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## THE BIBLE AND DEPRESSION

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### Synopsis

Life isn't easy. We're vulnerable to a wide array of psycho-emotional invasions like guilt, shame, anger, fear, bitterness, jealousy, anxiety, panic, depression, purposelessness, and masochism. Because of the resulting suffering, secular cures have proliferated, even destructive ones like using drugs. Even psychotherapy has had a questionable impact. Many have found that it has made them more myopic and self-absorbed, depriving them of an appreciation of the greater reality around them, including values, commitments, and the meaning of life. In contrast to secular interventions, the Bible's scope is life-encompassing and its solutions are deep and satisfying.

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In many ways, the Bible embodies evidence that it's the product of a superior Intelligence. This can be demonstrated by examining its wisdom regarding human psychology, especially as we compare it to the secular solutions for psychological-emotional problems.

### THANKFULNESS AND DEPRESSION

Thankfulness is great for body and soul and even for depression. According to author Lauren Aaronson, "Feeling thankful and expressing that thanks makes you happier and heartier...Just jot down things that make you thankful...Call it corny, but gratitude just may be the glue that holds society together."<sup>1</sup>

Her advice, in other words, is "Just do it!" (be thankful). Thankfulness may help or work emotionally, and make psychological sense, but without God and an assurance of heaven, it can be irrational and delusional. Consider someone who is terminally ill, has lost family and friends, and has nothing tangible to look forward to but death: besides being insensitive, advising her to be thankful is asking her to deny the most significant aspects of her life.

There also remains the awkward question, "Thankful to whom?" but Aaronson avoids this obvious question. It's like throwing a party without inviting the host—not a very thankful act at that!

Thankfulness demands that we notice that there must be a hidden subject whom we should acknowledge. This comes naturally and comfortably for the Christian, who does not make believe that the Host does not exist. The Christian recognizes that the Host is the lynchpin who ties life neatly together, making sense out of seemingly thankless situations. Asaph, the Psalmist, writes, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26 NIV). Practicing biblical thankfulness does not require the depressed to deny the painful realities of their lives.

## HOPE AND DEPRESSION

Depressed people need hope more than anything else. They have been fighting a foe that is greater than they and have despaired of their own efforts. Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl had observed many people struggle and finally acquiesce to the verdict of the death camps. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, he writes, "The prisoner who had lost his faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and become subject to mental and physical decay."<sup>2</sup>

Frankl understood that the best elixir for despair was hope. The Bible concurs: "A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" (Prov. 18:14 NIV). In *The Noonday Demon*, termed by one reviewer as "the definitive book on depression,"<sup>3</sup> Andrew Solomon, himself a long-time sufferer of depression, describes how in his view one can obtain hope: "Since depression is highly demotivating, it takes a certain survivor impulse to keep going through the depression, not to cave into it. A sense of humor is the best indicator that you will recover; it is often the best indicator that people will love you. Sustain that and you have hope."<sup>4</sup>

A sense of humor is a great gift. Some have a natural endowment of it, whereas others have to learn it. It is more than a skill, however; it is a vision of life. One who has a sense of humor can laugh at oneself and one's foibles, because they are insignificant when compared to eternity (Rom. 8:18–19), and because they are not the actual substance of life. Solomon understands the difficulty of laughter in the context of his experience:

*Of course it can be hard to sustain a sense of humor during an experience that is really not so funny. It is urgently necessary to do so....Whatever time is eaten by a depression is gone forever. The minutes that are ticking by as you experience the illness are minutes that you will not know again. No matter how bad you feel you have to do everything you can to keep living, even if all you can do for the moment is breathe. Wait it out and occupy the time of waiting as fully as you can. That's my big piece of advice to depressed people.<sup>5</sup>*

In short, his advice is, "Just wait—it will get easier. In the meantime, try harder!" That's not very hopeful—especially not for those who really need hope. We often do need to wait, but we as Christians also need to know that, when we are at our weakest and lowest, we are actually at our highest (2 Cor. 12:9–10)! We need the assurance that even in the midst of depression, our dear Lord is drawn to us in our pain (Isa. 57:15; 66:1–2; Ps. 34:17–18), is suffering along with us (Heb. 4:15; Isa. 63:7–11), and is working even our defeats and failures towards a blessed and eternal conclusion (Rom. 8:28; Phil. 1:6; John 6:37–40)!

In reflecting on his journey from Zen Buddhism to Christianity, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, writes how he repeatedly had observed that his Christian clients would improve, no matter how serious their psychiatric condition. He concludes, "The quickest way to change your attitude toward pain is to accept the fact that everything that happens to us has been designed for our spiritual growth....We cannot lose once we realize that everything that happens to us has been designed to teach us holiness....We are guaranteed winners!"<sup>6</sup>

If our hope is in ourselves rather than in our omnipotent and all-loving God, we have no guarantees except death and decay. Solomon also appreciates the power of faith: "Frankly, I think that the best treatment for depression is belief, which is in itself far more essential than what you believe in. If you really truly believe that you can relieve your depression by standing on your head and spitting nickels for an hour every afternoon, it is likely that this incommensurable activity will do you tremendous good."<sup>7</sup>

It is a well-demonstrated fact that the placebo effect is powerful. If we believe in something, anything, it will make a difference, at least for the short-run. Unless a faith accords with reality (our experiences and observations) and is nurtured by compelling evidences, however, it will subside, and so too its positive influences.

God has not left His suffering people destitute of compelling reasons to hope. He has not been slack in providing authenticating miracles (Matt. 11:5–6; John 5:31–36; 10:37; 20:25–31; Acts 1:3; Heb. 2:4) and fulfilled prophecy (Luke 24:25–27, 44–45; John 14:28–29; 16:1–4, 32–33; Acts 17:2–4; 18:4; 28:23) to reassure our fretful minds.

The alternative to trusting in God is trusting in oneself. Our experiences constantly attack and indict this notion of trust. We are not worthy of self-trust; consequently, we can maintain self-trust only through a most repressive form of denial. We nonetheless yearn to trust, but trust can only flourish when finally married to its intended Husband.

## **AUTHENTICITY, SELF-ACCEPTANCE, AND DEPRESSION**

We have to be authentic and at peace with our true selves, but this is difficult. When we lack authenticity and transparency, we are in disharmony and conflict, obsessively trying to maintain an image, a lie. Author Karen Wright writes, “Authenticity is correlated with many aspects of psychological well-being, including vitality, self-esteem, and coping skills. Acting in accordance with one’s core self—a trait called self-determination—is ranked by some experts as one of the three basic psychological needs.”<sup>8</sup>

Here are some of Wright’s recommendations for achieving authenticity: read novels, meditate, cultivate solitude, and play hard. Her advice basically suggests that all we need to do is to spend some quality time with ourselves. She also maintains that we should “be willing to lose,” and cites Thomas Moore’s rationale for that: “Feelings of inauthenticity are heightened by a lack of a philosophy that allows failure to be part of life. If you’re leading a full life, you are going to fail some every day.”<sup>9</sup>

Moore is correct. Failure is a part of life, and we need to learn to accept it graciously rather than to be inauthentic and deny our failures. Finding that supportive philosophy, however, is not easy. Secularism can’t provide it. If you believe that you only go around once and that there is no afterlife, then failure assumes monumental importance. There is no mercy for those who stumble or fail to achieve. Secularism thus puts an even greater burden on our shoulders to succeed in our limited time.

Buddhism is more compassionate and accepting of failure, but at a great price. It diminishes the significance of failure because failure is illusion, but so too is the rest of life! Life in this temporal world of illusion must be transcended through enlightenment. “Enlightenment,” however, is a matter of “recognizing” that everything we’ve valued (friends, family, vocation, and so forth) is *also* illusion. Buddhism therefore represents a denial not just of failure, but of everything. It’s like cutting off a head because of a toothache.

Authenticity and self-acceptance are rare commodities. Psychologist Shelley E. Taylor sums up the clinical evidence: “People are positively biased in their assessments of themselves and of their ability to control what goes on around them, as well as in their views of the future. The widespread existence of these biases and the ease with which they can be documented suggests that they are normal.”<sup>10</sup>

Mainstream secular counseling, ironically, panders to our insatiable appetite for even more “positive” illusions through the building of self-esteem. That, however, is something diametrically opposed to authenticity and self-acceptance—a *refusal* to accept the truth about ourselves.

We need to be converted from self-esteem to self-acceptance. God sends trials to reveal to us our

true character and true need and to wean us from self-trust (2 Cor. 1:8–9; 4:7–18; 12:9–10; 1 Pet. 1:6–7; Eccl. 3:18). It is only through the promises of His unchanging love and forgiveness, however, that we can tolerate such a revelation. Accordingly, Elyse M. Fitzpatrick, director of *Women Helping Women* Ministries, writes,

*The counter-intuitive truth that the depressed person needs to hear isn't "you're really a wonderful person," but rather, "you're more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe"....Bathing our soul in the Gospel message will powerfully transform....It's true that I'm more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe, and that truth frees me from the delusion that I'll ever be able to approve of myself; but I'm also more loved and welcomed than I ever dared hope, and that truth comforts and encourages me when my heart condemns me and my darling desires are all withheld. It assures me that although I struggle with accepting myself, the Holy King has declared me righteous.<sup>11</sup>*

It is only through God's acceptance that we can begin to accept the painful truth about ourselves and to live authentically; ironically, there is great freedom in this. If we can learn to rejoice in the pit, then enjoying the mountaintop isn't problematic. If we can accept the unflattering portraits of ourselves, we can cease the obsessive and strenuous occupation of trying to prove ourselves. If we can accept ourselves, then the opinions of others lose their bite. Criticism would no longer constitute a threat because it can tell us no new dirt about ourselves.

Self-acceptance is a precondition for authenticity. Modern-ity's answer is self-esteem, but self-esteem turns out to be the antithesis of self-acceptance—the refusal to accept ourselves as we truly are.

## **EUDAIMONIA AND DEPRESSION**

Mental health professionals recognize that living in accordance with our moral convictions is an important factor for mental health. Accordingly, Karen Wright wrote, "Eudaimonia refers to a state of well-being and full functioning that derives from a sense of living in accordance with one's deeply held values."<sup>12</sup> This is so obvious, it makes even atheists intent on living moral lives. They ascribe their moral programming, however, to evolution. For example, Richard Dawkins writes, "Natural selection, in ancestral times when we lived in small stable bands like baboons, programmed into our brains altruistic urges, alongside sexual urges, hunger urges, xenophobic urges and so on."<sup>13</sup>

Dawkins believes that altruism, consequently, has nothing to do with truth or right and wrong, but with chance processes. If chance processes programmed these altruistic urges, however, why should we follow them? Appealing to our genetic programming is inadequate. Should we be xenophobic (fearful of foreigners) merely because we have been "programmed" to have this reaction? Of course not! Why then should we be altruistic? For the atheist, the only possible answer is pragmatic: altruistic behavior works; it benefits the doer with good feelings. It is solely a matter of cost/benefit analysis.

Atheist, humanist, and author of the *Humanist Manifesto II*, Paul Kurtz affirms that pragmatism is the "only" possible justification for morality: "How are these principles [of equality, freedom, etc.] to be justified? They are not derived from a divine or natural law nor do they have a special metaphysical [beyond the material world] status. They are rules offered to govern how we shall behave. They can be justified only by reference to their results."<sup>14</sup>

Pragmatism, however, is inadequate. Sometimes it *isn't* pragmatic to be moral. Hiding Jews from the Nazis wouldn't pass the cost/benefit analysis. The price of a bullet in the head of the entire family is just too high! Nontheists thus cannot live in harmony with both their pragmatic rationale and the law of God written on their conscience (Rom. 2:14–15). Either they hide Jews and violate their pragmatic rationale or they don't hide Jews and violate their conscience. Heart and mind (in pragmatism) are divided and in conflict. In either case, their mental wellbeing will suffer, because they are unable to live

“in accordance with [their] deeply held values.”

More fundamentally, one who denies God and therefore denies the moral absolutes of the conscience will fail to derive the benefits of eudaimonia. There is little satisfaction in living in accordance with the dictates of the conscience if we understand those dictates to be no more than tyrannical electro-chemical reactions that demand us to make sacrifices that go against our desires and then punish us with guilt feelings. To derive the benefits of eudaimonia, this view advises, one should just take a conscience-numbing drug!

In contrast, for the Christian, the conscience and the Word (heart and mind) represent the will of God, which is the source of all truth, joy, peace, and love. We have every reason to regard it as a tremendous privilege to follow Him, since living according to His will is a delight (Ps. 1:1–3; John 4:34).

## MEANING, PURPOSE, AND DEPRESSION

We are psychologically constituted to seek to understand our place in the world and to comprehend our purpose and meaning within it. Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Heschel asserted this very idea: “It’s not enough for me to be able to say ‘I am’; I want to know who I am and in relation to whom I live. It is not enough for me to ask questions; I want to know how to answer the one question that seems to encompass everything I face: What am I here for?”<sup>15</sup>

Not just any understanding of our significance in the world will do the trick. We have to understand that we are more than just an accident, a mere product of nature and nurture. Maverick psychologist James Hillman concurs:

*We dull our lives by the way we conceive them....By accepting the idea that I am the effect of...hereditary and social forces, I reduce myself to a result. The more my life is accounted for by what already occurred in my chromosomes, by what my parents did or didn’t do, and by my early years now long past, the more my biography is the story of a victim. I am living a plot written by my genetic code, ancestral heredity, traumatic occasions, parental unconsciousness, societal accidents.*<sup>16</sup>

If we fail to see ourselves as part of a *higher* narrative, we are in great danger of falling into depression. When we recognize that our lives have meaning, we can endure our trials and frustrations. Even atheist and Christian-despiser Frederick Nietzsche wrote that “He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how!’”

From where, however, does this “why” or rationale come? Not from secular materialism, which denies all spiritual realities! In this regard, psychologist Arthur Deikman writes, “Human beings need meaning. Without it they suffer....Western Psychotherapy is hard put to meet human beings’ need for meaning, for it attempts to understand clinical phenomena in a framework based on scientific materialism in which meaning is arbitrary and purpose nonexistent.”<sup>17</sup>

This leaves us with one possibility: a self-created existential meaning. The brilliant atheist mathematician Bertrand Russell was confident that he could create this very thing for himself. In *Why I Am Not a Christian*, he wrote that what mankind has to do is “to cherish...the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of [those who are] slave[s] of fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; [and] undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from...tyranny.”<sup>18</sup>

A self-constructed meaning, as Russell advises, is not sufficient, however. To suggest that one can dream up his own purpose is like telling him that instead of getting married, he can merely dream up his own wife and children for company. Instead of constructing our own meaning, we need to *know* that we

are somehow connected to someone greater. Russell's self-created meaning failed to hold back the "coward terrors." Later, regarding his own gospel, he wrote, "I wrote with passion and force because I really thought I had a gospel. Now I am cynical about the gospel because it won't stand the test of life."<sup>19</sup>

None other but the Christian gospel can stand the test of life. That is because we were made to participate in a glorious drama (Jer. 29:11), and only acting on this exalted stage truly can ennoble and fortify us against depression (2 Cor. 5:20–21).

## **GUILT, SHAME, AND DEPRESSION**

Depression often results from the unresolved, crippling feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy. Motivational speaker, John Bradshaw, warns about the depressing effect of these feelings, especially shame, which he defines as "the internalized feeling of being flawed and defective as a human being...shame, which should be a healthy signal of limits, becomes an overwhelming state of being, an identity if you will. Once toxically shamed, a person loses contact with his authentic self. What follows is a chronic mourning for the lost self."<sup>20</sup> Bradshaw then explains how shame, the "master emotion," tragically begins to numb the rest of the emotions through denial, repression, and dissociation.

Bradshaw believes that this life-controlling shame is a product of not being loved unconditionally. If this is the problem, then the answer, he advises, is a matter of providing unconditional love. One way to achieve this, according to Bradshaw, is through loving affirmations: "Repeated positive messages are emotional nutrients...Here are the loving words you can say to your inner infant: 'Welcome to the world, I've been waiting for you. I'm glad you are here. I've prepared a special place for you to live. I like you just the way you are. I will not leave you, no matter what.'"<sup>21</sup>

Here are some of the problems with Bradshaw's approach:

*Bradshaw unjustifiably assumes that toxic shame is the result of a lack of love. Love indeed may decrease our sensitivity to guilt, but an increased sensitivity to guilt is not necessarily pathological. It instead may be beneficial. It is better to live with uncomfortable inhibitions than to go "wilding" with friends, whose association decreases these inhibitions.*

*Guilt and shame demand self-examination. If we have transgressed, the appropriate action is confession and repentance (1 John 1:8–9), not soothing self-talk! If sin is the problem, then Bradshaw's suggestion is merely a professional form of denial.*

*Bradshaw's affirmations are neither factual nor believable. If positive affirmations are going to work, they must be believed, but they should only be believed if they are in harmony with reality! It is difficult, however, to take seriously Bradshaw's proposed affirmations, "I've prepared a special place for you to live. I like you just the way you are...."*

*Believing something silly can provide only minimal and temporary relief.*

On the other hand, if Bradshaw's affirmations can work to alleviate depression, how much more can God's affirmations! If it helps me to assure myself that "I will not leave you," how much more will God's assurance that *He* will never leave me (Rom. 8:38–39; Heb. 13:5)! If I am reassured by the statement, "I like you just the way you are," I will find God's statement that He loves me with a love that surpasses anything I can understand (Eph. 3:17–20) even more reassuring! I may be able to forgive myself, but God's forgiveness (Heb. 8:12) will penetrate much more intimately and persuasively, and eventually will secure my self-forgiveness.

Bradshaw's self-affirmations are to God's affirmations as masturbation is to true relationship—a

substitute for the real thing. Even worse, self-affirmations must be believed if they are to have any impact, but Bradshaw promotes them apart from any consideration of their truth-content. The mind and reality are thus compromised for the sake of emotional relief. If we stoop to unreality, we will pay a hefty price further down the road.

In contrast to this, the Bible doesn't admonish us to believe that Christ died for our sins simply because we will derive a sense of relief from that, but primarily because it is true, as many reliable witnesses have attested. God's solution never requires us to compromise our intellectual integrity or reality.

## MORAL LIVING, BLESSING, AND DEPRESSION

Lastly, moral living translates into blessing (John 13:17) for all, including those who are depressed. Nottingham University psychologist David Small, author of *Taking Care*, writes,

*Psychological distress occurs for reasons which make it incurable by therapy but which are certainly not beyond the powers of human beings to influence. We suffer pain because we do damage to each other, and we shall continue to suffer pain as long as we continue to do damage. The way to alleviate and mitigate distresses is for us to take care of the world and the other people in it, not to treat them.*<sup>22</sup> (emphasis in original)

The relationship between obedience to God and blessing is no more clearly observed than in the context of marriage, where we find that we best meet our own needs when we best address the needs of our spouse (Eph. 5:28; 1 Pet. 3:7). In this regard, it is interesting to see how the leading names in marriage counseling are counseling couples according to the very principles found in Scripture. Whereas psychotherapists had been jumping on the communication-techniques bandwagon as the primary means to address marital conflict, now they are returning to the concepts of love and respect. John M. Gottman, professor of psychology and cofounder of *The Gottman Institute* writes, "The typical conflict-resolution advice won't help. Instead, you need to understand the bottom-line difference that is causing the conflict between you—and learn how to live with it by honoring and respecting each other."<sup>23</sup>

Marriage guru Harville Hendrix similarly writes, "Feel more loving toward each other simply by engaging in more loving behaviors....The husbands and wives are to grant each other a certain number of these caring behaviors a day, no matter how they feel about each other."<sup>24</sup>

The type of "other-centeredness" that Gottman and Hendrix advocate can certainly jump-start a languishing relationship. In the long run, however, relationships need more. If we just give in order to *get*, eventually the getting will dry up along with the giving; our mate will perceive our behavior as manipulation, like a thinly concealed business transaction. It requires quite an effort, driven by deeply held convictions, to keep giving. Each of us must rest our focus on our spouse's needs. We need to learn how to do this even when our own needs go unmet.

Larry Crabb explains that this "humanistic foundation" for focusing on others' needs sets us up for failure by placing the emphasis on meeting our own needs.<sup>25</sup> Instead, if each of us is going to continue to act lovingly toward our mate, we will need a true other-centeredness based on the conviction that it's right to do so even if we aren't getting what we want from the relationship. If we are going to be able to continue with this type of sacrifice, we will need to be assured that God is taking care of us, providing seed to the sower (2 Cor. 8:10).

What can lift people out of self-serving "altruism?" The conviction that our Lord addresses their psychological needs (for forgiveness, contentment, joy, accomplishment, validation, and so forth) according to His wisdom (so they have no need to seek counterfeits), but also that their mission is far

loftier than the immediate fulfillment of their needs—that they are ambassadors (2 Cor. 2:15; 5:20) of the God of all truth, wisdom, healing, and love, and that they belong to Him (1 Cor. 6:19–20). They, consequently, will no longer be helpless depressives, but servants of glory (Gal. 2:20).

The Bible contains wisdom that teaches that God meets each of our needs. Numerous other books contain counterfeits that claim that we can meet our own needs. These provide some relief in the short-run, but as we have seen, their recommendations have hidden costs, and their advice ultimately fails.

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#### notes

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- 2 Os Guinness, *The Journey: Our Quest for Faith and Meaning* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 38.
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- 14 David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times, abridged ed.* (Colorado Springs, CO: Association of Christian Schools International, 1995), 237.
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- 18 Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, quoted in Guinness, 105.
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- 21 Ibid., 93.
- 22 David Small, *Taking Care: An Alternative to Therapy* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1987), quoted in Dorothy Rowe, "Introduction," in Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Against Therapy* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 21–22.
- 23 John M. Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 24. Gottman claims that a year after the average couple graduates from a standard course of conflict resolution training, only eighteen percent retain any benefit from it (10). This represents a far smaller percentage than those marriages that improve spontaneously.
- 24 Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 119.
- 25 Larry Crabb, *The Marriage Builder* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 12.