

# “DEPRESSED LIVING vs. JOYFUL LIVING”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

## The Issue of Spiritual Depression

Depression is becoming increasingly common in our world today — though everyone goes through it at some point in life, many are not able to overcome “*their negative state of mind.*” It is normal to experience “*situational depression*” due to the loss of a job, relocation, death of a loved one, divorce, and retirement... but “*psychological depression*” is a more disconcerting issue — in the US alone it is estimated that this year over 20 million people will experience this form of depression. To put those numbers in perspective for those of us living here in Arizona, since we basically comprise two percent of the US population, that means 400,000 people in our state will experience psychological depression in the coming year (that is one out of every fifteen people... seventy of every one thousand); for those living in California, that number will exceed two million. Psychological depression is a systemic problem in our world — it affects people of all ages irrespective of race, gender, economic status, or religion. The most familiar symptoms of psychological depression are feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and sleeplessness, as well as a change in appetite — eating too little to eating too much. Other common symptoms include excessive crying, staying in bed longer than normal, and even entertaining thoughts of wishing one’s life was over. Psychological depression can greatly affect one’s thoughts, feelings, behaviors and physical well-being... thus causing them to feel empty, hopeless, worthless, helpless, guilty, irritable, hurt, restless, lacking interest and energy, and have a “*sad mood*” that will not go away. Most who experience this form of depression say there is an “*absence of joy*” in their life, that life essentially is “*dark,*” and that their future looks “*bleak.*” Since depression causes a “*pessimistic view of things*” and stifles one’s initiative, it is imperative that people learn to overcome it so that they can live with a greater degree of happiness, more energy, and a more positive attitude... thus enabling them to live with greater satisfaction and fulfillment.

Some describe “*spiritual depression*” as a kind of “*despair of the soul,*” where there is actually a “*distrust of the mercy of God*” — it is a feeling that one cannot “measure up” to God’s standards, therefore it focuses on “*one’s own unworthiness*” without considering the love and mercy of God that overrides that unworthiness. For those who are often acutely aware of their own sinfulness, their failings, their shortcomings, and their pasts, it can be very hard to understand and accept the fact that *God’s mercy overrides all of this.* Many Christians become troubled in their souls when they are about to partake of the “*Lord’s Table,*” because all they can think of is how they have failed God during the week, and how many sins they have committed — thus, their focus is on “*their performance*” rather than on what “*God has done for them.*” The truth is, to refuse to partake of Communion because of the presence of indwelling sin, is to deny ourselves the “*greatest help*” we need... to turn from the “*greatest solace*” there is... and to forego the “*greatest food*” with which God feeds our souls. If our primary focus in life becomes “*our performance,*” we will continually find ourselves being spiritually depressed — due to the presence of indwelling sin, we all stumble *often* and in many ways (Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10); none of us have the capacity (because of the flesh) to live life with anything close to absolute goodness

(Rom 7:18) — that is simply the reality of our spiritual condition. It is also important to remember “that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23), so failing to believe God’s promises is sin.

Spiritual depression is a time of “feeling emotionally alone” — we feel severed or separated from God, and the ability to reconnect with Him seems out of our grasp. The idea of broken dreams, hearts and relationships all ending in depression are common in human psychology, but when carried into the spiritual realm brokenness takes on a new, and more bitter meaning. Due to the fact “spiritual depression and despair can be crippling,” it needs to be fought as vigorously as any major sin, because it is a sin that causes incredible damage to the believer’s soul. Remember, sin is not just committing overt acts of evil, sin is also not trusting God in difficult times (Rom 14:23). It is also important to remember, that when you do sin, God doesn’t become disgusted and angry with you, doesn’t conclude that you’re a loser and regret choosing you, and doesn’t sit around and contemplate what kind of “painful punishment” to send your way. So when you sin, you need to avail yourself of the “grace of confession” (no matter how bad you have blown it) that God has provided for you (1 Jn 1:9; 2:1), that He might clean you up... restore your spiritual armor... and get you back on your feet again (spiritually). This “renewal process” occurs in the life of the healthy believer several times every day. As a believer you also need to remember that you are surrounded by a cloud of heavenly witnesses who are cheering for you (not booing you), so “lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles you, and run with endurance the race that is set before you, fixing your eyes on Jesus (as opposed to your own sinfulness!), the author and perfecter of your faith” (Heb 12:1-2) — fix your eyes on the solution (Christ) rather than the problem (sin); “you have a high priest who sympathizes with your weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). Did you hear that? He is well aware of how terribly weak you are, so “draw near to the throne of ‘grace’ that you may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). The number one problem for all of us as Christians is that we are far more inclined to focus on “our sinfulness” than on “God’s graciousness.” And to the degree that “God’s grace,” rather than “our sin,” is more prominent in our thinking, to that degree will we live joyfully and victoriously — fleshly thinking always results in more sin, discouragement and depression.

When “doubts” plague our minds — we are all subjected to them — they come in the form of thoughts that run contrary to the Word of God. Remember, Satan’s primary work in our souls is that of lying to us... trying to get us to think wrong thoughts... and trying to get us to doubt and disbelieve God; that is why it is so important for us to know God’s Word. The essence of “faith” is a matter of “believing God’s Word” (Rom 10:17); and the ministry of the Word to our hearts and minds is one of the primary ministries of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; Rom 12:3; Eph 2:8). God’s Word is a lamp (Ps 119:105) that gives us clear guidance when circumstances are bleak... when we meditate on it, affirm its truths, grapple with it, act upon it, and pray over it, His light chases away the darkness — hope replaces discouragement, and trust overcomes doubt. So when trouble comes, focus on God’s ability to care for you. Satan uses “negative thoughts” to drag us down into depression and despair, so it is in the “mind” where the battle is won or lost; “therefore cast down every negative imagination and bring your thoughts into the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). The prophet Isaiah said, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee” (Is 26:3) — when you let your mind wander into enemy territory, there will be a “war in your soul!” When your mind is not steadfastly fixed on Christ, and you are “not conscious” of His presence in your life, you will experience very little joy or victory in the Christian life. That’s why it is important to have a “God focus” in life (which is what it means to walk with Him) — meditating upon God and His ways needs to be an ongoing part of your “thought life” (Ps 1:2; 63:

5-6; 77:9-12; 119:15, 97-98; 143:4-12). Due to the fact no believer is always conscious of God's presence in his life, selfish, sinful thoughts roam the mind; the charge to each of us is that we put forth a concerted effort to maintain a "God-focus" throughout the course of each day. It is this discipline that characterizes the thought-life of a mature believer. Though God is "always with us" (Mt 28:20; Jn 14:16; 16:3; Heb 13:5), we are not "conscious of His presence" unless we THINK about Him. Think about that.

Satan and the Holy Spirit are both at work in us fighting to control our minds (Gal 5:16-17), and the one we listen to (whose thoughts we think) "wins." When **Peter** stepped out of the boat to walk on water at Jesus' command, it required faith (he believed Jesus); when he began to focus on the "storm," he became frightened and was overcome with doubt and unbelief (he believed a lie) (Mt 14:31). The devil brings storms into our lives to intimidate and defeat us... and when we take our eyes off Christ and focus on our circumstances or what he is saying to us, we fall (Gen 3:6). It is important to remember that as human beings we don't have the capacity to "consider" what Satan tells us and "not fall" (Gen 3:1-7) — it is simply not in us to listen to him and stay on our feet; either we immediately "reject Satan's proposal" or we fall... none of us have the capacity to entertain his overtures and stay upright — Satan and the flesh will get its foot in the door if we listen to them! With that said, we all sin exceedingly more than any of us think or care to admit. The Christian life is all about "trusting God" through the ups and downs of life, and rejecting every message that we are consciously aware of that runs counter to His voice (Prv 3:5-6; 2 Cor 10:5). This battle is one that must be fought every waking hour, and is one that oftentimes gets very intense. The results couldn't be more radical — when we trust God we experience peace and joy... when we fail to trust Him we experience frustration, anxiety and depression.

Let me use a "baseball metaphor" to make a point: We are all on God's team, we all play the game every day, so "we all have a batting average." The best of us is batting .300, and the worst of us is hitting a paltry .100 — for those of you not familiar with batting averages, having a .100 average is about as low an average as anyone has ever had in the Major Leagues... except for a few pitchers who never work at their hitting. Because .300 is looked upon in baseball circles as being a "great batting average," we would all love to hit .300. The reality, however, is this — a person with a .300 average doesn't get a hit seven out of every ten times at bat... conversely, the person batting .100 doesn't get a hit nine out of every ten times at bat. That means the .300 hitter only gets two more hits every ten times at bat than the .100 hitter. The metaphor when applied to our "spiritual batting averages" is this — we all fail far more often than any of us care to admit. So, if you're a .100 hitter, start working at getting your average up to .150... and if you're a .200 hitter, work at getting your average up to .250... and if you're a .300 hitter, you have obviously been working at being a good hitter for a long time, so you've already developed a disciplinary approach to your hitting (living), and with that in mind, you will probably continue to keep doing everything you can to raise your average "just one more point!" — that is simply what good hitters do! By the way, God isn't going to kick any of you off His team no matter how poorly you're hitting... He's just going to keep on pushing you to make you the player He wants you to be... and, as incredible as it may sound to you, He's going to succeed at it! He is going to constantly remind you what you're doing wrong (much to your frustration), and constantly push you to do things right — that's what coaches do!... and every day He is going to put His arm around you and tell you how much He loves you! (much to your wonderment!). By the way, He is so good at what He does, one day you are going to be hitting balls you never dreamed you could hit! One more note — without God as your coach, you would never get a single hit! That

pretty much let's you know what you're capable of on your own, and how great a coach God is. Though each of us as believers have "saving faith," the problem is most of us have a "weak faith" (cf. Mt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Rom 1:17), and are only batting about .150 (and that might be generous). Hopefully you are able to see the significance of this baseball metaphor and how it applies to your life... but if you just don't get this baseball stuff, just move on to the next paragraph.

The apostle Paul said, "There is a Sabbath rest for the people of God... be diligent to enter that rest" (Heb 4:9-11). Under the Old Covenant the Sabbath was observed as a "day of rest"... under the New Covenant the Sabbath rest is a "spiritual place of rest" where the believer can abide. The "rest of God" is a gift from God to us to keep us in peace during times of trouble. Jesus said, "My peace I give to you, not as the world gives to you" (Jn 14:27) — His peace is a spiritual peace, and His rest is one that operates in the midst of the storm. It is the privilege of every believer to refuse to worry or have anxiety over the circumstances of life (Phil 4:6-7) — obviously, if we give the flesh time to present its argument, we will forfeit that peace, because the flesh will not come away from the debate until it has "exact[ed] its pound of flesh" (no pun intended); remember, we cannot entertain what the flesh has to say and not be affected by it. Paul said, "Be anxious for nothing." (Phil 4:6) — the only way to not be anxious is to immediately take the matter to the Lord in prayer (Phil 4:6); the answer to "sinful fretting" is "spontaneous prayer!" As believers, we can enter the "rest of God" and actually abide there — we enter that rest by believing (having a "God focus"); we forfeit that rest by not believing (not focusing on God); whereas unbelief will keep us in a state of joyless frustration, belief (exercising faith) will let us experience God's joyful rest. By the way, we do not enter the "rest of God" by attaining a high degree of personal righteousness where we hardly ever sin, we enter it by faith (focusing on God and the truths of Scripture — and truth must be "consciously affirmed!"). As **David** said, "Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being" (Ps 51:6; cf. Ps 15:2; Jn 8:31-32; Phil 4:8).

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that "the righteous live by faith — believing God" (Rom 1:17), and it is this life to which we have been called (2 Cor 5:7; 1 Jn 5:4). Faith rests upon divine revelation (Rom 10:17) — that is its foundation — thus it is the assurance and conviction that what God has said is true and can be trusted and acted upon (Heb 11:1); so faith is a strong confidence grounded in the truth of Scripture. Furthermore, since our lives "are transformed by the renewing of our mind" (Rom 12:2), we learn to live by faith when "we take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). Jesus said to His disciples, "If you have faith and do not doubt, you can say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and it will be done" (Mt 21:21-22; 1 Jn 5:14). Some of the "mountains" God wants us to cast into the sea are our worries, our wrong thoughts, and our unbelief; but that cannot happen outside of "a knowledge of God's Word and a 'conscious reliance' upon the Holy Spirit" (it is Grace/God working thru faith). Mountain-moving faith is an undoubting, confidence in God (as opposed to ourselves)... it is believing in God's truth and God's power while seeking to do God's will. When we seek something that is consistent with God's Word and trust in God's power to provide it — Jesus assures us that our request will be granted. Why? because it honors Him. Remember, we are called to live for Christ, and not ourselves (Mt 16:24-25; 1 Cor 15:31; Phil 1:21), and doing such means having a "God focus" (not a self focus), and that involves "faith." The New Testament teaches us the following about faith —

- God is the object of our faith (Mk 11:22)
- Faith moves mountains (Mk 11:23)
- We are to live by faith (Rom 1:17)

- We are justified by faith (Rom 5:1)
- Faith is rooted in the truths of God's Word (Rom 10:17)
- We walk by faith (2 Cor 5:7)
- We live by faith in Christ (Gal 2:20)
- We are saved by faith (Eph 2:8)
- We are to fight the good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12)
- Faith is the assurance of things hoped for (Heb 11:1)
- Faith is the conviction of things not seen (Heb 11:1)
- Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6)
- Faith without works is useless (Jam 2:20)

**Spiritual depression tends to cause a progressive deterioration in our ability to think clearly and rationally.** This means it has a tendency to cause us to misinterpret and distort the tenants of our faith as well as our spiritual experiences. Spiritual depression also causes us to believe that we cannot be forgiven of real or imagined sins... that confessing is useless... and that we cannot measure up to God's expectations or the rules of heaven... hence it causes us to feel isolated from God, and feel that nobody really cares about us. **Spiritual depression sees God as a God of fear and punishment, rather than a God of love and forgiveness...** and it causes the believer to become overly discouraged with himself because of his own weaknesses and imperfections — as **King David** put it, “**My sin is ever before me**” (Ps 51:3). The spiritually depressed believer is inclined to think that “**his moods**” not only dishonor God, but affect God's love for him. Jesus told His disciples, “The devil comes to steal, kill and destroy, but I came that you may have life and enjoy it, and have it in abundance till it overflows” (Jn 10:10). The primary way in which Satan attempts to steal life from us is to cause us to see God as being unloving, uncompassionate & unforgiving. The devil believes that if he can get us to “**distrust God,**” by entertaining wrong thoughts about Him, he will cripple and destroy us spiritually.

For a person to truly “**feel dynamically alive**” he must find the passion and joy that consumes him — true love consumes... the love of a child consumes... a cause or a calling from God consumes... but most of all **a relationship with God consumes.** Obviously there is no such thing as some kind of spiritual Prozac we can take... only **intimate communion with God** cuts away the anger and resentment, the failings and sins, the emptiness and the loneliness, and the doubts and fears that inhabit the depressed soul. When we affirm God's forgiveness and His love for us, and commune with Him on an intimate level, and move on to a deeper place of trust — that's faith — spiritual depression will fall away and new life and purpose will replace it. To simply ask God for “**deliverance from some depressing malady**” is not enough, “we have to affirm those spiritual realities that are perplexing to us” (God's love and forgiveness) — affirming truth is faith — once we do that the Spirit will then make those truths a reality in our heart again, and nourish our soul. I will expand on this principle several times throughout this study. The issue for the spiritually depressed believer is this: **the passion and joy that consumes us must be our relationship with Christ!** One cannot be consumed with disquieting problems and experience peace. Ultimately, the reason we become spiritually depressed, is that Christ is no longer our passion and joy — we have simply “**listened to the flesh**” and bought into its depressing message. When “**trials**” overwhelm us, the flesh immediately takes advantage of our anxious heart and sends a debilitating message to us in hopes that he will cause us to become depressed. The truth is, suffering, trials, adversities, difficulties, diseases, calamities, and afflictions are all “**blessings in disguise,**” that

God uses to build & strengthen our faith, promote moral purity and godly character, strengthen our will and our resolve and increase the power of endurance, let us participate in some sense in the sufferings of Christ, and cause us to depend more upon the One who heals, restores and transforms our soul (cf. Acts 14:22; Jn 15:4-5; Rom 5:3-4; Phil 1:29; Col 1:24; 1 Th 3:3; Jam 1:2-4, 12; 1 Pet 2:21).

Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life, and have it **abundantly**” (Jn 10:10). Jesus didn’t just come to give us life, He came to give us “abundant life.” The word “abundantly” (*perissos*) describes something that goes far beyond that which is necessary — the matchless gift of eternal life exceeds all expectations. After we are saved, however, we find that there are various degrees of enjoyment to our life in Christ — the more we turn ourselves over to the Holy Spirit, the more we **enjoy** the life which has been given to us. The night before Jesus went to the cross, He met with His disciples in the “Upper Room,” and shared some significant spiritual truths with them (Jn 13-16). When He told them that it was essential for them to “**abide in Him**,” He said, “I have shared this with you, that **My joy** may be in you, and that **your joy** may be made full” (Jn 15:11). He wanted His disciples to have that joy that comes from dependence upon Him — He wanted “His joy” to be theirs — it would only be fulfilled in them by abiding in Christ and obeying Him. Later that same evening in His prayer to the Father (before His disciples), He said: “Father, I have spoken these things in the world that **My joy** may be made full in them” (Jn 17:13) — in His prayer, Jesus mentioned the fact that He wanted them to be partakers of His joy. The fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22) — when believers walk with Christ they **experience His joy**. Think about it, when you walk with your best friend somewhere you enjoy their presence; but you don’t enjoy their presence if you think they are mad or disappointed with you (carefully think about that). The renowned Puritan preacher **Jonathan Edwards** put it this way, “The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied” — so if we insist on buying into what “our culture” and “our flesh” have to say about happiness, we will **never** experience it. The joy of the Lord is a delight in life that runs deeper than pain or pleasure or difficult circumstances... it is a gift that is experienced when there is a deep sense of the presence of God in one’s life. Ultimately, all that God has made available to us through His redemptive grace is cause for great rejoicing, and such a perspective on life enables us to experience life with joyful spontaneity.

## The Message of Asaph

The psalmist **Asaph** in Psalm 73 recorded the following words (an abridged version) —

*Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!  
But I had almost **stopped believing**, and had almost lost my faith.  
I became envious of the proud, as I beheld wicked people doing well.  
They don’t have **troubles** like the rest of us, nor are they plagued with problems.  
They are wicked, always at ease, and ever increasing in wealth.  
**Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure**, and kept my hands from doing wrong?  
I have **suffered** all day long, and have been chastened every morning.  
When I pondered to understand this, **it was troublesome in my sight**  
Until I came into the sanctuary of God — then I perceived their end.  
When my heart was **embittered and angry**, and I was pierced within,  
Then I was senseless and stupid, and acted like a beast toward You, God.*

*Nevertheless I am always with You, and You guide me with Your counsel.  
I have no one in heaven but You, Lord; and I want nothing on earth besides You.  
**My body and my mind may fail; but You are my strength and portion forever.**  
The nearness of God is my good; the Lord **GOD** is my protection and refuge.*

The choir director **Asaph** was an eminent musician who was appointed by King David to preside over the sacred choral services (1 Chron 16:5). “His sons” are mentioned as choristers of the Temple (1 Chron 25:1-2; 2 Chron 20:14), so this office apparently was made hereditary in the family. Years later Asaph was celebrated as a prophet and poet in Israel (2 Chron 29:30; Neh 12:46) — the titles of twelve of the psalms (50, 73-83) bear his name, though in some of these psalms (74, 75, 79) the “*sons of Asaph*” should probably be understood. In Psalm 73, Asaph saw the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering, and this *caused his heart to question the integrity of God’s wisdom*. I can’t help but reflect upon the cultural and political malaise that exists in our country today... and wonder why God permits it? The *temporal perspective* is nearly always a disheartening one. It was only when Asaph saw the circumstances of the rich from *God’s eternal perspective*, that he came to see that the “*eternal rewards of the righteous*” far outweigh the “*temporary prosperity of the wicked*.” ***Due to our sin disposition, we are all inclined to judge God by our “temporal circumstances”*** — when they are positive, we feel more loved by God and are more *pleased* with Him; when they are negative, we feel less loved by God and more disappointed and *displeased* with Him. Remember it is our *daily circumstances* that cause us to ruminate in such fashion.

The story is told of two prisoners living in a small cell with no light except what came through a very small window three feet above eye level. Both prisoners naturally spent a good amount of time looking at that window — one of them saw the *bars*; obvious, ugly, metallic reminders of reality, and from day to day he grew increasingly discouraged, bitter, angry, and hopeless. By contrast, the other prisoner looked through the window to the *stars* beyond; hope welled up in that prisoner as he began to think of starting a new life in freedom. The two prisoners looked at the same window, but one saw bars while the other saw stars. And the difference in their vision made a huge difference in their lives. **Bill Hybels**, founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, writes in his book “*Who You Are When No One is Looking*” — “*Vision*, like courage and discipline, is a character trait that can be stimulated and developed in anyone who is willing to understand what it really is, and then to *work hard at making it part of everyday life*. Everyone can choose to look at bars or stars. In fact, everyone makes that choice several times every day.”

**Dr. Jay Adams**, in his book “*The Christian Counselor’s Manual*,” says that ***self-pity*** consists of a concentration upon one’s self and one’s supposed rights, and *usually involves a protest against God’s providence* (Adams, pp. 370-374). That’s why the psalmist wrote, “I almost stopped believing, and almost lost my faith, because I was envious of the arrogant” (Ps 73:2-3) — envy, mixed with a brooding self-pity, almost brought him to deep despair and rebellion against God. He explained, “When I pondered to understand why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, it was very troublesome in my sight” (Ps 73:16). He then went on to say, “***When my heart was embittered and angry, and I was pierced within; I was senseless and stupid, and acted like a beast toward God***” (Ps 73:21-22). Plainly the psalmist brought suffering and heartache to himself through the sins of self-pity and envy — by ruminating over *disquieting thoughts*, we bring anger and grief to our soul. It wasn’t until **Asaph** was instructed about the final eternal outcome of the wicked that he repented (Ps 73:17-21). Self-pity is the stuff out of which depression, despair, murder, suicide and

other sins are made. Many believers spend hours wondering why they have not been **blessed** as other people, and as they wallow in self-pity their problems seem to grow even larger, and their depression deeper and heavier and more debilitating. The story of **Elijah** is illustrative of the destructiveness of self-pity — Elijah was bold as long as his mind was centered on God, but not when he began to focus his attention upon himself (1 Kg 19:4, 10, 14). Because he refused to turn from his “self-orientation,” God took his prophetic ministry from him and gave it to Elisha.

Continual brooding over particular issues can have bad effects, simply because it excludes God from the equation. The mind set upon the things of the flesh results in destructiveness, pain and misery... whereas the mind set upon the things of the Spirit results in constructiveness, life and peace (Rom 8:6) — what a radical difference. By the way, God is the one who gives us peace (Gal 5:22)... and causes us to reap what we sow. When a person focuses on self-pity and broods over past problems, he allows that which no longer exists (except in his mind) to make him miserable. It is important to remember, “self-pity” is always destructive; if continued it leads to depression (the downward cycle that enslaves one in hopelessness and guilt results in depression), which in turn is often the most direct route to despair and the ultimate self-destruction — suicide. The **children of Israel** continually looked at their circumstances and “grumbled” — they deplored their conditions so such they actually preferred returning to the bondage they were in back in Egypt, rather than pressing on through the wilderness to the Promised Land (cf. Num 14:2-3; 20:2-4; 21:4-5)... they simply could not stop focusing on where they were, as opposed to where it was God wanted to take them. The same goes for many believers today... they are so preoccupied with the negatives in their lives, that they don’t even think about the future God has for them. **King Solomon** reminded his sons that “the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths; the wicked is captured by his own iniquities, and he is held fast by the cords of his own sin” (Prv 5:21-22). Sinful habits and sinful thoughts are hard to break... if they are not broken, however, they bind the person ever more tightly... he then discovers that as sin spirals downward, he is captured and tied-up by its ever-tightening cords. Again, it is important to remember that not trusting God is sin (Rom 14:23), so continuing to not trust God results in being bound ever more tightly in the bondage of unbelief. The danger for believers is to think that “deliverance” from some sin will actually become easier down the road... the reality is, it is always more difficult and more painful later, because it is only the “discipline of the Lord” that will ultimately cause you to turn from your sin. Beloved, keep short accounts with God.

## The Message of Cain

The story of Cain illustrates the fearful dynamics of the downward cycle — **Cain** began badly by presenting an offering to God that did not meet with His approval. When God rejected it, Cain complicated the problem by responding wrongly to the rejection (he became angry and depressed). God warned him against the consequences of his wrong response, and graciously told him: “If you do right, you will feel right; but if you fail to repent and offer an acceptable sacrifice, you will complicate the problem and fall into the clutches of even deeper sin” (Gen 4: 5-8). God offered hope to Cain by telling him that he could reverse the spiral and rule over sin by breaking out of the sinful pattern through repentance and a subsequent change of behavior. Cain failed to heed God’s warning and fell into the clutches of even greater sin just as God had forewarned — the downward cycle led to Cain murdering his brother Abel. Nursing his grudge, self-pity and anger were all elements that led Cain to greater guilt, despair and murder (Adams,



pp. 375-377). Nothing short of the **grace of God** can enable a person to “put off” the old ways and “put on” God’s pattern of life. It should be noted, one can only establish new patterns by first repenting and then engaging in Spirit motivated works appropriate to repentance; so rather than wasting time brooding and swimming in self-pity, we must concentrate our energies and attention upon more God-honoring, productive ends (Rom 15:1-3; Eph 4:7, 16, 22-32; 5:8-10, 15-18; Phil 2:3-4). Regarding the matter of **grace**, I would encourage you to read my study on “Growing in Grace & Faith.”

**Jay Adams** says depression never needs to occur if the “initial problem” is handled God’s way. Depression is not inevitable... nor is it something that simply happens and cannot be avoided. Furthermore, the cycle can always be reversed at any point by biblical action in the power of the Holy Spirit — when we intentionally focus on God and His perspective, the Holy Spirit makes our efforts efficacious and brings peace to our soul; without God effecting a deep abiding peace, we would not experience it. “Hope” for depressed persons lies in this — depression is always the result of sin, not a result of some strange malady that has overcome them for which they are not responsible (if that were the case, they could do nothing and all hope would evaporate); but because “it is sin” we have hope through Christ. **Remember, God is in the “sin” business!** Let me remind you, “that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23); so God is in the business of getting you to trust Him! The fact is, though we may not be responsible for the initial problem (physical illness, financial loss, etc.)... we are responsible for handling the initial problem God’s way. When we mishandle problems by “sinfully reacting to them” (by becoming resentful and giving in to self-pity), we become depressed, and guilt and its miseries are added to the original problem. If we continue to deal with the consequences sinfully, the spiral intensifies (Adam, p. 378). The good news is, in spite of the seeming overwhelming nature of our problems, God has an answer for them — all of them! There is in the gospel of Christ a way out of difficult circumstances that before seemed to lead only to despair. It begins with repentance and proceeds with an effective application of the Word of God. Remember, Scripture is God’s revelation to man and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). God’s Word is more than adequate to deliver us from our problems. As the apostle Paul wrote: “All Scripture was written for our instruction, so that through the patience and encouragement of the Word we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). The light of the Word expels the darkness! Apart from Christ and His Word there is no basis for hope (but the Scriptures were written to give us hope), so take God’s promises seriously if you want to experience “wellness” in your soul. Read it... study it... apply it daily... and consciously depend upon the Holy Spirit to make it efficacious in your life (cf. Jn 17:17; Rom 10:17; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 2:2). Daily ask God for the **grace** to grow in your faith... to know Him... to love Him... and to walk with Him (Eph 1:18-19; 3:16-20; 2 Pet 3:18) — it is all by grace! and it is always available! no matter how badly you mess up!

## The Message of the Psalmist

The psalmist said, “O my soul, why are you despairing? Why are you so disturbed? Put your hope in God; I shall yet praise Him for the help of His presence” (Ps 42:5). Depressed persons are often prone to being introspective in a negative way; as such, they are pessimistic and ruminate over past failures — a “negative self-concept” causes them to blame themselves for all their problems; they become so preoccupied with themselves and their sin that their attention, concentration, and memory are impaired. Anxiety and perplexity make them feel sad, helpless, hopeless, worthless, empty, and lonely; thus they operate at a low energy level and with a sense

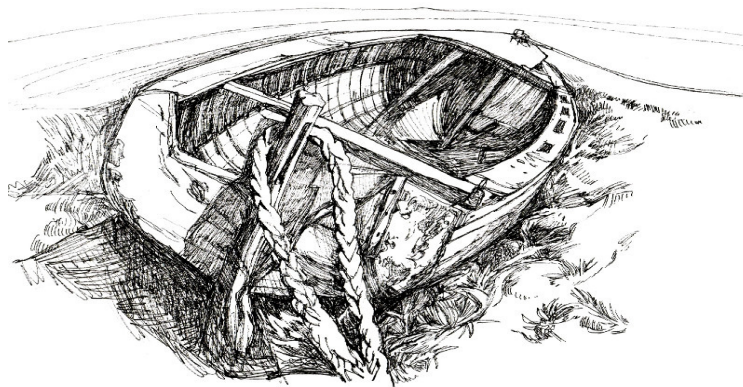
of futility about the future. Their painful thinking often centers around “guilt” — and **David** describes guilt this way: “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer” (Ps 32:3-4). And then there is the cry of **Asaph**, “Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? This is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed!” (Ps 77:9-10). **Frank Minirth & Paul Meier**, in their textbook “*Intro to Psychology & Counseling*,” tell us that “painful thinking causes a lack of motivation” (a primary characteristic of depressed individuals); painful thinking is a depressant, and “most depressed people begin to avoid people (they want to be alone)... and suffer from intense feelings of hopelessness” (Minirth, p. 259).

Minirth and Meier go on to say that most depressions are caused by holding in an excessive amount of “repressed anger” — the depressed person oftentimes fears becoming aware of his repressed anger because it would lower his self-esteem to do so. Pent-up anger is the root of nearly all clinical depression — depression feeds on itself as one’s thinking becomes progressively more painful. Though one might be able to “justify being angry,” to live with it is to let it destroy your peace. People who feel hopeless, helpless, worthless, and guilty become very self-critical and debasing. Cyclical in effect, inappropriate thinking results in irresponsible behavior, which only increases depression. Most depression results from irresponsible behavior in handling guilt and anger. When individuals realize that they will never obtain the “goals” they have set for themselves (a great job, financial independence, positive circumstances, a happy family, being physically attractive), that realization oftentimes causes “anger” which in turn can cause clinical depression (Minirth, pp. 260-264). God does not want us to stay depressed — He wants us to repent (not trusting Him is sin), and solve our problems by applying His Word.

A major cause of discouragement among dedicated Christians surfaces when they try to live and work for Christ in their own strength (Jn 15:5; Rom 7:14-24) — and we all do at times. Scripture very clearly teaches that the Christian life can be lived joyfully only through the power of the Spirit. The joyful Christian lives life with “a conscious dependence upon the Holy Spirit”... he recognizes his own shortcomings... He knows God loves him in spite of his weaknesses... he is aware that God is at work in him slowly transforming him into the image of His Son (no matter how he may feel; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:13)... he knows that God desires his affection & intimacy (Mt 22:37; Jn 15:7-11; 1 Jn 2:28; Rev 19:7), and that there is nothing he can do to make God love him less or more (Rom 5:8-10; 8:31-39; Heb 7:25; 1 Jn 2:1, 12) — thus he is secure in Christ. In short, the joyful Christian accepts the wonderful truth that salvation from beginning to end is all a work of God’s love and grace (beginning to end). Though all of us are predisposed to “earning it” in some way (because of the presence of indwelling sin), none of us will ever earn an ounce of it. When we “accept these humbling truths” God will make all grace abound to us (Is 30:18; 2 Cor 9:8; Eph 3:20; Jam 4:6). That word “accept” is monumental — when we really believe God’s Word we fully accept its truths... to accept spiritual truths we must oftentimes affirm them over & over again, until they take root in our hearts” (Jam 1:21-25). Because Satan and the flesh are always challenging the truths of Scripture, by interjecting thoughts into our minds that run counter to the Word, we often have to affirm truths over & over again that they might be implanted deep in our souls (Jam 1:21). By the way, it is often helpful to verbally affirm biblical truths “out loud,” because in doing so we use both the left and right sides of our brain, thus giving us greater cognition of the truth we are affirming; it also helps us keep our mind focused on the issue before us, and keep it from wandering. So if you are having a difficult time accepting some particular truth (that God loves you or that God forgives you), or some truth that Scripture is teaching you, by

affirming it over and over again, the Holy Spirit will ultimately cause that truth to take root in your soul (that's God's work); your work is to simply prayerfully affirm it over and over again. As the best-selling Christian author **Joyce Meyer** puts it in her book, "*Battlefield of the Mind*:" "A lot of people have *wishbone*, but no *backbone*! ... [they] want to have everything and do nothing!" (published by "Faith Works," 2011, p.192). Beloved, you have a responsibility to do your part in overcoming discouragement and experiencing God's peace & joy (cf. Mt 25:26; Gal 6:9; Phil 4:13).

*Abandon the depressing life of the flesh... and live in the light of God's love!*



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