

“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;  
you have loosed my sackcloth  
and clothed me with gladness.”  
—Psalm 30:11

JESUS CHRIST, the Son of the living God, was called a “man of sorrows.” His soul was grieved unto death through rejection, slander, abandonment, betrayal, false accusations, extreme physical pain, weeping over loss, and ultimately death itself—following his orphaned cry on the cross. But he was never debilitated, and there was not a furrowed gloom on his brow, because his kingdom is unshakable. “[God will shake things which can be shaken] that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:27–28).

## THE *NORMALITY* OF DEPRESSION

“It is a myth that faith is always smiling.”  
—Edward Welch<sup>1</sup>

There is no ordinary depression for each individual, but it is and has always been ordinary to the human condition.

Experiences of malaise and melancholy can range from a gray day to grieving the loss of a loved one or pondering man’s estate without Christ—a broad spectrum of suffering that comes from living in a creation groaning for redemption and is common to every man and woman. After all, two thirds of the Psalms were

1. Edward T. Welch, *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness—Light for the Path* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2004).

written in a minor key. They take us into the valleys of sorrow, fear, insecurity, and despair—the realities of life in a fallen world—but in the end always guide us back to the praise of our Creator, followed by a restoration of peace and joy (a wonderful counseling model).

Depression can also be the result of physical problems such as anemia, arteriosclerosis, low blood sugar, thyroid disorders, hormone imbalances, infections, and even dehydration. It is always recommended for those who find themselves struggling with unrelenting despondency to seek medical advice to rule out somatic causes. And yes, there are those times when severe trauma or emotional shock can lead to a break, punctuated with episodes of severe depression, from the horror of reality. (For a more comprehensive treatment of the physical causes of depression, I recommend Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dr. Laura Hendrickson's *Will Medicine Stop the Pain?*<sup>2</sup>)

Where there is empirical evidence of an imbalance or deficiency, antidepressant medication can be an irrefutable help with physiological as well as psychotic maladies that may cause a loss of appetite, mood swings, and insomnia. Some of the godliest people I know avail themselves of these medications. God has graciously given man the ability to see through a microscope, develop custom-made medications, and prescribe that which would relieve unnecessary suffering. As a cancer survivor, I am particularly grateful to God for revealing to researchers target chemotherapies to arrest the rouge cells threatening my life, as well as those whose application limited nausea during treatment. There is nothing spiritual about denying the wisdom God has dispensed to the medical community to save undue misery. That is not faith; it is foolishness.

The soul, however, especially in regard to the kind of depression that immobilizes, debilitates, and renders an individual “nonfunctioning,” is God’s exclusive territory. It has been said that psychology may *describe* but only the Bible *prescribes*.

2. Elyse Fitzpatrick and Laura Hendrickson, *Will Medicine Stop the Pain?: Finding God’s Healing for Depression, Anxiety and Other Troubling Emotions* (Chicago: Moody, 2006).

Medications can assuage and heal physical pain or stabilize a mind reeling from shock, but they cannot heal the soul from “wrong [that] seems oft so strong.”<sup>3</sup> God’s Word stakes the claim that it can. That is the promise of Psalm 107:20: “He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.” But like all balms, the choice must be made to apply it.

## THE POWER TO CHOOSE

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

—Viktor Frankl, survivor of Auschwitz concentration camp<sup>4</sup>

“Our will can control our feelings if only we are steadfastly minded to do so. Surging emotions, like a tossing vessel, which by degrees yield to the steady pull of the anchor, will find themselves attached to the mighty power of God by the choice of your will.”

—Hannah Whithall Smith<sup>5</sup>

Our circumstances—no matter how difficult in the past or present—do not determine whether we live expansive and joyful lives or just exist in the small world of a self-pitying depression. But the *choices* we make *in light of* those circumstances do.

Jesus is our great example in Gethsemane, *the place of decision*, when he asked his Father, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me,” and then declared, “nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39). That decision would be seminal in all our decisions

3. Maltbie D. Babcock, “This Is My Father’s World,” 1901.

4. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search For Meaning* (repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 75.

5. Hannah Whithall Smith, *God Is Enough* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 52–53. Also quoted in Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe and the Truth That Sets Them Free* (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 198.

to come—my will and my kingdom or God’s will and his kingdom. The great determiner of the soul’s well-being hangs on the answer. Elisabeth Elliot further qualifies why the choice is not easily made when she says, “It is hard to enter the kingdom of God—not because an angel is set to keep us out, not because God would surround Himself with a highly selected elite, but because the condition for admittance is renunciation of all other kingdoms.”<sup>6</sup>

A Christian friend who had been dominated most of her life by depression said the turning point came after she had recounted to *yet another* counselor how she would at the end of each day go straight to bed and cry until she fell asleep. She was depressed, inert, and felt hopeless. She was angry that life had not lived up to her expectations. But this counselor was different. She was a *biblical* counselor. Instead of the usual deterministic matrix of blaming her past and her parents, parroting Freud’s “ethic of non-responsibility”<sup>7</sup> (a postulate that keeps the injured party going around the same mountain in an ever deepening rut), she looked her square in the face and said, “Yes, and you choose to go there.”

It was a jolting surge of life-giving hope—a catalytic spark of revival. She was not a victim! She could, by making the right choices, begin the sometimes slow but certain ascent out of that melancholy to sustaining joy. And these choices are afforded all whose spirit is occupied by the living God.

It is noteworthy that the Bible uses the word “walk” 1,550 times. It assumes that the path we are on determines our destiny, and Scripture makes it clear that there are only two paths. One is the narrow path called *difficult* because it demands humbling ourselves, relinquishing our rights, putting others before us instead of using them to get our needs met, and ultimately dying to the never-ceasing demands of the self-life. Its destination: *an abundant life*. The other path is wide, smoothed by millions of feet,

6. Elisabeth Elliot, *A Lamp Unto My Feet: The Bible’s Light for Your Daily Walk* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2004), 153.

7. Jay E. Adams, *Competent To Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 17–18.

made popular by all the self-aggrandizing road signs that bolster our natural default to self-centeredness along the way: “You are a victim.” “It’s not your fault.” “You deserve to be happy.” But the end is destruction—destruction of family, relationships, and even health. The end is also a dampening of hope, resulting in a spiral further down into the dark world of depression.

This is a booklet of good news because its center is the gospel of Jesus Christ, whose power saved us from the penalty of sin at salvation, whose power will save us from the presence of sin at glorification, and whose *same divine dynamism can save us every day* from the power of sin in sanctification. The gospel doesn’t just save us from hell; it saves us from ourselves. And these few pages face us head-on with the choices we can make—the world’s way or God’s, the centrality of self or Christ, depression with moments of happiness or joy with moments of depression. Whichever path you are on, you have chosen to go there.

## THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

“His going forth is as certain as the dawn.”

—Hosea 6:3 (NASB)

“Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,  
and burst their bonds apart.”

—Psalm 107:13–14

My parents had just begun to build their dream home in the country, and they were so excited to watch the progress that they moved into an old trailer next to the building site. But before one nail was driven, my mom had a fatal heart attack. To paraphrase Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as she walked home through the gloaming woods on a Halloween night, “Thus

began my longest journey”<sup>8</sup> and one that would take me through what many have called “the dark night of the soul.”

Dad loved Mom so much that he would have been terminally dispirited without someone occupying “her chair.” So I moved in with him. I left my home, my job, and my friends to live in the middle of nowhere in a derelict trailer, which seemed porous to every creepy, crawling species of insect native to Texas. Worse, the shadow of my mother’s death was “like the sky—it spread over everything.”<sup>9</sup> It blighted any vestige of joy and left me wondering whether the heavy cloak of depression that seemed to swallow me whole would ever lift. But then God used my little dog Baxter to show me that *it would*.

On the night of a new moon, when a swath of clouds masked the steering stars, Baxter ran from the trailer into the woods after some varmint that proved too tantalizing for his terrier instincts. I was away visiting friends, so my dad took his flashlight and went to find my beloved dog. Well into his search, the flashlight battery died. There he was in pitch black, surrounded by a thick overgrowth of scrub trees, ravines, and old barbed wire fences, without a heavenly body for light or compass.

When I came home the next morning, I found Dad sitting in his easy chair, drinking a cup of coffee in perfect peace, with one sheepish little dog at his feet. After regaling me with his harrowing tale, I asked, “What did you do?” He looked at me almost quizzically and said, “I just sat down.” “You just sat down?” I asked. “Yes, Margaret. I knew the sun would come up in the morning.”

There was the answer. In the deepest, seemingly inescapable nightfall, the sun always rises. The disciples on the stormy sea cried out in fearful desperation, and Jesus came to them in the fourth watch, the Roman’s division of the day that heralded the dawn.

You may be facing some hard things in life now, all of which could easily spiral you into the depths of depression: a loveless mar-

8. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960), 292.

9. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 13, 39.

riage or what may seem interminable singleness, a wayward child, the haunting pain of abuse from childhood, looming foreclosure, age replacing youth. Maybe you've gotten a call from a doctor who found "something suspicious." These are times John Calvin calls "critical seasons,"<sup>10</sup> when we choose to sink into the dark depths of fear and anxiety, or be like Peter, who changed his focus from the storm's threatening swells to a triumphant Savior. When we choose to focus on the Savior, we can walk astride the very thing that would drown us. Our wills, motivated by the knowledge of God's unconditional love and in his enabling power, *can* decide to stand against that which threatens to undo us.

In Ed Welch's book, *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*, we read, "Martin Luther called depression *anfechtungen*, which means, 'to be fought at.'" <sup>11</sup> Instead of being translated as "something to surrender to," it is a call to arms. He goes on to quote D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the British pastor and physician who addressed the topic of depression. He says, "You have to take yourself in hand. . . . You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, 'Hope thou in God'—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way."<sup>12</sup>

What follows is a list of resolutions infused with truth to help you fight the good fight against depression and fight for joy in a world hostile to it. While there is no necessary order to the list, I begin purposefully with *gratitude* because God bids us come into his gates with thanksgiving. It's amazing how that one act can change the entire trajectory of emotions. However, each resolution below has potency for lifting a heavy heart, while its neglect will most certainly weigh the heart down.

10. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 8: Psalms, Part I*, trans. John King (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), available online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc08/cc08037.htm>.

11. Welch, *Depression*, 97.

12. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 21; also quoted in DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe*, 208.

### *Choose Gratitude*

“Our sorrow upon any account is sinful and inordinate when it diverts us from our duty to God and embitters our comfort in him, when it makes us unthankful for the mercies we enjoy and distrustful of the goodness of God to us in further mercies, when it casts a damp upon our joy in Christ, and hinders us from doing the duty and taking the comfort of our particular relations.”

—Matthew Henry<sup>13</sup>

I love the original word for gratitude, *beholden*, whose first-generation meaning is “owing a debt” or, more literally, “bound.” I cannot repay the debt of gratitude I owe God for my redemption, but it binds me to him. I cannot recompense the many kindnesses shown by friends and family, but my gratitude strengthens the ties of corporate and familial love.

Gratitude awakens the soul to the sweetness of being tethered to God and humanity. A refusal to be “beholden” breaks ties, allowing the soul to drift into isolation with a sense of entitlement and rancorous pride. Ungrateful people will not be bound by such a debt. They care more what is owed them.

Roman philosopher Cicero said, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues but it is also the parent of them all.”<sup>14</sup> A grateful person knows that all of life is dependent on the grace of a benevolent God and his people who extend that benevolence on earth. Conversely, while gratitude is the portal through which we enjoy God and others, ingratitude is a darker passage into moral and relational decline, as seen in Romans 1 when the apostle Paul describes the degeneration of man. His downward spiral began the moment he refused to give thanks.

13. Matthew Henry, John Gill, and Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of I & II Samuel* (repr., Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 11.

14. Cicero, *Pro Plancio*, 54 BC.



Acerbic American writer and poet Dorothy Parker called gratitude the “most sniveling attribute in the world.”<sup>15</sup> And where did her refusal to be beholden to anyone take her? She died so bitter and alone that after she was cremated no one claimed her ashes. They stayed in her attorney’s filing cabinet for almost twenty years. That is the common destiny of all who have no gratitude to God or man—a withering of the soul into depression and, finally, into irredeemable darkness.

But gratitude must have a legitimate source; otherwise it is a counterfeit emotion based on our circumstances. And when it is based on circumstances, I’m thankful that people are fulfilling my expectations, but the moment things go awry, I am resentful and angry. The great catalyst of being truly thankful in all circumstances (1 Thess. 5:18)—of gratitude being an unchanging feature of the soul—is the knowledge that we were worthy only of condemnation. In Jonathan Edwards’s words, we were “hang[ing] by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it”<sup>16</sup> with no more ability to save ourselves than Lazarus could reanimate dead tissue.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. (Eph. 2:1–5)

15. Dorothy Parker, “The Art of Fiction,” interview by Marion Capron, *The Paris Review*, no. 13 (Summer 1956).

16. Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 23.

All gratitude springs from the two words “but God.” God mercifully called my name. He regenerated my dead estate to life by indwelling the formerly “untenanted chamber”<sup>17</sup> of my heart. I was on a trajectory of utter and eternal destruction—but God! Cicero was right. Gratitude cannot be just a great attribute; it must be the wellspring from which it constantly flows.

On January 13, 1982, an Air Florida commercial jet took off from Washington National Airport for Fort Lauderdale. It climbed only two hundred feet before crashing into the Potomac, the cause later determined to be ice and pilot error. One of only four survivors, twenty-one-year-old Priscilla Tirado, whose husband and son perished, emerged from the tangled debris and was filmed by news crews as she tried to swim to safety.

Blinded by jet fuel, unable to make her frozen limbs work, and still in shock after the impact, Priscilla could only mechanically wave her arms in a swimming motion as she began to sink under the icy depths that had already claimed 74 souls. One of the horrified witnesses, a man named Lenny Skutnik, could no longer stand by. He threw off his jacket and dove into the river of jagged ice just as she was going under. Within seconds, he pulled Priscilla safely to shore. In a rare interview some years later, Mrs. Tirado said simply, “Lenny Skutnik is my angel.”<sup>18</sup>

Gratitude is the language of those who *know* they were perishing. Who *know* they were blind and now see. Who *know* what fate awaited them if God had not sent his Son into an inhospitable world to save them. Nothing routs ingratitude from my soul more than the sure knowledge of just how close I came to that tenuous

17. F. B. Meyer, “The Natural Man,” sermonindex.net, accessed March 6, 2013, <http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=18529>.

18. Lynn Schnurnberger and Synthia Sanz, “Angels: Ignoring Danger or Bringing Hope, They Proved That Anyone Can Make a Difference,” *People* 51 no. 10 (1999), available online at <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20063606,00.html>.

thread over a pit of eternal darkness *breaking*—leaving me in separation from God. I am beholden every moment of my life to God, who sent his only Son to rescue the perishing. A life-transforming practice is to rise every morning and thank God for his salvation.

Thou that hast given so much to me,  
Give one thing more: a grateful heart;  
Not thankful when it pleaseth me,  
As if Thy blessings had spare days,  
But such a heart whose pulse may be Thy praise.  
—George Herbert<sup>19</sup>

### ***Choose to See God's Sovereign Love***

"Your night of weeping may go on for months or even years. But if you are a child of God, it will not go on forever. God has determined the exact duration of your suffering, and it will not last one moment longer than He knows is necessary to achieve His holy, eternal purposes in and through your life."  
—Nancy Leigh DeMoss<sup>20</sup>

"I entreat you, give no place to despondency. This is a dangerous temptation—a refined, not a gross temptation of the adversary. Melancholy contracts and withers the heart, and renders it unfit to receive the impressions of grace. It magnifies and gives a false coloring to objects, and thus renders your burdens too heavy to bear. God's designs regarding you, and His methods of bringing these designs, are infinitely wise."  
—Madame Guyon<sup>21</sup>

19. George Herbert, *The Temple*, ed. Henry L. Carrigan (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), 123.

20. DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe*, 225.

21. Madame Guyon, quoted in L. B. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert* (repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 171.

Nothing can lift us with such surety from the abyss of depression as the double strand of God's sovereignty entwined with his supreme love. The knowledge that he is in absolute control, "choreographing the molecular dance,"<sup>22</sup> *and* loves his children with an eternally secure love gives us two indispensable necessities: *purpose and hope*.

When a pebble is dropped into a pond, its effects radiate to every part of the shore, looking like second, third, and fourth causes. Like the pebble, God is the first cause. Not one thing can touch the life of his children apart from his sovereign and gracious will. That is the promise of Romans 8:28–29.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. (NASB)

And behind each cause is a goal, a way appointed to shape us into the image of his Son. (That *is* why you were saved—to *manifest* to a lost world the life of Christ.)

God incarnate, whose earthly work was that of a carpenter, knows how to use the hammer, chisel, and sandpaper of life with divine mastery to bring forth the image of his Son in each of his children—the gospel's power in sanctification. One of the great examples of this truth comes from Michelangelo's statue of David, the most anatomically perfect image of a man in Renaissance art. The master sculptor took a flawed piece of marble and saw in it the man David. Then, with the keen eye of masterful skill, Michelangelo took away everything that wasn't him. When our divine Master looks at his children, he sees his indwelling Son and sets about in his refining work to take away everything that is not him. So whatever is happening in your

22. Elisabeth Elliot, *Keep a Quiet Heart* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1995), 41.

life is not a capricious whim of fate, but *caused* by a loving God. It is this loving God “who began a good work in you [and] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

When we choose to see the Carpenter’s hand at work in the irritating behavior of a friend or spouse, the crushing hammer blows of injustice, or self-serving treatment from others, we experience a Copernican Shift that puts the Son, rather than “self,” as the center of our lives. We *know* there are no “second causes,” and this is a life-changing truth! When Christ is in his rightful place on the throne of our hearts and we relinquish to him control over our lives and the desire to change those around us, then and only then will we see our sovereign God accomplish what *our* attempts to govern could not. And the more we see *him* change hearts, restore broken relationships, protect, and provide (or give grace in the midst of pain or deprivations) through simple trust and obedience, the more we love him. And the more we love and trust him, the more we want to obey his commands. Dr. John Henderson in his biblical counseling book *Equipped to Counsel* calls this *the ascendancy to joy*.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, trying to control and manipulate for our own self-gain or our own self-protection is a sure *descent to depression*—a downward gradient to which I have been no stranger.

Years ago, I perceived someone’s actions as a painful rejection, which was magnified by my own sense of self-importance and pride. When *self* is on the throne of our hearts, the least skewed glance or misplaced word can be turned into an oversized offense (people aren’t thinking of us nearly as much as we imagine), sending us in retreat to our tenuous kingdoms for protection. I put up thick walls of isolation and defensive anger so that no one could enter and hurt me again.

The problem is that if there is no possibility of pain, there is no possibility of relationship. And without a relationship we

23. See John Henderson, *Equipped to Counsel: A Training Program in Biblical Counseling* (Bedford, TX: Association of Biblical Counselors, 2008), 185.