

Offering Hope to a Depressed Heart

NOTE: This sermon mentions suicide. If you are struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide, call: 1 (800) 273-TALK. [1 (800) 273-8255]

A woman in her 30's realized she was gay when she was 9 years old, but was unable to talk about this with anyone in her family, church, or community. For more than a decade, for most of her childhood, she hid the majority of her thoughts and feelings from everyone around her. It wasn't until she moved out of state in her 20's that she was able to live an open, authentic life. She was never diagnosed with clinical depression, but many in her same situation are.¹

A woman was caught shoplifting. Both she and her husband had their work hours cut back due to COVID. She has three teen-agers, one of which struggles with depression and self-harm. Depression is an issue with the woman as well. With everything going on at home, at work, and in the country last fall, she felt so desperate that she stole items valued at less than \$25. Now she wants to make amends.²

A 44-yr old man, who was successful in his business, who was in a happy marriage, and who delighted in his children, called a suicide prevention hotline. He was a master at hiding his depression. He never talked about the pain, because acknowledging it made him feel weak. So when he got home that day, he said nothing to his wife about the call. The next morning, when his wife got up very early to go to work, she found the breakfast he had laid out for her along with some gifts and a card because it was her birthday. A few hours later, he got the kids up, made sure they were dressed and fed, and kissed them good-bye as they left for school. That was the last time any of his family saw him. He died by suicide. He simply couldn't live another day. In his journal, which his wife discovered after his death, he'd written, "I have to choose to let my pain consume me or find strength in the pain and find purpose in my life." He called depression the bully in his brain. That bully was relentless, refusing to surrender its power over him. All he ever wanted to do was make his family happy, but he didn't know how to make himself happy. A year after his death, his wife still isn't able to open the gifts he left for her the day he died.³

After heart surgery, a man struggled with many conflicting feelings. He knew he would need to change his diet, do cardiac rehabilitation, and take several medications indefinitely. He wanted to "get back to normal." Yet, try as he might, he still felt extremely tired and blue—as if he was going through life in a fog. He often went to sleep watching television. When he went to bed, he tossed and turned for hours, feeling hopeless and unsettled, and he couldn't figure out why. Family members, friends, and coworkers reached out to him, but he put them off, saying he was "catching up" after being away from his normal life for so long. A few weeks later he decided to talk to his pastor. "I shouldn't be depressed," he said. "I was lucky to make it through the surgery. But here I am six weeks later, yet nothing seems the same. Even at church, I don't feel I fit in. I don't even feel like I'm a Christian anymore." At his next checkup, the man's cardiologist told him that depression was common after heart surgery and urged him to follow his diet and exercise regimen even if he might not feel like it. The doctor also affirmed the man's decision to see a therapist. At first, the man had to push himself to attend church, but eventually he came to find meaning in the fellowship he experienced there.⁴

These four stories of real people are just a few of those we could find in this congregation, community, and country. Depression is a mood disorder that causes a person to feel sad or hopeless for an extended time.⁵ It

¹ Personal conversation

² Personal correspondence

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb_1IklnhaU

⁴ [CTH Depression Handout.pdf \(faithandliferesources.org\)](#)

⁵ Information about depression comes from: [CTH Depression Handout.pdf \(faithandliferesources.org\)](#), <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/depression-and-older-adults>, <https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Depression>

can occur in anyone— men, women, teens, children, and the elderly. At least 15 per cent of North Americans will have depression at some point in their lives.

Depression involves a chemical imbalance in the brain. For some, depression runs in the family, while for others it's triggered by difficult life events. Often, genes and life events work together to bring on depression. Other problems, such as anxiety or addiction, may also feed it.

The COVID-19 pandemic brings anxiety and fear with it. Physical distancing guidelines and travel restrictions can also cause people to feel isolated or lonely. In some cases, this contributes to depression.

Depression is a common problem among older adults, but it isn't a normal part of aging. In fact, studies show that most older adults feel satisfied with their lives, despite having more illnesses or physical problems. However, important life changes that happen as we get older may cause feelings of uneasiness, stress, and sadness. After a period of adjustment, many older adults can regain their emotional balance, but others do not and may develop depression. Depression in older adults may be difficult to recognize because they may show different symptoms than younger people.

Whatever causes it and whoever experiences it, depression results either in disconnection from one's own feelings or in extra strong feelings of hurt and rejection. It causes people to withdraw from relationships with friends and family – and from God.

Depression is more than just feeling sad or going through a rough patch. It's a serious mental health condition that requires understanding and medical care. Depression is not a character flaw. It is not a weakness. A person is not going to just snap out of it. Left untreated, depression can be devastating for those who have it and for their families.

Fortunately, with early detection, diagnosis and a treatment plan consisting of medication, psychotherapy and healthy lifestyle choices, many people can and do get better. Sharing their journey with people whom they trust, whether in their family, circle of friends, or church, can also be part of treatment. It may be difficult to accept offers of help, but prayers and encouragement can be part of healing.

As with other forms of mental illness, reading scripture is not a cure for depression, but it can be part of the healing journey. The feelings of depression – feelings of guilt, shame, laziness, worthlessness, rejection, anger, fear, and loathing – appear in the Bible. Hagar, Moses, David, the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak, and many others—all show symptoms of depression. Elijah and Jonah, immediately after they had done important work for God, were so low emotionally that they prayed that God would end their lives. The authors of Job, Lamentations, and many of the Prophets also include lament in their writings. It's probable that at least some of these godly people experienced classic depression, not just normal cases of the blues. Even Jesus cried out from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

More than a third of the Psalms complain about difficult life circumstances, or about a sense that God doesn't care. While many of these laments eventually give way to words of assurance and hope, the expressions of loneliness, anger, sadness, and hurt are raw. The fact that such voices are included in our Bible gives us permission to express our own feelings. By doing so, we can begin a path toward wholeness. Although we may feel alone and want to be alone, wellness happens more often when we risk reaching out to others and staying part of a community.

Today, I offer two psalms that express feelings of despair and abandonment. They also offer a glimmer of hope in the midst of suffering and depression. Psalms 42 and 43 actually belong together as one song with the refrain repeated three times.⁶ This lament is about exile, abandonment, and hope for deliverance amid injustice. The psalmist longs for the presence of God and for vindication from oppression by enemies. The poem voices both a sense of abandonment by God and memories of past worship.

Read both of these psalms from the *New Revised Standard Version*. Note the two-sentence refrain that's repeated three times.

⁶ Background on Psalms 42 & 43 drawn from James Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 218-222.

Psalm 42, New Revised Standard Version

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

**⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶ and my God.**

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”

¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

**¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.**

Psalm 43, New Revised Standard Version

¹ Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
deliver me!

² For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because of the oppression of the enemy?

³ O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling.

⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.

**⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.**

The lament in these songs begins with a striking metaphor.⁷ The psalmist depicts the search of a soul for the living God as a doe roaming the parched landscape in search of refreshing water. Every verse includes images of desperation: insatiable thirst, longing for God, daily tears, taunts, memories of what can no longer be. The refrain displays a soul in conflict, depressed by mockery and taunts, but buoyed by hope of future participation in worship.

The psalmist feels abandoned, forgotten, and forsaken by God – separated from God by physical, emotional, and spiritual distance.⁸ Abandonment feels like drowning under a powerful sea. Yet the psalmist remembers God and takes comfort in God's steadfast love. God as *my rock* contrasts with Sheol, the abode of the dead, seen as a vast quagmire with no firm footing. The fear of death is the fear of being forgotten by God. The question "Where is your God?" arises from the belief in biblical times that illness was evidence of God deserting the person because of sin. The psalmist's life is drained of vitality, and he is at the mercy of the *enemy*, whose taunts ridicule his faith. But the refrain returns, pointing to a future hope.

The third stanza opens with hope for God's intervention and deliverance.⁹ The psalmist pleads for God to be both judge and defense counsel against the ungodly. The scene then changes from a courtroom to the temple with God as the object of praise. The writer pleads to be led by God's light and truth back to the place and the ability to worship. The refrain returns for a third time, asserting that communion with God will once more be restored. While at times God seems hidden or God's way is difficult to understand, the psalmist expresses the hope that God's light and truth will lead to worship, praise, and singing songs of joy once again.

Read Psalms 42 and 43 again, this time from the *New Living Translation*.

⁷ Psalm 42:1-5

⁸ Psalm 42:6-11

⁹ Psalm 43:1-5

Psalm 42, New Living Translation

¹ As the deer longs for streams of water,
so I long for you, O God.
² I thirst for God, the living God.
When can I go and stand before him?
³ Day and night I have only tears for food,
while my enemies continually taunt me, saying,
“Where is this God of yours?”

⁴ My heart is breaking
as I remember how it used to be:
I walked among the crowds of worshipers,
leading a great procession to the house of God,
singing for joy and giving thanks
amid the sound of a great celebration!

⁵ **Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
I will praise him again—
my Savior and ⁶ my God!**

Now I am deeply discouraged,
but I will remember you—
even from distant Mount Hermon,
the source of the Jordan,
from the land of Mount Mizar.

⁷ I hear the tumult of the raging seas
as your waves and surging tides sweep over me.
⁸ But each day the LORD pours his unfailing love upon me,
and through each night I sing his songs,
praying to God who gives me life.

⁹ “O God my rock,” I cry,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I wander around in grief,
oppressed by my enemies?”

¹⁰ Their taunts break my bones.
They scoff, “Where is this God of yours?”

¹¹ **Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
I will praise him again—
my Savior and my God!**

Psalm 43, New Living Translation

¹ Declare me innocent, O God!
Defend me against these ungodly people.
Rescue me from these unjust liars.

² For you are God, my only safe haven.
Why have you tossed me aside?
Why must I wander around in grief,
oppressed by my enemies?

³ Send out your light and your truth;
let them guide me.
Let them lead me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you live.

⁴ There I will go to the altar of God,
to God—the source of all my joy.
I will praise you with my harp,
O God, my God!

**⁵ Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
I will praise him again—
my Savior and my God!**

These psalms give voice to those who are down-hearted, desperate, or depressed. They express the basic longing of the hearts of people in all ages. The soul's thirsting is a longing for God's nearness. Even though it seems impossible to a person in the depths of depression, the psalmist points to a glimmer of hope. To hope is to live by the conviction that God will see us through. In hope we wait and long for God. Thanks be to God.

Voices Together #978
Prayer for Mental Health

Hear our prayer, O God of healing and hope,
for all who struggle with mental illness
and those who care for them,
for their families and friends, their church and community.
We pray for greater understanding, compassion, strength, endurance.
Make your presence known even when fears threaten,
when anxieties overwhelm, when thoughts fragment and accuse,
and the burden seems too heavy to carry one more step.
Almighty and merciful God, grant one more moment,
one more breath, one more foot in front of the other.
Bring healing. Restore peace. Raise up hope.

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