

Depression

THE SUN ALWAYS RISES



MARGARET ASHMORE

The GOSPEL for REAL LIFE series

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P U B L I S H I N G

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“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
you have loosed my sackcloth
and clothed me with gladness.”

—Psalm 30:11

JESUS CHRIST, the Son of the living God, was called a “man of sorrows.” His soul was grieved unto death through rejection, slander, abandonment, betrayal, false accusations, extreme physical pain, weeping over loss, and ultimately death itself—following his orphaned cry on the cross. But he was never debilitated, and there was not a furrowed gloom on his brow, because his kingdom is unshakable. “[God will shake things which can be shaken] that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:27–28).

THE *NORMALITY* OF DEPRESSION

“It is a myth that faith is always smiling.”

—Edward Welch¹

There is no ordinary depression for each individual, but it is and has always been ordinary to the human condition.

Experiences of malaise and melancholy can range from a gray day to grieving the loss of a loved one or pondering man’s estate without Christ—a broad spectrum of suffering that comes from living in a creation groaning for redemption and is common to every man and woman. After all, two thirds of the Psalms were

1. Edward T. Welch, *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness—Light for the Path* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2004).

written in a minor key. They take us into the valleys of sorrow, fear, insecurity, and despair—the realities of life in a fallen world—but in the end always guide us back to the praise of our Creator, followed by a restoration of peace and joy (a wonderful counseling model).

Depression can also be the result of physical problems such as anemia, arteriosclerosis, low blood sugar, thyroid disorders, hormone imbalances, infections, and even dehydration. It is always recommended for those who find themselves struggling with unrelenting despondency to seek medical advice to rule out somatic causes. And yes, there are those times when severe trauma or emotional shock can lead to a break, punctuated with episodes of severe depression, from the horror of reality. (For a more comprehensive treatment of the physical causes of depression, I recommend Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dr. Laura Hendrickson's *Will Medicine Stop the Pain?*²)

Where there is empirical evidence of an imbalance or deficiency, antidepressant medication can be an irrefutable help with physiological as well as psychotic maladies that may cause a loss of appetite, mood swings, and insomnia. Some of the godliest people I know avail themselves of these medications. God has graciously given man the ability to see through a microscope, develop custom-made medications, and prescribe that which would relieve unnecessary suffering. As a cancer survivor, I am particularly grateful to God for revealing to researchers target chemotherapies to arrest the rogue cells threatening my life, as well as those whose application limited nausea during treatment. There is nothing spiritual about denying the wisdom God has dispensed to the medical community to save undue misery. That is not faith; it is foolishness.

The soul, however, especially in regard to the kind of depression that immobilizes, debilitates, and renders an individual “nonfunctioning,” is God's exclusive territory. It has been said that psychology may *describe* but only the Bible *prescribes*.

2. Elyse Fitzpatrick and Laura Hendrickson, *Will Medicine Stop the Pain?: Finding God's Healing for Depression, Anxiety and Other Troubling Emotions* (Chicago: Moody, 2006).

Medications can assuage and heal physical pain or stabilize a mind reeling from shock, but they cannot heal the soul from “wrong [that] seems oft so strong.”³ God’s Word stakes the claim that it can. That is the promise of Psalm 107:20: “He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.” But like all balms, the choice must be made to apply it.

THE POWER TO CHOOSE

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

—Viktor Frankl, survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp⁴

“Our will can control our feelings if only we are steadfastly minded to do so. Surging emotions, like a tossing vessel, which by degrees yield to the steady pull of the anchor, will find themselves attached to the mighty power of God by the choice of your will.”

—Hannah Whithall Smith⁵

Our circumstances—no matter how difficult in the past or present—do not determine whether we live expansive and joyful lives or just exist in the small world of a self-pitying depression. But the *choices* we make *in light of* those circumstances do.

Jesus is our great example in Gethsemane, *the place of decision*, when he asked his Father, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me,” and then declared, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39). That decision would be seminal in all our decisions

3. Maltbie D. Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World,” 1901.

4. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search For Meaning* (repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 75.

5. Hannah Whithall Smith, *God Is Enough* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 52–53. Also quoted in Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe and the Truth That Sets Them Free* (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 198.

to come—my will and my kingdom or God’s will and his kingdom. The great determiner of the soul’s well-being hangs on the answer. Elisabeth Elliot further qualifies why the choice is not easily made when she says, “It is hard to enter the kingdom of God—not because an angel is set to keep us out, not because God would surround Himself with a highly selected elite, but because the condition for admittance is renunciation of all other kingdoms.”⁶

A Christian friend who had been dominated most of her life by depression said the turning point came after she had recounted to *yet another* counselor how she would at the end of each day go straight to bed and cry until she fell asleep. She was depressed, inert, and felt hopeless. She was angry that life had not lived up to her expectations. But this counselor was different. She was a *biblical* counselor. Instead of the usual deterministic matrix of blaming her past and her parents, parroting Freud’s “ethic of non-responsibility”⁷ (a postulate that keeps the injured party going around the same mountain in an ever deepening rut), she looked her square in the face and said, “Yes, and you choose to go there.”

It was a jolting surge of life-giving hope—a catalytic spark of revival. She was not a victim! She could, by making the right choices, begin the sometimes slow but certain ascent out of that melancholy to sustaining joy. And these choices are afforded all whose spirit is occupied by the living God.

It is noteworthy that the Bible uses the word “walk” 1,550 times. It assumes that the path we are on determines our destiny, and Scripture makes it clear that there are only two paths. One is the narrow path called *difficult* because it demands humbling ourselves, relinquishing our rights, putting others before us instead of using them to get our needs met, and ultimately dying to the never-ceasing demands of the self-life. Its destination: *an abundant life*. The other path is wide, smoothed by millions of feet,

6. Elisabeth Elliot, *A Lamp Unto My Feet: The Bible’s Light for Your Daily Walk* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2004), 153.

7. Jay E. Adams, *Competent To Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 17–18.

made popular by all the self-aggrandizing road signs that bolster our natural default to self-centeredness along the way: “You are a victim.” “It’s not your fault.” “You deserve to be happy.” But the end is destruction—destruction of family, relationships, and even health. The end is also a dampening of hope, resulting in a spiral further down into the dark world of depression.

This is a booklet of good news because its center is the gospel of Jesus Christ, whose power saved us from the penalty of sin at salvation, whose power will save us from the presence of sin at glorification, and whose *same divine dynamism can save us every day* from the power of sin in sanctification. The gospel doesn’t just save us from hell; it saves us from ourselves. And these few pages face us head-on with the choices we can make—the world’s way or God’s, the centrality of self or Christ, depression with moments of happiness or joy with moments of depression. Whichever path you are on, you have chosen to go there.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

“His going forth is as certain as the dawn.”

—Hosea 6:3 (NASB)

“Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,
and burst their bonds apart.”

—Psalm 107:13–14

My parents had just begun to build their dream home in the country, and they were so excited to watch the progress that they moved into an old trailer next to the building site. But before one nail was driven, my mom had a fatal heart attack. To paraphrase Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as she walked home through the gloaming woods on a Halloween night, “Thus

began my longest journey”⁸ and one that would take me through what many have called “the dark night of the soul.”

Dad loved Mom so much that he would have been terminally dispirited without someone occupying “her chair.” So I moved in with him. I left my home, my job, and my friends to live in the middle of nowhere in a derelict trailer, which seemed porous to every creepy, crawling species of insect native to Texas. Worse, the shadow of my mother’s death was “like the sky—it spread over everything.”⁹ It blighted any vestige of joy and left me wondering whether the heavy cloak of depression that seemed to swallow me whole would ever lift. But then God used my little dog Baxter to show me that *it would*.

On the night of a new moon, when a swath of clouds masked the steering stars, Baxter ran from the trailer into the woods after some varmint that proved too tantalizing for his terrier instincts. I was away visiting friends, so my dad took his flashlight and went to find my beloved dog. Well into his search, the flashlight battery died. There he was in pitch black, surrounded by a thick overgrowth of scrub trees, ravines, and old barbed wire fences, without a heavenly body for light or compass.

When I came home the next morning, I found Dad sitting in his easy chair, drinking a cup of coffee in perfect peace, with one sheepish little dog at his feet. After regaling me with his harrowing tale, I asked, “What did you do?” He looked at me almost quizzically and said, “I just sat down.” “You just sat down?” I asked. “Yes, Margaret. I knew the sun would come up in the morning.”

There was the answer. In the deepest, seemingly inescapable nightfall, the sun always rises. The disciples on the stormy sea cried out in fearful desperation, and Jesus came to them in the fourth watch, the Roman’s division of the day that heralded the dawn.

You may be facing some hard things in life now, all of which could easily spiral you into the depths of depression: a loveless mar-

8. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960), 292.

9. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 13, 39.

riage or what may seem interminable singleness, a wayward child, the haunting pain of abuse from childhood, looming foreclosure, age replacing youth. Maybe you've gotten a call from a doctor who found "something suspicious." These are times John Calvin calls "critical seasons,"¹⁰ when we choose to sink into the dark depths of fear and anxiety, or be like Peter, who changed his focus from the storm's threatening swells to a triumphant Savior. When we choose to focus on the Savior, we can walk astride the very thing that would drown us. Our wills, motivated by the knowledge of God's unconditional love and in his enabling power, *can* decide to stand against that which threatens to undo us.

In Ed Welch's book, *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*, we read, "Martin Luther called depression *anfechtungen*, which means, 'to be fought at.'"¹¹ Instead of being translated as "something to surrender to," it is a call to arms. He goes on to quote D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the British pastor and physician who addressed the topic of depression. He says, "You have to take yourself in hand. . . . You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, 'Hope thou in God'—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way."¹²

What follows is a list of resolutions infused with truth to help you fight the good fight against depression and fight for joy in a world hostile to it. While there is no necessary order to the list, I begin purposefully with *gratitude* because God bids us come into his gates with thanksgiving. It's amazing how that one act can change the entire trajectory of emotions. However, each resolution below has potency for lifting a heavy heart, while its neglect will most certainly weigh the heart down.

10. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 8: Psalms, Part I*, trans. John King (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), available online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc08/cc08037.htm>.

11. Welch, *Depression*, 97.

12. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 21; also quoted in DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe*, 208.

“My dear friend Margaret Ashmore loves the Lord, she loves his Word, she loves people, and she loves to see hearts transformed and lives set free by the power of his truth. God has used this faithful servant to help many struggling pilgrims find hope and help by way of the ‘old rugged Cross.’”

–NANCY LEIGH DEMOSS, Author; *Revive Our Hearts* radio host

CHOOSING GOD’S LIGHT IN A WORLD’S DARKNESS

The periods of depression that we all share can range from having a bad day to grieving the loss of a loved one. Our fallen world harbors a broad spectrum of suffering that, while never the same for each individual, has always been part of the human condition.

Yet Margaret Ashmore reminds us that however difficult our circumstances, they cannot determine whether our lives are ruled by joy or by depression . . . the choices we make in light of those circumstances do. She lays before us a set of godly choices we can make in our own “dark night of the soul” to seek God’s freedom from our dominating depression.

THE GOSPEL FOR REAL LIFE booklet series by the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC) applies the timeless hope of Christ to the unique struggles of modern believers.

“The gospel isn’t just an ethereal idea. It’s not a philosophy, and it’s not static. It moves and shapes and transforms. I am grateful for ABC’s work of letting the gospel bear its weight on these real life sorrows and pains.”

–MATT CHANDLER, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Flower Mound, Texas

MARGARET ASHMORE serves on the board of the Association of Biblical Counselors and served on the support staff of Denton Bible Church in Denton, Texas, for fifteen years. She speaks at conferences and retreats throughout the United States and encourages women through biblical counseling.



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