



WHEN THE SPIRIT IS FAINT
Psalm 142, Acts 18:5-11

A disturbed and deeply troubled individual went to a psychiatrist to relieve his anxiety. He awoke melancholy every morning, and he went to bed in the evening deeply depressed. His day was marked by darkness and clouds. He could not find relief from this anxiety. In his desperate condition, he decided to seek the help of a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist listened to him for almost an hour. Finally, he leaned toward his patient and said to him, "You know, there is a local show at the theater. I understand a new Italian clown is leaving the people laughing in the aisles. He is getting rave reviews from the critics. Maybe he is the one that will bring back your happiness. Why don't you go see this professional clown and laugh your troubles away?" With a sad expression, the patient muttered, "Doctor, I am that clown."¹

Psychologists and other trained personnel have discovered that the one element common in all cases of depression is DISAPPOINTMENT. Something happens that causes a person to lose his/her sense of reality and focus.

Depression is both ancient and universal. Depression knows no educational – gender – cultural – racial – or financial boundaries. However, I was surprised to learn that twice as many women suffer from depression as men. That was new information to me.

According to the National Institutes of Health – depression is one of the major health problems of Americans in 2007. You have seen the television ads. One ad correctly shares "Who hurts when you experience depression? Everyone!"

In any one year period 9.5 % of the population or about 18.8 million adults suffer from depression. The annual workplace cost of depression in America is \$40 billion. However the cost in terms of human suffering is incalculable.² It is not a laughing matter.

History records that some of the world's most notable people - like Martin Luther, Abe Lincoln, Sir Winston Churchill, Beethoven, and Charles Spurgeon have fought this enemy. It is commonly called 'the blues,' 'the black dog.' In theological circles we call it 'the dark night of the soul.'

Last Sunday a member of our church placed in my mailbox an article on depression in men. Men – because it is considered a feminine disorder - often hide

behind the disorder or fail to address it. I know. I did 17 years ago. Yes, when days seem evil – like on April 16th in Blacksburg, Va. – when life is collapsing around us – we need a place to turn to when it seems that we have no other place to turn to.

We are grateful to the Psalms of David – and other people of faith – who have faced this ancient foe and give us all counsel on how to move forward.

I have shared with you before that the purpose of the Christian faith is not to avoid difficulty and trouble but to produce a character adequate to meet it when it comes. Depression does not need be an overwhelming problem. Face it, admit it, seek the power of God and the presence of other people to help you move through this dark valley of despair and discouragement.

Please turn to **Psalm 42**, which we used as our Psalter today. In **Psalm 42**, we see that God’s servant, David, is going through a bout with depression in **verses 1-4**.

1. In **verse 1 and 2**: he desires to feel the power and presence of God again.
2. He longs to be back at the Temple praising God with others in divine worship (**verse 2**). Worship is God’s way of giving himself back to us.
3. He cannot get beyond his feelings of loneliness and despair (**verse 3**).
4. He is living under constant harassment by his enemies who not only mock David, but the almighty God. **Verse 3**.
5. He remembers the good times of an era gone by. He wishes for things to get better. He attempts to go back to the ‘past’ to find strength and hope for the present moment of crisis.

One of the greatest challenges to the Psalmist and to many that have experienced depression, despair, and disillusionment is that the wicked and evil-doers seem to profit. I have asked myself that question many times. If God is good, why is there evil? In my files, I have a quote by Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick that has been very helpful to me in my journey that I want to share today. When an incident like the tragedy at Virginia Tech happens – I turn to its insights again.

“Once, I also decided that I could not believe in the goodness of God in the face of the world’s evil. But then, I discovered that I had run headlong into another and even more difficult problem: what to do about all the world’s goodness – if there is no God? Sunsets and symphonies, mothers, music, the laughter of children, great books, great art great science, great persons, victories of goodness over evil, the long hard-won ascent up from the Stone Age, and all the friendly spirits that are to other souls ‘cups of strength in great agony.’ How can we, without God, explain all that as the casual, accidental by-product of physical forces going at it blind?

The mystery of evil is very great on the basis of a good God – but the mystery of goodness is impossible on the basis of no God.”³

I further share another insight by Dr. Fosdick which is at the heart of what I want to share with you for your consideration today. Dr. Fosdick writes, “I celebrate the resources of a Christian faith to see a man through. A vital faith in God gives a man available resources of interior power. We never produce power. We always appropriate it. That is true from the harnessing of the Niagara to taking a walk in the fresh air. We never create power – we assimilate it. So, a man with a real faith in GOD senses around his spiritual life a spiritual presence as truly as the physical world is around his body. He knows of the deep well of staying power that divine companionship can replenish.”⁴

I also believe and celebrate with Dr. Fosdick the resources that the Christian faith provide when we walk the lonesome valley of despair and depression. I marvel at the utter honesty of God’s people in the biblical witness in dealing with this ancient but ever-present aspect of life. I share today not as a once-removed witness, but as one who has walked this road of despair and disappointment.

The late Henri Nouwen, in his outstanding book **THE WOUNDED HEALER**, shares how our woundedness and loneliness can by God’s grace become a source of beauty and strength when it is understood as being a vital part of the fabric of life woven by the Master Weaver. He uses the imagery of the Grand Canyon, which is a deep incision in the soil, but produces great beauty and scenery. So too, our woundedness can become a source of beauty and understanding for our journey and for others. Remember, soil never produces a crop until it is broken and the seed can be planted.

I want to share some suggestions for your consideration in dealing with the ever-present reality of depression.

FIRST, ADMIT YOU ARE TROUBLED.

The Psalmist declares in **Psalm 142:12**, “I pout out my complaint before Him, I tell my trouble before Him.”

I want to suggest that sometimes depression stems from the fact that we either cannot or will not acknowledge and confess what lies within us. This is why we always have a special time set apart in each worship service for prayer. We simply need time to talk to God.

Psalm 32:3 tells of a pilgrim who slowly wasted away because he refused to talk to God about his difficulty. The pilgrim begins to recover when he talks to God. A good, honest, earthy talk to God will beat a liquor bottle all to pieces. St. Augustine was right on target when he declared, “Confession is good for the soul.” The hymn writer shares:

“What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!

The article from the National Institutes of Health shared good news. “Over the past 20 years, biomedical research has shed considerable light on depression, and, as a result, new medications and psychosocial therapies exist to help depressed people. As more people recognize that these illnesses are treatable, more are rediscovering their sense of optimism and purpose through appropriate treatment.”⁵

About 6 years ago I began to experience severe chest pain, a burning throat, and loss of voice after preaching twice on Sundays. It affected my ability to swallow. My doctor sent me to a specialist in Pottsville. He diagnosed me in 10 minutes. I suffered from GERD – acid reflux disease. I take 2 Prevacid a day – probably will for the rest of my life. My doctor does the same. Taking medicine does not make me a person of lesser faith. As a matter of fact – the medication makes me more effective in the work I do for the Lord.

Depression is an illness. If a medication is helpful to you – rejoice and give thanks for it! Don’t tempt the Lord your God.

SECOND, SIMPLY ASK GOD TO DELIVER YOU FROM THIS BONDAGE.

Don’t run – unless you run into the loving arms of God. Simply declare, “God, I am helpless against this power and enemy. I submit myself to You. My life is simply useless and out of control without Your loving presence.” It is when we declare our utter dependency on the power of God that God can do something for us. We are now out of the way and God can do His best work in us. We have seen the futility of our own self-help methods. Evelyn Underhill, an insightful writer on the spiritual life shares, “God’s power comes into action at the very place where our actions fail.” One of the greatest breakthroughs any Christian can make is to know (really know) that Christ cares for you. Simply admit your need. Pour out your complaints before Him.

THIRD, REMEMBER YOUR SALVATION IS NOT DEPENDENT ON YOUR PRESENT MOOD OR EMOTION.

Emotions, simply put, are not the final authority on our relationship to God or anything else important in life. We are saved by what Christ did, not by what we do.

Our emotions are like the weather, they are always changing. When we think on a ‘gut level,’ it is our lowest level of thought. Emotions can be good and valid, but they are only one level or way of reacting to the circumstances of life. We must rule our passions and emotions or they can rule us. How foolish it can be to let an important decision of life depend upon the emotion of a moment. Our emotions have no impact on the faithfulness of God. God’s hands are sturdy and steadfast.

Last week Matt Lauer of The Today Show interviewed a voice from the past of that show – Joe Garagiola. Joe shared how one day he left the show feeling quite ill. He went to a nearby drug store. He picked up a bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol, a box of Imodium D, an elastic knee support, a vaporizer, a jar of Vicks Vapo-Rub, and a tube

of Preparation H. The clerk rang up the items – put them in a plastic bag and said, “Joe, have a nice day.” Not every day can be a hot fudge sundae. Get over it!

LASTLY, DEPRESSION IS A ROADBLOCK, NOT A DEAD END, IF WE KEEP OUR EYES ON CHRIST.

Let us now turn to our New Testament lesson for today from **Acts 18:1-11**, as we see the Apostle Paul in a moment of discouragement asking the question “Is it worth it?”

Paul has just left Athens and was greatly discouraged. His spirit was faint. Circumstances in life had not been exactly favorable. It has been tough in this sophisticated center of learning in Athens to make any impact with the gospel message. We perceive a feeling of tiredness when Paul arrives at Corinth. His spirit is low. However, he seeks God’s will and God tells him that he has many people who need to hear the gospel. He tells Paul not to hold his tongue, but to speak boldly for the cause of Christ.

Life is a series of efforts – some prove successful, others not. Donald Grey Barnhouse often would remind Christians that we are not to live life under the circumstances but above the circumstances. God always looks down at our problems, for he is sovereign over them, and has told us that “all things work together for good for those who love God and whom are called according to His purpose.”

There is a well-known story of a soldier in the army of the historical king of the Franks, Charlemagne, in the 9th century. The soldier was in charge of the rear end of the army when he was suddenly surprised by the enemy’s army. They waged a fierce battle. The soldier had in his possession a huge horn which could sound a loud blast to call for replacement troops to help him wage the war. However, the soldier was too proud to sound the horn. One by one his army was shrinking until only he was left. At that moment he blew the horn and the soldiers who heard it quickly responded, but it was too late. The soldier also was defeated.

It is easy in our battles with depression, despair, and discouragement to be too proud to cry out to God and other trained persons to ask for help in our hour of great need.

In **Psalm 142, verse 6**, the writer declares, “Deliver me from my persecutors; for they are too strong for me!” The Psalmist takes his problem to the only One who can really be of help and comfort to him. The Psalmist further declares in **verse 7**, that he knew “God would deal bountifully with me.” That is our hope and that is God’s promise to His people.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
April 22, 2007 – 10:30 a.m. service

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, **LIVING ON THE RAGGED EDGE**, (Word Books, Inc., 1985), page 44.

² This information is from a link shared by the National Institutes of Health. This source is www.usnews.com/usnews/health/brain/depression.

³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “**Riverside Sermons (Harper and Brothers, 1957)**”, pg. 248.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 36.

⁵ Op. cit, No. 2.