

## **Message: Hope in the Darkness**

### **Listen to these three, real-life experiences:**

“Jarod's pain comes off him almost in waves. ‘I can’t believe I am going to work for \$15 an hour when I have a college education and a new law degree. I don't want to see friends and admit this is what’s happening to me.’ He had no more ideas of what to do to find a job. Tired all the time, holing up in his apartment and drinking too much, Jarod can’t envision even trying again, after failing to get hired for the last 18 months.

Tara sighs, ‘I give up. I'm never getting out of this apartment and never going to be able to give my son what I hoped for. Even though I love him, I don't feel the joy I should when I’m with him. There is no way I can afford the time or money to go back to school. I wish I’d known how hard getting ahead was going to be once I had a child. I’m tired all the time, I cry at the drop of a hat, and I just don't even feel like I can think about how to make this happen.’

Paul, at 59 years old, has been trying to deal with forced retirement after he was laid off more than a year ago. ‘I don’t see that I’m going to get another job at all. I go to a men's meeting at the community church hoping the connections and encouragement will keep me going, but we’re really just all a bunch of losers: too old and useless as far as the world can see. I’ve been trying to offer my services as a consultant, and I opened a small office, but it seems like it’s too late to build up the connections necessary to succeed. My wife is fed up with my sitting around the house, but what else is there to do?’”<sup>1</sup>

### **These three normal, every day people are just like you and me.**

They’re frustrated, tired, uninterested in the activities they used to enjoy, don’t want to get together with others socially and have a hard time seeing a positive future for themselves. They’re discouraged and, perhaps, on the path to depression. As you can imagine, telling a person “you shouldn’t feel depressed” does nothing to relieve their depression and often adds guilt since most of us can’t change our feelings.

**How do we live with depression?** That’s our topic for today.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/depression-management-techniques/201511/when-is-depression-not-depression-part-2>

**There’s a difference between being discouraged and depressed.**

Discouragement is a milder, more temporary mood swing. Depression is its more aggressive relative. Depression is hard to define, but we know it when we experience it.

**Rev. Vance Havner described Christian life as having three levels.**

“First, there are ‘mountain top’ days when everything is going well and the world looks bright. These days are fleeting. They only last for a short time. It’s unrealistic to expect to be able to leap from mountain top to mountain top, skipping the plains and valleys in between. Next are the “plains” or ordinary life days. Most days are like this. We live, work and do our regular chores without great joy or sadness. Finally, we have the days when we’re in the valleys; the dark days. These are days when we struggle with confusion, doubt, despair and discouragement. Sometimes these days can string into months or even years before we begin to experience a sense of relief or victory. When they persist, dark days are days of depression.”<sup>2</sup> Rev. Havner spoke from personal experience. His wife died after a lengthy illness. Her prayers for a miracle weren’t answered. Vance suffered deep grief for a long time.

**Depression goes by different names.** Melancholy is a term used in the past. “The blues” is a familiar term. I call it the “brain cloud” days. Christian psychologist Dr. Gary Collins says depression can be as mild as a passing period of sadness following a personal disappointment and, in its more severe forms, can be overwhelming feelings of despair, fear, exhaustion, immobilizing apathy, hopelessness and inner desperation.”<sup>3</sup>

**The Bible shows plenty of evidence of depression.** Depression has been around for thousands of years. Jonah, Job, Solomon and David experienced depression. Jesus wasn’t happy in the garden or on the cross. Hezekiah was so depressed he turned his face to the wall to avoid people. Overwhelming fear, despair, exhaustion and apathy certainly described the prophet Elijah. Elijah was so depressed he sat under the only tree in the wilderness and asked God to take his life (1 Kings 19)!

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Collins, *Christian Counseling*, W Publishing Group, 1988, pp. 104-5

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105

This was just hours before a mountain top moment when he experienced God as the still, quiet voice in the storm.

**There are some myths about depression we must be careful to avoid.** It's *not* true that depression always results from sin. It's *not* true that all depression is caused by self-pity. It's *not* true that depressed feelings can be removed permanently by spiritual exercises. It's okay for a Christian to be depressed. Happiness isn't always a choice. It's *not* true the expression “depressed Christian” is a contradiction in terms.<sup>4</sup>

**Like everyone else, Christians get depressed for a variety of reasons.** Some psychologists call depression the “common cold of mental health. Depression is the most widespread, serious and costly psychiatric disease affecting humanity today.”<sup>3</sup> There are two, major causes of depression. Depression often has a physical basis. In the simplest cases, lack of sleep or exercise, illness, drugs or diet can create depression. Thousands of women suffer depression as a result of their monthly cycle. Postpartum depression after childbirth is well-known (Genesis 25:21-16). Rebekah most likely suffered from it. Disorders, diseases, tumors, genetics and brain chemistry may be linked to depression. Bipolar disorder is one example.

**Depression is more often related to non-physical causes,** including developmental, psychological, interpersonal and non-spiritual influences. This is a significant problem for 1 in 10 people. Deep depressions affects 1 in 4 college students and 1 in 3 dropouts. Younger children, including infants, are also at risk.<sup>4</sup>

**Stress and conflict are contributing factors.** A significant loss - job, status, freedom, health, a contest or possessions, is a factor. Divorce, death or prolonged separation are some of the most powerful causes. For example, young children who are separated from their parents or any caregiver for a lengthy period of time may suffer depression all their life. Some psychologists suggest that anger turned inward, against ourselves, can cause depression, in a form of “self-revenge.” Depression can lead to suicide.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105

**What can we do?** Some of the causes of depression require medical care, prescription medication and professional therapy. If you're participating in any of those, you're doing a good thing. I encourage you to follow the full course of treatment. Sometimes, counseling sessions can help us move forward. I'm happy to help with that or to provide references. I encourage you to join a small group. That's where you'll be encouraged and learn how others deal with their challenges.

**Here are a couple of things experts recommend to help us:**<sup>5</sup>

**Challenge our thinking.** We talk to ourselves all day long: it's called self-talk. It's part of us. Self-talk is like a soundtrack that plays over and over. It can be helpful or harmful. If we're telling ourselves that we're incompetent, we can undermine our self-esteem and become depressed. To challenge this thinking, let's ask ourselves, "What's the evidence that I'm incompetent?", "How am I incompetent?", "Is it okay to be incompetent in some things?" and "How can I become more competent in the areas that matter?" This is positive thinking. We can change our inner dialog.

**Learn coping techniques.** Studies have shown that people can learn to resist depression. We can learn to manage the stresses of life. When we feel like we have a little control over our circumstances, it helps us to avoid feelings of helplessness. There are a number of techniques we can try or you can create your own. One good one is this: even when you don't feel like it, get out of bed and brush your teeth. Then do one more thing: women – fix your hair; men – shave. Then do one more thing: get dressed like you're going to some activity. Pray. Read the Bible. You can control these little steps. Doing them leads to a greater sense of purpose and hope.

**Paul knew a spiritual way.** In his letter to Philippi, Paul wrote, "*I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor*" (4:12). Paul turned to God. That's the best way. God's grace is

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 117

up to it. But it's not easy. Not all of us have had positive experiences or know where to start.

**What can our congregation do to help?** We talk about the church as family, a place to come where we can be honest about what we're feeling. We talk about the church as a community, where we're given the time and space to recover, at our own pace. We talk about the church as a space where we can trust others, relying on the vows and promises we make, holding one another accountable with grace and love. We talk about the church as a place where forgiveness and the restoring love of Jesus are most important, not the judgment of imperfect people. That's the community of faith Jesus came to lead and commissioned to continue his work. That's a positive image. But it's hard to find. That's because churches are filled with imperfect, self-centered individuals, led by imperfect, self-centered leaders.

**Maybe we're asking the wrong question.** Instead of asking "what can our congregation do to help?" we can ask "how can we be that community?" That's a hard question, one that requires us to learn how we can live together in a healthy, spiritual and practical way.

**Jesus showed us how to live: put God and others first.** That's the way he lived. And the world changed. We can, too. Changing the way we live transforms our lives, from the inside-out. But it isn't easy. Our tendency is to quit and give up when things get tough. James tells us the way to get out of the rut, "*After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing*" (James 1:2-4). Trusting God means we have to hang tough and be ready for the long haul. Endurance is needed, but very difficult when we're in pain or when we see others in pain. There are no quick fixes.

**There is a way to trust God: we can learn to say "no," "maybe," and "yes."**<sup>6</sup> The first step is learning to say "no" to gods-who-are-not-God. These are the false images of God we've learned or experienced. For example, the god-of-impossible-expectations, which leads us to set

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<sup>6</sup> Jeff VanVonderen and Dale & Juanita Ryan, *Soul Repair*, InterVarsity Press, 2008, pp. 113-123 (following)

standards that we always fail. Then there's the god-who-does-not-care, which leads us to see God as passive and unable to help us with the crises of life. For some, there's the god-of-abuse. This is a view where God is quick to anger and slow to forgive – petty and unloving. These are false images. Sadly, they're images we've grown up with or learned in church, at home and from pastors, parents and friends. The first step to a new relationship with Jesus is to say “no” to experiences that shame us, spiritually.

**We can only take the second step once we've taken the first.** When we deny the distorted images of God that we've experienced, we can learn to say “maybe” to start a new relationship with God. When we have spiritual experiences that respect us, we'll eventually feel ready to say “maybe.” We can take spiritual baby steps. We need to watch out for hypervigilance and disassociation: the over-reaction and distancing habits we've learned. While they're helpful and necessary when we distrust God and the church, they can hinder the development of a new, intimate relationship with God. The second step to a new relationship with Jesus is to say “maybe” to experiences that respect us, spiritually.

**After we've learned to say “maybe” more often than not, we can take the third step.** We begin to say “yes” to God. We're learning to be confident in our new relationship with a God who loves and cares for us, even when we struggle. Our spiritual steps become more confident. We develop and grow as a person within a community of faith. When our interactions with God aren't shaming but respectful, we can let go of our defensive responses more easily. We still need to watch for “triggers” – things that remind us of past, negative events or experiences. But, with care, our confidence grows. The third step to a new relationship with Jesus is to say “yes” to God with confidence.

### **How do we live with fear, loneliness, anger and depression?**

Don't try to do it alone. Do it as part of a community that loves and cares for you, imperfect as it is. Make friends. Even if you're filled with doubt, uncertain about what to do or not sure you can do anything, you're here! That's the first step. It's a good step. Together, let's challenge the false images of God that distract you. Jesus wants to

restore you. Listen to a new, positive voice in your mind. Learn to trust God with all your heart. Let God's Spirit fill your soul with hope, even when you're in the deepest, darkest valley. That's how our faith gives us life.

Let us pray...

*Fill us with your Spirit, the spirit of love and power. Show us how to pray and how to live by faith. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### **Genesis 25:21-26 (NRSV)**

Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

### **Isaiah 38:1-3 (NRSV)**

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover." Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the LORD: "Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

### **Matthew 11:28-30 (NRSV)**

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."