

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Beyond the blues

Presented by Chris Witts

Introduction

I think I'm right in saying that nearly everyone feels down sometimes. It's part of everyday life that things don't always go smoothly, and the usual sense of happiness and well-being evaporates. And that's when we feel down. You know what it's like when someone in the family misunderstands you or angry words are exchanged. And for the rest of the day you might feel anxious or sad.

So, what I'm saying is ... we all feel a bit miserable or a bit down in the mouth from time to time. There's not much you can do about it. But depression is another matter entirely. And studies have shown that depression of some degree is very common among Australian adults, even if figures vary from report to report.

But there is some good news. Even God's great people become depressed as the Bible shows. So if you feel depressed today, you are in good company.

1.

Health professionals today are very concerned about the growing problem of depression. A National Study of Mental Health and Well Being revealed that over 12 months, one in 16 Australian adults would experience clinical depression. Other studies talk of one in five. So whatever is correct, one thing remains consistent. Depression and anxiety are the most common complaints of all mental health complaints.

Winston Churchill suffered depression and called it "the black dog". Perhaps you know what he means. I read of a 23 year old girl who sat down and wrote of her feelings, describing depression as "walking through life with no sense of being or direction. I travel through my days like a zombie only achieving basic day to day tasks through sheer habit". It's an awful feeling, a sense of despair and lack of interest in life. Sufferers lose confidence in themselves and can't enjoy the good or simple things in life.

No-one is immune from depression, for it affects people of all ages, including Christians. Some people feel a sense of shame saying "I'm a committed Christian and go to church. Yet I still feel depressed". We're all human, and depression occurs for a variety of reasons including grief, pain, financial crisis, which can strike any of us. Sometimes our mind and emotions become as dysfunctional as our organs and muscles, and we need help. It is not correct to say "Because I am a Christian I will never suffer depression".

The wonderful fact is that God understands how we feel at times like this. After all, He made us and knows what makes us tick and can help in the dark times of life.

As I read my Bible I read between the lines when thinking of the apostle Paul. It seems fairly obvious he felt depressed at different times in his life. When working for God in Asia he wrote to the church at Corinth: “We want to remind you, friends, of the trouble we had in the province of Asia. The burdens laid upon us were so great and so heavy that we gave up all hope of staying alive. We felt that the death sentence had been passed on us.” (2 Corinthians 1: 8,9. GNB). These were difficult days for Paul and his supporters. Another time he was in jail... alone, bored, and cold, and probably depressed. In his note to Timothy he asked if his coat and books could be brought to him. (2 Timothy 4:13). He needed a lift in spirit and turned to his friends for a bit of comfort.

In trying to look at this problem, can I suggest that we can't base our life on emotions. Some people are very emotional, others not. What I'm talking about is that Christians can base life on truth, not on feelings. Scripture says to rejoice in the Lord always. Not an easy instruction because life is not always a happy experience. So, whether we feel like it or not, rejoice in the Lord. (Philippians 4:4) That will help chase the blues away. James in his epistle says to consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way (James 1:2) That doesn't seem to make sense; but with Jesus Christ as Saviour, it is possible to be positive.

Choosing to trust truth rather than your feelings may require a lot of faith. But it could be the cure for depression. Trusting what God says rather than your feelings is certainly a more realistic approach to life. It's more than a vague hope that He will somehow pull you through your dark times. We can't ignore God's principles for healthy living. If we reject the good advice from the Bible, we won't escape the consequences, even if we do have faith.

Have you ever tried to praise God in spite of what's happening around you? Those who try it say it works, and the results are amazing. God's Word says “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Maybe hard to do, but it's worth the try.

2.

Because depression has become such a problem today, many people are seeking professional help. Doctors are seeing more and more patients suffering from depression. They have no energy and cannot feel the whole range of basic human emotions. Some sadly choose suicide while others cut themselves off from friends and family.

Because the Bible is God's Word, it tells of people who suffered depression, although in those days it wasn't called depression. And I'm thinking of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, the most outstanding of the prophets. He had long thick hair and tremendous courage. He came into Israel's history like a storm, and was God's mouthpiece pronouncing judgement on a people who worshipped other gods. He was the most amazing man of his generation.

Yet he also experienced great loneliness, discouragement, and depression. One day he met 450 prophets of Baal, a false god, for a duel on Mt Carmel, and in dramatic fashion, proved the power of Jehovah, Almighty God. But the King of Israel's wife was after his blood and he fled for his life into the wilderness. He was afraid and came to a tree and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors (1 Kings 19: 3-4). After a draining emotional experience on Mt Carmel, Elijah was exhausted, physically and emotionally. He didn't want to eat, only to lie down and sleep. And that's what happens today. Depression often involves loss of motivation, appetite.

But the story doesn't end there. God came to Elijah at his time of need and encouraged him to eat and sleep, and to have a long walk. God was very patient and understanding, and allowed Elijah to pour out his emotions. In fact God healed Elijah of his depression. "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by" (1 Kings 19:11). There was a wind, earthquake, fire and then silence. The Lord was in the gentle whisper of that silent moment as He came to Elijah at the cave's entrance. A depressed man listened to God and was restored. He learned that day that God is not only present in miraculous, sensational events, but also in the silence and stillness.

Ever felt like Elijah? Come to the end of your own ability to think straight because of personal stress and difficulties? Elijah was such a driven person, he had to stop. He had to put the handbrake on. He was severely depressed. Many things in life cannot be accomplished unless we stop and listen to God's still voice .. perhaps your life is too busy for faith in God. George Fox, a well known Quaker used to say "Carry some quiet around inside yourself". And I think that's terrific advice. Silence encourages deep feeling and deep thoughts, and we ignore this at our own peril. It's in the quiet time that God's will is discovered and our emotional balance is restored.

Richard Foster in his book *Celebration of Discipline* said "in contemporary society, the devil majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in "muchness" and "manyness", he will rest satisfied".

That's why Elijah was depressed. He was physically exhausted and needed a new focus. And God came to him. And it's a great truth to know God loved Elijah regardless of how this man felt. Our God does not just love us when we are going well. He loves us all the time, and especially when we have times when life gets all topsy-turvy. God loves depressed people.

3.

Depression has been called the "common cold" of mental disorders, and it's too complicated to solve with a single pat answer. There are a number of good books you can read to help like David Seamand's "Healing for Damaged Emotions". Nobody I know understands exactly what causes depression, although it can be triggered by a traumatic event or period in your life.

Having a friend to talk to is very important. Someone said "a friend a day keeps depression away". Don't go through life without the support of friends who care about you. Because a mature friend can help you interpret for yourself some of your troubled feelings.

Remember too that the words of Scripture are powerful in helping us face up to rough days. Try and remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 11: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, 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" (v28-30). Because you are a child of God, He loves and accepts you as you are. Realise you are only human, and commit yourself to God and His indwelling power in your life. The writer of the Psalms said "He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

The promises of God are for you. Take them and put your own name in verses like Ephesians 2: "By grace I have been saved through faith; and not of myself, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that I should boast. For I am His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that I should walk in them." (Ephesians 2: 8-10). This is not just a verse from history – it's God's living message for you and me today.

Make an effort to get rid of negative feelings like grudges, resentment or bitterness that may cause the feelings of depression. Let go of the past and try to break the pattern. Say to yourself “I have expressed my thoughts and feelings, and this is old stuff. It is finished. I will not repeat it any longer.” Deal with the day’s problems each night before you go to sleep and ask God for His strength to overcome. Do everything you can to remove family conflicts. Spend time getting to know your wife or husband more, and reach out to your children in love and forgiveness.

Ask yourself, “What is causing my stress levels to go up?” Your body will only tolerate so much stress before it tells you something is wrong. Get eight hours of sleep and some exercise. Break any negative behaviour pattern because the depressed person behaves in a way that reinforces his depression. Am I worrying too much about trivial matters? Focus on actions and thoughts that keep you moving in the opposite direction to depression. Think through your personal values and try to sort out what really matters most remembering that Jesus said “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Perhaps your goals in life are not what God wants.

Learn to handle your own self talk by thinking about God’s goodness, His mercy, love and forgiveness. Read Psalm 42 which is particularly helpful in the Living Bible paraphrase because it says “O my soul, don’t be discouraged. Don’t be upset. Expect God to act. For I know that I shall again have plenty of reason to praise him for all that he will do. He is my help. He is my God.” (v11). Relax and imagine yourself walking and talking with Jesus, and tell Him about your feelings.

Another cause of depression is guilt. Guilt is a form of mental and emotional pain which violates our moral standards. If there is guilt, the Bible says “if we confess our sins to Him, he can be depended on to forgive us and cleanse us from every wrong” (1 John 1:9). His forgiveness is such a relief. It works, and instead of inner turmoil we can have His divine peace. After all, the apostle Paul said “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

CLOSING COMMENTS and PRAYER

Depression has been called many things, but I think the simplest definition I’ve read is this. “Depression is a symptom that something is out of balance in your life”. It’s a warning signal that some aspect of your life is out of adjustment. Don’t give up or feel the situation is hopeless.

Allow the verses of the Bible to bring you comfort and new direction, like these words from Romans 15: “May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit” (v 13).

Heavenly Father, our hope today lies in you and your restoring power. Sometimes we feel life is like a roller coaster with many ups and downs, and we look for answers. Help us to remember You are the Lord of all. You can offer peace in our days of trouble. Amen.