

Depressed

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- [0 : 00] Now, let me pray before we dive into this topic. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we come before you this evening and we have a very difficult topic to discuss.
- And yet we thank you that your words does not shy away from things that we find tough, but that we can find hope and that we can find comfort in your words.
- And ultimately through Jesus Christ, in whose holy and precious name we pray. Amen. Now, brothers and sisters, tonight we come to a very difficult topic, depression.
- We're only going to be able to dip our toes into the waters of what is a very, very vast and complicated topic. I know that for many of you here, this is a very real and raw battle.
- For some of you, depression is something that you go through every single day. It's that ever-present darkness in your lives that robs you of the ability to live the life you actually want to live.
- [1 : 08] For others, depression is something that you, maybe you have friends or family members who struggle with it and you want to know how best to care for and support them in their depression.
- Now, in the course of tonight, we are going to touch on topics and feelings that may be triggering to some of you. We may talk about things that you want to unpack a little bit further.
- And if that's the case, please do reach out. Come and talk to me afterwards. Talk to one of the elders. We want to help you think through this topic together.
- Now, depression is something that I find myself speaking about a lot. It is not a topic that I like, nor am I a mental health professional.
- It is a topic that pains me. It is a topic that plagues people that I love. And it is a topic that has robbed me of loved ones in the past.
- [2 : 07] But it is also a topic that I have firsthand experience with. So I grew up in a Christian home, but for years wore a mask, pretending that everything was fine, that I was a good Christian boy.
- But all the while, I wasn't. As time went on, I began to feel alone. A room could have been full of people, but I reasoned that they didn't really know me.
- And the more I wore the mask, the darker my thoughts became. And a weighty cloud of darkness seemed to fall on me. The words I would now use to describe my depression are empty, hollow, dark, grim, despair.
- There seemed to be no hope. There was no joy. And even slight moments of happiness would be overcast with the dark shadows of depression that followed me night and day.
- Whilst everyone slept in the physical darkness came, my thoughts descended even further into despair. For a number of years, I self-harmed almost daily in an attempt to feel something.
- [3 : 23] I tried on three separate occasions to take my own life. Now, my story is much longer than that. And if you want to know more, please do ask me.

I would love to grab a copy with you and to chat through things. But if you want, you can also grab a copy of this book. So this is a book that I've contributed my own testimony to.

It's a book that seven pastors have written together of our stories of depression and what the church can do to help and how our experiences of depression shape the way we do ministry today.

So there's two copies. I'll just leave them there. If you want to take one, please, please do. But I'm not saying any of that to glorify my past. Or to say that I know how every single depressed person feels because everyone's experience is different.

But I'm opening up about my own past so that we can all see that this isn't only an out there problem. But it happens in the church.

[4 : 29] And it can often go unnoticed. And I want you to know this evening that I'm coming at this topic as a former sufferer of depression. I'm coming at it as a pastor with a heart for those who have poor mental health.

And I'm coming at it as a Christian who always wants to point people to Jesus in both the good times and the bad. Depression or the general topic of poor mental health is not to be taken lightly.

It affects so many people today. Christians and non-Christians alike. So let me just give you a plan of where I hope we're going to get through tonight.

We're going to start by looking at some statistics on depression. Then we'll look at what the Bible has to say about depression and to the depressed.

And then we'll think through some practical tips both for the depressed and for those caring for the depressed. So here are just a handful of statistics about depression to help us see how relevant a topic it really is.

[5 : 37] So the World Health Organization has ranked depression as the single largest contributor to global disability.

Depression is one of the most common mental health problems today in Scotland. One in ten people are diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives. That means that one of ten of us in this room, roughly speaking, either has, has had, or will have depression at some point in our lives.

So even if you don't have depression yourself, you probably know someone who has. This is a topic so close to home for so many people. But closely connected to the topic of depression, two are the horrific stats on suicide and self-harm.

On average, two people a day in Scotland will die by suicide. Over the course of a lifetime, one in five people have suicidal thoughts.

It's estimated that 115 people are affected by every suicide. Some of you here will probably know someone close to you, or know of someone who has taken their own life.

[7 : 08] It is never, ever easy. And it can bring up emotions and trauma that must be taken seriously. Suicide is the most common cause of death in men aged 15 to 44 after accidental death.

And around 17% of people will self-harm during their lifetime. Now those stats are horrific. And they are deeply saddening because they aren't just numbers on a screen.

They are loved ones. Each representing a person who struggles and in need of help. It is heartbreaking. Sadly, this is the nature of the world we live in.

So many people are crippled or impacted negatively by depression. But on top of all of that, there are countless people who suffer from depression or periods of depression-like symptoms who go undiagnosed.

Here's what Ed Welch, a registered psychologist and Christian counselor, says about depression. Think of depression not so much as I have it or I don't have it, but as a continuum of severity.

[8 : 30] On the one end, it is bothersome and at the other end, debilitating. The less severe is commonly referred to as situational depression and the more severe as clinical depression.

Now depression is a vast topic that covers a wide variety of symptoms with a varying degree of severity. But it is not a topic that the Bible is afraid of.

And it is not a topic that we as Christians should be afraid of or ashamed of either. Instead, as a whole church, we need to see our role as we support and care for the depressed, both inside and outside.

While at the same time recognizing our own limitations because we are not mental health professionals. But let's turn our attention to God's word and look at what the Bible has to say about depression.

Now the big questions that we may be asking is, where exactly does depression come from? And is there hope of an end to depression in the life of a Christian?

[9 : 44] And to understand that, we need to take a bit of a step back and go right back to the beginning of God's word in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. So Genesis 1 and 2 describe the creation of the world.

God looks at the world, everything he created and said it is good. And then he looks at humanity, the pinnacle of creation, the only part of creation that bears his image.

And he says that they are very good. But a dramatic change comes in Genesis chapter 3, which I would argue is the beginning of depression.

Genesis 3 is the point where sin enters into the world. We know it as the fall, to where humanity are filled with shame and fear and where the whole of creation and every human heart is broken by sin and evil.

So Genesis 3 is the beginning of the presence of sin and evil in the world. General suffering, evil, our corrupt natures, our broken bodies find their root in the fall.

[10 : 54] So it can be argued that depression finds its cause first and foremost in the fall. And this doesn't mean that depression can't be caused by chemical imbalances, but it means that even those chemical imbalances or even spiritual elements of depression, and there can be spiritual causes for depression, find their root in the corruption and alienation from God of his good creation from Genesis 1 and 2.

The root cause of suffering and depression is the entrance of sin in the world. So Genesis 3 tells us where depression comes from, but then on the other end of the Bible, in Revelation 21, we see the end of depression in the life of the Christian.

Look at the description with me. It'll be on the screen in Revelation 21 verses 3 to 4. Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

At the end of the Bible, we get this glorious picture of the future that awaits every Christian, free from sin, free from suffering, free from pain, free from the attacks of Satan and united perfectly with our God forever.

[12 : 33] So those are the bookends of the Bible. Depression finds its root in the fall, resulting in broken bodies, broken minds, broken emotions.

But depression finds its end in Revelation, where the whole of creation is restored. But we find ourselves somewhere in the middle, don't we? We find ourselves in what I call Romans 8 times, a time of groaning.

Romans 8 verse 22 to 25 say this, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we were saved. But hope in what is seen is no hope at all for who hopes for what they already have. But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

[13 : 44] Creation is groaning. That's where we find ourselves. Now how does the Bible help the depressed in this time of groaning that we know is life on earth? What comfort does the Bible give to the troubled soul?

Now obviously in our remaining time, we aren't able to talk about absolutely everything the Bible says to the depressed. But I would like to highlight just two things that the Bible does.

First of all, it gives us examples of faithful people who suffered depression like symptoms. So we cannot say with absolute certainty that anyone in the Bible had depression, but we can say that they suffered depression like symptoms.

Maybe the one that springs to mind is Job, who we recently looked at over the summer. He said that he had no peace, that he should have died before he was born, that he hated his life.

And in Job 6, he even asks to die to be rid of the pain that he feels. Or maybe you thought of David, who in 2 Samuel 12 mourns and grieves as his child lays sick and dying.

[15 : 09] Or maybe you think of some of his honest reflections in the Psalms as he opens up about his own weakness and struggles like Psalm 38 or Psalm 130. Or maybe you think of Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet.

Who in Jeremiah chapter 20 prays this, Cursed be the day I was born. Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?

The Bible gives us these examples to show us how God walks with people even when they were at the end of their tether. And so we can trust that it's true for us today in life.

Even when all we see around us is darkness, God is there. Just because you maybe feel far away from God and maybe you even feel abandoned by him, that doesn't mean you've lost your salvation.

That doesn't mean it's true. Just because you feel differently about God, doesn't mean that God feels any differently about you. Those are just a few examples of people who suffered depression-like symptoms in the Bible.

[16 : 30] But do you see that the Bible isn't afraid of our dark emotions? It's not afraid of our frustrations, of our anger, of our pain.

In fact, the Bible invites us to come with all of that to God. Not just with our joy, with our thanksgiving, but with our pain and with our sorrow.

Now maybe you are depressed. Or maybe you know others who are suffering and that makes you feel down. That leaves you feeling depleted of energy with no desire to do anything.

So often Christians can think that we have to hide those emotions. That we have to pretend to be fine on a Sunday morning.

Put on the Sunday best. Put on the good show. But a third of the Psalms are lament Psalms. Psalms where the writer is literally crying out to God as he looks at his life and sees pain and agony and he says, why?

[17 : 33] We need to learn to lament like the Psalmists. We need to know the benefit of praying our pain to God.

The God who listens, who cares and who wants us to run to him with it all. So that's the first thing the Bible does is it gives us faithful examples of people who suffered depression-like symptoms.

But the second thing that the Bible does is it gives us language and metaphors that can help us express our pain. So keep Psalm 88 open in front of you.

We're going to be jumping around it just for a few moments together. The best example of this kind of Psalm is 88 because it is a Psalm of Heman, the Ezraite.

We first meet him in 1 Chronicles 6. He's renowned for his wisdom and he served Solomon as a seer, a kind of Old Testament prophet. But Heman is most renowned today for writing what is arguably the most painful Psalm in the whole book of Psalms.

[18 : 48] And this was a song that was sung by the sons of Korah. This is a Psalm of lament, an individual Psalm of lament that Heman wrote out of his pain.

Now reading that Psalm, maybe you felt you resonated with Heman. Maybe you read some of those things and you thought, yeah, I can remember days where that was true for me.

I felt alone and abandoned in the pit. Or maybe you read that Psalm and you were amazed that God would allow such openness and honesty in the Bible.

This Psalm is an individual lament, a crying out to God in prayer and an example of how we too can pray our pain to God in a biblical way.

Unlike other Psalms of lament, there is no hope at the end of Psalm 88. There is no resolution to continue to praise God despite severe depression-like symptoms.

[19 : 52] There is only pain. The Bible acknowledges our darkest feelings. Look at the end of Psalm 88.

Darkness is my closest friend. Heman feels that there is no hope. And this has been going on for a little while. Look at verse 15.

From my youth I have suffered and been close to death. He looks back over his life and he sees nothing but bleak darkness, pain and suffering.

But just look at some of the poetic language and metaphors that he uses to describe how he feels. In verse 3 he says, I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.

He feels that his life is nothing more than a shadow and he's overwhelmed. He feels like death is just around the corner. In verse 6 he says that he feels like he's in the lowest pit in the darkest depths.

[20 : 58] Now imagine you're in an underground cave. No sunlight can reach you. You don't notice the difference between day and night. Every waking minute is wracked with anxiety, darkness, pain and despair.

It would feel suffocating. It would feel claustrophobic and terrifying. That is exactly how Heman says he feels in his depression. In verses 16 and 17 he laments because he feels that his depression is a result of God's wrath on him.

He says that God's wrath and troubles surround him like a flood that has completely engulfed him. He feels that he's drifting away in a sea of darkness with no lifeguard, no hope, no air, but he's drowning in pain.

Do you feel that pain? And he also feels abandoned by all of his friends and family and he feels abandoned by God.

Look at verse 14. Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? Brothers and sisters, this is how so many people feel in the darkest days of depression.

[22 : 17] But notice that even in his deepest pain and depression, Heman still cries out to God. Verse 1, Night and day I cry out to you.

Verse 9, I call to you every day. Verse 13, I cry to you for help, Lord. He feels like his prayers are not being listened to, but he keeps on praying and he reminds himself of who God is.

The psalm, whilst it's bleak and full of pain, it starts in verse 1 with a declaration of who God is. Lord, you are the God who saves me.

There he's using God's covenant name packed with all the history of God's covenant faithfulness, of his unfailing love for his people. He recognizes that even if he doesn't feel it, even if all he sees around him is despair and darkness, that God is the one who saves him.

Psalms 88 gives us language and metaphors that we can use to cry out to God in our deepest pain. In the struggles of dark days, of depression, of isolation, of poor mental health, this psalm is an example of what it means to suffer as a believer, to take it to God and lament, and to mourn the situation that you are in.

[23 : 45] I would encourage you all to take the psalms of lament and study them. Use them as templates to express your darkest emotions and pray them to God.

Whilst many of the psalms of lament are full of darkness, there are also great treasures to be found. This psalm ends with no hope, with darkness.

For some people, depression will never go away, but it plagues them their whole lives. We don't know why. We may never get the answer to that question, but we are pointed to God.

We are pointed to the one who keeps his promises, the one who has promised to walk with his people through the good and the bad of life, no matter what comes our way.

But we also need to remember truth. Because no matter how real it may feel, no matter how overwhelming our pain may be, you are not alone.

[24 : 50] The God who is hearing this psalm of darkness and pain for the first time is the same God who took on flesh and stepped into our darkness and pain. Jesus is the very answer to human's prayer.

Jesus knows what it's like to feel despair. He knows what it's like to feel pain, to feel abandoned. In the Garden of Gethsemane, in Matthew 26, Jesus said, my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

On the cross, Jesus cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? In his hour of darkness, he felt abandoned and alone and yet we know, don't we, that God was doing a greater work through his suffering.

We know that darkness was not the end to Jesus' story. Jesus bore that darkness, he bore that pain so that sinners like us, sinners who suffer, sinners with poor mental health, sinners with depression, broken people can be accepted by God.

Jesus understands and just like his story didn't end in darkness, neither will the story of all of those who follow him.

[26 : 15] The dark clouds of depression may never leave you in this life but in the midst of that darkness, you need to remember the truth that Jesus loves you and that he promises to be in that pit of despair with you.

Jesus promises never to leave or forsake his people and that is a promise that you can stand firm on. In your moments of despair, as the old hymn says, turn your eyes upon Jesus.

look full in his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

Now before we sing that song and enter into a time of communion together, let me just give a few practical tips for the depressed and for the carer of the depressed.

So some tips for the depressed. One, go to the doctors. By God's grace, we have mental health professionals who have been trained and know how to help.

[27 : 24] That help may take the form of counseling or medication or both. It is not wrong for Christians to take antidepressants. It is not wrong for Christians to need help.

God, by his grace, has given us people with wisdom to know how to do that. The Bible never says come to Jesus and all your problems will be gone. That is the false teaching of the so-called prosperity gospel.

So go to the doctors. Go to the Lord. Take all of your concerns, your fear, your worries, your pain and pray it to God. Sometimes praying will be the last thing you want to do.

But speaking openly and regularly to God, crying out to him will help. Remember that God doesn't say, come to me all you who are happy and have everything sorted.

What does he say? Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden. It may seem like the hardest thing to do, but keep on praying.

[28 : 36] Keep on running to God. Thirdly, go to God's people. The church is here to help you. Speak to the elders. Ask us to meet you.

Read the Bible with someone. Often reading the Bible alone for the depressed can be quite hard and quite a difficult thing to do and it's also quite massive. So where do you begin?

Pick it up with someone. Walk through passages together. Work through your difficult questions and have an honest and open relationship where you are held accountable for your actions and for your thinking.

I know that seems like the hardest thing to talk to people about your poor mental health. We're here to care for you. We want to support you.

No one will think any differently of you because you struggle. And lastly, remember the truth.

[29 : 35] Too often depression can rob people of the ability to see the truth. They feel that God has left them, that God is punishing them, that there is no hope, but that isn't true.

Instead, fill your minds with the things that are above as Colossians 3 says or Romans 12, renew your minds daily. Have people around you who regularly pray for you and pray with you.

People who remind you of the gospel and how it's true for you too. And there can be a spiritual element to depression because Satan knows how to pull us down and how to distract us from God.

He does that through lies and we combat those lies with the truth of God's word. So for example, make a list of the lies that you're believing and combat that with biblical truth.

Write it all down. Write down what God says about you, not what you're believing or what culture says about you. So those are just a few tips for the depressed and just a whistle stop tour of things, of tips for the carers.

[30 : 51] Go towards the depressed. Be in it for the long haul. Some people may suffer from depression for the rest of their lives. You will need to listen well and for a long time.

Be compassionate. Don't try to fix people. Just be there for them and be normal. Don't always talk about their poor mental health.

Invite them into your lives. Be a family for them. Go to the Lord. You might be hearing and seeing things that are unbelievably hard for you and you need to take that to God because you will most often be out of your depth.

Go to support. Caring for the depressed is hard and you need to make sure that you are supported as you care for others as well. And then lastly, go to school.

Invest time in the Bible. Get to know the promises of God. Get good gospel truths into your blood because a time may come when that is all you have to cling to.

[32 : 02] Invest in your suffering even before it comes. Now there is obviously plenty more than the Bible says to the depressed. We haven't even began to scratch the surface but remember that the Bible is not afraid of depression and neither should we be.

Instead, we have a Savior who promises to be with us even in that pit of despair. So let us fix our eyes on Him and help each other as we eagerly await the day that He returns.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we come before you this evening and we realize we haven't even scratched the surface of what your word has to say.

And yet, Father, we thank you that there is hope. For all those who cling to you, we have the hope of eternal life, of perfect harmony, without sin, without the broken bodies, without the result of the fall in this world, but a creation and a relationship with you restored.

Father, would that hope carry us through this Romans 8 life of groaning that we live in? Jesus, would you bring comfort to the depressed?

[33 : 17] Would you, by your Spirit, be reminding them of gospel truths that will carry them through even the darkest of days? Would you protect them? Father, would you give us wisdom to know how to care for and support them and to love them well?

Father, we pray we would be a church that cares for those with poor mental health and welcomes them in to join our family as we gather to worship you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.