

“The Christian in Spiritual Depression”

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Scriptural Foundation: Psalm 77, NIV

For the director of music. For Jeduthun. Of Asaph.

A psalm.

¹ I cried out to God for help;

I cried out to God to hear me.

² When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands
and my soul refused to be comforted.

³ I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;
I mused, and my spirit grew faint. Selah

⁴ You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.

⁵ I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;

⁶ I remembered my songs in the night.

My heart mused and my spirit inquired:

⁷ “Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?” Selah

¹⁰ Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:

the years of the right hand of the Most High.”

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

¹² I will meditate on all your works
and consider all your mighty deeds.

¹³ Your ways, O God, are holy.

What god is so great as our God?

¹⁴ You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.

¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

¹⁶ The waters saw you, O God,

the waters saw you and writhed;

the very depths were convulsed.

¹⁷ The clouds poured down water,
the skies resounded with thunder;

your arrows flashed back and forth.

¹⁸ Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,

your lightning lit up the world;

the earth trembled and quaked.

¹⁹ Your path led through the sea,

your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.

²⁰ You led your people like a flock

by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

What shall we think of the believer nearly drowning in deep, spiritual depression? The waves of trial have rushed past the knees, the waist, and the chest, and now splash against the chin. Doubts, fears, and gloom darken the once bright soul to the point where he wonders if morning will ever come. What shall we think of the Christian who feels himself nearly swept away by unending sadness? Do we label his melancholy a sinful rebellion? Do we consider him undisciplined, spiritually weak, and lacking in faith? Do we think of him as physically ill and in need of medicine?

One of my great spiritual heroes is Charles Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest preacher of the 19th Century. He was a man of tremendous conviction, faith, and integrity. When Charles Spurgeon died in 1892, at the age of fifty-seven, he had pastured the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for thirty-eight years, a tireless defender and preacher of Jesus. By the time he was twenty years old he had already preached over six hundred sermons. His sermons sold twenty-five thousand printed copies every week. Every week his sermons were translated into twenty different languages. By the end of his life, those sermons compiled a sixty-three volume work, a volume of greater length than the Encyclopaedia Britannica. That volume, yet today, stands as the largest set of books by a single author in the history of Christianity.

He was a tireless servant of God, often working eighteen hours a day. Not only did he preach, not only did he pastor, not only did he minister to the sick, not only did he perform weddings, funerals, and everything else that goes with it, he also tended to an orphanage. He also began a Bible college to train young men for ministry and he taught there. He also corresponded, as people all over the world wrote to him. Every week he averaged five hundred hand-written letters which would go out from his office. Each week, on average, he would read six substantial books. This is a man of tremendous service to God.

At his fiftieth birthday, a list of sixty-six organizations for Christ, which he founded and conducted, was read. Lord Chatsbury was there at his fiftieth birthday and he said, "This list of associations instituted by his genius and superintended by his care were more than enough to occupy the minds and hearts of fifty ordinary men. Yet, for all Charles Spurgeon did, for as great and deep a man as he was, he struggled almost all of his life with deep, spiritual depression.

His first experience with depression occurred at the age of twenty-four. He would write, "My spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, yet I knew not what I wept for." He would go on to talk about his depression, "Causeless depression cannot be reasoned with nor can David's harp charm it away by sweet discourses. As well as fight with the mist as with the shapeless, undefinable yet all the cloudy hopelessness. The iron bull which so mysterious fastens the door of hope and holds our spirits in gloomy prison needs a heavenly hand to push it back."

I wish I could promise a spiritual people who walk with God would be free from the torment of spiritual depression, but I cannot for God does not. As we will see in our text, however, God does promise to strengthen us so we will not give in to despair, so we can battle against the depression which may wage war against our soul. God gives us this psalm to comfort us in dark seasons of discouragement. From this psalm we discover a strategy of attack for fighting spiritual depression. The main message for us is found for us in Verses 11 and 12,

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. ¹² I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.

Sound thinking is essential to suffering well. You and I are called to suffer in this life and if we follow Him we, too, will find strength to persevere and to endure for God's glory and for our joy. There are four parts to our discussion. The first is the possibility of the Christian being in spiritual depression. Second is the danger for the Christian in spiritual depression. Third, we will discuss the prescription for the Christian in spiritual depression. Finally, we will look at the purposes for the Christian in spiritual depression.

First, let us consider **the possibility of the Christian being in spiritual depression**,

¹ I cried out to God for help; cried out to God to hear me. ² When I was in distress, I sought the Lord...

Friends, we must put away the idea that good Christians do not enter and encounter real and difficult days of discouragement; days when we do not feel like getting out of bed, days of melancholy so strong we find it difficult to concentrate, day when we wonder whether God is real or present, times when we are tempted to question God's very goodness and kindness to us and His purpose.

Godly men such as Charles Spurgeon, but more than Spurgeon, if you were the lone example, perhaps we would have some thought we would never need to fear the possibility of spiritual depression. But, other heroes of the faith, such as Billy Graham, William Cowper, Francis Schaffer, my first pastor, my second pastor who provided for me an impetus to love expositional preaching, each of these men and many, many more suffered. Here Asaph, the leader of the worship in the Temple, the spiritual leader amongst his peers and the people, we find languishing with spiritual depression. God seems very distant to him: "I cried out to God for help; cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord."

He is troubled by what appears to him to be unanswered prayer. At the end of Verse 2 he says, "my soul refused to be comforted." As he cries out to God with his burdens, his burdens are not immediately removed and he is bewildered by that. He believed that is how it works. If we have a heavy burden on our soul we cry out to God and God lifts that burden. That is the way it is supposed to happen, is it not? Yet, he remained in darkness and he craved for light, but only shadows their darkness before him.

Indeed, to ask and not receive, to seek and not find, to knock and not have the door opened are serious trials of the heart. Has God forgotten to be gracious? Unanswered prayer is staggering, even to the strong faith. The question burns: God, why do you let my suffering go on for so long? Asaph continues,

³ I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint.

It is important to affirm the possibility of spiritual depression for two reasons. First, we might not be too ashamed or bewildered if we are to encounter it. It is not a guarantee all of us will experience spiritual depression, but we ought not to be absolutely bewildered or ashamed if we do.

Sometimes people try to ignore their inner turmoil and hide their turmoil from others, and even from themselves. They attempt to take a stoic stance, “I cannot let this affect me. If I do not acknowledge it surely it will go away.” But, God intends for us to honestly confront our internal pain so we can benefit from the suffering.

I appreciate Asaph's honesty. He acknowledges this struggle boldly. Imagine Asaph, the worship leader, as he comes to the Temple on the day of worship and he says, “I have a new song to teach you. It is a song I just wrote. Let me teach you the first stanza, ‘I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress I sought the Lord. At night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.’ Let’s sing it together.” “Asaph, you are the worship leader. You are not supposed to feel this way. You are not supposed to have these kinds of struggles, ‘My soul refused to be comforted.’ Asaph, get with the program. Be a leader. Be a man.” O, how thankful I am for Asaph's honesty. Asaph told it like it was.

Friends, it is important for us to understand the possibility of spiritual depression that if it attends to our soul, we, too, will be very honest with it so we, too, might benefit from the suffering God designs in it and through it.

The second reason why it is important to acknowledge of spiritual depression is so we can learn to weep with those who weep. We, as believers, should seek to emphasize and show mercy with those with spiritual depression. We must not assume, immediately, it has been brought on by sin or that the weeping soul is a faithless one.

I know from the experiences of some of you within this church you have gone through some of these times and you have had the comforters of Job gather around you. I remember one such family; their child was in the hospital for weeks and they did not know what the outcome would be. Their heart was obviously so terribly grieved. After a couple of weeks in the hospital, I went to visit and the mother came to me and said, “Pastor, is it okay to cry?” I thought, as I heard her ask that, why she would say that, so I asked her. She said, “Some Christians have told me I should not cry because crying shows a lack of faith in God.”

Let us all be aware of the possibility of spiritual depression so we can learn to weep with those who weep. We do not love others in the midst of this kind of pain by telling them they should not feel as they do, or by telling them it is not so bad, or by telling them to try and fix the problems quickly. We love them, first, by weeping with them.

There are two applications. First, be honest with yourself, with God, and with others about your pain. God has a purpose you will miss if you are not. Only by acknowledging this darkness will we begin to seek God in the midst of it. Also, we will be able to allow others to enter along with us to be used as God intends for them to be used.

The second application is weep with those who weep. Our first response ought to be to come along side people and love them. There is a time for counsel, to be sure, as we will see in the next point: the danger of spiritual depression. I always remember, when I read Dr. David Jeremiah's book, A Bend in the Road,¹ he was experiencing a struggle with cancer and he was laying on his hospital bed. He describes this kind of spiritual anguish which was accompanied by physical pain. I believe that is a part of Asaph's problem as well; our physical and spiritual are often integrated together, that certainly was Charles Spurgeon's case.

David Jeremiah described one night, in such physical pain and emotional and spiritual darkness, a friend came to visit him and he told his friend he did not think he had any strength to talk that night. His friend said, “That is okay. Why don't I lay over here on the hospital bed next to you and I will just be here with you.” David Jeremiah said that friend did not say anything, but he just laid on the bed and slept there that night. He talked about what a tremendous ministry that was because he had someone who came along and was just there with him.

The second aspect of the study is: **the danger for the Christian in spiritual depression**. The danger is two-fold; first, that we would give into despair and we would refuse God's comfort. Certainly this was Asaph's temptation,

¹ “A Bend in the Road,” Dr. David Jeremiah, Thomas Nelson, 2002.

² ...my soul refused to be comforted.

Why would Asaph's soul refusing to be comforted? It was because he was getting perturbed at God and he was beginning, in his pride and willfulness, to blow up his back and say, "I do not know if I even want to be comforted anymore! It is nearly too late, God."

The sufferer certainly has a right to groan, a right which Jesus sealed when He "groaned" in the Garden of Gethsemane.² The sufferer certainly has a right to weep, a right which Jesus sealed when he wept at his friend's, Lazarus, house and funeral.³ But, that right certainly can be abused when that sorrow is turned to bitterness against God.

We must remember Job. For all the darkness of his soul, it is interesting what Job describes,

^{1:22} In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Friends, there is a great danger to spiritual depression because we are tempted to charge God with wrong-doing. There is no value to that whatsoever. The only value to that is destructive value, value which will plummet us further into darkness.

Charles Spurgeon would write, "Much of unholy rebellion against the Most High will be found as a sediment at the bottom of most tear bottles. Sullen repining and protracted lamentation indicates the existence of idolatry in the heart. Sorrow deserves sympathy, but when it springs from a want of resignation, it merits sensor more. When believers refuse to be comforted they act as mere worldlies might."

Friends, comfort is what we need the most in such times of depression, so let us humbly look for it and let us humbly request it and be ready to receive it from God's kind hand. Be careful of the danger of giving into despair or refusing God's comfort or becoming embittered against Him.

The second danger is that of focusing solely upon the problem rather than on God's providence. Rather than keeping our eyes up, we are so tempted to only look downward,

⁴ You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak. ⁵ I thought about the former days, the years of long ago; ⁶ I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired...

Asaph is remembering how God used to deliver His people and how He used to answer Asaph's prayer. That is not a prayer which is looking up at God, but it is a prayer looking down, "You used to do that, God, but you are not doing that now. Where are you, Lord? God, you used to bless your people, but you are not blessing me today." Asaph is reminiscing about the good-old days and he was beginning to feel very sorry for himself.

We see this self-focus in some of the pronouns Asaph uses in the first six verses. If we look carefully at them, he uses "I", "me", and "my" eighteen times. All of his focus and energy was focused right here and Asaph would never ever have his soul lifted up and strengthened in the midst of spiritual depression as long as his eyes are set this way, and you and I will not find strength as our eyes are set that way, either.

The change begins in Verse 6 and he begins to pull away from self-pity and look to God,

^{6b} My heart mused and my spirit inquired...

The word "heart" is not so much the seat of emotions in the Hebrew language, but in the Hebrew language it emphasizes the mind and the will. It emphasizes thinking and reflection on an objective basis for those subjective feelings. So often times we view the heart as the seat of emotion, but that is not how the Old Testament Jew would have considered it and it is not how Asaph considers it.

² Luke 22:39-44

³ John 11:1-44

When he used the word “inquired” it is a word which means an intense search, “My heart, the place where I think, where I objectively examine the happenings of my life, made a careful study, a careful search...”

When the psalmist was encountering spiritual depression he responds to the melancholy of his spirit with a disciplined search for the truth. That is the beginning of the change. Up to this point he was refusing comfort, but now there begins to be a change. Warren Wiersbe writes, “This offers us a wonderful model, very much in keeping with all we have been learning in these meditations on the psalms. By the grace of God we can prevent ourselves from becoming so overwhelmed by our emotions that our faith is incapacitated. With the support and the encouragement of others in the Christian community, we can deal with ourselves and our grief by putting things into God’s perspective and thereby finding hope and comfort.”

After Asaph sets his mind, instead of looking down inwardly at himself and his own problems and looking up and beginning to think about God, he asks six rhetorical questions. Each rhetorical question is answered with a resounding, “NO! God forbid! We do not want to think such a thing.” Consider these questions,

^{7a} “Will the Lord reject forever?” No, of course not!

^{7b} “Will he never show his favor again?” Of course He is going to show His favor.

^{8a} “Has his unfailing love vanished forever?” No, it has not vanished forever. We would not want to think such a thing.

^{8b} “Has his promise failed for all time?” No.

^{9a} “Has God forgotten to be merciful?” Not at all.

^{9b} “Has he in anger withheld his compassion?” No, I will not believe it.

What Asaph is doing is, rather than being beaten down and allowing himself to be a helpless, weak victim of his spiritual depression, he is beginning to say, “I am going to rise up and fight back.” His spirit and his heart, the place where he is thinking, begins to muse and meditate. His spirit begins to search out deeply and he asks questions about God. As he asks those questions about God, they are not doubting questions so much as they are reviewing questions. They are questions which help him to rise up in his spirit and say, “I will not believe those lies about my God, those lies which my spiritual depression are tempting my soul to embrace. I will not believe them.”

I believe it is a great thing that Asaph asks them and he asks them in a psalm. Alexander MacLaren writes, “Doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkening like poisonous mist in the heart.” In other words, it is much better, if we have doubts, to lay them out there, as Asaph did, and answers become apparent to us.

Our depression tells us debilitating lies about God. Depression will take the majesty and the infinite greatness of God and shrink Him down and begin to tell our soul deception after deception after deception. As the deception speaks to Asaph’s heart, Asaph’s heart speaks that deception out loud, “Is it true God will be unfaithful to His promise? No!” He rises up and asks these questions in a way to make himself angry at those lies, “I am not going to rise up like a warrior and fight against these lies which are training my mind to think unworthy thoughts of God. I will not allow that to take place in my heart, for I am one of God’s worshippers.”

Let us look at **the prescription for the Christian in spiritual depression**. What are we to do? What is the strategy?

There is a danger that we would become self-focused in our depression and we would give in to despair, refuse God’s comfort, and focusing on our problems rather than on the perspective God has for us. I note, as we look at this text, the prescription Asaph teaches in this psalm is not exhaustive. This Asaph talks about is not the only thing we can do to help ourselves and others in the midst of spiritual depression, but it is the foundational and fundamental act of commitment.

It is certainly true, in spiritual depression, it is often helpful to take a physical rest. Many times spiritual depression comes because we are sick and ill or we are tired and worn out from such an active schedule. It is true, in spiritual depression, we should talk to other Christians, pray with them, and hear their counsel. We should review the past of God's faithfulness in our lives and think of all the acts God has done for us personally and begin to thank God and write out a list of all the things we are thankful. It is true it is helpful, in spiritual depression, to sing praises to God. There is something of singing songs unto God which can be so immensely powerful.

This specific prescription Asaph gives to us is the fundamental, and first priority, which we must hold to when we battle spiritual depression. Asaph calls us to actively set our minds on God through His Word and as He reveals Himself in Scripture. We certainly could add other steps, but setting our mind on God, as He reveals Himself in His Word, is the most powerful and most foundational and most fundamental act and commitment we could possibly make.

The great struggle in the midst of spiritual depression is the struggle to remain confident in God's goodness and confident in His greatness. We need a clarity of God's character before our face every moment of every day,

¹⁰ Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High."

We will notice all the thinking words set before us. Other translations are quite a bit different from the New International Version and the English Standard Version, but they are wrong! You will have to trust me on that, but we do not have the time to consider those translations.⁴ There are about different translations to this verse, but I believe the NIV and ESV translators have it way Asaph writes it. Asaph is saying, after he asks all the questions and he gets the fighting spirit back to fight the spiritual depression and not lay down to it and be a victim, he will appeal to the years of the mighty hand of God's working in His people's lives and in his life. Though the spiritual depression has built up over weeks, months, or years of time, Asaph is going to appeal to the years and years and years, the ages, and he is not going to think in the narrow window of time of his depression, but he will appeal to the ages, lift his eyes up, and see the horizon of God's goodness.

The idea is he is not going to allow depression to relax inside of him. It is true, Asaph may not be able to kick depression out of the house of his soul and evict him, but as long as depression resides inside his heart, the home of his soul, he is not ever going to let that depression believe it owns the place and it is a comfortable tenant. It is a tenant who is not welcomed and he is going to appeal and argue against his depression in the years of the faithfulness of the right hand of God. Depression may remain, but depression will always know it is a visitor which Asaph is seeking to rush out the door. How does Asaph do that?

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. ¹² I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.

Notice, again, the thinking words: I will remember; I will remember; I will meditate; (I will) consider. Three thinking terms are used which Asaph commits himself to and they require energy and work. They are not natural and that is why Asaph says, "I will not allow passivity and resignation to cover my soul in the midst of this struggle, rather I will remember, I will meditate, I will consider."

There are times of discouragement, and I do not believe I have entered into the depth Asaph or Charles Spurgeon entered into, when I begin to consider these things and I think to myself, "I know these things are true in my head, but I am having trouble embracing them with my heart. What am I going to do? Instead of saying, 'I know I have trouble in my head and I know I have a hard time embracing them in my heart, which I guess is impossible, but rather than resigning myself over to the impossible act, I will do like Asaph and I will remember and keep remembering. I will meditate and I will keep meditating. I will consider and I will keep considering.'"

⁴ And I said, "This is my anguish; But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High." New King James Version (NKJV)

And I said, This is my infirmity; But I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High. American Standard Version (ASV)

Then I said, "What hurts me most is this—that God is no longer powerful." Good News Translation

And I say, "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed." Revised Standard Version (RSV)

Some may say they have done that. They have read Scripture, but it simply has not worked. We need to understand the Bible is not a shot to take away the pain of spiritual depression. God does not promise that, but He promises as we meet Him through the Word we will be given the medicine we need to make the pain productive. If we are looking for the Bible to remove the pain, we will be looking in vain and we will become frustrated. But, if we are looking to the Bible to understand more of God so the pain we are experiencing will actually be productive for His glory and for our joy, that is what we will find as we continue to go to Scripture in faith, consciously remembering the truth about God, grasping onto Him, pushing all the thoughts depression brings through the filter of the objective Word of God.

Friends, God gives us this same emphasis in the New Testament when he says in Romans 12, Colossians 3, and 2 Corinthians 10

^{12:2} Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

^{3:2} Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

^{10:3} For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

We do that through the Word of God.

What did Asaph learn about God as he meditated Scripture?

¹³ Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? ¹⁴ You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.

He came to discover God is far above and beyond him and that He is not like Asaph. His reasoning is not like Asaph's; it is far above. His plans are not like Asaph's plans; they are far above. But, he learned God is holy, unique, and not like him. Asaph was glad of that and he loved that. Asaph learned God is great and mighty. God is able to all of His holy decrees into motion and not one fails. Nothing frustrates God and nothing surprises Him. Nothing turns Him aside from His perfect path and Asaph remembered that. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Asaph also learned and remembered God is loving,

¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people...

Friends, we have so much more evidence of God's redeeming grace than Asaph did. Asaph saw in the window of the rest of this psalm of God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. What do we have? God demonstrates His love toward us in this,

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

If God is for us, against us who can it be?⁵ I tell you, if He did not spare His own Son, how will He also not with Him freely give us all things. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God; nothing, never, in anyway.

As we meditate on the Word and pray to God and seek after God through the Word, we remember the character of God and we renew our consecration to God. **What is the purpose for the Christian in spiritual depression?** There are two purposes and I believe they are very important. Understanding there is a purpose for our pain makes it endurable in itself. Ask any mother who has given birth to a baby. The purpose makes it endurable.

⁵ Romans 8:31

First, we learn to enjoy God's provision and His person all the more. We become more dependant upon Him and we recognize how able He is and how near He draws to us. We know by experience the faithfulness of God.

Second, we are enabled to comfort others with the same comfort God gave to us. That is an immeasurable value as God begins to use us to help others and encourage them.

God calls us to actively set our minds upon God. It is so easy to grow sloppy in this practice. Most of the ills of our life have come because we have grown sloppy in this practice. We believe we can read the Bible on Sunday morning and get a little bit of it in Sunday school or a message and those little bits will be able to sustain us, but it will not. We will not be able to keep a clear picture of God.

Yesterday was not a great day for me. I got frustrated and impatient with almost everyone in my family yesterday. At the end of the day, I asked the question: Why is that? Why was I so frustrated and impatient all day? I had to realize it was not because they were doing anything unusual, but I realized I had started the day in a rush and I had not spent any time with God to settle my soul. I believe there is a direct correlation of the misery of my day and my neglectfulness of getting a clear view of God. I believe there is a direct connection to most days which are like that.

I encourage you, let us commit ourselves afresh to meditate upon God through His Word.