

## **DEALING WITH DEPRESSION**

### **Psalms 42-43, Hope Church, July 2016**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Most of us will know someone who has struggled with depression at some point in their lives; indeed, perhaps you've suffered with it yourself – I know I have.

Clinical depression seems to be a growing epidemic across the world, particularly in developed countries. According to the WHO, an estimated 121 million people worldwide are currently suffering from depression. At the current rate of growth, depression will be the second most disabling condition by 2020, behind heart disease. It affects people of all ages, backgrounds, lifestyles, and nationalities, and the average age of a first episode is in the late 20s.

In some countries, over 30% of the population report a major depressive episode, with the highest rates in India, USA, France and the Netherlands. The UK isn't far behind, with about 20-25%.

That means that about a dozen of us here today will have experienced significant depression at some point in our lives, with a few currently suffering today. *[personal story]*

Depression used to be a taboo subject until recently, when the place of mental health in the NHS became more important. People are still reluctant to admit to being depressed or having had it in the past, as it seems to suggest failure or weakness, inadequacy of some sort – but this is gradually changing.

Fortunately, there are a range of treatment options available for depression, including:

- Counselling
- Talking therapy
- Medication
- Exercise
- Rest
- Friendship
- Prayer/meditation

When I had my first bout of severe depression, I tried all of these at the same time, and it worked! But I felt that perhaps something was missing, so I looked to see if the Bible has anything to say on depression. It does!!

There's also a view among some that "real Christians" shouldn't get depressed, that it somehow implies a lack of faith. But several characters in the Bible seem to be depressed, including:

- Jonah, Job, Moses, Elijah, Hannah, Naomi, Jeremiah, David, John the Baptist...

So there's nothing to be ashamed of if we too suffer from depression – we're in good company!

Today's talk is part of a series on the Psalms, and we're going to look at a couple of psalms which offer an important way to address depression. We'll also take a quick look at a third "sort-of psalm" that covers the same ground but in more detail.

#### **PSALMS 42-43**

We start with Psalms 42 and 43. In the Hebrew Bible, these two are combined into one psalm. You can see that they belong together by looking at the structure: this is a prayer-poem with three "verses" with a repeated "chorus".

- The verses are: 42:1-4, 42:6-10, and 43:1-4

- The repeated chorus is: 42:5, 42:11, and 43:5

The verses give us some insights into what happens inside the head of someone who's depressed, but who also has a relationship with God.

And the repeated chorus gives us some important pointers towards an effective response to depression, one that many people don't know about or use.

## INSIGHTS INTO DEPRESSION FOR A BELIEVER

### Verse 1 (Ps 42:1-4)

The psalmist starts by telling us that he feels really distant and separated from God.

- V1-2. He uses the picture of a mountain deer longing for fresh water, feeling parched, desperate to drink. He feels the same – longing for God, thirsting for him, feeling like he's never going to see God again or spend time in his presence.
- V3. He can't stop crying, and people ask him why God isn't there to help him. That just makes it worse of course!
- V4. He remembers when he used to join in the celebration with God's people, singing and shouting in praise as they went together to the temple to meet with God at festival time.
- V5. But now he just feels depressed, downcast and disturbed.

Those of us who believe in God and get depressed have this experience from time to time, just like the examples we've seen in the Bible of Job, Elijah, Jeremiah and the others.

We feel a million miles away from God, desperate to find him again and spend time with him, but somehow still feeling separate, wondering whether we'll ever regain what we've lost. Going to church doesn't help, as it reminds us of how we used to feel and behave, and highlights the contrast with how we feel now.

### Verse 2 (Ps 42:6-10)

The theme of separation continues in the second verse.

- V6. Here we discover that the person writing the psalm is living abroad, in Syria, close to Mount Hermon, about 250 miles north of Jerusalem. Mount Hermon is the source of the river Jordan, and when the mountain snow melts there are big waterfalls that feed into the river.
- V7. Seeing the waterfalls reminds the psalmist of how he feels – it's as if God is thundering past him, over him, round him, and he's completely insignificant and unnoticed.
- V8. The Hebrew grammar in this verse is ambiguous, and the tense is uncertain – it could be past, present or future. So he might be saying that he used to know God's love with him day and night, but he doesn't now. Or he may be hoping that he'll experience God's love again at some point, because he doesn't now. Or it may be a flash of faith in the middle of his depression, a bedrock assurance that God loves him despite how he's currently feeling.
- V9-10. Whichever it is, it doesn't seem to help! He still feels like God has forgotten him and the enemy is out to get him. And people are still asking him why God isn't helping him.
- V11. So, unsurprisingly, he still feels depressed, downcast and disturbed.

Does this sound at all familiar? When we're depressed we feel that God is rushing past us, over us, round us, not stopping or noticing that we exist. We feel like God used to love us once, but now he's just forgotten us and left us to fend for ourselves.

### Verse 3 (Ps 43:1-4)

In the last verse we find the writer still feeling got at, and God still isn't helping.

- V1-2. He's surrounded by people who are ungodly, deceitful and wicked. God is supposed to be his helper and a place of refuge in the middle of this hostile environment, but he feels shut out from God's presence – it's as if God has slammed and locked the door in his face, and rejected him.
- V3-4. He knows that he needs God's light and truth to direct him, that's the only way he's ever going to get back into a right relationship with God and find the joy and delight of being in God's presence.
- V5. But somehow he's not finding his way, and he still feels depressed, downcast and disturbed.

Does this sound familiar? We live in a society and culture that is hostile to God, that doesn't recognise his presence or live by his values and commands. As believers, we're called to live in this world and be witnesses, bringing the kingdom of God here on earth, demonstrating the values of the kingdom in practice, and being led by the light and truth of God.

But sometimes we feel like it's all pointless, we're not making any difference, God doesn't seem to be there to help us, and we don't know which direction to go.

### THE PSALMIST'S SOLUTION

As we looked at these two psalms, we skipped over three really important verses, which form the repeated chorus of this prayer-poem, namely 42:5, 42:11 and 43:5. Here we find the same words repeated exactly, which tells us that they're really important. So what do they tell us about dealing with depression?

The first thing we discover about dealing with depression is that it's a good thing to talk to yourself!

The psalmist addresses his inner self, his soul, and challenges what he finds there: *"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you so disturbed within me?"*

- Hebrew "downcast" means sinking
- "disturbed" describes a tumult or commotion, with a loud roaring sound

He recognises that his mind has got into a negative loop, spiralling downwards into chaos, leading to the depression and disturbing feelings that he's experiencing. But he doesn't just accept it – he reminds himself of something that will lead him out of this negative spiral: *"Put your hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my saviour and my God."*

Here is something that will help us out of depression – we can put our hope in God. He will never let us down, he is our help and our God.

- The last phrase is interesting. The NIV says "my **saviour** and my God", RSV has "my **help** and my God", and KJV says "my **health** and my God". The Hebrew word is actually "Yeshua", which is of course the Hebrew form of the name **Jesus!** Hmm...!! We don't know what the psalmist was thinking of course, and he may not have understood anything about Jesus who would come to save and rescue us, but maybe this is a hint for us?
- Perhaps more importantly, in Hebrew "put your hope" means to wait patiently, stay trusting. There may not be a quick fix to depression, the road to recovery may be longer than we'd like it to be, but we can determine that our basic position will be to hope and trust God, to wait patiently for him. We can actively put our hope in him, as an intentional choice. **Hope is a choice** not a feeling. Feeling hopeless is no reason for not putting your hope in God. The psalmist tells himself to do it, precisely because he

is feeling hopeless. We need to be deliberate and intentional with ourselves when we recognise our thoughts getting off track, and bring our thinking back into line with the truth. God is trustworthy, I can trust him, there is hope for me because God is my hope.

- Lastly, it's important to see that these thoughts are **repeated three times** in this poem. Often it's not enough to tell yourself just once to trust in God and things will eventually get better. We need to keep reminding ourselves to do it.

In fact, this whole poem is a series of ups and downs, with the psalmist repeatedly intervening to challenge himself and interrupt his negative train of thought.

- 42:1-3. I'm desperate to find God, longing to be with him, but somehow he seems a million miles away.
- 42:4. Even going to church doesn't help, or the memory of how I used to enjoy worship.
  - **42:5. STOP! What's going on here? Why are you thinking like this? Put your trust in God, wait for him, things will get better, and you'll find yourself praising God again.**
- 42:6-7. But I'm sinking here, I feel like I'm drowning under a waterfall, with God thundering past and ignoring me.
- 42:8-10. I used to know his love with me day and night, but now God's forgotten me and it hurts.
  - **42:11. STOP! Don't be so negative, even if your thoughts threaten to drown out the truth. Hope in God and the future will be different.**
- 43:1-2. Yes, but everywhere I look around me there are people who don't trust God, who act appallingly.
- 43:3. God is supposed to help me, protect me in this hostile environment, but he's rejected me and locked me out.
- 43:3-4. I need God's light and truth to guide me and bring me back to him, but...
  - **43:5. STOP! Why do you keep sinking down into this chaos? God is there for you as your helper, and if you put your hope and trust in him you'll come out the other side of this.**

## MORE ADVICE

Interestingly, we find exactly the same strategy described by one of the other Biblical characters who suffered from depression – Jeremiah. Lamentations chapter 3 is another sort-of psalm or prayer-poem, and it echoes many of the thoughts in Psalms 42 and 43, and offers the same solution, but with different details.

Lam 3:1-18 details the inner thinking of a man suffering from severe clinical depression, using very descriptive language:

- 1-3. God is against me and he's driven me into a dark place
- 4-6. I feel old and broken, like a dead man
- 7-9. There's no escape, I'm chained up, surrounded by walls, all escape routes are blocked
- 10-13. God doesn't care about me and he's trying to hurt me
- 14. People are laughing at me all the time and make fun of me
- 15-16. Everything tastes bitter, it's like my teeth are grinding on gravel
- 17-18. I'm never at peace, I've forgotten what it is to be happy, and I don't expect any help from God

In verse 20, Jeremiah says his mind continually keeps going over and over these things, and it causes him to sink into depression.

Then in verse 21 comes the key word: BUT

*“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope...”*

He found something else to think about that gave him light at the end of the tunnel, that offered a way out of his negative spiral into deep depression. What was it that made such a difference?

Verses 22-23: *“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.”*

Just like the psalmist, Jeremiah has to remind himself to think differently. If he focuses on his feelings it just reinforces his depression (verse 20). But if he thinks about the love and mercy of God, and his faithfulness to bring new blessings every morning without fail, then he finds hope for the future (verses 21-23).

Jeremiah also has to do this deliberately and intentionally. Left to himself, his thoughts run over the same negative pattern. So he has to “call this to mind”, actively reminding himself to think differently. The Hebrew word has this sense of repetition in it, better translated “**recall** to mind”, with the idea of turning back, returning to the starting point, and doing it repeatedly. So he remembers God’s constant love, his endless daily mercy, his great faithfulness.

## CONCLUSION

**For those of us suffering from depression**, the prayer-poem in Psalms 42-43 offers us a strategy for dealing with it. Recognise that negative train of thought that makes you sink into a downward spiral. As soon as you recognise it, talk to yourself. Remind yourself of God’s goodness, of his love, of his care and faithfulness, that he is your helper and saviour, that he is **your** God.

And do it repeatedly, as often as you find yourself sinking, every time, as frequently as you need to. Actively and intentionally put your hope in God because of who he is.

We get the same advice from Jeremiah. Don’t focus on your negative feelings, but repeatedly call to mind the goodness of God, his steadfast love and mercy, his daily blessings.

This is an important strategy for those of us who are believers and followers of Jesus, but who find ourselves suffering from depression. We should consider it alongside other treatment options, like medication and talking therapy, but we certainly shouldn’t forget it.

**And if you’re not suffering from depression yourself** but you know someone who is, you might look for ways to gently and sensitively point them towards hoping in God, while praying for them and supporting them along the way.

And finally we should remember that these insights from Psalms 42-43 and Lamentations 3 **don’t only apply to people with clinical depression**, but can help any of us when we get downhearted or feel low. All of us should remind ourselves regularly to put our hope in God, because of who he is.

## PRAYER

Romans 15:13: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may overflow with hope.”*