

WHEN HOPE IS LOST

Captain Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin participated in one of the greatest technological feats of the 20th century--he was one of the first two men to walk on the moon. Then something very unexpected happened. In just a few short years after his historic voyage, his life had turned from success to the brink of disaster. Instead of basking in the glow of his heroic achievement, he sagged into a state of such severe depression that it nearly ruined him and his family.

Buzz slid from the mountaintop of achievement into a valley of despair. "I had been immersed in just one project--going to the moon," Aldrin reflected.¹ "I had gone to the moon. . . . What possible goal could I add now. There simply wasn't one."² And when the emptiness set in with no hope of ever finding purpose in life again, he became depressed.

Some, like Buzz Aldrin, become depressed after they reach their goals and find that there is nothing left to live for. Others slip into a state of depression when hope for what has *not* been reached seems lost--hope for a caring companion, hope for a successful career, hope for enough money to pay the bills, hope for a reconciled relationship, hope for relief from a stressful situation, or hope for the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream.

One young woman was struck down in the prime of life with a crippling disease. Not only did she lose hope of ever again experiencing activities she once enjoyed, but her hopes for a husband and a family came crashing down when her fiancé broke off their engagement. While some might have found the energy to continue, she felt stretched beyond what she could endure. Before long her grief turned to despair and eventually to depression.

Regardless of how it comes about, depression can afflict the soul as few other personal experiences can. Left unattended, it can develop into a severe struggle that drains life of its hope and energy.

The path is difficult for all who stagger through the darkness of depression. Gloom, confusion, and loneliness can hound the soul relentlessly. But no matter how painfully taxing the path becomes, one can find in the pages that follow good reason to "take heart" (Jn. 16:33) and to believe that the best is yet ahead.

Author Jeff Olson is a licensed counselor in Michigan and works for the RBC Ministries Biblical Correspondence Department.

AN OVERVIEW OF DEPRESSION

Depression is a common result of living in a fallen world. Some of the strongest and noblest among us have struggled in its grip. The patriarch Job, the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon, and the courageous leader Winston Churchill are just a few examples of those who have experienced and survived this nightmare of the soul.

Today, it's estimated that millions of people battle with various degrees of depression. Although research suggests that women typically struggle with a higher incidence of the problem, it is also a significant battle for men.

Depression is as complicated as it is common to the human experience. It can have its source in physical disease, unsuccessful personal choices, severe emotional trauma, chemical depletion, or even demonic oppression (1 Sam. 16:14-16).

Multiple causes suggest the need for multiple treatments. While either medication or counseling can be used, a combination of both can often show more favorable results than if one or the other is used exclusively. In such instances, it's apparent that more is going on than just a medical problem.

The purpose of this booklet is to consider the spectrum of factors that could be involved. In the following pages, we'll take a look at the nature of depression, its setup, the process of giving up, the reasons we give up, and the process of recovery. Although depression is a dreadful experience, we will see that there is hope even for those who feel that all hope is lost.

THE NATURE OF DEPRESSION

The experience of depression has been referred to as a heavy blackness. Others compare it to being buried alive. Charles Spurgeon likened it to "the horror of a soul forsaken by God." It is a hellish experience when people give up on life or feel that life has given up on them.

The Signs Of Depression. People who wrestle with depression generally display a number of unsettling and sometimes disabling symptoms. Several of the classic signs include a lack of energy, a loss of appetite or eating too much, difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, and an inability to concentrate.

You can be alerted to a problem with depression by considering the following statements:

- I feel consistently sad or numb nearly every day.
- I have little or no interest in activities that I used to find enjoyable.
- I'm having difficulty sleeping.
- I'm sleeping too much.
- I've lost my appetite.
- I'm eating too much nearly every day.
- I feel tired most of the time.
- I find it hard to concentrate or stay focused.
- My interest in marital intimacy has lessened.
- I feel overwhelmed by the burdens of life.
- I don't hold out much hope that my life will improve in the future.
- I shift between feeling powerless and unworthy to feeling angry and victimized.
- I think about death or killing myself.

If you identify with five or more of these statements *and* at least one of the first two statements (feeling sad or a loss of interest), you should probably seek professional help. You may be struggling with major depression. Those who identify with two to four of the statements should, at the very least, consider seeing a physician for a complete medical checkup. Sometimes these are symptoms of a medical condition such as hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia, or Cushing's disease.

The Definition Of Depression. Depression is hard to define because it can be so elusive. There are components of depression that are simply impossible to describe.

Sometimes healthy grieving is confused with depression. Grieving and depression do share some similarities, but they are not one and the same. Depression is a departure from the grieving process. When we grieve, we feel the sorrow of loss. But in depression, the sorrow of loss is numbed.

Once some degree of stability is achieved, a reflective look at the roots of depression can become important to the recovery process. Although understanding alone may not relieve despair, having some insight into depression can help us avoid being completely overwhelmed by it. With that in mind, let's consider some of the major factors that can set us up for depression.

THE SETUP FOR DEPRESSION

Depression rarely comes out of nowhere. Although depressed people may feel utterly confused about their plight, there are multiple factors at work, both in and out of their control, that contribute to a condition that blankets their lives like a dark cloud. These factors generally fall into one of three areas:

1. Physical Factors. The complexity of the human body is one of the hallmarks of God's creation (Ps. 139:14). How the body works and interacts with the soul (our desires, thoughts, and feelings) is not fully understood. Nonetheless, there is an undeniably strong link between the body and soul that is frequently a part of the precondition to depression.

Disease. We especially notice a negative effect on our soul when disease afflicts our body. As mentioned earlier, various physical illnesses may cause the onset of or may aggravate the symptoms of depression. Again, this is why a medical checkup is recommended in most cases.

Diet And Exercise. What we eat and our level of exercise are two significant areas that affect the interaction between the body and soul and, in turn, the setup for depression. Without knowing it, we can develop eating patterns that are out of balance, or we can misuse certain food groups that can actually trigger or reinforce a state of depression. The same is true for a lack of regular exercise.

For instance, those who eat sweets such as chocolate to soothe pain or stress will experience a quick burst of energy. This is always followed by a drastic letdown, however, leaving a person feeling tired and weak. Similarly, those who are not involved in any kind of regular physical activity are more prone to fatigue. This is especially true of those who overextend themselves and

fail to give their bodies time to recover. With other factors going on, any or all of these could be precursors of depression.

Genetics. Another item worth noting is the relationship between genetics and depression. Some may inherit melancholic tendencies that make them more vulnerable to depression. But the influence of genetics must be kept in perspective. Research shows that "the environment has a strong influence on whether and how a gene gets 'expressed.'"³

In most cases, however, "biological vulnerability alone is not enough" to produce depression.⁴ In the majority of cases, there are also outside factors at work that set the stage for depression.

2. Outside Influences. Life in a fallen world is disappointing and sometimes brutal. Although we are not merely byproducts of our environment, external forces do influence the areas in which we struggle.

Family Background And Past Abuse. One of the more obvious factors that influences depression is family background. Every family carries the capacity to nurture or injure. Many who struggle with depression have had damaging levels of criticism, rejection, and even violence in their past as well as in their present family relationships.

Abuse is another factor that can lead to depression. Painful incidents of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse can often occur within the family, but there are also many times when the abuse takes place outside the family.

Family dysfunction and incidents of abuse deeply affect us. Many of us are out of touch with the level of harm we suffered growing up and how it continues to affect the way we live today. Sometimes the pain from family interactions or abusive events was so overwhelming that the thought of feeling anything other than guilt seemed unbearable. This is partly why we are inclined to blame ourselves for what was not our fault. We may also have been taught by example to feel our pain as little as possible. Or we may not have even been allowed to feel. We were insensitively told never to cry but simply to "get over it."

A general lack of empathy and an unwillingness to acknowledge how we have been harmed can be foundational to a struggle with depression. When these factors are combined with experiences of loss and unfairness, the conditions are set for a depressive storm to strike the soul.

Loss And Unfairness. The experience of loss is a major factor that contributes to the setup for depression. This could involve the loss of a spouse or a child, the loss of a job or position of status, the loss of an opportunity or personal freedom, or the loss of one's health or financial resources.

Job was a man who apparently went through a time of depression after experiencing a series of losses that few of us are able to comprehend. Listen to him describe what it was like for him to lose his family, his health, and his possessions:

Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, "How long before I get up?" The night drags on, and I toss till dawn. My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again (Job 7:2-7).

The experience of loss is often tied to a sense of unfairness. Many Christians tend to struggle with feelings of injustice prior to and during their bouts with depression. At some level, they believed that if they worked hard enough, followed the rules, loved the Lord and served Him, then their lives would turn out okay. They knew, of course, that life would be difficult, but they didn't imagine it could be so unfair. They never dreamed they would get laid off from their job, be passed over for a promotion, be betrayed by a friend or a spouse, or lose their health to a crippling disease. They never thought they would end up feeling so lonely or meaningless.

3. Deferred Hope. We all naturally hope for an end to loss and unfairness. We long for better days. When they don't come, the unsettling pain of delayed or deferred hope sets in. The Bible reminds us of this common painful reality when it says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12).

In other words, the pain of unfulfilled hope is the emotional equivalent to physical nausea. Few things are more miserable than feeling nauseated. When there seems to be no hope for gaining what is desired or for

recovering what's been lost or for ending injustice, the pain is emotionally gut-wrenching. Over time, this can create deep despair--that dreadful sense that life is not working out as we had hoped.

Some people deal with the pain of deferred hope by hoping in only what is easily attainable. This is the basis for much of society's materialism. Others tend to deal with the pain of deferred hope by making sure they don't hope at all. As we will see later, this is often a core element of depression.

Although loss and unfairness can result in the pain of deferred hope and a growing sense of despair, depression does not automatically follow. When external factors are involved, choices exist that can either thwart or accelerate the onset of depression.

For instance, some deeply grieve over what they've lost and the harm that has been done to them, while others get cynical and vindictive. Some resort to drinking or drugs, while others just give up and tumble into the pit of depression. Some even do both. It all depends on how they interact and respond.

It's important to remember that physical factors such as diet, exercise, and inherited tendencies are able to influence the context out of which depression emerges. Our purpose at this point, however, is to turn the focus primarily toward our beliefs about life and the self-destructive process of giving up, which can trigger the onset of depression.

THE PROCESS OF GIVING UP

Despair is a common human experience. We all go through it to one degree or another. We all know what it feels like when it seems the wheels are falling off and there's nothing we can do about it. In many cases, despair can deteriorate into a mild or major bout with depression when we internally give up and say to ourselves, "Why bother. Things aren't going to improve. So what's the use in trying."

Consider, for example, a time in the life of Elijah. He was a scrappy prophet of the nation of Israel during the reign of the evil King Ahab. Among other

things, he directly took on the problem of Baal worship, which was poisoning the Lord's chosen people.

On one occasion in particular, he courageously challenged and defeated 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in a most spectacular and somewhat humorous fashion (1 Ki. 18:16-40). It's difficult to imagine someone getting discouraged after such a successful showdown. But that's what happened. After hearing that King Ahab's wife was out to kill him, Elijah ran for his life. He fled for nearly 70 miles into the desert before he stopped. Exhausted and discouraged, he sat down under a tree and prayed that he would die:

"I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep (I Ki. 19:4-5).

In other words, Elijah was saying, "I give up. Despite all that I've done, I'm no more successful at driving out Baal worship than my ancestors. I quit."

Elijah was discouraged, and he may have even been on his way to depression. Certainly, his circumstances were part of the setup. He was fatigued from traveling so far, and his situation looked grim. He was tempted to give up, if he hadn't already.

In her book *Why Am I Crying?* Martha Maughon describes the moment when she totally gave up inside. "I remember it very well," she recalls. "I was sitting at my dresser, staring but not seeing. By then, I was obsessed with my condition. So I did what I had said I would never do. I gave up After that it seemed that I was always miles away from everybody, everything was remote, and I was only a zombie."⁵

Giving up, whether consciously or unconsciously, is a self-destructive response that can trigger the onset of depression as well as reinforce it. It is often at the point of giving up that feelings of anxiety give way to a state of depression. In anxiety, we're afraid that something awful *might* happen. At the onset of depression, we feel that something awful *has* happened. We also feel that since nothing good will ever happen again, why bother.

When external factors are involved, the extent of our depression is often equal to the degree to which we give up. The process of giving up manifests itself in a variety of ways. These ways include blaming others, blaming ourselves, hating pleasure, and hating responsibility.

Blaming Others. When we are feeling down and hopeless, there's a tendency to blame others. We blame the people in our lives for not caring enough. We resent their unwillingness to see things our way or to come through for us on our terms.

Blaming others justifies giving up. For example, one woman stopped trying to work through her marital problems because of what she saw in her husband. She used his ongoing lack of interest in spiritual matters and in spending quality time with her as a reason to give up on her marriage. The more she pointed her finger at him, the more she gave up and plunged further down into the pit of depression.

Blaming Ourselves. People who experience personal loss or disappointment often turn their anger inward. It's not enough to blame others, they also feel they must blame themselves. They typically attack their own souls with a fierceness that seems, to those around them, out of proportion to their situation.

Many depressed people drift toward the idea that it's their fault that life has taken a turn for the worse. They believe they've either done something wrong or they simply feel unworthy. They also tend to believe that they are to blame for being disappointed because they were foolish enough to hope that life would work out in the first place.

One woman began to blame herself when she discovered that she was losing her husband to another woman. She thought, "If I could just keep the house cleaner, cook better meals, or lose some weight, then maybe my husband would want me again." But when she couldn't "fix" what she perceived to be the problem, her fear gave way to despair and she slowly began to give up.

Frequently there is a drastic swing between blaming themselves and blaming others. For example, one depressed man said, "If I had any backbone, I'd get even with my ex-wife. But then again, if I had any backbone, I wouldn't be in this mess. I am such a huge failure." In either extreme, it seems entirely reasonable to someone who's depressed to give up on the future and on life.

Hating Pleasure. Those who struggle with depression tend to find themselves in a state of enormous tension. Although a part of them wants to stay hopeful, they tend to back away from anything that arouses hope. The pain of deferred hope and the increased levels of despair are just too much for them to bear. This is often why many who get depressed hate the feeling

of pleasure or enjoyment of any kind. The experience of pleasure arouses hope, which only stimulates their hunger for what is not. This just causes more pain.

One single mother who was battling with depression wouldn't allow herself to enjoy receiving financial help from her friends. Although she accepted the money with a forced smile, she refused to let the gift touch her heart. Later, when I pointed out her struggle to enjoy the help, she said, "If I feel any pleasure, all it will do is raise my hopes and put me in touch with something that I deeply want but don't believe will ever happen. I'm always going to struggle alone to make ends meet, and I don't want to feel anything that will get my hopes up unnecessarily."

Hating Responsibility. Someone who's depressed may feel that because life is hopelessly unfair, there's no reason to be responsible. Many get to the place where they feel it doesn't matter if they pay the bills, take care of the house, go to work, or attend class. Since life is unfair and the rules don't seem to mean that much, they see no point in following the routine. In severe cases of depression, people struggle to find a reason to get out of bed.

Regardless of how we give up in the face of hopelessness and despair, the byproduct is the emotional and physical disturbances of depression. We have trouble sleeping, eating, and concentrating.

This raises an interesting question: If giving up can lead to depression, then why do we give up? Why don't we instead elect to hang in there and remain hopeful when confronted with despair? Before discussing a process of recovery that will help to lift the heavy weight that depression can have, let's take a look at *why* we tend to give up.

THE REASONS WE GIVE UP

There's no question that natural tendencies or biological realities may play a part in why we give up in the face of despair. Without dismissing the role these factors may have, let's consider reasons that are within our control--reasons that can even alter factors that are beyond our control.

A Refusal To Live With Deferred Hope. We noticed earlier that deferred (unfulfilled) hope is painful. It "makes the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12). So if we give up hope, we don't have to feel the pain when it's unfulfilled. In this way, giving up is an indication that we are refusing to live with the ache of hope that is unfulfilled.

It's difficult for most people to accept that the burden of depression is often easier to bear than the pain of deferred hope. After careful reflection, however, many admit that this is true. As one woman said, "I want to be happy and feel peace in my life. I have had enough unhappiness, yet it seems that one side of me actually thrives on it. I feel so confused within myself." Over time, she came to see that she would gravitate toward giving up on herself and the future because she was afraid to live with hope; namely, the fragile hope to be loved that she wasn't sure would ever be met.

In reality, it's not a matter of preference. It is a matter of control. While people who are depressed usually feel out of control in so many ways, they do have some control over how much pain they feel. More than anything else, people who give up and become depressed are committed to living with as little pain as possible on their terms, especially the pain of deferred hope. Giving up helps to avoid feeling the kind of pain and emptiness that only heaven will take away.

Misplaced Hopes. People give up to deaden the pain of deferred hope. But they also may give up because they believe that life is pointless without what they've lost or what may never be attained. They see little or no reason to love, to work, or to stay involved in life if they can't be with a particular person or be engaged in a specific activity or reach a specific goal. So they withdraw into a state of self-imposed numbness.

Many who struggle with depression feel despair because they put their primary hopes for meaning and joy in all the wrong places--such as a boyfriend or girlfriend, a job, a happier marriage, or a house. Essentially, they placed their hopes in a false god of their own making--one that could never satisfy their souls (Ps. 115:3-8). And when these false gods or illusions of fulfillment seem hopelessly lost, out of reach, or indifferent to their needs, the tendency is to give up on life.

As awful as the consequences of giving up might be, there is hope for those who battle with the darkness of depression. Unlike false gods that can't

provide us with guidance, the God of the Bible has provided us with a light of hope that will cut through the darkest of nights and guide us until the dawning of heaven.

THE PROCESS OF RECOVERY

Depression is a serious struggle, and there are usually no simple or quick solutions. In many ways, the road to recovery will be under construction until we get to heaven.

Recovery from depression is like a gradual resurrection from the dead. The Spirit of God working in us can bring what is dead back to life--and in a way that honors God and the dignity He has instilled in each of us.

It's encouraging to know that God is in control, that He can provide for our deepest needs, and that He is able to renew our hearts in the midst of great despair (2 Cor. 4:16). We must understand, however, that the One who works in us is the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:16-17). So it's in the realm of truth that He is able to bring renewal and growth to our hearts.

The process of recovery is built on the foundation of facing the truth, no matter how much it hurts. Pain is not the enemy, it's a sign that life and feelings are returning to our deadened hearts. Only as we begin to face the truth will we be able to [recover hope through despair](#), [recover faith through doubt](#), and [recover joy through giving to others](#).

RECOVERING HOPE BY FACING DESPAIR

At first glance, it may seem foolish or cruel to invite people who are struggling with depression to face their despair. It would seem to make them feel all the more hopeless. What we often overlook, however, are the paradoxes involved in matters of the soul. As in childbirth, what can feel like the throes of death actually produces life. As strange as it may seem, facing despair is one of the best things a person battling with depression can do.

Many who struggle with or who are on the verge of depression have an especially difficult time facing the darkness of despair. They're too afraid that the darkness will devour them. But as they find the courage to begin facing the darkness, they are able to discover that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and 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. 5:3-5).

Facing despair is not an exercise in self-pity. It is an honest, heartfelt cry of the soul that feels rather than numbs the agony and heaviness of one's situation. Consider the level of despair Jesus felt the night before He was crucified:

Jesus went with His disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and He said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with Him, and He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then He said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with Me" (Mt. 26:36-38).

Notice that Jesus didn't minimize His situation. Nor did He face His despair all alone. He shared the anguish of His heart with a few close friends. Although we will carry much of the burden of despair alone, it is best when people who care are involved (Gal. 6:2).

Like Jesus, we should face our despair with others *and* with our heavenly Father. Listen to the words of the weeping prophet who, in the midst of incredible despair, wrote:

The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord. . . . Let your tears flow like a river day and night; . . . pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord (Lam. 2:18-19).

Instead of leading to deeper depression, facing our despair can increase a sense of true hope in the One who promises to comfort and take us through the sorrows of life (Ps. 23:4; 2 Cor. 1:8-10). For those who struggle with depression, facing despair involves at least two important components: the pain of loss and the failure of misplaced hopes.

Acknowledging The Pain Of Loss. Loss is often at the center of depression, especially when the loss is irretrievable. Healing can't take place unless we

start to feel the pain. In the long run, it doesn't do any good to deaden our pain. Severing our emotional nerves only hides our pain and allows it to become self-destructive. By contrast, facing our pain starts the process of grieving so that God can begin to draw near and renew us with His comforting presence (Ps. 119:49-50).

Many of the people who struggle with depression find it difficult to feel and to accept the pain of loss. Many were never given permission to feel. Some hide from feeling loss behind the claim that it's their fault or that they don't know how to feel pain or sorrow. In any event, most simply don't wish to feel deep disappointment because it only awakens a hunger for what is not. But if people who are depressed give themselves permission to feel the pain of loss instead of deadening it, it will actually promote healing and disrupt the tendency to numb the ache by blaming themselves.

We can begin to feel the pain of loss when we admit to ourselves what it is we deeply hungered for that has been lost--a particular relationship, for example, or the ability to achieve a dream. Identifying our unmet desires and the emptiness of loss and disappointment (past and present) will likely turn our world upside down at first. But it can put us on the path out of depression. In time, we will not only find that we can survive our pain, but we'll see that there is something worth living for that is bigger than ourselves.

Admitting The Failure Of Misplaced Hopes. Along with facing the despair of our losses and disappointments, there is an even deeper level of despair to be faced as we realize that our idols do not work. An idol is whatever we put our hope in more than in God--people, objects, activities. In this context we can begin to see that we've been placing our hopes in what *cannot* satisfy. Hope in what *does* satisfy can grow as we face this level of despair.

For example, the woman who normally gets depressed after being used and left by yet another man can begin to take an account of what she is truly living for. She can start to acknowledge that her excessive attempts to win and keep the love of men by fixing their problems isn't working out. When the men don't change, she's always left feeling angry, confused, and alone. As she begins to feel the desperation of being let down by her false hopes, the stage is set for her to face her sinful demand, "I must have a man to be okay." Instead of giving up, she can be drawn to a greater level of gratitude for God's forgiveness in ways that can revolutionize her life (Lk. 7:36-47).

Acknowledging the hopelessness of our idolatry can expose any demands we need to confess and repent of. Further, it can create a desperate hunger for our heavenly Father that no idol can ever fill. Admitting the failure of our misplaced hopes can stimulate our hunger for God so that He can feed us with His provision (Dt. 8:2-3) and help us realize more of the "living hope" He has given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:3).

RECOVERING FAITH BY FACING DOUBT

In most cases of depression, one's faith in God is dying a steady, slow death. Many feel that God no longer cares about them. They find it difficult to read their Bible, to pray, and to attend church.

People who experience loss and unfairness, and then depression, often feel they have a strong case against God. One woman who was struggling through her own doubts about God said, "If God can take away my husband and my health, why can't He take away my depression? I have a difficult time believing that He's on my side considering all that has happened to me."

It's important to realize that God invites us to struggle with (not deny) our doubts to recover faith in the same way that He wants us to face despair to recover and strengthen hope. Paradoxically, faith is able to grow as we wrestle with our doubts about God's protection and provision.

The Bible has many examples of people crying out to God with their doubts. David went through several occasions when he honestly questioned God:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You
so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?
(Ps. 22:1).

Consider the words of Jeremiah as he poured out his doubts to God:

Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will You be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails? (Jer. 15:18).

Later, Jeremiah took up his quarrel with God again, only in much stronger terms.

O LORD, You deceived me, and I was deceived; You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long (Jer. 20:7-8).

Why such strong words? A brief analysis of Jeremiah's life reveals that God had persuaded him as a teenager to go and tell his fellow countrymen of God's impending judgment. He also promised Jeremiah that even though all of the people would oppose him, He would protect him. But think about what happened to Jeremiah. He was constantly mocked, the people chased him out of town, his family and friends hated him, and he underwent extreme torture. On one occasion, he was hung in a pit of mud and left to die (Jer. 38:6).

Jeremiah's experiences caused him to feel that God had not only let him down but that He had also set him up. As a result, Jeremiah seriously thought about putting God out of his mind and never speaking of Him again (Jer. 20:9). Ironically, he got more than he bargained for. He found that his attempts to push God away actually increased his passion for Him. Jeremiah likened God to a burning fire that he could neither contain nor put out. God had his heart and Jeremiah knew it. He saw that the best thing to do was to surrender and follow Him.

It's important to notice that Jeremiah's desire for and confidence in God increased *because* he struggled through his doubts. Jeremiah demonstrates by example that a growing faith is not completely devoid of doubt, and that there are moments when it is best to struggle. Although Jeremiah did not allow his doubts to completely unravel his faith, a part of what caused his weakened faith to regain strength and thrive was that he was realistic. He wrestled with his doubts when it seemed as if his world was turning upside down unnecessarily.

Struggling with God is no light matter. It exhausts all the energy we can muster. But it's in our exhaustion that we are more apt to be humble and quiet before Him. It's as if our soul runs out of breath and we have no more energy left to speak. This is when God shows Himself to us in ways that are life-changing.

Sometimes we're not ready to hear what God wants us to understand until we pour it all out before the throne of grace. And when there's nothing left to say (Job 40:4-5), the truth can sink in. God doesn't turn away from us. We are the ones who turn away from Him. But no matter how hard we try to put Him out of our minds, and no matter how many doubts remain, we just can't escape the growing conviction that there is no better place to turn than to our compassionate heavenly Father (Lam. 3:32).

Sadly, many who battle with depression tend to suppress or censor their doubts for fear of being irreverent. Rarely are they encouraged to take doubts to God with the level of honesty and energy we see in people like Jeremiah and David. Yet it's only as we honestly struggle with our doubts and face our despair that we become more deeply convinced of our love and passion for God--which will lift us out of our depression and on to an exciting life of giving. The pain of loss and deferred hope will still be present because we aren't home yet (Rom. 8:22-23), but it can be surrounded by the joy of giving ourselves to others instead of the misery found in numbing our hearts and withholding ourselves from others.

RECOVERING JOY BY GIVING TO OTHERS

When those who struggle with depression begin to recover faith and hope, a desire to give will gradually increase. Instead of giving up, which keeps them from being what God wants them to be, they can grow to be wrapped up in giving for the sake of others. As they begin to act on the desire to give, a deep sense of joy will begin to fill their hearts.

Nothing brings more satisfaction in this life than sacrificial giving. The principle that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35) was stressed by Jesus in both His life and His words. It is one of the most radical

ironies of life that cuts against the grain of a culture that promotes the god of self-indulgence.

Giving can be as simple as allowing a car to enter the flow of traffic ahead of us. It can be helping a neighbor who is recovering from surgery. It can include listening to our children read a story at bedtime or going to work for no other reason than to provide for our family. At times, it may call for giving notice to the people who use and/or malign our dignity that there will be consequences if they continue to cross the boundaries of love. Giving never passively permits that which regularly compromises what is best for others and ourselves.

For example, one wife learned that it was loving to give her husband consequences for his involvement in pornography. She still felt despair, at times. But rather than getting depressed in order to hide from hope, her life began to sparkle with a joy that came from giving her husband the kind of honest ultimatums that would get his attention and help him deal with his sin.

Depending on the situation, giving involves offering people a mixture of gentleness and strength, which affords them an opportunity to encounter God's character. To give at this level requires nothing short of a miraculous work of God in our hearts. Only when we are amazed by and grateful for the ultimate example of giving--God giving His only Son as a sacrifice to redeem us from our sins (Jn. 3:16)--will we give others a sample of God's gentleness and strength despite the risks of attack or desertion.

It is in Jesus, God's Son, that we see the Provider of our souls. In Him we see God involving Himself in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice to meet our deepest need for forgiveness and life. By dying for our sin and rising from the dead to confirm the success of His mission, Jesus showed His power and right to give spiritual well-being and confident hope to all who receive Him (Jn. 1:12).

As God captures more and more of our appreciation and confidence, we will discover a rich sense of honor and value that comes from being used by Him in the battle against Satan. It has always been Satan's goal to smear and distort God's reputation. It's thrilling to know that we can play a vital role in setting the record straight by revealing to others the kind of being God really is, so that they can be drawn to Him as well (Ps. 73:28).

The process of recovering hope through despair, recovering faith through doubt, and recovering joy through giving should be taken as a biblical frame of reference and not as a rigidly followed blueprint. Life is rarely that straightforward or easy. The process is actually a way of life that one gradually learns to develop with the help of the Spirit of God.

The process doesn't eliminate pain or fear. It doesn't guarantee that our circumstances will improve. Only heaven offers us those options (Rev. 21:4). It does, however, offer the opportunity to live more in touch with our built-in hunger for our heavenly Father--a hunger He longs to satisfy--and to develop a thriving passion to give. It's often a peculiar process. Before it can get better it must often get worse. But those who learn to put their hope in God "will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isa. 40:31).

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RECOVERY

Depression is an extremely complicated struggle. There is so much going on in the body that affects the soul, and vice versa, that it requires us to take a holistic approach to the struggle of depression.

Eat Wisely And Exercise Regularly. Earlier we mentioned some of the disadvantages of poor nutrition and lack of exercise. Let's go further and consider some of the positive aspects of diet and exercise as it relates to depression.

Except for those who are physically disabled, exercising on a regular basis is something practical that most who struggle with depression can begin to do. It's important to begin slowly, keep it fun, and gradually work your way into whatever form you choose. Current research indicates that regular exercise reduces the symptoms of depression.⁶ Even the Bible recognizes that there is some profit in exercising (1 Tim. 4:8). Regular exercise raises and maintains energy levels and increases our capacity to concentrate.

Eating a balanced and nutritious diet is just as important as exercise. For example, the first thing that Elijah was instructed to do at his lowest point was to eat (1 Ki. 19:5). Many find that sleep patterns and energy levels stabilize when they are eating sensibly. Researchers are just beginning to understand how much diet affects how we think and feel. Those who struggle with depression should consult an expert on nutrition and read up on the subject to find out what kind of diet is best for them.

Seek Professional Help. Depression is never to be taken lightly. Again, if several of the [signs of depression listed earlier](#) describe what your life has been like for at least the last few weeks, then you should seek professional assistance. You may need to be on medication to help restore a sense of balance to your system. Counseling is often needed as well (see RBC booklet [When Help Is Needed](#) CB931). Seeking help is not a sign of weakness or moral failure. On the contrary, it's a sign of courage and integrity.

Keep A Journal. Enough can't be said about how important it is to write about our losses and disappointments, the feelings and questions we are struggling with, and the exciting changes we notice taking place in our lives. Journaling is a powerful way to augment the process of recovery and keep us from falling into the trap of premature closure in issues where significant insights could easily be forgotten.

A WORD TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS

If you suspect that someone close to you is depressed, it's important for you to know the struggle you are up against. You will likely encounter self-destructive patterns that will take some time for the person to climb out of. For example, you may find that no matter how much support you offer, it will be deflected by your family member or friend's negative attitude toward life in general. You may feel as if you are being drawn into a no-win situation. If you offer support, it's rejected. If you don't, you're accused of not caring.

As a result, you may go through times when you will either feel helpless and want to withdraw or you will feel frustrated and be tempted to exert pressure

("Would you just get a grip and snap out of it!"). Either response is harmful and only aggravates the struggle of depression.

The desire to withdraw or apply pressure lies in all of us. But if we've been redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there's a greater desire and capacity to offer something better.

We can give to those who are depressed in ways that will promote their recovery and growth. Instead of making them feel as if we've given up on them, we can let them know that we believe in who they could be as they learn to put their confidence in God. We can't force them to get help (unless they're a danger to themselves), but we can invite them to be honest and to grieve in a way that could renew a strong sense of faith and hope and a desire to follow their calling of love (Jn. 13:34).