

Depression vs. Lament (Final Draft)

Two Sundays ago, Pastor Lance launched our “Wholly Sanctified” emotions series by starting us out in Genesis, the book of beginnings. He pointed out that our Creator designed and made our bodies and then breathed His spirit into us. This means that we’re not *only* bodies or *only* spiritual beings, but that each one of us made in the image of God is comprised of body, spirit and soul. And the soul comprised of the mind, will, and emotions.

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were primarily spiritually-minded, meaning they were rooted in the truth and righteousness of God. Because their minds were steeped in truth, they were able to orient their priorities in a way that honored God, which in turn allowed them to be in such unhindered relationship with God unlike anything we’ve ever seen this side of eternity.

And so what they believed and knew to be true informed the choices they made, and those choices in turn informed their emotions and feelings. But after the Fall, when sin enters the world, we see a sore distrust of God and His ways, which led them to hide from God in their shame and fear, causing separation from the One who created them and a disordering of those three components. Now, their decision-making was driven by what they felt to be true instead of what they knew to be true.

As Pastor Lance said, “God intends our emotions to be responders to and affirmers of right, wise choice. They were never meant to drive our choices for the pursuit of a particular feeling...”

And so tonight we cover the subject of depression and lament because we need to know that there is a place for them in the journey of disciple. Loss is a place where powerful transformation can happen when we give those losses to God and join in Him in the work He is doing in us and in the world. We can make the decision, even in our pain, to stay with Jesus during these times. This makes all the difference.

The truth is our pain pushes us to ask questions of what we believe. Who is God? Is He here? Who am I? Why am I going through this? Is there a purpose to all this suffering? Our faith is not disconnected from our pain. And so we push through the fog and do our best to do as 2 Corinthians 2:5 says to “*take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*”

But we can know these truths in our minds and yet, because fighting depression is a mental, physical, and spiritual battle—we need to be prepared to do battle on all three fronts.

We must remember that, though it is not the only component, there is a spiritual aspect to essentially all suffering in the world. Satan’s main strategy is to get us to believe lies about God and ourselves, going after our identity in Christ. He lies about God’s character, going after our trust in Christ. Satan wants us to question God’s power and goodness, and he knows just when to strike us at our most vulnerable moments.

We need to realize that feelings of sadness and depression reveals areas of our hearts and our lives that need extra care and attention, and we must invite Jesus to shepherd us through this process. Depression is painful suffering, but God doesn’t leave us hopeless. Isaiah 53 says that Jesus came as a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”. As Hebrews 14 tells us, “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

But before we go any further, let’s define what we mean by the term “depression”. Is there a difference between “feeling depressed” and “being depressed”. (Full disclosure: I’m not a therapist or counselor or psychologist.

These definitions I’m about to give you are not medical definitions. I’m merely trying to paint a picture of a complicated emotion that sometimes can become a condition). Depression is a form of suffering without a universal cause. The causes of depression are unique to each person. Sometimes the cause could be spiritual, other times physical, and still other times chemical. We need to be careful not to just label it a spiritual issue or a chemical issue. We need to remember that we can do great damage in our attempt to try to “solve” or “fix” someone’s depression. Don’t try to diagnose something you have no training in.

Although its name is “depression” it the feelings that result from it are multi-faceted. Some feel numb, others feel anguish and wish they no longer existed or had never been born. Decisions become impossible to make, and sometimes it feels like there doesn’t seem to be a way forward.

The truth is, everyone feels down from time to time due to circumstances. And for some, the feelings of sadness may disappear when circumstances change or even after a good night’s sleep. But for others, it doesn’t go away just because they want them to, and these feelings tend to linger for much longer periods of time. They can significantly interfere with a person’s life and relationships.

I need to be clear that tonight’s study is not a medical talk. It is spiritually focused. But we do want to provide you with some tools that might help you be able to recognize the difference between feeling depressed and

clinical depression. The pastors of CCO want you to know that, if there's a possible mental disorder, like clinical depression, then you need to be evaluated by a medical doctor. There is no objective answer to the question "What causes clinical depression?". It's a complex interaction between genetics and environment. It's a medical condition like asthma and diabetes that may require medical intervention. As the pastors and I discussed what needed to be covered in this section of tonight's study, we agreed that oftentimes, a combination of medication, therapy, and habits can boost chemicals in the brain to help someone "get their head above water". Realistically, we should expect multiple causes for depression and be willing to admit we don't have the answers to these questions. "Some medications prescribed by a medical professional can, in many cases and under the proper guidance, return the brain to a more normal chemical balance." (J.P. Moreland) "No matter the cause, depression always has a spiritual effect, making us ask the biggest questions about God and life. As stated earlier, scripture teaches us that we are whole people, body, and spirit, and sometimes our bodies just feel sick. However, when pursuing options for help, it's important to remember that even if you pursue one, there is still heart work to do. The heart is the real battleground. We are all wrestling through the brutality of a fallen world. That's why there ARE such things as chemical imbalances, and generational issues. The fall affects OUR GENETICS and in Heaven, we will have resurrected bodies. But we aren't there yet."

And because of this, biblical counseling should never be replaced by any other form of support. And by that I don't specifically mean regularly meeting with a certified Christian counselor, although this may be a valuable resource, I mean we must continue to see through the lens of a biblical worldview. We do this through studying scripture, being part of Christian community, and seeking the wise counsel of other mature believers. This may include the pastors and teachers at your church, but again- we are not trained therapists- we are pastoral counselors. We're here to give you the tools of truth provided in Scripture, your job is to pick up those tools and apply those truths to your life. We should expect multiple causes for depression and be willing to admit we don't know the answers. And because we don't have the answers to these questions, we must ask and answer the questions, "Who will we worship? When the night is darkest, who will we serve?"

Before we move on, I need to hit "PAUSE" and just give another disclaimer or "Public Service Announcement". As pastors and ministers and teachers here at CCO, we are mandated reporters. That means that if we have reasonable suspicion that someone's life may be in danger in anyway, we are required by law to report that for that person's sake, and this includes thoughts of suicide. Research shows that just asking someone about suicidal thoughts can drastically reduce their suicide risk.

Friends—we cannot afford to NOT SAY SOMETHING. In this case, it is HARMFUL to keep someone's secret if they communicate to you that they don't want to be here anymore. DO NOT IGNORE THIS. And if this is you I'm talking about right now. PLEASE SEEK HELP. You won't be alone. We need you here. Call the national suicide hotline, it's open 24 hours a day.

And now back to the main point of our study: SCRIPTURE IS NOT SILENT ABOUT DEPRESSION AND GRIEF. It gives us language for this feeling of hopelessness and despair. In this season, we can choose to cry out to God or choose to refrain from depending on Him. The Psalms are our model for crying out to God in our pain. During a season of depression, we would be wise to pick a psalm and claim it as our own, coming back to it often as our model prayer when crying out to God... This is the good news: you don't have to know the exact cause of suffering in order to find hope and comfort. If you don't know what to pray during a dark season, start there. My family's going through something difficult this past year and I've found that meditating through a single psalm each morning is a balm for the soul.

We need to see that Jesus, the only perfect human, was sorrowful to the point of deep distress. We were created by our Maker to have the capacity to experience this—not because He is cruel, but because He is good and sovereign. We look to the example of Jesus as our blueprint for what we should do when deep sorrows wash over us. (We need to stop saying "I'm only human" as an excuse to cope with our pain in sinful and destructive ways. Jesus was FULLY HUMAN, and He demonstrates what it looks like to be a WHOLE human, even in the midst of anguish.) Matt. 26:36 -39 "*Then He said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as You will.'*" "The cup in Scripture is symbolic of one's divinely determined destiny, whether blessing (Ps. 16:5) or disaster (Jer. 25:15), salvation (16:13), or wrath (Isa. 51:17)". Even in the garden as Jesus experiences grief over what was to come and separation from the Father, he did not choose to go backward. HE MOVED FORWARD . He both leaned in AND pushed past his grief. The truth he knew of the Father's love informed his decision to move forward and choose

the cross because of His love for us. Can you imagine if Jesus ran from his pain? If he sought to numb and escape it the way we so often do? Jesus knew there was future glory ahead, and so must we.

John 11:28-36 *“When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see...’. Jesus wept... then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb...”* Do you notice that Jesus’ tears are a response to the living? They weren’t only for Lazarus. Jesus saw Lazarus’ family and friends in communal mourning and their display of grieving moved him to weep... He dignified the ceremony of grief by adding his own. He doesn’t rush their tears. He doesn’t try to cheer them up by saying, “Close your eyes and count to ten!” Aubrie Hills, an expert in grief and death, says “There is only one way into our grief and it begins by recognizing that our world has changed... Mourning begins as we attempt to reconcile the pain we feel with the goodness we were sure existed.” This is what Jesus demonstrates for us.

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann explains that the Psalms can be broken up into three categories. By the way, two-thirds of the psalms are laments, complaints to God. He says the first category are the psalms of “orientation”. This best describes the stage of our early faith, when life is wonderful because we are awakened to the goodness of God. Our faith at this stage is settled as we say, “God is trustworthy! He has ordered life and creation well!” This is a season of clarity, such as the songs of creation or the songs about life’s blessing. Obedience to God comes easily during the stage of orientation.

However, the second category, the psalms of “Disorientation”, are songs of disarray, suffering, death, and disequilibrium. These are the songs of protest and complaint. John Coe says, “Prayer is not a place to be good, it’s a place to be honest.” Such are the words in Psalm 44 and Psalm 88, which says “Darkness is my closest friend.” The honesty of these psalms can provide deep comfort for us as we struggle with depression. But even with these long stretches of pain and grief, we are given a choice to not stay in the darkest spot of the darkest place. God isn’t looking for us to be strong before Him, He’s longing for us to draw near and be close to Him.

The last category, the Psalms of “RE-orientation”, is not merely a return to the first stage of orientation. It’s a new kind of orientation that factors in the darkness. It’s the Psalms that say there is hope IN the darkness—not outside of it, but in the MIDST of it. It’s the surprise that, even in the pit, God is THERE. And there’s no other way to get to this stage but THROUGH the disorientation. It’s isn’t the removal of the darkness, but it’s God’s meeting us in the darkness that we find hope. And the movement from DIS-orientation to RE-orientation take place as we begin to recognize that God has moved in our lives and has taken action with our suffering: He meets us there in our sorrows.

Mike Erre says, “WE LIVE IN THE NOW AND THE NOT-YET. Sin and death entered the world. There is a disordering of the human personality that we see all throughout scripture. We have the resources that help explain why this world is so terrible and why life is hard. This is a FALLEN world. It is NOT ideal. And Jesus is making it new.” But unfortunately our culture in the U.S. doesn’t have space for grief and loss. We know the world doesn’t stop just because we’re going through traumatizing grief. No one gets a trophy for taking time to heal. No one gets promoted at work for admitting they aren’t in a place to be able to fire on all cylinders right now. Admitting pain reveals weakness and no one applauds for weakness. And yet we have Paul’s declaration of his own personal weakness in I Corinthians 12:9- *“And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”*

We need lament because it forces us to confront reality and tell the truth. It insists that the world must be experienced the way that it is, and not in some “pretend” way. God longs for our honesty, not in our pretending to be happy. And so the Psalms teach us that there is nothing we cannot bring to God. We live in a culture that spins and denies hard realities. We fear aging, we run from death. Our culture has even sanitized death. Not that long ago people would die in their homes, but not anymore. Not it takes place in hospitals and facilities. You see lament speaks out what culture wants to suppress. It doesn’t keep secrets: it names what’s wrong in order to heal. It forces us to acknowledge our disappointment with the way our dreams have been crushed. It’s the repeated cry of “It’s not supposed to be this way”, and it leads us back to the God of the scriptures.

Ecclesiastes 3 says, “There is a time to weep and there is a time to dance”. There is a time for sitting in our grief. Here’s what we need to do: sit in our grief. We need to allow ourselves to admit the pain that we’re experiencing. We don’t run from it, we don’t try to fix it right away. We must learn to be loved by God in the middle of it—without trying to perform our way out. And we also need our people to just sit with us. We don’t always need more insight. I love how we see Job’s friends sit with him in his grief instead of trying to offer explanations

immediately. That allow him to mourn and grieve his losses, and they do this with him too. “In a famous sermon, Jonathan Edwards noted that the story of Job was the story of us all. Job lost everything in one day—his family, his wealth, his health. Most of us experience our losses more slowly, over the span of a lifetime.” (Pete Scazzerro) J.P. Moreland says, “Expressing to God our honest feelings and beliefs is a good way to get things off our chest, stop stuffing our feelings, release anxiety, and begin a path toward a more intimate relationship with God. Clearly, the fact that God’s people felt the freedom to express things to God like the ones we’ve just examined is based on foundational theological convictions.”

In RE-orientation, we now know that God has heard our cries. There is hope in the darkness. We have been transformed. Our souls enlarged. We will never be the same because our faith in God will never be the same after a season of DIS-orientation and depression. Jerry Sittser is a man who has known tremendous suffering and pain after he experienced the tragic loss of his daughter, wife, and mother in a single fatal car accident. And in his journey through grief and sorrow as he spent years processing these tragedies with the Lord he describes his experience this way: “The soul contains a capacity to know and love God, to become virtuous, to learn truth, and to live by moral conviction. The soul is elastic, like a balloon. It can grow larger through suffering. Loss can enlarge its capacity for anger, depression, despair, and anguish, all natural and legitimate emotions whenever we experience loss. Once enlarged, the soul is also capable of experiencing greater joy, strength, peace, and love.” So how do we come alongside those currently in a stage of DIS-orientation? Number one: DON’T LET THEM ISOLATE THEMSELVES. Depressed people who do best are cushioned by persevering love. I love that Jesus doesn’t go to the Garden of Gethsemane alone, but invites Peter, James, and John to accompany him and pray nearby as he pleads with the Father to “let the cup pass”. If our Savior knows not to journey through times of pain and anguish alone, then why do we allow ourselves to believe we’ll be fine on our own? I remember a time of pain in my own life in my early young adult years, and I must admit that I’m not proud of the way I tried to numb and run away from my pain. Because looking back now, I can see that God wanted to reveal a facet of Himself to me that I had never experienced before. Instead I ran, and I read books, and I watched lots and lots of television over and over again instead of leaning into what God was doing in my life. I didn’t reach out to anybody, and yet here in the gospels we see Jesus reaches out Himself.

Next, if you’re walking alongside someone in their sadness or depressed state, allow them to be silent or to speak about their pain, but be a safe place for them to be able to remove the masks they have to wear throughout the day for the rest of the world. A good therapist friend of mine once told me about a professor who, in teaching about grief and loss, said that when you’re meeting with someone who’s in the middle of their pain and tears, we should hand them the box, but don’t hand them the tissue. This is a compassionate gesture of letting them get there on their own. Just be there. Don’t rush that process. This is what it means to come alongside them like Jesus did with Mary, Martha, and those mourning their brother’s death. Don’t try to fix them, but DO intercede for them through prayer. Never stop interceding, knowing that God is doing a work we cannot see. And remind them that God is still using them to bring light in a dark world. Jerry Sittser said that the tragic loss of his family pushed him toward God even when he didn’t want God. And in God he found grace, even when he wasn’t looking for it. To conclude I must note that “We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world” (Anne Lamott). The central message of Christ is that suffering and death bring resurrection and transformation. “The incarnation means that God cares so much that He chose to become human and suffer loss, though He never had to. We grieve so long and hard and intensely. But we find comfort knowing that the sovereign God, who is in control of everything, is the same God who has experienced the pain we live with every day. God understands suffering because God suffered. The decision to face the darkness, even if it leads to overwhelming pain, shows us that the experience of loss itself does not have to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss. It is not what happens to us that matters as much as what happens in us.” (Jerry Sittser) At the end of Job’s trials, he was able to confidently say, “*My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You.*” Job 42:5 Here’s the final word:

In Christ we are becoming joyous people, and when He returns we will be with Him in a place of eternal joy. "Depression wants to be the hero of our story; to have the loudest voice. Although we should listen to what it is telling us, we must remember that we have a better story: God's story. God has a better word for us in Christ. Depression does not have to be our identity. In fact, if we are in Christ, depression cannot be our identity. He has given us a new one and we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Depression is an opportunity to know God more even if He never takes it away. With God, it is possible to see light in the darkness." (Edward T. Welch)

Questions for further reflection or discussion:

- How has your experience of sadness or depression encouraged you to ask questions of God and His will?
- Why should we be careful not to categorize our suffering on this earth as ONLY physical or ONLY spiritual?
- What might it look like in your own life to battle depression in body, soul, and spirit?
- Why is grief and loss seen as an obstacle or as something we must avoid in our society today?
- How does Jesus express His own grief?
- How do we see Jesus come alongside those who were grieving?
- How is the stage of “Re-orientation” different from the first two stages?
- Can you think of a time of deep loss and suffering in your life when you chose to ignore or numb the pain? How might have God been reaching out to you during that time?
- What does it mean that “We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world”?