human soul. This issue of *JBC* comes with an extra measure of the awareness of limitation. It also comes to you with an extra measure of intentions to be truly helpful. We really want to help depressed people. We who write have each seen dramatic breakthroughs (on occasion) and patiently-wrought progress (frequently) in those we counsel. We really want to help those who counsel depressed people. This is not the first word on depression, nor will it be the final word. But we hope it will prove to be a very constructive word along the way, contributing a significant portion to the church's corporate wisdom. May God fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:11f).

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The lead article by Ed Welch, "Counseling Those Who Are Depressed," comes in four parts. First, he helps us simply to listen well to the experience of

depressed people. Then he calls us to tangible, persistent love. Third, he unfolds a way of understanding depression and of disentangling its various strands. Finally, he offers concrete strategies for helping.

The second piece is an interview with a woman who experienced deep depression for about fifteen years. Her story traces both the experience of depression and the dynamics of deep-seated change that gradually worked out in her life.

"Words of Hope for Those Who Struggle with Depression" by Ed Welch is written for the depressed person. Feel free to make copies and to put it in the hands of people who might benefit from it.

At first glance, Paul Tripp's sermon on grumbling might seem tangential to the problem of depression. But he ably captures how a seemingly "little" sin can play a very significant role within a "major" life problem. Failure to deal with such "little" problems can blunt our ability to address the seemingly large problems that usually dominate the attention of both counselor and counseled. As grumbling is faced and dealt with, depression also changes.

A book review by Bill Oldham considers a classic pastoral treatment of depression, *Spiritual Depression* by Lloyd-Jones.

Queries & Controversies addresses the question of diagnostic categories: "How Valid or Useful Are Psychiatric Labels for Depression?"

You will notice that suicide and further clarification of the biological issues in depression are not addressed

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in this issue of *JBC*. These articles are already in hand, but have been reserved for the next issue because of space considerations.

Ponder our back cover art by calligrapher Michael Podesta. I can't think of a more timely word of promise both to those struggling with depression and to those seeking to help such strugglers. We shrink in fear and inability before problems that daunt us: "Who am I, that I should face this and do this?" And God answers us by changing the subject!: "I will be with you." Take heart.