

My Psalm 42

Depression is no stranger to me. In his many shadowed forms, he has several times visited my doorstep and forced his way into my fortress. I have experienced depression as a nonbeliever and as a believer, as a daughter and as a new mom, as a result of my own sin nature and as a result of medical issues beyond my control. Sometimes I have willfully allowed him to stay; other times I found no authority or power to ask him to go. Every time he comes, he brings heavy burdens and damages relationships.

Depression smothers me with a black hood that blocks out light, pleasure, and joy. He whispers bitterness and lies in my ear as he marches me to his dungeon cell. He throws me into the cold, hard dark—and places an anvil on my chest so that my heart feels only pain. When he lets my body out of the dungeon to mingle among other people, he leaves my soul locked up below and tells me to get along without it. All the while, he whispers lies. He steals hope.

I know the battle plan of the psalmist—praising my Redeemer to ward off despair. I know the power and love of Jesus Christ. But I also know a chemical imbalance that hides from me the victory Christ has won. I know medications to treat chronic physical pain that cause chronic emotional pain instead. I know what it feels like to have that anvil of despair pushing down so hard on my soul that when I lift my eyes up to the Cross, I cannot find it.

Some of you embrace the pick-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps philosophy that I grew up with. I beg you to avoid applying that philosophy to those suffering with depression. I appreciate the discipline of endurance and perseverance that philosophy taught me. But endurance alone finds no foothold to break through the dungeon bars. Who among you would cry out to a cancer patient, “Physician, heal thyself!”? Yet depression is a cancer of the spirit, a tumor of the soul, that eats away at normal emotions and logic until the diagnosis becomes terminal.

In the first quarter of this year, I was reminded once again how insidious and misunderstood this cancer of the soul is—not only how to treat it but also its many causes. After a major surgery and two years of daily, crippling pain, I agreed to a medication that was intended to treat an underlying cause of that crippling pain. Not without trepidation. Several years before, doctors had given me a sister medication to this one. It took me years to realize and convince the doctors that that medication was the source of the depression I experienced, not my medical condition.

This time, I spoke with my husband about my doctor's decision and thought I had warned him sufficiently that tough times might be coming. I thought that knowing this time what I might experience would help us cope with it.

But depression lacks the outward signs of a broken arm. We don't all end up staying in bed for weeks. Some of us boot-strappers can still put one foot in front of the other. And family members lack the ability to see into the dungeon to understand the torture going on in there. All they know is that their loved one hurts—and their loved one's pain burns them too.

After two-and-a-half months of improvement in my physical condition, I chose to return to the physical pain over having emotional pain. Two-and-a-half months of this medication had once again robbed me of true relationships, motivation, and pleasure in anything I had previously enjoyed. My beloved husband was so confused by the anger and pain that I couldn't hide, he thought I wanted to leave him.

I take full responsibility for my attitudes and words and actions during that two-and-a-half months. I knew better. I knew my eyes had turned inward rather than upward. I knew that the whispers echoing in my thoughts were lies and twists of the truth. I knew that the Cross conquered my slavery to sin and bitterness. I knew that I have received blessing upon blessing. I knew I had a responsibility to obey and love. I knew that love is an action not a feeling. I knew that Christ loves me without measure.

But with only physical pain, I had still been able to praise my Redeemer and sit at his feet to ward off despair. Depression stole that ability. When depression came in through the door, he raised the drawbridge and surrounded me with a moat of my sinfulness. I could praise God with my lips, but the anvil still sat on my heart.

Within two weeks of removing the offending medication, I began to experience healing. My circumstances of stress, disappointment, and loss had not changed; my physical pain had not gone away; and my knowledge about the truth, my redemption, and the characteristics of depression had not changed—but the anvil was lifted, the black hood was raised. I could praise God with my heart. And that made all the difference.

“Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
For I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.”
(Psalms 42:11 NKJV)

If you think you are suffering with depression, my heart goes out to you. Depression has many causes. Please get counseling and medical help! But know this: ultimately the only true source of hope is God. You will never find lasting joy anywhere else because—when we were unlovely—he loved us with an everlasting love. And that is why I can proclaim: I am no stranger to Depression, but I am a blessed and chosen *child* of the King.