



CHAPTER 1

The Story of My Depression

Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is. I cry out, “My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the Lord is lost!” The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, “The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him.”

—Lamentations 3:17-24, NLT

If you have picked up this book it is very probable that you, one of your family members, or a friend of yours is going through the stubborn darkness of the soul known as depression. My heart goes out to you. I have experienced those horrors up close. The pain of a major depression may be as great a malady as we are called to go through in this life.

How well I remember sitting in the emergency room on the morning of August 12, 2009, wondering if I would be committed to a psychiatric ward. It seemed that morning that I had literally lost my mind. I was thinking wild, bizarre, and crazy thoughts, including those of suicide, and I could not sit still. I had experienced yet another sleepless night. But how did I get here? Allow me to tell you my story.

In my role as pastor-teacher, for thirty-five years I had been able to bring hope to those in distress through the sustaining power of God's Word. Now, as a teacher of biblical counseling in a Christian college, I understood and taught that God's Word, and specifically, God the Father and the *Incarinate Word, Jesus*, are sufficient to sustain and guide individuals through *every* hardship they might face—including depression. But *all* of that was being put to the test through the crucible of experience when I awoke one morning to be confronted by my wife.

It was Mary's birthday when she said to me, "I think you're in depression." I thought, *I couldn't be in depression! I'm a counselor who has helped dozens of people in depression! No, that's not something I'll ever deal with.* But I realized that I needed to check it out, so I began reading the book *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness* written by Dr. Edward Welch. When I got to chapter 2, I said, "This is me and I'm depressed! How did I get here?" Of course I read every word of the book (which we had on our shelf and had read before), but now with new interest and with the desire to apply it to *myself*; very thankful that one of my colleagues in biblical counseling understood what I was going through so thoroughly and offered hope and practical ideas as to what I could do. I wanted to learn what God had for me in the midst of it. But things did not get better immediately. In fact for the next two months my feelings got progressively worse, culminating in that morning in the emergency room.

Allow me to give some further background. The summer before my depression, my wife and I had gone on a speaking assignment in Russia instead of catching up on much-needed rest. Upon beginning the school year I experienced back pain from a herniated disc. During the following

nine-month period I could no longer stand to teach. Sometimes the pain was so severe that I could hardly walk. This led to surgery and strong pain medications. Not free from pain after the surgery, we discovered through another MRI that the disc had re-herniated. I was advised to maintain complete bed rest for two months so my nerves could heal. During that time I lost fifty pounds and most of my muscle mass. Besides these physical factors, I was maxed out in my teaching load, seeking to serve in our church, and giving counsel in an extremely emotional situation. Subsequently I found myself in severe depression—the dark night of the soul.

When the fall semester came I couldn't teach. The counseling professor was in depression! How humbling is that! But my colleagues and the administration at the college couldn't have been more supportive. I thought that I would never teach or preach again. I thought my life was over and my usefulness for God's kingdom was finished. When you're in the pit, there isn't any hope. Jeremiah described it so well when he said, "Peace has been stripped away, and I have forgotten what prosperity is. I cry out, 'My splendor is gone! Everything I had hoped for from the Lord is lost! The thought of my suffering is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss'" (Lam. 3:17-20 NLT).

Before the severity of all of this broke, we had made what we thought was a temporary move into a very small apartment in a senior complex because we could no longer navigate the three levels and thirty-two stairs of our townhouse. So we were in a tiny apartment with a parking lot view during this whole ordeal. Our journey at this apartment lasted a year and a half. God had seen fit to take away our health and comfort, beautiful home, profession, and church ministries. He had stripped me of my self-sufficiency and the record of a depression-free life. He was teaching, softening, and molding me. He was allowing me to see that all I need is Him and His body, the church—that His love is enough! I learned that it's not about me and what I can do for Him; it's all about knowing Him!

Just what are the symptoms of deep depression, what the Puritans called melancholy and what the medical community calls *clinical* or *major* depression? If you are extremely sad and anxious, or you are feeling hopeless most of the day for at least two weeks or longer, you probably don't need anyone to tell you that you are in depression. Everyone feels sad and blue at times, but typically these feelings pass in a few days. However, if you are in *major* depression, your mood is severely depressed and your activity level is as minimal as possible over an extended period. This greatly interferes with your daily functioning and impacts all of those around you.

You may have lost the joy of your salvation. You may not even feel like a believer. I did not believe that I was saved. How could anyone be a genuine Christian and be thinking the thoughts of despair and suicide that I was thinking? Worship songs and messages that had moved my heart seemed meaningless and hopeless. I could no longer believe they really applied to me.

With depression, there is a numbness and complete lack of positive feelings about anything. Guilt and feelings of worthlessness consume you. Your conscience works overtime in convicting you. Everything is negative. A minor problem becomes major as you imagine the worst possible outcome. Your mind is drawn to your saddest memories, the record of your own sins, failures, and disappointments. Negative thoughts crowd out all happy ones.

There is nothing in the future that appeals to you. In the negative grid of the despair, you believe that everything will turn out wrong. I remember thinking *I will never be able to work again. Our income will be so very small that we will be required to live out our days in my brother-in-law's basement apartment.*

You have lost interest or pleasure in what used to interest you. I had no interest or pleasure in historical reading, mystery novels, and playing games with my wife or the family. I no longer thrilled to the competition of a sports event. A comedy was no longer funny. All of these things had been sources of fun and recreation, but nothing was fun or interesting anymore. Life was blah to the max!

You have trouble concentrating and find it hard or impossible to make decisions. In my case, it took twenty minutes for me to look in my closet to decide what t-shirt to wear for the day. Then half of the time I would just wear what I had worn the day before.

Your thoughts and movements have been slowed down. You feel like your brain is fuzzy and in slow motion. During my depression, an exam that previously took me three hours to grade ended up taking me three days to grade. I knew an answer was wrong and that I should grade it wrong, but that would mean the student would need to revise it and I would have to deal with it again, and I did not want that. I would agonize for an hour or two over questions that would normally be graded in ten minutes. I was thoroughly indecisive. Often I would just stare at the computer, pretending to be doing something when in reality I was just attempting to look busy.

You may feel like a child. You just can't decide what to do, and you want someone else to decide for you. You don't want to be alone, yet you don't want to be around people or talk.

All of this negative thinking can easily produce thoughts of death or suicide. I prayed for God to take my life. I thought of ways I could take my own life. I could step off the curb in front of a car. However, I knew that was a murderous solution and confessed my wrong thoughts to my counselor and my wife so that they could be vigilant in keeping me safe. If this is you, you need to let someone know: someone who lives with you or is close by who can lend support when you feel desperate. You need to seek counsel and be honest about this issue. It is humbling, but when we humble ourselves, in due time God will lift us up (1 Pet. 5:5b-11).

You are constantly fatigued. You are restless and irritable. Sleep escapes you or you may just feel like sleeping all the time. I found it hard to get to sleep, and my sleep was restless as I tossed and turned all night long. When I woke up in the morning I was just as tired as when I went to bed. My worst nightmares hounded me in the night, bombarding me with guilt.

To some people, food becomes tasteless and they lose their appetites. Others try to comfort themselves by eating all the time and end up gaining weight. I lost fifty pounds and all muscle mass because nothing really appealed to me. My wife is a great cook and I have always loved her cooking, but in my depression I could barely force myself to eat.

You may even have unaccounted-for pain. My back pain, strong medications and subsequent physical deterioration brought on the depression. But you may have had the depression first and with it, resulting headaches, neck aches, and other aches and pains that may come from increased levels of inflammation.

There are no words to adequately describe the anguish you feel. You don't know where to turn. It seems hopeless. How can you go on? I wondered if my feelings would ever become normal and natural again.

This is only a partial description of the despair that consumed me. You believe that God has cut you off completely, and you have no peace and are without hope. David also described the agony of this desperate state when he said, "My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long" (Ps. 32:3). The mental pain is excruciating, and there seems to be no way of escape—not even in your sleep. When combined with physical pain and exhaustion, it can be an incomprehensible horror.

You Are Not Alone

You may have wondered, *Am I the only one who has ever experienced this kind of thinking?* While you might feel alone, the fact is that depression is a common problem. All of society tells us that it is a common problem. According to *The Depression Answer Book*,

... well over 18 million people, 6 percent of the total population of the United States (are depressed). Counting spouses, significant others, parents, children, grandparents, doctors, nurses,

psychotherapists, and friends, depression touches the lives of about 200 million people in the United States right now.¹

In 2007, *Newsweek* carried a cover story, indicating that millions of American men would be diagnosed with depression that year. But millions more suffer silently, unaware that their problem has a name or unwilling to seek treatment. In her article “Men and Depression,” Julie Scelfo writes,

Although depression is emotionally crippling and has numerous medical implications—some of them deadly—many men fail to recognize the symptoms. Instead of talking about their feelings, men may mask them with alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, anger or by becoming workaholics. *And even when they do realize they have a problem, men often view asking for help as an admission of weakness, a betrayal of their male identities.* The result is a hidden epidemic of despair (italics mine).²

These statistics on depression are actually quite “depressing” and certainly reveal that depression is a common problem. But if we have been studying our Bibles, we already know that truth. In depression we feel as if our problem is unique and no one else can really understand our utter despair of life, our lack of joy, or our complete sadness of heart. But God, in His Word through the apostle Paul, states very clearly that there is “no temptation (trial or test) that has overtaken you but such as is common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13). Depression is one of the common temptations of man. If this is a common problem, then there can also be a common solution.

It is somehow comforting to know that one is not alone in this malady. It became very clear to me that many men and women go through depression but never share their struggles with anyone. One man who came to sit with me so that Mary could have an afternoon out shared that he had gone

through a serious period of depression. He would cry for no explainable reason. He kept an old sweatshirt in the car and on the way home from work he would soak it with his tears. He could not explain the feelings of despair, but they were real, and so were the tears. I asked him, "Who did you tell?" His answer was, "No one, not even my friends at church. I figured they didn't want to hear about it, and besides, I didn't think there was anything they could say that would help."

I asked, "What did you do?" He answered, "I just endured. I gritted my teeth and went to work. After soaking the sweatshirt with my tears on the way home, I would pull to the side of the road before reaching my home and say to myself, *I can't discourage my wife and children with this behavior. Now put on a good face in front of the wife and kids.* After about six months it just gradually lifted."

As I have shared my experiences with depression, many have come to tell me of their own trials with depression. They have stated they have never told anyone else because they felt guilty about their feelings or they felt they would be judged. It can be a subject that is hard to talk about in the Christian community. That is one of the main reasons why I am writing this book. We need to know that it is a common problem—even among believers.

We also need to know the rest of the verse: "God is faithful." God watches over every temptation and trial that you will ever face in your life and He will never "allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able." He will measure each trial to what you are able to endure. You may feel overwhelmed and be physically at the end of your rope. But the truth is that God never allows any believer to be tested or tried beyond what the Lord will enable him to endure. Just as Satan had to have permission to test Job, so God measures each trial to what you are able to bear.

But there is still more! The God who is faithful will "provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" through the victory you have in Christ. He never gives you a trial or a test, a period of depression, without providing the way of escape—whether it be through faithful counselors or

the ministry of His body to you. Look for that way through. Seek Him, and He will be there for you.

Those who are suffering gain much comfort from those who are willing to share their experiences freely. It gives great hope to hear how our faithful God has enabled others to endure and even triumph in their sufferings. A pastor of a large church called and told me of his experience with severe depression that took him off of work for five months. In the midst of my hopelessness, it was encouraging to know that another pastor had faced these same struggles and to hear of the victory the Lord had given him. Even if I didn't have the confidence to believe that I would be delivered, I could hear that our God was able to deliver. Ken and Joni Eareckson Tada, in their book about their marriage, frankly share about their own periods of depression. They give God all the glory for granting them hope.

I have read of many godly men in the past who went through bouts of depression, including Martin Luther, the great reformer; David Brainerd, the missionary to the American Indians; William Cowper, the prolific hymn writer; and Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers. But they all endured to the end and left lasting works for Christ behind them. They found "the way of escape" through the trial. Now they are all enjoying the land of eternal sunshine.

David Brainerd wrote of his melancholy damps and his successive deliverance:

My spiritual conflicts were unspeakably dreadful, heavier than the mountains and the overflowing floods. I seemed enclosed in hell itself; I was deprived of all sense of God, even of his being; and that was my misery.... My soul was in such anguish that I could not eat, but felt as I supposed a poor wretch would, that is just going to the place of execution.³

My mind was remarkably free from melancholy damps and animated in my work. I found such fresh vigor and resolution in the service of God that the mountains seemed to become a plain before me. Oh, blessed be God, for an interval of refreshment, and fervent resolution in my Lord's work!⁴

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, possibly the most prolific of reformed preachers, wrote in his *Lectures to My Students*:

Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between, I thought it might be consolatory to some of my brethren if I gave my thoughts thereon, that younger men might not fancy that some strange thing had happened to them when they became for a season possessed by melancholy; and that sadder men might know that one upon whom the sun has shone right joyously did not always walk in the light.

It is not necessary by quotations from the biographies of eminent ministers to prove that seasons of fearful prostration have fallen to the lot of most, if not all, of them. The life of Luther might suffice to give a thousand instances, and he was by no means of the weaker sort. His great spirit was often in the seventh heaven of exultation, and as frequently on the borders of despair. His very deathbed was not free from tempests, and he sobbed himself into his last sleep like a greatly wearied child.⁵

We understand that depression is a snare that has been trapping men and women throughout history and into our present age. It appears that women

are more likely than men to experience a major depression probably because of the hormone fluctuations they experience at various stages in life.

Depression comes to Christians and non-Christians alike, the weak and the strong. We are not only spiritual beings; God has made us of clay—vulnerable to weakness, sin, disease, and yes, depression.

Is There Any Escape?

Where do you turn for help when depression overwhelms you? What do you do when the counselor wakes up depressed and that counselor is you? Through the years, I have counseled many people in all levels of depression, but I never expected it to be an issue in *my* life—after all, shouldn't the biblical counselor somehow be exempt?! I found I was not exempt! After all, it is a common problem.

The hope is right where Jeremiah found it: “I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him’” (Lam. 3:17-24 ESV)!

We must turn to the Lord and seek Him for help. We live in a fallen world, but in Christ we have hope for this world and the next and can cry out with Paul,

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, [or feelings of depression] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:37-39)

Response

We all desperately need hope every day of our lives! I encourage you to seek your hope in the Lord through His Word. It helps to journal what we're going through and learning. Why not get a journal and begin with this first response?

1. Journal a paragraph or two describing the anguish you feel.
2. Write a paragraph telling how my experience has given you hope, if it has.
3. Write out 1 Corinthians 10:13 in your journal and on a 3x5 card.

- Seek to memorize it.
- On the back of the card write out a prayer, paraphrasing the verse as a prayer back to God. It might look like this: "Father, I thank You that You are faithful and that all our problems are common to man. I thank You that You never give us a temptation, test, or trial that is greater than we can handle. I thank You that You always provide a way through the problem so that we can handle it. Lord, as I face my depression today help me to look for the way out that You have provided so that I might be able to endure."
- Review the card and pray it back to God several times each day.

4. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13, Hebrews 4:14-16, and 1 John 1:9 and answer the following questions on each verse:

- What has God promised you?
- What hope and encouragement do you get from these three passages?

- How will you respond to God's promises in your situation?
5. Make a date to get together with a biblical counselor or someone who you respect that can point you to the scriptures for direction and encouragement.

The Valley of Vision Prayers

During the time of my depression I found that it was very difficult to pray. It was so helpful and encouraging to rely on the prayers of others. I found the prayers in the book *The Valley of Vision* to be of great comfort and encouragement. I hope these prayers at the beginning of each chapter will comfort your heart as they did mine.

A College Student's Story of Despair and Praise

Edward T. Welch puts it very well when he describes depression as a “stubborn darkness” because that’s exactly what it is. It’s stubborn because as hard as you try, it doesn’t go away on your terms and only gets worse before it can get better. It is darkness because you really feel like you’re the only person in the world who feels this way and that nobody else understands. It feels as if there is no hope—that this is *it!*

For me, it seemed to last for ages. I thought I had always felt this way and that I always would. I went from being a happy, bubbly person who loved serving the Lord and ministering to people, to someone who hated even the thought of living another day.

There really aren’t any events that I can think of that contributed to my depression. Nothing had happened to me.... school was going fine, volleyball was going well, and life at home was as it always had been. Everything was normal. At least, that’s what I thought and this made me feel even more frustrated and guilty.

I still remember the day that I first knew something was wrong. It was the Monday before Halloween and I realized that I was thinking illogically. My thoughts were repetitive, condemning and all-consuming. I literally questioned everything that I did and concluded that it was all sin. I thought I was losing my mind. For me, the mental symptoms were the most miserable and most frustrating. All the racing and obsessive thoughts that never gave me a break, the anxiety, the lack of concentration or ability to think straight, and those times when I felt like I was losing touch with reality! Was I going crazy?

In the back of my mind I knew this kind of thinking was wrong, but that didn’t change anything. In the matter of a day, my whole life seemed to have taken a 180 degree flip in the wrong direction. I remember being

so angry with myself for not being able to get it together. Why couldn't I just stop thinking this way?

I no longer had a desire to do anything. Just getting out of bed in the morning seemed like the hardest task in the world. I couldn't even smile at someone when walking on my way to class. I remember all the crying.... so much crying! Crying became an everyday ritual. It was the only way I felt I could let out the way I was feeling without hurting anyone.

The physical symptoms were miserable as well. I had fatigue and weakness, where it was a struggle to even hold my head up or walk from class to class. I had insomnia that woke me up every other hour during the night while I was trying to sleep. I also had a loss of appetite, loss of interest in all activities and friends/ family. I had problems with my digestive system (probably from a lack of food and sleep.) Headaches, brain fog, blurred vision; I had it all.

During this time, I contemplated suicide for the first time ever. I was never actually close to attempting this, praise the Lord, but I remember thinking that I would rather be dead than have to live the rest of my life feeling this way.

After about a week and a half in this dark and confusing pit, God led me to Dr. Somerville. I came to him crying and desperate for help. I was certain that this was all my fault and that I was caught in some big sin that I couldn't get a grasp on. I was discouraged, defeated, and out of options. But God, who is always faithful to His children, would never let me go from His hand and He had a plan.

After desperately spilling out all these things that had been haunting me for the past week, Dr. Somerville first asked me about past medical conditions, how much I had been sleeping, and what my stress level was like. This caught me by such surprise! I hadn't even once considered that this could be health related. That was the day that I discovered I was suffering from depression.

At first, this was hard for me to grasp. I thought that Christians should never be depressed. They're supposed to find their joy in the Lord! But I quickly had to learn that as spiritual and physical beings, depression is more than just sadness, it can become a debilitating state that comes as a result of spiritual or physical infirmities. Many Christians have experienced depression since the beginning of time. It has to be combated with care for the soul and body.

Well, this episode of depression lasted for about 3-4 weeks but got significantly better over winter break. I had a recurring episode in February after I had come back to school. This finally forced me to start looking into what could medically be causing this. Through our searching we found that I had a hormonal imbalance. I was majorly lacking in some necessary hormones. We began addressing this issue, but I still struggled through fighting this depression all semester. Although it was progressively getting better, it still was something I had to work through with every waking moment.

Looking back to my episodes, I can honestly say that those were the darkest times in my entire life. I felt like I had even been deserted by the One Person who I had always turned to during trials. It felt like my Savior had left me. I no longer felt like I had a relationship with Jesus Christ and that I really was all alone to suffer this way for the rest of my life.

But, no matter how much I felt that way, I had to constantly remind myself that it wasn't true! I had to learn that no matter how much my body and mind seemed to be changing, God was never-changing! God is constant and loves me just as much through those times as He does any other time.

Once I became His child, I was "stuck." Nothing could separate me from the love of Jesus Christ as Romans 8:38-39 says. I had to depend and lean on God every minute of every day. My whole life I had really been confident of my relationship with God. But once my depression hit,

I became more dependent than I had ever been on Him. I had to learn to trust that God would keep His promises no matter what.

Every Christian should have to learn that lesson! I learned to look not at my present fleshly estate, but instead to look to eternity with Him where I would have a perfect, flawless body, where I would forever spend eternity enjoying my Savior. That became my hope! Even if I would spend the rest of my life depressed here on this earth, it would be okay because God would give me the strength to press on. One day I would be rid of it in heaven. God gave me this hope and constantly reminded me of it daily. I can't ever say that I've "walked through depression," because God carried me through it! He carried me the whole way!

Three months after my depression, I still continually deal with wrong thoughts, anxieties, and feelings. Those times have left a huge scar that I may need to deal with for the rest of my life. But God is gracious and so good! He continues to give me strength daily and courage to face those things. With every day, I sense healing and moving on. I have learned to pray through all things— every concern, question, or anxiety. This has given me a closer relationship with my Savior that I do not regret! I am still in the midst of discovering health contributors and working through my sleep patterns, exercise and eating habits. It's a slow process that requires a lot of trial and error, but God uses it to continue to teach me patience and reliance upon Him alone.

The three most important things I would recommend to someone facing depression stem from the things that I had to learn as well through my trial.

1. Seek answers from a medical standpoint first. I really had to humble myself in this area because I'm a young college volleyball player. I should be just fine! I had to accept that I might need to take care of myself physically before continuing to live my "normal" life again. Sometimes we need to fix the physical side of things before blaming it all on spiritual matters.

2. Speak truth to your heart daily. Learn to start talking to yourself instead of listening to yourself. I wish I had learned this earlier on during my trial. Depression has a way of making your mind feel like it is on repeat mode. It is always playing those thoughts that condemn us the most. I had to learn to stop listening to those constant and obsessive thoughts and start filling my mind with the truth. Dr. Somerville taught me how to take every thought captive and fill my mind instead with what the Bible says is true. Philippians 4:4-9 helped me with that.

3. Remember Romans 8:28. This was probably the most beneficial verse for me through my depression. I constantly questioned why God was allowing me to go through something like this and how it could ever be good. I had to remember that God only does that which is most glorifying to Him and that which is the very best for His children! I had to look not at my current state, but towards eternity and realize that He was using this for my good and ultimately for His glory. I now can say that I have encouraged multiple people through my testimony, learned what dependence upon God really looks like, and most importantly, God has strengthened my relationship with my Savior even more! It is because of this that I can say, "Praise Him!"

Morgan Fay