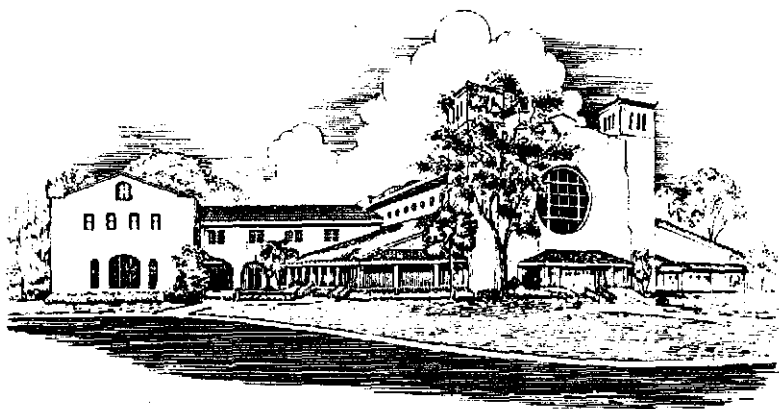


First Church Pulpit

"HOW TO OVERCOME DEPRESSION"

Text: "But he went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree, and he asked that he might die."

— (1 Kings 19:4)



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Today we dive into deep waters indeed with a sermon on "How To Overcome Depression". For while the whole wide earth might turn on end, and world peace is hard to find, and poverty and hunger are the scourge of all the globe, no subject is more pressing to the Christian people I know, nor more important, than the question of how to cope with, and how to conquer depression. It comes to all: young and old, rich and poor, the successful and the failures, the married and the single and the divorced, the male and female. Throughout the Bible, in all of literature, in history and in our modern world, this peculiar malady marches its solitary way against individuals, families and communities, with a power unknown in other places.

Abraham Lincoln suffered bouts of dark depression. Winston Churchill was frequently depressed, and likened it to a little black dog, who nipped at his heels all the time. MacBeth, King Lear and Hamlet did not come by accident, for Shakespeare, too, was often in dark depression. Musicians from Mozart to Tchaikovsky to Schubert have suffered from the same. Artists from Michelangelo to Van Gogh have been plagued by this perennial nuisance. Modern rock stars like Elvis Presley, and endless others have not escaped its tentacles and terrors. Nearly 20% of the world's people have a tendency toward clinical depression, and when it comes, if you have ever seen it, you will know,

persons are rendered nearly helpless, and the fall-out strikes their families, too.

It is there throughout the Bible. From Cain to Moses, from Saul to David, from Jonah to Job, from Jeremiah to Malachi, from Paul to Jesus Christ himself, there are moments, months and even years of depression; that sad and rejected feeling, which made them rue the day (as Job said) when they were born. I could have gone to many different places in the Bible to guide our thoughts and prayers, but I have chosen to take you to Elijah, the first and greatest of all of Israel's prophets, in First Kings Nineteen.

An interesting story...it has puzzled me for decades. Let me tell you a little of it. In Chapter Eighteen, Elijah had his well known and widely heralded confrontation with the prophets of Baal, all forty of them against the one of him. Each side prayed for their God to come down to fire the altar miraculously for the sacrificial gift. God answered. God Baal of the prophets did not. Elijah was the victor. All forty of Baal's best prophets were finished, gone from the earth for good. The important point, as we move on, is that Elijah had been vindicated. God's special blessing was upon him.

Then, Chapter Nineteen begins. Ahab, the weak King, reported to the wicked

Queen Jezebel what had happened. Not unbelievably, she, a follower of Baal, was terribly distressed that forty of her best prophets were consumed in the fire. So, she sent Elijah a message. Queen Jezebel, a prophetess of Baal, wrote and said: "By tomorrow night you will be as the forty of my prophets...gone from the earth for good."

Now, what would you guess should have happened next? Elijah, who only the day before had seen the Presence of God, whose life and prophecy were vindicated, should have replied something like: "Queen Jezebel, nonsense! My God will defend me, as He did yesterday." Right?... Wrong! It says, in the words of our text: "He was afraid." Of Jezebel, and of Baal. And then, the greatest of Israel's prophets went "a day's journey into the wilderness, and sat down under a broom tree, and asked that he might die." He was so depressed...he asked the Lord to take his life away.

One day on top of the world, the next day in the depths and pits of depression. How could it happen to a man of God, you might be thinking. But, you will think that only if you have never been depressed; only if you have never witnessed it firsthand. Anyone who has, will tell you that is exactly what can happen: one day the whole wide world is mine; the next day I feel worthless.

Now, my friends, the introduction is over. Let's leave the story of Elijah for a moment. There are three things I want to share with you, and have you think and pray about with me today. (1) The first thing I want to do is to try to find a useful definition of depression. Not a perfect one, but a useful one. What is it? (2) Secondly, once having discovered that, we want to ask: Why does it come, why is it here? (3) And thirdly, when it does come, what can we do about it? That is a tall order, to be sure, but we can manage it together.

I. Depression: what is it? This alteration of our spirit and body, mind and soul. We all know the symptoms. It is the other name of a multitude of sadness, and loneliness. It thrives on hopelessness. It features loss of interest. It often follows moments of our triumph. It is accompanied by withdrawal, fatigue, or restlessness, or by the feeling that life really is not worth it. It often leads to excessive drinking of alcohol, to drugs.... It wanders frequently to the edge, and sometimes over, into suicide. In the past twenty years, there has been a 300% increase in teenage suicide. Most of those who work with them will tell you that depression is near enough the underlying reason.

To begin a definition, we turn to psychiatrist Dr. Leonard Cammer, who

in his book Up From Depression defines it in laymen's terms as "mild", "moderate" or "severe". Professionals will think that all too simple, but it will do for us. I myself reduce it even further to "normal" and "abnormal" depression. It is critical to know that depression is often a normal reaction to circumstances, similar to what happens when a burden you are carrying becomes too heavy, and you bend or break under its weight. If it is too heavy, you'll fall down.

Perhaps you read yesterday in the Miami Herald the sad story of I. L. Ellington of Miami. His son Tommy, 31, was dead. The newspaper said he raised the boy himself, with six others, alone. When Tommy died, he went down to make arrangements at the funeral parlor; and while he was there, a grandson at home, quite by accident, set the house on fire. Everything Mr. Ellington had was gone, save a soggy, red-covered Bible, that someone somehow salvaged for him. Seated on a lawn-chair in his front yard, and looking at his gutted home, he said: "Too many things happened to me. I have been upset all day." He was depressed. No wonder. If life has dealt you a series of burdens, or even one great smashing one, do not be over-alarmed if you fell down. Depression is the normal reaction. In fact, psychiatrists say, and I agree, it can often be a healthy response; often a predictable reaction. The withdrawal can be a protective measure for the body, mind and soul. No boat can go full throttle

all the time. It will burn its engines out. Depression can be a way of telling you and me: "Slow down". It can be a way of warning us that our lifestyle should be changed. It could be saying: "You have neglected something that you need", or "You have too much of something that you do not need." Norman Wright in his book An Answer to Depression advises that a person should listen to his depression, for it is telling him something that he needs to know.

There are many technical definitions for depression, but I will save them until I am invited to speak before the American Association of Psychiatric Counsellors. Admittedly, it is difficult to frame a definition that will be acceptable to all, but I shall rest my case, as Justice Blackman did in the Supreme Court on pornography. When they asked him to define it, he replied that while a precise definition is difficult, "when I see pornography, I know it's there." The same is true with depression.

II. Having sketched the little definition, I promised I would add a word as to why it comes. What causes it, especially when it sometimes seems to come without any reason whatever? I guess the most critical thing I have to say here is to remind you if you are depressed, or know someone else who is, that even if we cannot find it, there is a cause, probably

several causes. Some of them you can find, if you work hard enough; others you might never know. But it is essential not to leave it out there somewhere, but to seek to find the cause. Otherwise you will blame you, or someone else, or even God.

Do you know a teenager who seems to have everything, yet is mysteriously depressed? There are a multitude of reasons. Maybe it is simply that he cannot live up to his parents' expectations. Maybe his inner voices are telling him he is worthless. Maybe he had a disruption in his friendship with his closest friend. Maybe he has lost a position on the team he wanted dearly. Maybe he has broken up with his girlfriend, and the parents don't even know it. The important thing, my young friend, is that there is a reason for it. Someone still cares for you.

Do you know a middle-aged person who is depressed? It can come with disappointments with work. Losing a job can be a dreadful blow. One can feel a failure as a parent. Marriages can level off or out. Problems of health begin to come. Right? Depression of several types is a common problem of those who are growing older. Those depressions, when you see them, have causes, and sometimes, when you find the cause, you ipso facto have the cure.

Let me give you an illustration from another point of view. Mrs. Cromie and I happened to be in England,

fifteen or sixteen years ago, when it was discovered that Yorkminster Cathedral was in trouble. (You think we have troubles with First Presbyterian Church...that 700-year old cathedral was in danger of toppling to the ground.) The people from York and everywhere lamented: "How terrible, Yorkminster is in trouble!" I often hear people saying similarly: "My life is in shambles, and I don't know what to do!"

What could be done for old Yorkminster? Well, I will tell you what they did. They got some civil engineers together with some architects, and asked them to analyze the problem. It was not so much that Yorkminster was in trouble, but that under the northeast tower there was some structural damage in the third and fourth stones. And near the second window over the great high central tower, there was another weakness. And along the west wall, the foundation was beginning to let go. Once they defined the causes, the cure was easy. Expensive, time-consuming, but easy.

And in the depression of your body, mind and soul, try not to relegate it to the general things out there. (Some people even say the devil causes it.) Analyze it and find the causes. It will not be simple. There will be many trying moments. The causes range from chemical imbalance to situations uncontrollable, to life's changes, to illnesses, to the loss of one you loved too much, to hidden psychological, physiological or

biological difficulties. In one celebrated case, it was traced directly to hypoglycemia.

It is complex, and many times (Are you listening?) you will need help in discovering what is going on. When the people of Yorkminster asked the civil engineers and architects, no one said: "Isn't that silly, that they went to a professional?" Everyone with sense applauded: "Now we'll find out!" If you broke your leg, you would go to an orthopedic surgeon, right? If you had a tear in your muscle, you would go to see your doctor. The same is true with depression. It is simply a disruption, mild or severe, of the emotions. There is no shame whatever in going to seek help.

Many, many years ago, my father was taken to the psychiatric ward of a hospital up in Pennsylvania. My mother was stunned. We all wanted to keep it quiet. Some members of the extended family told us to tell no one, as if an alien force had come, as if something were wrong with my father's faith, or with his personhood, or even that he might be guilty, too. It was a different generation. Well-meaning Christians can oversimplify life: "If only you love God; if you only give your life over to Jesus Christ, everything will then be perfect..." It won't. They promise more than Jesus does. "There will be wars and rumors of wars, and not one stone will be left upon another" is true of the inside psyche, as well as the outside world.

Jesus Christ himself had moments of depression. St. Paul had times when he did not want to live to see the light of the day. Jonah, Jeremiah, Cain, and Elijah...men of God, and women too, had dry and barren months and moments. Life is a new struggle each and every morning. Evil and danger are there each and every day.

III. Well, assuming you can find the cause or causes for what we have defined as depression, now we move along, thirdly, to what should you do about it. I encourage you, dear friend, to seek the help I am speaking of. Think of it as an ailment, as we have come to view alcoholism as a disease. If you have a son who breaks his leg, and the doctor puts a cast on it, and he limps around on a crutch, you don't say: "Something is wrong with you. Why are you limping, boy?" You say: "Nice cast. May I write my name upon it?", and "Hey, you are doing well on crutches!"

Yet, when a loved one is mentally ill, we have a tendency to judge it as a sign of weakness, or a bother, or a preventable problem, if only he or she would get hold of themselves. In Reverend Don Baker's (A Baptist minister) book "Depression" he relates that as he entered into the psychiatric ward for treatment (Pastors everywhere, and counselors, and doctors, and psychiatrists, each and all experience depression, too), Don said the first

person he met was an employee there who was a member of his congregation. She thought he was visiting a patient. He said he couldn't stand to tell her that he was coming as a patient, for fear somehow she would think that he was weak, and that his ministry had failed, or that Christ left him. It took a long time, hard work, competent help and many prayers, until he finally realized that in his weakness was his strength. He eventually got better, and returned to his pastorate.

There are a couple of other things you can do. One you've heard many times, but I need to repeat it, anyway, for you who are depressed, who are subject even to acute depression (Are you listening?): Never give up hope! Revered Don Baker said that one of the most wonderful things the counselors told him early on, as he meandered through the psyche and soul of who he was: "Dr. Baker, you are depressed. The diagnosis is correct. You need some help. But, you will get better. It will take time, but you will get better."

In the middle of many lonely nights, Baker wrote, it was the only thing he could think of to say: "It'll take some time, but I'll get better." He said it to himself, to his wife and to his children. Whisper it to yourself, if you are in trouble now: "I'll get better! It will take time, but I'll get out of this. I

need God's help and love, but I'll get out of it, I'll get better..."

Have you ever met a person for a brief time, who made such an impression on your life you could never forget? I saw one such at an alcoholic rehabilitation center in southwestern Pennsylvania, twenty years ago, I guess. A little man, whom life had mistreated. And, he had mistreated himself. He was seated on a bench inside the locked door. He had been abused, you could tell by his misshapen face, and fallen countenance. One eye was even closed for good. I was with him for a total of thirty seconds, a single conversation, but I often repeat his words, and I give them now to you, as a gift from him. In walking out the door, I stopped and asked: "How ya doing, Bud?" He looked up somewhat startled, that I had spoken to him. But...he answered... "I am hanging on, Bro...I am hanging on." You know the feeling? When all of life's energy is taken up just holding on, so that you don't fall in? If you are there now, remember my little beaten-up friend, cheering me on that day. "I'm hanging on, Bro (Sister), I'm hanging on."

For there was another who hung on one day, upon a cross. And in the agony of all that, he cried, depressed: "My God, where are you now, when I

need you?"...And...God was silent. Remember?.... But, because he hung and died, you and I can live, wherever we are. You will get better. It will take some time, but never give up hope.

There are many other things that you can do (Too lengthy and numerous to recite before you now). They include positive action as well as positive thoughts. They include a hard and honest look at where you were and are and where you long to be. They include changes in life-style and diet, and your physician's care. They include finding new things to do, etc., etc., etc.

This sermon rests on the three points we have covered here: (1) a suitable definition of "depression"; (2) why it comes, and (3) what you can do about it. The rest is for another day.

But, before the end, I almost forgot. We left Elijah sitting under his broom tree, wishing he could die. Do you remember what happened next? It says that in the middle of his depression, an angel of the Lord came down, and touched him: "Wake up, Elijah, go and eat." He did. Then, he took a walk up on the mountain, Mt. Horeb, the Mountain of God, and he sat down in a little cave. And a great whirlwind came by, and the wind was howling. Then an earthquake, and the whole place was rumbling. Then

a fire.... If you have ever been depressed, you know what the whirlwind is. You know what an earthquake is, too, when the ground under you begins to shake. You know the fire that can burn your hopes. But God did not come in the middle of the tumult. Why, it does not say.

But then, the Lord passed by. And...He whispered in a still small voice: "Go your way, Elijah, your depression is over. Go on with your life and live it."

So, you too, my beloved friend, wherever you may be, I pray that after the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, you will hear the still small voice, each and every morning, whispering: "It is over now. Arise and eat, and go your way, and live your life." For now and evermore. Amen.