

GOOD NEWS FOR THE DEPRESSED

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Our root problem is how to handle deep depression, despair, feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness. That is also the problem with alcoholism, painkillers, and addictions. The pain and torture of such despair is so overwhelming that the addict feels forced to return to the substance that at least superficially offers relief. Part of the despair is the quintessence of guilt—that which will at last kill the lost in the second death.

The question is which of two “therapies” will solve the problem of existential despair: (1) drugs and psychology administered by physicians and psychologists, or (2) the Good News gospel of Christ. There are times when some kind of drug administered by a physician is necessary and I would not ever counsel against it. But I question its permanent value. In the long run, despair can be overcome only by believing Good News, Bad News induces despair; Good News—the opposite.

Part of the Good News is the reality of how Jesus experienced such quintessential despair, truly, in the flesh. No drug addict or alcoholic or criminal ever has known the painful, soul-destroying despair that Jesus felt. For Him to have called Heaven to intervene and get Him off His cross and into a taxi on the way home to Heaven would have been as welcome a relief to His tortured soul as a drug fix comforts an addict. Every cell of His tortured being

cried out for that “fix.” “Consider Him,” says Hebrews.

I know despair, feelings of hopelessness. I have feelings of emptiness and inadequacy that cry out for relief . . . which I find in contrite prayer. I tell the Lord that I am nothing, and have failed in everything I have tried to do, it seems that Heaven’s frown is upon me, I am unworthy ever to try to preach again, please let me die rather than fail in my mission. I was in agony beforehand—what would I say? I simply could not find rest until I was alone and could kneel and talk to the Lord and beg Him to do one of two things—get me out of there or give me grace to do my duty in a way to please Him.

Maybe that is near to what Paul meant when he said, “I die daily” and that he was “in deaths oft.” When in despair stay on your knees and beg the Lord to either (1) heal you or (2) let you die right there.

When we ask Him for bread He *never* gives us a stone. He won’t say “No!” for you but the grace of God which has brought salvation to all men has come teaching us to say “No!” to temptations to self-indulgence.

What does the Bible say about addictions—whether to cigarettes or tobacco, or to liquor, or to drugs? The Bible teaches liberty from them all! “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all the inhabitants thereof” (Lev. 25:10).

The first of God's Ten Commandments forbids addiction to anything evil or harmful: "You shall have no other gods before Me," the Lord says. Addictions to habit-forming substances are idolatry and thus a violation of the first commandment.

They are *loveless* idolatries and for that reason are wrong. The truth says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment." Love can't be forced by terror. All His commandments are love-awakening love. The *agape* of Christ "constraineth us" (2 Cor. 5:14, 16, KJV). The commandment to love the Lord with all our minds is in fact a divine promise: true worship rests in that love—and we are heart and soul devoted to Him because of His love for us.

When that kind of love has penetrated our souls, addictions fall off like dead leaves. Our idolatrous love for what is harmful to our souls (even coffee!) is transcended by a deep heartfelt reverence for the One who went to His cross to find and save us. In such worship is the purest liberty.

We can never know the joy of obedience to the first commandment unless we believe the Preamble to the Ten. Many helplessly break God's holy law because they don't know that Preamble where the Lord says He has "brought [us] out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). Yes! delivered us from all our evil addictions by His sacrifice on His cross.

He has reversed the "condemnation" Adam brought upon us, by giving us His "judicial verdict of acquittal" (Rom. 5:15-18, NEB). Therein is truth that

the addict of whatever kind needs to understand; there is liberty in it!

Who is stronger—Christ or the angel who fell from heaven—Satan? Which is stronger, light or darkness?

Which is stronger, love (*agape*), or hatred? Which is stronger, that "much more abounding grace of the Lord Jesus" (Rom. 5:20, 21), or the power of our evil appetites and habits and obsessions and addictions?

Which is stronger: the power of death (that held Jesus Christ captive in Joseph's tomb), or the resurrection power of the Father that raised Him up after three days?

We can't say it often enough: that much more abounding grace is stronger than all the power of sin the devil can invent. In fact, there is in that grace "much more" power! "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

Let's not try to serve God with anything less than that full power of that much more abounding grace that is revealed in Christ. That grace of Christ is the enemy of sin; it condemns it, defeats it, conquers it, annihilates it, so that we might be free indeed.

Then the grace of God will be manifested in us in "newness of life" (6:4). That grace "reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Then we discover something precious: it is easy to be saved and it is hard to be lost, when we begin to appreciate that much more abounding grace! We must not conclude that the upward path is the "hard path" and the downward path is the "easy one;" it's

the opposite. All the way that leads to hell there are impediments and obstacles to hinder us in that way; God is constantly trying to tell us this. It's like we are driving on the freeway, you're at the wheel (because you are the boss), but the Holy Spirit is sitting beside you in the front seat. He is saying, "Don't stay on this freeway to hell; take this exit to the kingdom of God!" That's what Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would do when He gave Him the name "Parakletos," the One called to sit down beside you and never leave you (John 16:7, 8; "para" = beside you; kletos = called).

Don't misunderstand: you do have something to do: it's to make the constant choice to let the Spirit guide you. But please remember, you are not your Savior yourself: you let the Lord save you. It is you who turns the wheel onto the blessed "exit" coming up that leads to eternal life. But He guided you to do it; and you praise the Lord for ever and ever.

Someday you and I will be in God's eternal kingdom of glory, thanks to our Savior. We'll look back on our earthly pilgrimage, wondering why it took us so long to overcome our worldliness, our selfishness, our sinful addictions, yes, our Laodicean lukewarmness. We will see that pure "river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1).

"The Lamb"? Yes, the crucified Christ. We will at last understand why Paul said long ago that he would "glory" in nothing else "save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14), why he "determined not to know anything among [us], save

Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). We will then begin to understand, "clear as crystal," how Christ as the Lamb of God "tasted" our second death, endured the horror of hell in our behalf, endured being made the "curse of God," "made to be sin for us, who knew no sin," experienced in Himself all the agony of the totality of all our human terror multiplied by the unspeakable agony also of divine terror, endured to the fullest the reality of every man's worst nightmares,—and then at last we will sing with new understanding the anthem, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain" (Heb. 2:9, Gal. 3:13, 2 Cor. 5:21, Rev. 5:12).

But what a pity if we can't begin to understand all that today! Or can we? If we could, we would find the victory over our worldliness, our sinful addictions, yes, our deep-seated selfishness, not sometime far off in eternity but now, today. True, a little child can't appreciate what happened on the cross; he/she can only laugh and coo and enjoy his superficial level of life (thank God he/she can!). But who of us is content to remain a little child forever? Is it not time to begin to "grow up into Him," to "come" into "the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown person, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13)?

Ask the Father to lead you to His Son's cross so you can begin to see what happened there. You'll never be the same person again.

It's a very widespread malady—depression. Even many who sincerely want to follow the Lord Jesus Christ suffer from it. Physicians are trained to treat it, books written about it, institutions exist where

sufferers can be treated, huge economic losses come because of it, the wealthy endure equally with the poor—perhaps more so. Even little children are given medications to correct it.

How does the Holy Spirit relate to it? Medical scientists who do not recognize His existence can rely on drugs and psychology in efforts to treat it. Even in the church there is widespread depression that pastors are at a loss to relieve. Many people find that jokes, funny stories, amusements, a social whirl, are helpless bandaids.

Depression is the condition that Jesus describes in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” But often the way seems blocked, and we wrestle with nagging doubts about whether “coming” can really help. Aren’t committed Christians also “heavy laden”? Doubts plunge us back into the pit.

Depression afflicts multitudes, and right here is an acid test of “the faith of Jesus.” The shadows are dark and heavy; can we let in a ray of sunlight?

(1) The first work of the Holy Spirit is to “convict of sin” (John 16:8). When He is resisted, depression is created—unless we cut our spiritual vagus nerve and create a soul-lobotomy (the final sin against the Holy Spirit). Some then find endless carefree abandon, because He is gone.

(2) The one truly sinless Man in history suffered the most enormous depression of any human—crying in an ultimate heart agony, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). Yet that depression was not personal sin on His part. There have been faithful followers of Jesus who have

suffered depression—Joseph sold as a slave into Egypt, David persecuted by King Saul (his psalms are healing medications), the prophet Jeremiah, et al. It could be a hidden blessing.

(3) The faith of Jesus gets slighted (as relief from depression) because many pastors cannot distinguish between the Old Covenant and the New. The New Covenant is not mere psychology; it’s honest truth.

No matter where we turn in the Bible, we meet someone who suffers what we moderns call “depression.” The Psalms of David are a prime example. There is one entitled, “Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD” (130:1); that’s the powerful name that just saying it humbles one’s heart). Then in verse 2, David begs, “Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.” He does not get immediate relief for he adds, “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits” (vs. 5).

David’s problem that makes his depression painful is guilt: “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (vs. 3). The Holy Spirit has been speaking to him, whose first work on David’s heart is the conviction of sin, and it’s painful. If we trace that conviction to its source, we come to Calvary—where Jesus prays the Father to forgive those who crucify Him. Then we realize that it’s us He is praying for! Not the Jews or Romans.

We have two wonders unfolding here: (a) the wonder of God’s redeeming love, and (b) David’s deep unworthiness that now he realizes. Therefore, “there is forgiveness with You,” he says, “that You may be feared” (vs. 4).

The Prince of sufferers from depression is the Lord Jesus Christ; see Him in Gethsemane. His disciples, even Peter, James, John, couldn't even give Him an hour of their precious human time without going to sleep on Him (Matt. 26:36-40). He "began to be sorrowful and deeply depressed" (the KJV says "very heavy"). How "heavy"? "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death." Have you ever been near there?

And we know that Jesus never sinned; therefore we must conclude—to be "depressed" is not of itself sin. It's human, and Jesus the Son of God became human, the Son of man. He took into His soul all the depression that all humans have suffered, cumulative, corporate, and bore it, "even unto death," the final God-forsaken kind of hopeless death when He cried out in those "depths," "My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Question: Why do so many people who go to church suffer from depression just like so many people who do not go to church?

Answer: For the same reason that Abraham's free-born descendants let themselves become slaves in Egypt. They became entangled in Old Covenant thinking, and the apostle Paul at last had the keen insight to see that their Old Covenant thinking even is what "gives birth to bondage" (Gal. 4:24). It was God's intention to renew to them at Sinai the glorious liberty of New Covenant experience—He had promised it to Abraham; but their slave-mentality at Sinai they brought with them from Egypt instinctively drove them to choose again the

Old Covenant experience. Their bodies were free but their minds were still in bondage.

God had promised Abraham, "'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:5, 6). But newly delivered Israel at Sinai did not so "believe in the LORD." They responded with a firm self-righteousness: "Then all the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do'" (Ex. 19:8). They didn't believe God's promise as Abraham did (at first); they made their own promise. (Even he fell back into this slippery Old Covenant in his affair with Hagar and Ishmael—hence modern Palestine today)

Thus God's true people at Mt. Sinai fastened themselves in their own home-grown Old Covenant; God did not lead them into it. Their national history thereafter all the way to a cross outside Jerusalem's wall where they murdered their holy Messiah was the up and down, revival/backsliding syndrome. Every revival such as that even of King Josiah (2 Chron. 34, 35) ended as did his with 36:14-16, "till there was no remedy," and the "City of peace" with its glorious holy temple had to be burned. The pagan Babylonians took the people off in captivity for 70 years.

Paul's conclusion: Learn from your history! "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free" (Gal. 5:1).

Seven times Abraham is spoken of in Romans 4 as "our father." He had to wait until nearly 100 for

the birth of his first son, Isaac, the one “promised.” Can you imagine the years of depression he and Sarah endured—waiting “against hope,” who still “believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations”? Abraham learned that “God. . . . gives life to the dead, and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations. . . . He did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith. Giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform” (vss. 16-21).

Our “father” Abraham became an expert in battling with depression. The New Covenant promises are what brought him through into the sunlight. The New Covenant promises given to him and thus to all his descendants (you and me!) are in Genesis 12:2, 3. To say glibly that they are the “cure” for our widespread malady of depression is to be superficial; they are not to be compared with this or that drug developed by the pharmaceutical companies; they are simply “the faith of Jesus.”

But they are included in the “everlasting gospel” of Revelation 14:6-12, and it is our privilege to live in their sunlight every day of our lives.

Sometimes we humans go through harrowing, traumatic experiences that leave us with the problem of depression and nightmares. Our minds are overburdened trying to understand the guilt we

may think we are involved in, and the underlying fear that oppresses us. It’s easy for people who haven’t been through this “hell” to say rather flippantly, “Oh, Jesus will help you!” but the problem continues. Then in desperation, we start taking prescription drugs, and lo, and behold, they do help! But in our better judgment, we long to find relief without drugs, for now we fear side effects.

Superficial, thoughtless “help” only makes the problem worse. Isaiah quotes the Father saying of Christ, “By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many” (53:11). Paul considers that this “knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” is an “excellency” more precious than winning any jackpot. Paul says he wants to “know” Christ and “the fellowship of HIS sufferings.” Could this “knowledge” be better than drugs?

Jesus went through the Ultimate human experience of trauma—in Gethsemane and on His cross. He experienced it as a human Being, but it was unspeakably worse because He was also divine so He suffered the pain on an infinite scale. That made Him become the exactly right Physician for every individual, depressed person, male or female. Psalms 22 and 69 can introduce you to understand His hellish trauma (it was actual hell that He endured!). He is your real brother. As you listen and share with Him what this hell was, you become “a partaker of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Peter 4:13), which means you see how “He was wounded for our transgressions, . . . bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace [nightmares?] was upon Him,” and then the blessing comes—“and by

His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). Walk softly:
this is more than “psychology.” It’s Bible.