

Depression

The Way Up When You Are Down

Edward T. Welch

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Susan Lutz, Series Editor


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It is technically called depression, but it can't be captured by a word. You feel numb, yet your head hurts; empty, yet inside there are screams; fatigue, yet fears abound. Things that were once pleasures now barely hold your attention. Your brain feels like it is in a fog. You feel weighted down.

Do you remember when you had goals? Things that you looked forward to? They could have been as small as going to a movie on Friday night or a job you wanted to accomplish. Now you have very few goals. Making it through the day seems like enough.

But every day is the same. There is no rhythm of rising anticipation, satisfaction, then rest. Each day brings a dreadful monotony, and you fear that tomorrow will be the same as today. The flatness of life feels like it is killing you.

Sleep? It's a mess. You can't get enough. You don't even remember what it feels like to wake up refreshed.

Have you ever seen Pablo Picasso's paintings from his blue period? The pictures are not encouraging, but if you take a look, you would at least find that you are not alone. Triggered by a difficult relationship, Picasso did a series of paintings where people looked lifeless and everything was in shades of blue and gray. Was he putting his feelings into his art, or was he faithfully presenting the world as he actually saw it? Either way, there are no sun-splashed days with depression—just dreary, overcast skies and a dull, colorless world.

Picasso wasn't the only one who struggled with what has come to be known as depression. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon, missionary David Brainard, and Bible translator J. B. Phillips were some of the more well-known and accomplished people who talked and wrote about their struggles. So if you are depressed, you may feel alone, but consider the fact that many have walked the path before, and many are walking it now.

Does any of this strike a chord with you? If so, keep reading. You already have reason to hope. The fact that you are willing to read this—something not absolutely necessary—is itself a positive step.

This booklet will be as brief as possible. It is a sketchy map that shows a way through depression. If you disagree with anything, argue. If it seems like too much, put it down and come back to it later.

Up front, I should say a couple of things. First, as you probably know, there are several causes to depression. It can be related to medical problems like Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, lupus, and hepatitis. Another frequent physical cause is the side effects of prescription medication, particularly blood pressure and heart medication, antibacterial drugs, and psychiatric drugs. This may be part of the picture for you.

For others, depression may express itself in physical symptoms (like weight changes, sleep problems, fatigue, and sadness) but have primarily spiritual roots. These roots could be related to anything from guilt to grief to trauma and stress.

But either way, if you are struggling with depression, you face spiritual problems every day. You must find a way to deal with them, or they will overwhelm you.

For that reason, the map I will be drawing ultimately leads to Jesus Christ. Some people say, "Jesus doesn't work. I've tried him and I am

still just as depressed.” But consider this: Jesus claims to be the way, truth, life, source of hope, lover of our souls, servant, brother, friend, the one who hears and acts, the one who never leaves. No therapy or medication makes such bold claims.

If Jesus and the teachings of Scripture seem like hollow platitudes to you—and perhaps they do—remember that *everything* sounds somewhat empty to you right now. What may seem trite now will be profound as you begin to be certain of its reality.

How Can I Do Anything When I Don't Feel Anything?

Answering that question is often the first challenge to face. Most people do things because they *feel* like doing them. They get up in the morning because they feel like going to work, or they feel like avoiding the boss's questions when they are late, or they feel like avoiding poverty. We are more feeling-driven than we think.

But in depression, you don't feel. (Or, whatever you *do* feel isn't going to motivate you to do anything profitable. It's more likely that you feel like dying, crying, running, disap-

pearing, avoiding). How can feeling-driven people set goals, have purpose, or get motivated when they don't feel?

Initially, you will have to learn another way to live. You will have to be like the woman whose muscles still worked but they stopped giving her information about her limbs. She wasn't paralyzed, but if she closed her eyes she couldn't tell if she was standing, reaching, or resting. She couldn't walk because she didn't know where her legs were. Gradually, by looking in mirrors and seeing her body rather than feeling it, she began to walk again. After much practice, walking began to feel natural again. But she had to learn a new way to live and move.

In depression, the new way of living is to *believe* and act on what God says rather than *feel* what God says. It is living by faith. To paraphrase Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is being certain of *what we do not feel*." In other words, when there is a debate between what your feelings say and what Scripture says, Scripture wins. Any other result and you are essentially telling God that he cannot be trusted. "God is not telling the truth. I can't trust him. I can only trust myself." You might want to say that you don't *understand* what God is doing, but to *deny*

that God speaks the truth is itself untrue. It is a lie. Don't believe it. God is truth.

Here is an example of this new way of living. You *feel* as if you have no purpose and no hope. There is no reason to get out of bed, work, love, or live. You feel it in your entire being. God, however, counters these feelings on every page of Scripture. For example, "Love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). That is a purpose statement, a reason to get out of bed. You have to fight the paralyzing feelings so that you can love another person. Why bother? Because it is your personal commission from God himself, the King of kings.

If you are God's servant—and you are—and he asks you to do something, you have just been given a purpose for living. It is only when the King says that he doesn't need you anymore that your purpose is done, and this, of course, will never happen with the true God. He says that his purposes for you last through all eternity.

To put your purpose for living in its broadest terms, your job is to glorify and enjoy God (1 Cor. 10:31). To glorify God means to make his name famous. His honor and reputation become more important than your own.

To glorify God. Does it sound like a cliché?

Although it sounds impractical, it is actually very concrete. It is carried out in small, sometimes private steps of faith and obedience. Other people may not see it, but if you do *anything* because of Jesus and what he did for you—from combing your hair to becoming a missionary—then you bring glory to God.

Do you want a tangible incentive? There is good evidence in Scripture that when you seek God and his kingdom, your troubles will become lighter (2 Cor. 4:16–17).

Listen

As you develop a clear statement of a purpose for your life, you should have someone help you refine it, remind you of it, and read it to you. At that point, your job will be to listen. You have been listening to your own thoughts, and it hasn't helped your depression. Now is a time to listen to what God says in his Word and what he says through his people.

Listening might sound passive, but if you really do it, it is hard work. The book of James reminds us that we are prone to “merely listen,” like people who glance at ourselves in a mirror and quickly forget what we look like. So when you read or hear about truth and love, don't just listen; really *hear*.

What will you hear? When God speaks, he inevitably talks about Jesus. Jesus is the one who had compassion on those who suffer, and he understands those who suffer because his pain exceeded our own. Have you ever noticed that when you listen to someone else's suffering, especially if that suffering was overwhelming and intense, your own troubles seem lighter? At least we see that we are not alone. This is what happens when you look toward Jesus and listen.

Keep listening, though. Even though you may feel rejected by others, Jesus won't reject you (Ps. 27:10). Turn to him with even a small speck of faith, and he will never leave or forsake you (Heb. 13:5). He pledges this to you.

Love doesn't always move you? Consider this. In God's presence is love that will take all eternity to comprehend. If it doesn't move you now, it will. God's love is like that of a good parent for a child who doesn't understand the details of parental love. The child is grief-stricken because he can no longer play in the mud, but the parent is cleaning him up for a trip to Disney World. If you can't connect with this love, keep listening to the gospel. That is, according to the plan of God, Jesus died for sinners like us. This is a wonderful and deep