
Words of Hope for Those Who Struggle with Depression

by Edward T. Welch

It is technically called depression, but it can't be captured by a word. You feel numb, yet your head hurts; empty, yet inside there are screams; fatigue, yet fears abound. Things that were once pleasures now barely hold your attention. Your brain feels like it is in a fog. You feel weighted down.

Do you remember when you had goals? Things that you looked forward to? They could have been as small as going to a movie on Friday night or a job you wanted to accomplish. Now you have very few goals. Making it through the day seems like enough.

Do you notice what life feels like without goals? Every day is the same. There is no rhythm of rising anticipation, satisfaction, then rest. Each day brings a dreadful monotony, and you fear that tomorrow will be the same as today. The flatness of life feels like it is killing you.

Sleep? It's a mess. You can't get enough. You don't even remember what it feels like to wake up refreshed.

Have you ever seen Pablo Picasso's paintings from his blue period? If you find a book on Picasso you might want to take a look. The pictures are not encouraging but you would, at least, find that you are not alone. Triggered by a difficult relationship, he did a series of paintings where people looked lifeless and everything was in shades of blue and gray. Was he putting his feelings

into his art, or was he faithfully presenting the world as he actually saw it? Either way, there are no sun splashed days with depression, just dreary overcast skies and a dull colorless world.

Picasso wasn't the only one who struggled with what has come to be known as depression. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon, missionary David Brainerd, and Bible translator J. B. Phillips were some of the more well-known and accomplished people who talked and wrote about their struggles. So although you may feel alone, many have walked the path before, and many are walking it now.

If any of this sounds familiar, keep reading. You already have reason to hope. The fact that you are willing to read this—something not absolutely necessary—is itself a significant step up.

This will be as brief as possible. It is a sketchy map that shows a way through depression. If you disagree with anything, argue. If it seems like too much, put it down and come back to it later.

Up front you should know that the map ultimately leads to Jesus Christ. It leads to a person more than techniques. Some people say, "Jesus doesn't work," "I've tried Him and I am still just as depressed." But consider this: Jesus claims to be the way, truth, life, source of hope, lover of our souls, servant, brother, friend, the one who hears and acts,

the one who never leaves. *No therapy or medication makes such bold claims.*

If Jesus and the teachings of Scripture seem like hollow platitudes to you—and perhaps they do—remember that *everything* sounds somewhat empty to you right now. What may seem trite now will be profound as you begin to be certain of its reality.

How Can I Do Anything When I Don't Feel Anything?

Here is the problem. Most people do things because they *feel* like doing them. They get up in the morning because they feel like going to work, or they feel like avoiding the boss's questions when they are late, or they feel like avoiding poverty. We are more feeling-driven than we think.

In depression, you don't feel. (Or, whatever you *do* feel isn't going to motivate you to do anything profitable. For example, you feel like dying, screaming, running, disappearing, avoiding). How can feeling-driven people set goals, have purpose, or get motivated when they don't feel?

Initially, you will have to learn another way to live. You will have to be like the woman whose muscles still worked but they stopped giving her information about her limbs. She wasn't paralyzed, but if she closed her eyes she couldn't tell if she was standing, reaching, or resting. Sometimes she would look in the mirror and notice that she was holding her right arm straight up in the air and she never realized it. She couldn't even walk because she didn't know where her legs were. Gradually, by looking in mirrors and seeing her body rather than feeling it, she began to walk again. After much practice, walking began to feel natural again. But she had to learn a new way to live and move.

In depression, the new way of living is to *believe* and act on what God says rather than feel what God says. It is living by faith. To paraphrase Hebrews 11:1, "faith is being certain of *what we do not feel*." In other words, when there is a debate between what your feelings say and what Scripture says, Scripture wins. Any other result and you are essentially telling God that He is not to be trusted. "God is not telling the truth. I can't trust Him. I can only trust myself." That is probably *not* what you want to say. You might want to say that you don't *understand* what God is doing, but to deny that God speaks the truth is itself untrue. It is a lie. Don't believe it. God *is* truth.

Here is an example of this new way of living. You *feel* like you have no purpose and no hope. There is no reason to get out of bed, work, love, or live. You feel it in your entire being. God, however, counters these feelings on every page of Scripture. For example, "Love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22). That is

a purpose statement. It is a reason to get out of bed. You have to fight the paralyzing feelings so you can love another person. Why bother? Because it is your personal commission from God Himself, the King of kings.

If you are the King's servant—and you are—and He asks you to do something, you have just been given a purpose for living. It is only when the King says that He doesn't need you anymore that your purpose is done, and this, of course, will never happen with the true God. He says that His purposes for you last all eternity.

When the triune God speaks, He inevitably talks about Jesus.

To put your purpose in the broadest terms, your job is to glorify and enjoy God (1 Cor. 10:31). To glorify God means to make His name famous. His honor and His reputation become more important than your own.

To glorify God. Does it sound like a cliché? Although it sounds impractical, it is actually very concrete. It is carried out in small, sometimes private steps of faith and obedience. Other people may not see it, but if you do *anything* because of Jesus and what Jesus did for you—from combing your hair to selling everything you have and being a missionary—then you bring glory to God.

Do you want a tangible incentive? There is good evidence in Scripture that when you seek God and His kingdom, your troubles will become lighter (2 Cor. 4:16, 17).

Listen

While you develop a clear statement of purpose, you should have someone help you refine it, remind you of it, and read it to you. At that point, your job will be to listen. You have been listening to your own thoughts, but now you must listen to what God says in His Word and what God says through people.

Listening sounds passive, but it is hard work. The book of James reminds us that we are prone to "merely listen," like people who look at ourselves in a mirror and quickly forget what we look like. So when you read or hear about truth and love, don't just merely listen; really *hear*.

What will you hear? When the triune God speaks, He inevitably talks about Jesus. Jesus is the one who had compassion on those who suffer, and He understands those who suffer because His pain exceeded our

own. Have you ever noticed that when you listen to someone else's suffering, especially if that suffering was overwhelming and intense, your own troubles seem lighter? At least, such listening diverts attention away from our own suffering, and we see that we are not alone. This is what happens when you look toward Jesus and listen.

Keep listening, though. Even though you may feel rejected by others, Jesus won't reject you (Ps. 27:10). Turn to Him in faith—even with a small speck of

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faith—and He will never leave or forsake you (Heb. 13:5). He swears this to you.

Love doesn't always move you? Consider this. In His presence is love that will take all eternity to begin to comprehend. If it doesn't move you now, it will. His love is like that of a good parent for a child who doesn't understand the details of parental love. In other words, the child may occasionally think that the parent is unloving, but the parent's love is too elaborate and beautiful for the child to understand. The child is grief-stricken because he can no longer play in the mud, but the parent is cleaning him up for a trip to Disneyland. If you can't see this love, then keep listening to the gospel. That is, according to the plan of God, Jesus died for sinners like us. *This* is a wonderful and deep love. If it doesn't sound wonderful, then perhaps you have forgotten that you are a sinner. Jesus, after all, didn't die for good people who needed a spiritual boost; He died to bring alienated and condemned enemies into His family.

There is much more that God says, but it is too easy to start drifting off and to think, "this isn't helping." As one woman observed, "No amount of love from or for other people—and there was a lot—could help. No advantage of a caring family and fabulous job was enough to overcome the pain and hopelessness." At this point, it is time to think.

Think

If you are depressed and you listen to yourself think, you will probably hear thoughts that are dark,

hopeless, pessimistic, and critical of yourself or others. Wherever these thoughts begin, they rarely stop until they get to the most despairing place possible. For example, if someone is talking about Santa Claus, you start thinking that you are fat too, and that, behind your back, everyone laughs about your weight. If someone compliments you on a job well done, you are confident that it was to cushion the blow of your imminent lay-off, and if the person really knew the kind of job you did you would be fired, and...

The whole process is automatic. Crank it up, and off it goes. Mental autopilot. The fact that your mind can feel perpetually foggy means that you don't feel capable of the Herculean effort needed to make mental corrections.

You have to start by thinking—not automatic thinking, but purposeful thinking. Your thinking must be guided by Scripture. Difficult work? Yes. Any mental effort is going to be work. Immediate changes? Probably not ones that are obvious to you. But you must do it. Your current thinking bends toward hopelessness and despair. You have to be willing to put up a fight.

If you are reluctant to work at it, then *you must question whether you really want to change*. It may sound odd, but many people don't. The work involved doesn't seem worth it, they hate what they will have to face if they are no longer depressed, or they are loyal to their own style of life, preferring instead that the world around them change.

So think. Do you really want to change?

If you find yourself more reluctant to change than you thought, you *must* go back and rethink your purpose. Some people use their children as a motivation for change, but children are not a powerful enough reason. Your dark thoughts would quickly persuade you that your children and everyone else would be better off without you. The only sufficient reason is that you are called to represent God on earth, He is your loving master and you are His child, servant or ambassador—take your pick. You live because of Him.

If that is not enough, you will have to go back to listening. Ask someone to tell you who God is. When your mind is in a fog it is hard to remind yourself, so ask someone else. Ask someone to tell you that the creator God lives, and that He sent Jesus to die for the sins of people like us, who ignored and were enemies of God. Ask the person to persuade you that God is good. Ask the person to keep talking until it sounds like good news and you believe it.

Think about it. If you weren't depressed, you would be in awe of what God has done. You would simply bow down, and, like so many others who have understood the love and the presence of God, say, "I am not

worthy, but I am grateful." Don't give up listening to these truths. They will change you. Don't give up.

What Is Your Depression Saying? What Does It Mean?

While you try to listen, hearing about Christ and your purpose for living, the next place to practice thinking is to ask, "What are my feelings saying?" Your feelings tell you something about yourself.

This is the way it is with all emotions: fear, anger, anticipation, dread, and so on. They are usually provoked by some circumstance in our lives, but they are *your* responses to and *your* interpretations of that event. In other words, they reveal *you*. For example, if you get an unexpected bill, it can provoke financial concerns. But if you obsess and are chronically fearful about your financial future, that fear reveals where you have put your trust: you have put it in yourself rather than your God. Your emotions reveal *you*.

Moses said this very thing to the Hebrews when they were wandering in the desert. He taught that the difficulties of life in the desert tested the people "in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his [God's] commandments" (Deut. 8:2). When the people were discontent and even angry, they were saying more about themselves than they were about the desert.

The same is true for depression: depression says something about your heart. The question is, what does it say? This is where you have to think. Consider some of these possibilities. Which ones put words on your feelings of despondency?

- "I am afraid."

Afraid to make a wrong decision
 to fail
 to be exposed
 to lose a loved one
 to be abandoned
 to not have control
 to die
 to have a disabling disease
 to see God
 of everything

- "I am guilty," or "I am shamed."

Guilty from
 my own sin
 not measuring up to my *own* standards of
 success rather than God's
 not being approved of by people whose
 opinions have become more important
 than God's
 living as if I had to pay God back for my
 sin when, in truth, the way I can bring

glory to God is to agree that He paid for everything

a conscience that is making judgments on incomplete data (e.g., I am taking responsibility for other people's sins)

- "I lost something." Depression often feels empty, like you lost something or somebody. It could be a job, health, youth, money, or a person. You feel like a loved one has died. But depression is more than bereavement. It is bereavement run amok. Most likely, the thing lost was like a god to you. It was

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where you placed your hope and trust.

- "I need something." Is depression saying that you need love, significance, respect, or some other psychological desire? We all enjoy these things when we have them, but sometimes they become more important than they should be. Can you notice what happens when your desires become the most important thing? Your desires transform into needs. You feel like you must have them in order to live. This is lust, and lust always wants more. It is never satisfied. It always feels empty.

- "I AM ANGRY." You have probably heard that depression can be saying, "I am angry." Usually, we are angry because we didn't get what we wanted from someone else or God Himself. This doesn't mean that you think murderous thoughts about others and shake your fist at God, although you might. Look for quieter expressions of anger, such as complaining, grumbling, lack of forgiveness, or self-pity. If you don't see them, look again. They will be there.

- "I must avoid something." Consider what would be disagreeable about no longer being depressed. Would you have to face something that you want to avoid, such as a person, financial difficulties, or responsibilities that carry the possibility of failure? The mental fog and physical fatigue of depression help you avoid thinking about a particularly troubling event or person.

- "Woe is me." Seasoned helpers of depressed people are quick to point out that depression speaks the language of self-pity. "If no one else is going to feel sorry for me, I will feel sorry for myself." This can be deadly. It means that you live like a victim rather

than one who has been shown infinite grace and mercy.

- “I have no hope.” If this sounds familiar, then you have to ask another question: “Hope for what?” Hope that you get rid of depression? Maybe you are hoping for too little.

We rejoice in the glory of God. Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Rom. 5:2-5)

This passage of Scripture is difficult to understand, but one thing is clear. The Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, had deep pain and suffering in his life, but, somehow, that did not weigh him down. Your job is to figure out his secret, which Paul is eager to reveal.

Here is a hint. “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb. 12:3). Paul kept his eyes on Jesus. When we take our eyes off of Jesus, the road is endless. We know we will not have the stamina for it. But when we see that Jesus—the Knower of hearts—has traveled this road before us, then we can be confident that the Spirit is with us and will give us strength to walk in humble faith and obedience.

And it hasn't been Jesus alone who walked the path of hope, anticipating the glories that were right around the bend, just barely out of sight. As Hebrews 11 indicates, the path is well worn and populated by saints past and present. Although depressed people feel absolutely alone, they are part of a huge heaven-bound procession.

- “I know that my Redeemer is with me, and I will humbly wait for his deliverance.” When faith is tested, as it is during depression, sometimes what is revealed is a heart that trusts in the Lord. You have decided that you will follow God, not because He makes you feel good, but because He is Lord of all, the loving Shepherd, the eternal Father. There is no one else to follow. Of course, you don't understand what is happening to you now, but you know that He is your God who is with you, and that is enough.

What does your depression say? This is just a short list of some of the more common utterances of the heart. There are many more. If you can't make out the meaning of your depression, there is still plenty to do. Hearing the gospel of Christ, knowing your purpose,

and acting on that purpose are enough work in themselves. But keep asking yourself what your depression is saying.

Trust and Worship God Alone

As you think about the meaning of your feelings, you will notice that, rather than leading you to more and more despair, the path leads you to the triune God. More specifically, it will lead you to the question, Will you live for God or will you live for yourself and the

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things you worship? Sometimes it takes awhile to get to this most critical of questions, but it is always there. Usually, all you have to do is ask yourself the “why” questions of a three-year-old.

“I can't go on.”

“Why?”

“Because I am so tired and I can't take the pain any more.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel like I am alone.”

“Why?”

“Because...I don't believe that God is with me.”

“Why?”

“Because...I don't trust him. I trust in *my* interpretation that comes from *my* feelings.”

“Why” questions should lead you to God. You will get tired of the questions by the time you get to the second one, but keep them coming. At the end of your questions say to Him, “Jesus is my Lord, I confess my unbelief, and I trust You.”

Trust, confession of sin, and following Christ in obedience—sound familiar? These are the staples of the spiritual life. When you get under the surface, these are the things that are important for everyone. You will find that they work.

If these seem superficial, then you are numb to the secrets of the universe and you need to go back to listening. Don't trust what your emotions are saying on this one. These may be simple, but they are not simplistic. They are the foundations for life itself. They are the primary ways we respond to God.

Confess Sin to Your Father in Heaven

Trust in Christ, confession of sin, obedience to the One who loves you: of the three, confessing sin might

seem discouraging at first. You might already feel like a bad person. This just makes you feel worse. But think.

- If the Spirit of God is going to allow you to see sin in your life, you have pretty good evidence that He is your Father and you are His child. You can't see your own sin without God revealing it.
- Confessing sin should be a normal part of our daily routine, whether depressed or not (Matt. 6:9-13).
- Confessing sin does not jeopardize our relationship with God. It only enhances it. If we have trusted in Christ, the divine judgment on our sin has fallen on Christ, not ourselves. Confessing sin reminds us that Christ has already dealt with our deepest problem, and we have reason to be thankful.

Here is the rule. If you consider what your depression is saying and it takes you all the way to your relationship with Christ, then don't stop on that journey until you have heard something good. God's Word always teaches us to end with Jesus and with words that are good news to our listening ears. So don't stop with, "What a miserable wretch I am." You might be a miserable wretch, but you can't end there. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24, 25). Remember that if you have put your faith in Jesus you are forgiven, adopted, beloved, and delighted in. You must start thinking the way *God* thinks, not the way *you* think.

Take Practical Steps of Love and Obedience

The following list includes a number of applications of Scripture. The basic idea is that faith is expressed in action.

1. Take one biblical story, read it every day, and write down 25 applications of it (or 5, 10, or 50 applications). This may sound impossible, but once you get past the first ten it will get easier. Don't forget, your mind drifts. It is fatigued. It will be hard to focus on one thing, but it will help.
2. Write five ways you have been blessed by a friend. Mail them.
3. Write your purpose for living. Allow it to be revised by others. Then memorize it and live it.
4. Become an expert in what God says to those who suffer. Consider starting with Hebrews 10-12. Hebrews 10-12 calls you to faith and hope, then it points you to Jesus. Yet it doesn't stop there. Scripture always points us toward other people as well: faith in God *and* love toward other people. In this case, it says, "make every effort to live in peace with all men" (Heb. 12:14). How can you be a peacemaker? Who do you need to forgive? Of whom do you need to ask forgiveness?

5. Take notes on the Sunday sermon. Act on them.
6. Each day, speak or write something that can be an encouragement to others. You have a calling. There are people to love, to care for, to help.
7. Each day, listen to God's Word, music that points you to Christ, or another person who has spiritual wisdom. Be able to summarize what you heard and tell someone about it.
8. Keep a sharp eye out for grumbling and complaining. Like gossip, these are sins that are acceptable in

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our culture so we don't see their ugly roots. What are grumbling or complaining really saying? Do you see how they are against God?

9. Consider these questions. In this culture, have we forgotten the benefits of hardship? What are possible benefits to suffering? (Ps. 119:67, 71; 2 Cor. 1:8-10; Heb. 5:8; James 1:3)
10. Ask a few people to pray for you and invite them to speak the truth to you. When you ask for prayer, ask for more than just the alleviation of depression. Use this as an opportunity to pray *big* prayers. Find prayers in Scripture and pray them. For example, pray that you would know the love of Christ (Eph. 3), that you would look more like Jesus (Rom. 8:29), that you would love others, and that you would discern what it means to bring glory to God.
11. When in doubt, creatively show love to other people.

Final Thoughts

Depression is hard. It doesn't leave without a fight. But there are good reasons to enter into the fight. Changes are guaranteed (Phil. 1:6). You are in the presence of "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Cor. 1:3, 4). Do you believe that? Think about it. When you consider that the Father sent His Son—His beloved, only son—to die for us when we were still His enemies, there is no reason to think that He will be stingy with His love and compassion now that we know Him as Father.

Sometimes, however, we have our *own* definition of compassion. Compassion might mean "to take away misery, quickly." Instead, you have to believe that God's love and compassion exceed even our imagina-

tion, let alone our understanding. He is up to something good. He wants to shower you with grace and make you look more and more like Jesus.

So don't give up. You have a purpose. God is on the move. You are a servant of the King, a child who repre-

sents the Father, and you will soon have the privilege of comforting "those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:4). The body of Christ needs you.

Some Common Questions

What has helped other people? Some people who have passed through depression were asked to complete this sentence: "I saw changes in my experience of depression when..."

1. I began to talk to myself rather than listen to myself. I began to speak different Scriptures to myself rather than listen to my own voices of hopelessness.
2. I stopped saying, "It doesn't work." I was always looking for the magic bullet. I would pray (trying to make deals with God), look at my own heart (for a minute or two), or briefly try some other seemingly spiritual activity, and when they didn't work, I would quit. Now I believe that it does "work." There is contentment and even joy in long-term, small steps of faith and obedience.
3. I had a friend and a pastor who kept the bigger picture of God's kingdom in front of me. Depression made my world so small; when I saw that God was on the move, I began to have hope.
4. My daughter became very sick. It forced me to see outside of my own world.
5. A friend didn't give up on me. She was always loving me and pointing me to the truth, even when I didn't want to hear about Jesus.
6. A friend let me "borrow" her faith. My faith was so weak, but I always knew that she was confident of God's presence and love for the church and even for me.
7. I forgave my father and entrusted him to God.
8. I saw that it was 90% pride. I felt like I deserved certain things from people.
9. I began to believe that I was in a battle and realized that I had to fight.
10. I saw that I was doing things rather than just having things done to me. For example, I was

doing anger, I was doing big time complaining. In my heart, I was doing what I wanted.

11. I began to know about God's grace. I began to see that my wallowing in guilt was more work-righteousness than godly sorrow.
12. Once I saw that it was a good thing to see my sin—it was evidence of God's love and the Spirit working in my life—I began to say to myself, "When in doubt, repent."
13. I practiced putting one foot in front of the other, and worked on what I believed were my God-given responsibilities.

What about things that alleviate symptoms? What about taking antidepressant medication? Changing your diet? Getting some full-spectrum lights? Following an exercise program? Taking a vacation trip? You may have already tried some of these things that can sometimes alleviate the severity of some of the symptoms of depression. Should you try these or not?

Ultimately, the decision is yours. Just make a thoughtful, wise choice. Talk to people about it. What are the benefits and risks? What are the alternatives? Do your homework.

Realize that there is no miracle cure. If something helps, you still should ask questions about what depression is saying, and you should still seek to grow in Christ. Depression still reveals us, not just the chemical composition of our brain. So don't think that the problem is either spiritual or physical. Instead, think of the problem as an occasion to consider your own heart. As you do, more often than not your depression will be significantly lightened. Might there be a physical or chemical problem? Perhaps. But trouble from any source is still an occasion for spiritual work.