



# SURVIVING DEPRESSION:

Biblical and practical  
advice for getting through  
the dark days

*By George O. Wood*

**I** speak from personal experience. In the early 1990s, I went through a steep two-year valley of depression. I could share the details, but I will opt for the example of the apostle Paul who described his thorn in the flesh without ever revealing the underlying cause.

The Bible gives plenty of insight into why believers get depressed. Six reasons stand out.

## Physical

In today's world, we go at such a maddening pace that depression rises because we are run-down. Look at Elijah in 1 Kings 18 and 19.

Elijah won the battle with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, then ran across the Armageddon Valley to Jezreel (1 Kings 18:46). From there, he raced more than 100 miles to Beersheba at the southern tip of Israel because he was afraid of Jezebel. After a day's journey into the desert, he sat under a broom tree depressed, praying that he might die.

"I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19:4, NIV).

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What was his problem? Too much running. What was the solution? Sleep and food (1 Kings 19:5-8). Strengthened by rest, bread and water, he then trekked 40 days and nights to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Elijah was depressed again, this time not under a tree, but in a cave. He was swamped with self-pity and declared, "I am the only one left" (1 Kings 19:10)

He had Moses' syndrome — the idea that the entire burden of caring for God's business fell on his shoulders (Numbers 11:10-17). God's solution for Moses and Elijah was to remind them that everything was not dependent on them alone. Their feelings of isolation and depression arose

Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"

In addition to fatigue, sickness, or aging, other physical causes for depression can be chemically related, a reaction to medication, or poor eating habits.

Christians often make the mistake of searching first for emotional or spiritual causes of depression. I suggest searching first for physical reasons, then getting some rest. Take a break. Exercise regularly. Start eating right. Get a thorough medical checkup.

## Sense of loss

My college years were among the happiest in my life. When they ended, I drove my 1954 Pontiac to the Los Angeles area

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because they were exhausted.

Illness may be another physical cause of depression. Read the soulful lament of the sick man in Psalm 88. With his life drawing close to the grave he mourned his isolation from people and believed God had rejected him. His prayer closes on a down note: "The darkness is my closest friend" (v. 18).

Closely related to sickness is the aging process. If you are older and would like to be further depressed, read Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 in a modern translation. Hear the plaintive cry of depression from a man whose foot was almost in the grave, "Meaningless!

to attend seminary. I moved into a small apartment with purple walls. I knew no one.

That summer I was so depressed. I had lost all my friends, and I was alone. People can become depressed when they lose someone or something.

My loss was inconsequential compared to the mother and father who lose a child, the husband whose wife is killed in a car wreck, the longtime employee who is let go a few years before retirement, the individual looking at a stack of bills and an empty checkbook, the married person dealing with infidelity and abandonment by a spouse,

and the parents with an empty nest when the last child is gone. The list goes on and on — each is related to losing what is dear to you.

If you want a biblical example of loss, read Lamentations. Jeremiah sobbed over the loss of homeland.

## Depressive environment

Look at Job. He not only lost his 10 children and wealth in one

day, but he also lost his health. He developed painful sores that he scraped with broken pottery as he sat in ashes. His wife harped on him to curse God and die, and his three best friends, along with a smart-mouthed youngster, vexed him with words. No wonder he said, "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" (Job 3:11).

A depressive environment can be both physical and emotional, as we see with Job. That is why

I clean off my desk when I leave work. Clutter tends to make me depressed. When I am physically organized, I do better.

A depressive environment can stem from the company one keeps. Job's wife certainly did not help him. He could not walk away from her and remain faithful to God. So, he endured, and God helped him. Ultimately, everything turned out right; even his wife got better and went on to have another set of 10 children.

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As a young minister I found myself getting negative about many things. The Spirit spoke to my heart one day and said, "You are hanging around with friends who are negative. You either need to change friends, or change them." I did a little of both and got relief.

## Poor self-concept

A healthy self-concept comes from our sense of identity, worth and competence.

A poor self-concept can lead to depression. Look at Naomi. In the opening chapter of Ruth she had given up on life and God. Her identity had been stripped through the loss of her husband and sons. The fact she had no descendants left her feeling worthless. And she felt helpless to do anything about her situation.

When she returned to Bethlehem she asked her friends and family to start calling her Mara (bitter) instead of Naomi (pleasant, lovely, delightful, see Ruth 1:20). She had lost her sense of identity, worth and competence.

Maybe you feel like changing your name to Bitter. Life has thrown you a wicked curveball, and you no longer have confidence in yourself or feel you are worth anything. That perspective can certainly breed depression.

## Spiritual failure

Psalms 32 records the depths of David's depression after his sin with Bathsheba. "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (vv. 3,4).

Thank God for that kind of depression. Why? That form of depression leads to repentance. An individual who sins and then walks away without sorrow endangers his soul eternally.

The best thing a believer can do when he has sinned is to follow David's example. In this case, depression is a sign that the Holy Spirit is using His Brillo Pad to clean the soul.

## Spiritual warfare

At one point in my ministry I went through a brief time of feeling down. I examined the causes for depression listed above and none of them applied. Then it dawned on me — the church was in a major growth spurt. The enemy was trying to pick me off through discouragement and depression.

In doing the Father's will, Jesus knew about depression produced by spiritual warfare. In Gethsemane, "He began to be deeply distressed and troubled" (Mark 14:33).

He told Peter, James and John, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:34). The Greek text has one word for "overwhelmed with sorrow" — *perilupos*. This word can be used to describe a tight-fitting girdle — encompassed with sorrow. Depression is often not a sin at all or a lack of faith and trust; it may be a deep sadness.

Before facing the outer agony of Calvary Jesus faced the inner agony of Gethsemane. The spiritual warfare was so great Luke tells us He was in "anguish" and "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

There are six major causes of

depression: physical, a sense of loss, depressive environment, poor self-concept, spiritual failure and spiritual warfare. Take a moment and ask yourself if you have experienced or are presently going through depression arising from any of these sources. It helps to identify the source before getting to the solution.

## Jesus' model for handling depression

We have just considered the lowest moment in Jesus' earthly experience — Gethsemane. His way of dealing with overwhelming sorrow provides a five-step pathway out of depression.

### *Jesus did not isolate himself*

Jesus let others into the inner circle of His apprehension, trouble and grief. Too many believers have imprisoned themselves by treating their depression as a deep, dark secret that cannot be talked about with others. Jesus openly revealed His sadness to His closest and most trusted friends. Do you?

### *Jesus did not put on a mask*

Jesus avoided the trap of saying to himself, *I am the Son of God, and therefore, I cannot let anyone know the trial I am going through*. He did not pretend to be happy when He was not. He verbalized what He was experiencing. Do you have anyone to talk to when you are feeling low?

### *Jesus prayed*

Jesus did not try to handle His problems without the Father's presence, comfort and help. In the privacy of Gethsemane's garden, He poured out His heart to His Father. He exemplified for us the power of accepting the things either we cannot or should not change when He said, "Thy will

be done" (Matthew 26:42, KJV). Are you praying for God to help you accept what has been thrust on you?

### *Jesus did not dissipate His strength with bitterness or blame*

Even the failure of His closest friends to stay awake and pray with Him did not deter Jesus from a right spirit and continued prayer. Are you keeping a sweet spirit in a difficult season?

### *Jesus rose to action*

Events of life can momentarily

paralyze or even cause people to flee in the wrong direction. Jesus could have abandoned the way to the cross by quickly leaving Gethsemane, ascending the Mount of Olives, and disappearing like David in a southeastern direction into the Judean wilderness. Instead, from His place of sorrow He rose to face what confronted Him.

What would you be doing today if you were not depressed? The challenge is to go ahead and

do it anyway. May the Lord give you strength to face your difficulties and not run from them. Remember, the same wind that uproots a tree can lift a bird because the opposing force becomes a lifting force if faced in the right direction. **tpe**

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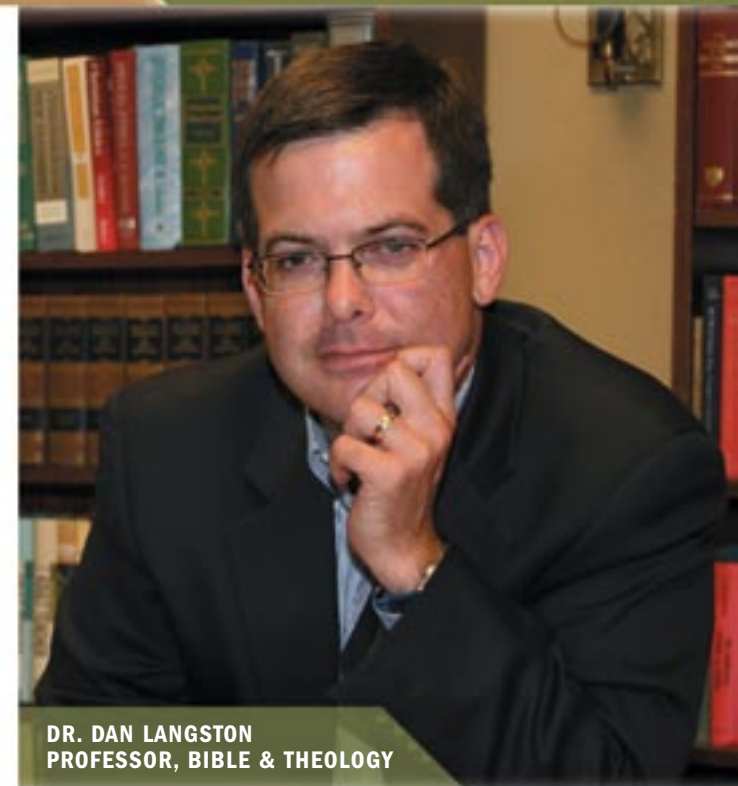
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