

Hope Against Depression



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 42, 31:10, 39:2–7, 32:1–5, 1 John 1:9, Mic. 7:1–7, Rev. 21:2–4.*

Memory Text: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (*Psalm 34:18, NIV*).

Depression, or extreme discouragement to the point of becoming disabled, has been experienced since the inception of sin. A number of Bible characters displayed symptoms that probably would meet today's diagnostic criteria for depression.

Hopelessness is a symptom of depression, and the biblical message of hope can offer us so much in contrast to a world that offers so little. All people, at times, face moments of extreme discouragement for any variety of reasons. No wonder, then, that the Word of God is filled with promises that can give all of us, no matter our situation, reasons to hope for a better future, if not in this world, then certainly in the next.

Of course, when depression is severe, it's important to get professional help, when possible. The Lord can work through these people to help those who are in need of special care. After all, regardless of your relationship with God, were you physically ill you would seek the help of a doctor or health professional. It's the same with those who are suffering from severe clinical depression, which often is caused by a genetic predisposition and chemical imbalance in the brain. Thus, even Christians, at times, might need the help of professionals.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 12.*

The Downcast Soul

Read Psalm 42. How can you relate to what's being expressed there? What hope is offered?

David experienced serious mood alterations, on many occasions because of unfair persecution (for instance, Saul and Israel's adversaries). In addition, his violation of God's commandments brought about a deep sense of guilt (*Ps. 51:4*), and guilt often is associated with depression.

When one sees oneself negatively ("I am dumb"), looks at the world pessimistically ("life is always unfair"), and contemplates the future hopelessly ("it will never improve"), chances of depression become high. This attitude is called "catastrophic thinking."

Christians may opt for alternative ways to interpret things, a way that incorporates God's plan and messages into the equation.

Consider the following alternatives:

- *How to look at yourself.* You were created in God's image, to rule over creation (*Gen. 1:26, 27*). God's traits, albeit marred, are still in you. Jesus Christ, through His sacrifice, rescued you from eternal death and granted you privileges—chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation (*1 Pet. 2:9, NIV*). Before God's eyes you have infinite worth.
- *The world.* It is true that the world is rotten and full of evil. At the same time, there also are many right, noble, and admirable things (*Phil. 4:8*) to ponder upon. Furthermore, Christians can understand the existence of evil without despair, as they know its origin and ultimate fate.
- *The future.* What a wonderful future is reserved for God's children! The Bible is full of promises with the assurance of salvation (*Ps. 37:39*).

Sadness is not a sin. After all, look at how often Jesus felt sad. We mustn't feel guilty because of sadness or depression. In some cases we have good reasons to be hurting. How can you use the biblical truths stated above to help you cope with whatever struggles you are facing now?

The Consequences of Discouragement

“ ‘I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!’ ” (*Isa. 38:14, NIV*).

The biblical description above leaves no doubt about the strong pain manifested by Hezekiah’s crying out loud. There are cultural differences in manifesting emotional distress. People in certain contexts suffer in silence, avoiding any obvious or visible complaint. Others (like Hezekiah) use moaning and wailing when going through sorrow. There also are personal differences; some people are able to approach death with more tranquillity than others can.

Depressive symptoms commonly are found in individuals with a prolonged or terminal disease. Hezekiah was suffering from illness, and its gravity announced death. Thus, he experienced a spell of depression as described in Isaiah 38. Depressive symptoms are so painful that many will attempt suicide to end this horrible experience. In fact, more than 10 percent of clinically depressed patients kill themselves. Clearly, clinical depression is a serious matter and must be treated that way.

What symptoms are expressed in the following texts?

Ps. 31:10 _____

Ps. 77:4 _____

Ps. 102:4, 5 _____

1 Kings 19:4 _____

Depression causes a variety of painful manifestations: (a) a deep sense of sadness (sorrow), (b) a lack of motivation to do anything, even enjoyable activities, (c) a change in appetite and either weight loss or gain, (d) sleep disturbances, sleeping either not enough or too much, (e) feelings of low self-esteem, (f) poor reasoning and memory, and (g) thoughts of death and suicide. Some people experience just one or two symptoms, while others manifest several and suffer for months until the episode ends. In any case, the burden of depression is enormous and must be relieved by medical and spiritual intervention.

We all suffer sadness and discouragement in one form or another for one reason or another at one time or another. What things bring you down and why? Recall incidents of God’s past guidance in your life. What hope and encouragement can you draw from remembering the Lord’s leading? Why is it important to keep those memories alive?

Relief From Depression

Read Psalm 39:2–7. What happened when David remained silent? And what was the result of his speaking up?

Like most emotional disorders, depression necessitates that the sufferer speak about his or her struggles. This act alone can begin to initiate healing. Approaching the Lord in fervent and sincere prayer is a safe way to release tension and psychological pain. Often more is needed, but it can be a good start.

A basic coping strategy for depression consists of talking to a friend (or a therapist) who knows how to listen and, even better, who knows how to help access more intensive resources, if needed. There is a healing effect in verbalizing thoughts and feelings. The church community can provide an excellent context to help the discouraged, but often this is insufficient, especially when professional care is required. Nevertheless, it is important for anyone going through hard times and who feels discouraged or even depressed to have someone they trust to talk to. Sometimes merely talking to someone can go a long way in helping a person feel better.

Read Psalm 55:17. What promise is there? Why should this promise mean so much to us?

The counselor's appointment, if possible at all, may not be available until next week. But like David—who learned how to get help any hour of the day or any day of the week—we, too, can turn to the Lord at any time. David knew that the Lord heard his voice, and that greatly encouraged him.

Even secular psychologists are recommending that clients who believe in prayer pray. All of us, even when not suffering with something such as clinical depression, can experience the impact of how praying to the Lord does help make us feel better. No matter who we are or how deep our discouragement, having a relationship with God can go a long way in bringing us hope and encouragement and healing.

Ellen G. White once described prayer as “the opening of the heart to God as to a friend.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 533. Though prayer doesn't always solve all our problems, how does it help us deal with them?

The Need for Forgiveness

How did David find relief for his agony? *Ps. 32:1–5*; see also *1 John 1:9*. **How can we find this same thing for ourselves?**

The guilt produced by unconfessed sins may become extremely painful. The expressions used by David are a clear indication of intense, inward pain. Psalm 32 and other passages in Psalms show the severity of David's emotional distress.

When we meet sufferers of depression, we must be extremely careful not to blame them for not having confessed their sins! Nor should we simply conclude that they are wicked people, and that's why they are in distress. It is unfortunate that many people seem to be able to offer concern and understanding to those suffering from an organic malady, true clinical depression, but tend to be quite judgmental in dealing with mental or emotional turmoil brought about by their own wrong actions.

Edgar Allan Poe in his "Tell-Tale Heart" refers to the story of a man who committed murder and hid the victim's body under the floorboards of the room in which the murder had been committed. He hoped to leave his guilt hidden with the body, but a strong sense of remorse grew within him. One day he heard the victim's heartbeat; and the beat grew louder and louder. Later it became clear that the pounding was coming not from the grave below but rather, from his own heart.

At the same time, too, there are people who, having confessed their sins, still suffer greatly from a sense of guilt. They often feel unworthy of forgiveness and lament the horrible suffering that they have brought through their sins, even though they have been confessed and are, by faith, forgiven by God. This, too, can be a great source of emotional distress. In such cases, it's important to focus on God's promises of healing and of acceptance, even for the worst of sins. We can't undo the past; what we can do, by God's grace, is seek to learn from our past mistakes and, to whatever degree possible, make restitution for whatever wrong we have done. After all, all we can do is surrender to God and seek His mercy, grace, and healing.

Many, having confessed their sins, still struggle with guilt over them. Why is it so important that we acknowledge our sins, take responsibility for them, and learn to move on and get past whatever wrongs we have done?

Hope Against Distress

What was the prophet's way out of the surrounding social and interpersonal problems? *Mic. 7:1–7.*

In just the first six verses, Micah describes a complete smorgasbord of immoral, unethical, and aggressive acts present in his time. Oppression and abuse of various kinds, lack of respect and consideration, corruption, and deceit all have been present since the inception of sin. We all face it even today. Just take today's newspaper, and you can find a direct correlation with Israel's misery at that time. This sociological chaos becomes especially hurtful when touching close to home—neighbor, friend, spouse, child, parent (*Mic. 7:5, 6*).

Highly defective interpersonal relationships cause much stress and are associated with depression. Clearly stated by Micah (*vs. 7*), the conclusive ingredient to survive in the middle of a crisis is hope.

Hope is essential to live our lives with a reasonable amount of mental health. Hope must be alive even for the unbeliever—youth in search of employment must hope that they'll find a job, a lost traveler will hope to find his way, and investors who have lost their money must believe that there will be better times. Living with zero hope leads to meaninglessness and death.

When Italian philosopher and poet Dante Alighieri (A.D. 1265–1321) attempted to describe hell in his *Divine Comedy*, he envisioned a big sign at the entrance saying: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!" The worst possible punishment is to deprive someone of hope.

The kind of hope presented in the Bible goes beyond positive anticipation. It encompasses an eventual perfect solution and salvation based on redemption through Jesus Christ. The historic "blessed hope" of Seventh-day Adventists must become the focal point of our lives. Hoping for Jesus' return helps us to gain perspective over the many unpleasant things that surround us and allows us to look in confidence toward eternity.

Look at these promises. **What hope is offered there for us?** *Isa. 65:17, 2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21:2–4.* **Why, in one sense, is this the only hope for any of us?**

A vision of faith in the new creation can reassure the suffering soul. In the same way that a woman in childbirth contemplates the final result of her child being born and soon "forgets the anguish" (*John 16:21, NIV*), the troubled soul can, by God's grace, gain hope with the vision of a caring God who promises us a new world without any of the things that bring so much sadness to us in this one.

Further Study: Read and reflect on Matthew 26:36–43. Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow “to the point of death” (vs. 38, *NIV*). Visualize the agony of Jesus, with lack of social support and betrayal from His disciples, seeming separation from God, and the load of guilt from humanity. His suffering exceeds any depressive episode experienced by mortals.

“As He neared Gethsemane, He became strangely silent. He had often visited this spot for meditation and prayer; but never with a heart so full of sorrow as upon this night of His last agony. Throughout His life on earth He had walked in the light of God’s presence. When in conflict with men who were inspired by the very spirit of Satan, He could say, ‘He that sent Me is with Me: the Father hath not left Me alone; for I do always those things that please Him.’ John 8:29. But now He seemed to be shut out from the light of God’s sustaining presence. Now He was numbered with the transgressors. The guilt of fallen humanity He must bear. Upon Him who knew no sin must be laid the iniquity of us all. So dreadful does sin appear to Him, so great is the weight of guilt which He must bear, that He is tempted to fear it will shut Him out forever from His Father’s love. Feeling how terrible is the wrath of God against transgression, He exclaims, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 685.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What great role can your local church community play in helping those who are suffering depression or emotional distress for any reason at all? Whatever your resources are, no matter how limited, what more can be done to help those in need?
- ❷ How can you help someone who prays, who counsels, who loves the Lord and who trusts in Him, and yet still feels overwhelmed with sadness, even if he or she doesn’t understand why? How can you help him or her not give up their faith but cling to the hope and promises given in the Word?
- ❸ One of the greatest mistakes people can make is to believe that because they feel so down, so depressed, so hopeless, it means that God has abandoned them. Why is that, first of all, not true? What Bible characters (such as Elijah, Jeremiah in jail, John the Baptist in jail, Jesus in Gethsemane) can you point them to in order to show them that sadness and discouragement do not mean God has forsaken them? How can you help them learn that feelings are not a good barometer of faith?

Rodeo Stars Shine for Christ

by MIKE BROWNHILL

It's not every day that rodeo champions turn their lives over to God, but recently Dale and Patricia Jones, rodeo champions living in South Queensland, Australia, did just that. They were baptized, and Dale's brother, Darryl, recommitted his life to God in a river that flows along the edge of their farm. A few weeks later another brother, Stanley, recommitted his life to God too.

After studying the Bible with several people, Dale and Patricia made their decision to commit their lives to God in baptism as Darryl and other family members watched from the riverbank. Darryl felt that his first love for God had faded, and he stepped into the river, boots and all, and was rebaptized.

The Joneses come from a family of rodeo stars. Their father was a champion, and Dale, Patricia, and Darryl all hold impressive rodeo records and championships. These days, however, Dale and Patricia enjoy a tamer life, breaking and training horses on their ranch.

"The rodeo is a tough place to work," Dale says. "I was proud, and when I'd get hurt I wouldn't admit it because I thought it was a sign of weakness. Now God is softening my proud heart and reigning in my rebellion. It's still a struggle, and sometimes I must stop and ask God to take over my life again."

Dale's wife, Patricia, is a rodeo champion in roping and bull riding, and Darryl holds titles in steer wrestling and is a rodeo circuit champion. Darryl managed to earn these titles even while refusing to compete on Sabbaths. "Since I've been rebaptized, I've regained my zeal in witnessing for my Lord," Darryl says.

Dale and Darryl credit their newfound zeal for God to their parents' prayers. Bill and Bronwyn Jones have been praying for their sons and daughter-in-law for years and rejoiced to see their prayers answered at the riverside baptism.

Patricia says, "Now that I've decided to follow Jesus, life is totally different. We're lapping up the words of Christ. Living for God is so much better than being national rodeo queen!"

Dale and Patricia and their children worship in a new Seventh-day Adventist congregation that was established as a result of a Global Mission outreach in their area. Attendance at the congregation's worship services averages about 30. Our mission offerings support Global Mission pioneers as they plant churches in more than 100 countries around the world. Thank you!

MIKE BROWNHILL was Global Mission project coordinator in South Queensland, Australia, when Dale, Patricia, and Darryl Jones were baptized.