

## Finding Hope in the midst of discouragement and depression

Sadly, following Jesus doesn't spare us from the discouragements of this life nor protect us from the possibility of depression. But there is good news. We can find hope even in our darkest moments. Here's how.

### **We're in week 2 of a 4-week series on finding hope in the struggles of life**

Week 1: Loneliness and loss

**Week 2 (today): discouragement and depression**

Week 3: fear and anxiety

Week 4: defeat and addiction

### **This week: How do you find hope when you feel discouraged or depressed?**

- I chose those 2 words to make sure we are all included
  - o While not all of us will experience depression, all will be discouraged from time to time
  - o So all of us need to know how to find hope in the midst of discouragement
- But let me encourage you – when we do talk specifically about clinical depression
  - o even if that's something you've never faced, please pay attention and take notes
  - o because there may come a day when you do experience depression
  - o or have a family member or friend who does... and they'll need your help
  - o Depression is incredibly common... *statistics*
- I promise: either you will struggle with depression or someone you know will

### **And if you're wondering, "Well, who do I know that's depressed?" Me!**

#### **So let me tell you my story of battling clinical depression...**

- **I'm 41 and for most of my life, I've been relatively happy**
  - o I've had bouts with discouragement like everyone has... but I was generally optimistic
  - o That optimism was founded in my faith in Christ
- **You see, I can't remember a time in which I was not a Christian**
  - o My parents tell me I trusted in Jesus at 4... but my memory doesn't go back that far
- **What I do remember: a happy childhood spent at a small Bible church in Tomball, Texas**
  - o We were there many times a week: church, Sunday School, AWANAs, Bible study
  - o Church was the air I breathed as a child
  - o And my music was the music of my church
  - o Hymns like "Great is thy faithfulness" and "The Old Rugged Cross"
  - o and children's songs such as...
- **"I've got the joy"... any of you remember that one?**

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart  
Where? Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!  
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart  
Down in my heart to stay  
And I'm so happy, So very happy  
I've got the love of Jesus in my heart, Down in my heart  
And I'm so happy, So very happy  
I've got the love of Jesus in my heart.

- **And I was happy in Christ most of my life...**
- **Until 4 years ago when over the course of 18 months all the joy and happiness vanished**
  - o When you get an x-ray and they put heavy lead gown over you and it presses down
  - o That's what it felt like, every day – like something was squeezing all hope out of me
  - o Till I was nothing but an empty husk
  - o Things that used to bring me joy no longer did
    - reading the Bible, praying, going on a date with Julie, going on vacation
- **I tried to fight back with more prayer and more willpower but it only got worse**
- **Despair became my constant companion day and night**
  - o robbed me of sleep
  - o when I finally did fall asleep, it wouldn't last – despair came raging back at 3am
- **Got so bad I couldn't function anymore – at Brian's birthday party a few years ago**
  - o small affair – 20 people – ate a nice dinner together
  - o But I could barely speak – couldn't look anyone in the eyes for fear of losing it
  - o And people noticed
- **So the next day Brian did one of the kindest things anyone's ever done for me**
  - o Drove over to say, "You're depressed, it's not getting better, it's time to get help."
  - o I told Julie and she said, "You know, I think he's right. I think it's time to get help."
  - o She'd noticed something was off, but when you live with someone hard to recognize gradual change – it's like boiling a frog in a kettle – doesn't see danger till too late!
- She concurred with Brian's assessment and pushed me to see a doctor immediately
- Brian and Julie courageously spoke truth to me... and that changed everything.

And that gives us our first biblical step to finding hope in the midst of despair:

## 1) TALK ABOUT IT

- Same first step we saw last week – spoiler alert – same step you'll see every week!!
- **Hope can't grow in the soil of denial or shame**
  - o You hide a potted plant in a dark closet and it can't grow – will die
  - o You must bring it out in the light for it to grow – so hope only grows in the light
  - o You fight discouragement and depression by bringing them into the light
- **Why did I try to hide my despair for so long: because I was ashamed of it!**
  - o This isn't what good Christians should feel, right?
  - o I have the Holy Spirit... and I'm a pastor! I should have joy!
- **So I put on my happy face like so many of us do here in the Bible belt**
  - o pretend to have it all together when inside we're dying
- **But that is NOT biblical... Look at David – manly man, warrior, king**
  - o Psalm 6:6-7  
*I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears. My eye has wasted away with grief*
  - o Psalm 69:2-3  
*I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; My eyes fail while I wait for my God.*
  - o David didn't put on his happy-Christian mask and pretend to have it all together
  - o Openly declared struggle to God and whole nation – exact opposite of hiding!
- **So did his son Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived short of Jesus**
  - o Eccl 2:11,17  
*Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun...*

*...So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.*

- Exactly how I felt... but I was ashamed of these feelings so I tried to hide them
- Solomon didn't – he spoke them to God and wrote them out for all to see
- **Lesson: To find hope in the midst of despair you must talk about it**
  - Stop hiding your pain and discouragement from others – put away the masks!
- **Talk honestly with God**
  - God sees through any mask we put on... so just be honest... cry out to Him
  - You won't shock Him or disappoint Him
  - Opposite: you'll please Him because it demonstrates dependence and humility
- **Talk with friends and family**
  - God has given us friends and family to help us through storms of life
  - Eccl 4:9-10  
*Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.*
  - Try to make it through despair alone and you will fall
  - But if you open yourself up to friends and family you will find strength
  - If you're not discouraged but see a friend who is, talk to them! Do what Brian did!
- **Talk with experts**
  - If discouragement persists, gets worse, negatively affects your life, or leads to thoughts of harming yourself: talk to a mentor, counselor, psychiatrist, doctor, pastor ASAP
  - Many from older generations have a stigma about seeing counselor or psychiatrist
    - as if a sign of weakness or admission of failure
  - Let me be frank – that belief is a LIE!
    - Seeing a counselor is a sign of strength... and it is wisdom
    - Prov 11:14  
*Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory.*
  - Who better to give advice for depression, anxiety, loneliness than a trained counselor
    - fools not to avail ourselves of their expertise
  - Me: I have been to multiple counselors on multiple occasions and feel no shame
    - That's proof I am wise... at least in this area of life!
  - If you haven't talked with counselor because of pride or embarrassment...
  - Stop being foolish... get help before it's too late

One reason we talk with experts: they can help us take step #2 to finding hope in despair...

## 2) IDENTIFY THE CAUSE(S) IF POSSIBLE

- Everything has a cause, including our emotional states
- If you want to change your emotional state it's helpful to identify what caused it
- Discouragement and depression are complex
  - many possible causes; often multiple causes
- **Here's a partial list...**
- **Despair can be caused by sin**
  - David – Ps38 – describes a painful struggle with despair caused by his own sin
  - Sin always produces guilt and fear – if left unchecked can grow into despair
  - So sometimes depression is caused by sin, but not always... not even most of the time
  - If someone you know is depressed don't assume it's because they sinned!
    - That's what Job's friends assumed... and God was furious with them

- **Despair can be caused by negative circumstances**
  - o Matthew 11 – John the Baptist struggled with despair because he was in prison about to die
  - o Any prolonged hardship – job loss, divorce, death of a loved one – can lead to despair
  - o In John’s case, there was a 2<sup>nd</sup> cause for his despair...
- **Despair can be caused by doubt**
  - o He’d anointed Jesus as King – saw the Spirit descend – heard God say, “This is my son!”
  - o But then things went south... put into prison to die... why would God allow that?!
  - o So John begins to doubt – maybe Jesus wasn’t the right guy after all
  - o Sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Was I supposed to find someone else?”
  - o Doubt over God existence, goodness, faithfulness, love can lead to despair
- **Despair can be caused by medical issues**
  - o By a prolonged illness, especially one that’s painful like cancer
  - o By a medical condition that effects your endocrine system
  - o By pregnancy – post-partum depression is common and dangerous if untreated
- **Despair can be caused by prolonged stress**
  - o Tommy Nelson, pastor of Denton Bible Church, struggled with clinical depression
  - o Caused by years of working constantly without rest – adrenaline junky
  - o All that stress finally broke the chemical balance in his brain.
- **Despair can be caused by demonic attack**
  - o As in the case of King Saul in the Old Testament.
- This is only a partial list – there are lots of possible causes for despair and depression
- **Identify the causes so you can address the cause and not just the symptom of your despair**
- **My story: What caused my depression? Friends & counselors helped me identify 3 sources**
  - o **Prolonged stress at work and home**
    - At work – Southwood growing leaps and bounds – always work to do
    - At home – Being a dad was so much harder than I ever imagined
    - Then Julie went down with medical issues that lasted months
      - I became primary care-giver at home – often leads to depression
  - o **Theological doubt**
    - Subsided when I became a pastor but came raging back 4 yrs ago
    - Doubt over the issue of hell and how a good God could have created it
    - At the worst of it: couldn’t sleep, pray, read Bible, worship
  - o **3<sup>rd</sup> cause... a surprise because it seems like a good thing: Southwood filled up!**
    - Reached maximum capacity – every chair & bench all the way to foyer doors
    - So a few weeks later we had a planning meeting – what’s next for Grace?
      - Chart: Anderson, Southwood, campus #3, #4... rows for year 2, 5, 10
      - Under Southwood it said, “Blake, Blake, Blake”...
    - Suddenly I realized... I’m done – no more mountains to climb
      - I just need to do exactly the same thing every week until I retire or die!
      - The walls started closing in – room felt claustrophobic
    - My success led to something very unexpected: despair
    - More common than you think – Michael Phelps
    - I once counseled woman couldn’t figure out why her husband was depressed
      - After decades of hard work and sacrifice a business had finally taken off
      - But he was made to climb mountains and there were no more to climb
      - Success left him empty... and that led to depression

So with the help of friends, family, counselors I identified the causes of my depression  
Now it was time to treat it

### Traditionally: 2 schools of thought about how to treat despair and depression...

- **Religious:** treat the spirit with scripture, prayer, worship, church fellowship & activities
- **Medical:** treat the body with psychological techniques and medications

### Some people say you have to choose... but God does not agree!

- Bible is clear: humans are BOTH body & spirit inextricably bound
- your body effects your spirit; your spirit effects your body; no way to avoid that
- so you must treat both spirit and body to cure despair / depression

### 3) Treat your spirit

- Here's a few ideas – certainly not an exhaustive list
- **First, continue to worship, pray, and obey**
  - o HARD because when depressed you get no joy out of these things
  - o That's when temptation will hit: Why bother?! Just do anything that feels good
  - o NO! Sin will only make it worse – will add guilt and shame on top of depression
  - o Look at end of Ecclesiastes – written at height of Solomon's depression  
Eccl 12:13  
The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.
  - o Don't give up the fight – pray, worship, obey even when it feels like ash in your mouth
  - o That is the only way to find true hope and healing in this battle
- **Second, fight lies with truth**
  - o Despair almost always linked to some lie you've been tempted to believe
  - o The particular truths you need will depend on the particular lies you're struggling with
  - o **E.g. If discouraged because you've sinned and feel perpetually guilty**
    - Biblical truth 1 John 1:9 – "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness."
    - If you've trusted in Jesus and confessed that sin... you are forgiven! No guilt!
  - o **E.g. If discouraged because you've lost your job and fear God won't provide**
    - You need Hebrews 13:5-6 "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"
    - Hear the truth that God is with you and will take care of you
  - o **A trusted mentor, pastor, or counselor can help you ID the lies and the biblical truth**
- **Third, find good things to enjoy**
  - o We are here on earth to tell people about Jesus, not just to have fun
  - o However, that doesn't mean that God wants you to be miserable in this life!
  - o God actually enjoys seeing you enjoy the good things He provides  
Eccl 5:18  
*Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot.*
  - o There is a balance we are to walk:
    - Don't worship happiness or pleasures or possessions
    - But don't avoid all happiness, pleasures, or possessions
  - o I've found relief in my own battle by finding new, good things in this world to enjoy
    - Like this – *red Miata*... Yes, I am a stereotype... midlife crisis; red convertible
  - o But that car gave me life!
    - New mountains to climb learning to wrench and race
    - New friendships with guys I met at the track... new chances to share gospel
    - New mission – OnRamp.org – came from skills I learned on that car!

- If there's any cars in heaven... that one will be there! Part of God's provision
  - Huge props to my wife who supported me rather than judged me
    - She wants me to find new adventures and relationships thru this hobby
- Treat your spirit when you feel discouraged or depressed. But also...

#### 4) Treat your body

- When a depressed person comes to me for counsel, first thing I ask: diet, exercise, sleep
  - College students battling despair... sleeping 3 hours a night and living on pizza
  - No wonder you feel despair! Your schedule and diet would make me want to die!
  - STOP staying out so late and stop eating so much junk!
- What you do to your body effects your soul – so treat your body well – spiritual imperative
- **Get good sleep**
  - ~ 8 hours a night for most people... ~ 9 for teenagers
  - Teens: if you're laughing at that – you are wrong and you will suffer
  - Your social life is writing checks your body can't cash... so GO TO BED
- **Eat well**
  - Elijah – 1 Kings 19 – running for his life, depressed, asks God to take his life
  - What does God do? Quote scripture? NO! Gives him food to eat!
  - Our emotional state is effected by our diet – so eat healthy foods in the right amount!
    - Talk to a doctor or nutritionist – don't discount the powerful effect of diet
- **Exercise**
  - Exercise alone can actually cure mild cases of depression – rebalance chemicals
- **Get rest**
  - Not talking about sleep or naps – talking about days off
  - Remember: my depression as well as Tommy Nelson's caused partially by overworking
- **Consider medication**
  - Every morning for last 2 ½ years I've taken a little white pill called Lexipro
    - SSRI – helps improve chemical balance in brain by adjusting serotonin uptake
  - At first I was very hesitant to take medication – felt like admitting failure!
    - I'm a believer, have the Holy Spirit, pastor for 14 years!... felt ashamed
  - Then I talked to my doctor and did research and learned...
    - depression is not just a spiritual issue – a DISEASE of the brain
    - *chart* – neurons in my brain weren't producing enough serotonin
    - result: areas of my brain linked to emotions weren't getting stimulated
  - No matter how much I prayed... I was not going to get better without medication
  - God convicted me: if I have no qualms taking antibiotics to treat an infectious disease
  - ...why am I rebelling against taking antidepressants to treat this disease?!
  - Pride! I was letting my pride keep me from getting the medical help I needed
  - So I started taking Lexipro... and it worked better than I could have imagined!
    - Took 4 weeks to kick in... but then like that lead blanket lifted – I was me again!
  - Lexipro won't work for everyone
    - must talk to doctor to find right treatment – may or may not include medicine
  - And medicine won't fix everything – still need to treat your spirit
  - But in many cases an antidepressant will be a necessary part of treatment
  - Funny thing: Found out a year later that Tommy Nelson took Lexipro, too!!
    - Tommy's been an incredible pastor and leader at Denton Bible for decades
    - If it's ok for him to take Lexipro, maybe it's ok for me and you!
- **God wants us to be willing to use EVERY tool at our disposal... which may include medicine**
- **Let's put to death this stigma in the church around the use of psychotropic medications**
  - They are God's gift to us; not something to be ashamed of

## 5) Be patient with yourself!

- Despair and depression are not quick-fix things – it takes time to get better
- **I'm in year 4 and still fighting – still take a pill every morning – may never end**
- **And you know what: that's ok!**
  - o Lots of heroes in the Bible struggled with despair for long periods of time
  - o They weren't guilty for that or immature for that... and neither am I
- I've come to see my depression as a necessary part of good story God is writing with my life
  - o Without it: no OnRamp, would have never gotten to know those guys at the track, certainly wouldn't be able to teach this sermon!
  - o God is bringing good out of my depression... and He can do the same for you
- But it takes time!
  - o We're often better at giving grace to others than to ourselves
  - o But if you try to rush your recovery it's likely just to get worse... you'll add stress!
- Be patient with yourself and give God time to bring the healing and hope you crave
- **And trust me... as you apply these 5 steps we've discussed, it really does get better!**
  - o I'm not cured... but I am much better than I was
  - o Counseling, medication, exercise, OnRamp, and a succession of sports car projects
  - o It's gotten better for me... it can get better for you!
- Just give yourself time and begin to apply the lessons we've learned this morning.