

Can a believer be depressed?

Psalm 42/43, 1 Kings 19:1-18

June 23, 2013

Can a believer be depressed?

Yes.

Elijah was a believer and Elijah was depressed. He exhibited several of the classic symptoms of depression: self-preoccupation and self-pity, exhaustion, feelings of isolation and helplessness, wanting to die.

The writer of the 42nd and 43rd psalms was a believer, and he, or she, was depressed.

Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled?

Day and night I cry, and tears are my only food.

Clearly, believers can be depressed. But I ask the question because there is a strong biblical link between faith and joy. Paul urged the members of one of his churches, "Always be joyful in your union with the Lord ... I say it again: rejoice!" And joy is listed, right after love, as one of the fruits of the Spirit, one of the definitive signs of the work of God's Spirit in our spirits.

So does that mean if I, a believer, am depressed, that God's Spirit is not present in me? God's Spirit brings love and joy and peace! As a believer, I learn to put my hope in God's grace and mercy, not in my own strength. I proclaim every day the good news that God has saved me. So does that mean that depression in a believer indicates a lack of faith?

Sometimes ...

Sometimes! One little word, but one very important little word! Sometimes. Because depression is a complex phenomenon. There are various and different kinds of depression, rooted in various and different causes, requiring various and different treatments. And sometimes, often even, depression can spring from multiple sources, requiring, in that case, a multifaceted approach to treatment and healing.

There are different kinds of depression, rooted in different causes, requiring different treatments.

There is clinical depression, a diagnosable malady, sometimes triggered by a specific experiential cause, but primarily a physiological condition, rooted in a bodily chemical imbalance. You feel sad, without energy, hopeless, most of the time, for no apparent reason. This kind of depression may benefit from counseling therapy, but will most often require medical intervention, drug therapy, to correct the chemical imbalances.

Another kind of depression is rooted in an emotional response to an experience of loss. It may begin in grief over the death of someone close to you, or in grief over your own serious, life-threatening illness. It may begin with a divorce or the loss of a job or repeated failure to be and do what you want to be able to be and do. Such depression may be short-term and temporary, lasting until you learn to manage the loss and live with it or live beyond it, but it may sometimes be long-term and require directed counseling therapy to assist you in strengthening your own coping mechanisms.

This kind of depression does not necessarily indicate a lack of faith -- after all, Jesus grieved, too -- but faith may indeed be an important part of the healing process.

There is another kind of depression which is mostly self-inflicted, rooted in a defect of character. In this case, there may be some kind of initial experiential trigger, but the depression itself stems from a distorted sense of self-importance. It is rooted in self-centeredness and self-pity, in the faulty notion that somehow the world is supposed to revolve around you, that the course of history is supposed to work out to your benefit, for your good pleasure. You can see some of this kind of thinking in Elijah.

And the treatment for this kind of depression? Maybe a bucket of cold water thrown in your face! But other than the water, this kind of depression calls for a good dose of humility and a sincere trust, a genuine faith, in God. Stop contemplating your own navel and look to God!

There is at least one more kind of depression, one I call spiritual depression. Spiritual depression has a direct spiritual cause, a palpable sense of the absence of God. You believe in God, you want God, you love God, but God doesn't seem to be there.

This is the psalm writer's depression. In exile in Babylon, far away from his geographical and spiritual home, God seems to be missing. God seems to have forgotten him.

We may not be in exile, but there are many occasions when we may look out at our world, at the terrible things that befall our neighbors on a daily basis, and sometimes us, too, and we may ask: "Where is God?" It is natural response to the world as it is, even a faithful response, because we refuse to turn our eyes away from suffering, to pretend it's not there. When we care, we hurt, and sometimes, the ongoing hurt leads to spiritual depression.

But spiritual depression requires spiritual healing, a choice to believe.

*Why am I so sad?
Why am I so troubled?
I will put my hope in God,
and once again I will praise him,
my savior and my God.*

Elijah eventually had to make that kind of choice, a conscious, deliberate decision to trust God. His depression has elements of several of the various kinds of depression: a physical piece, an emotional piece and a spiritual piece.

It began in the aftermath of the great confrontation with the prophets of Baal atop Mount Carmel -- that's a story for another day! Elijah was exhausted and scared and he fled for his life in response to Jezebel's threat to kill him. He fled into the wilderness, took shelter in the shade of a tree, and wished he would die.

How did the Lord respond to Elijah's prayer? How did God treat Elijah's depression? It was a multifaceted depression and its treatment required a multifaceted response.

Treatment #1: taking care of the body. Elijah slept, and God provided him food and water. When you are depressed, start by taking care of yourself! Rest, eat, drink, exercise.

Treatment #2: taking care of the spirit. Elijah walked through the wilderness to Sinai, the holy mountain. He took a spiritual retreat. But the critical part of being there, the healing he needed for his soul, was not just being there, in that holy place, but meeting God there. He felt alone, abandoned, tired, scared, used up, hopeless, but God met him on the mountain.

"Go out and stand before me on top of the mountain," the Lord said to Elijah. And the Lord met Elijah there, but not in the fierce wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire! God was just there, always just there.

That was the reminder Elijah needed -- and we need -- that God is there, not rushing to our aid with a great display of glory and might, not miraculously solving all our problems or decisively defeating all our enemies, just there. You are not alone.

But I find it very interesting that even after Elijah encountered the presence of the Lord on the top of the mountain, he was still singing the same tune: "I am the only one left!"

He didn't need a spiritual retreat, he needed to get back in the game! "What are you doing here?," the Lord asked him ... twice. What are you doing here, running away, hiding in the wilderness? I want you back where you came from, engaged, doing what I called you to do. I want you to return!

And Elijah did ...

He had to make a choice. Sometimes, with some kinds of depression, that's what it takes -- making a choice.

When my sister was here visiting two weeks ago, we had a conversation about depression. She is a therapist, and she is my sister! There was a time in my life when I suffered long and deep bouts of depression. but -- thanks be to God! -- that isn't true any more. Many things have changed. I grew up. I got married. There is something about being in relationship with a loving partner that won't let you stay self-consumed and self-preoccupied.

But now I also choose not to be depressed. Remember the sometimes! Can you choose not to be depressed? Sometimes.

I choose not to be depressed. It is easier to be depressed, to avoid dealing with issues, to avoid dealing with life, to avoid doing anything, just "enjoying" the sulky feelings, but I choose not to be depressed. I choose against self-indulgence and self-pity, realizing -- at last! -- that depression is rather selfish, that it is the shadow side of pride. But it's not just about me! Get over it!

If you are depressed, think about somebody else. Do something for somebody else. If you are depressed, do something!

And for spiritual depression, of any kind, remember the Lord. Turn to the Lord.

Here in exile my heart is breaking, and so I turn my thoughts to him ...

Look up, look out, turn your thoughts to him. Don't just brood about yourself. Praise him, your savior and your God!

The Lord is there. You are not alone. You cannot see him or feel him, and you may not sense any evidence of his presence, but the Lord is there. And realizing that, knowing that, is joy!