



Jesus is the ultimate cure for our spiritual depression, but it can be hard to know how to access His healing power. Readers explore the causes of spiritual depression, including calamity, longstanding afflictions, persistent melancholy, fear, persistent sin, and more. And they discover a wholistic, practical road to spiritual health.

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PART ONE

*THE CAUSES
OF SPIRITUAL
DEPRESSION*

Chapter 1

EXAMINING YOUR OWN HEART: INVESTIGATING AND DIAGNOSING YOUR CONDITION

*U*nderstanding why you are depressed can seem like an unobtainable task. There have been times I have felt so inundated emotionally that I didn't know where to start. I knew I needed to work through the reasons for my depression, but it felt impossible. Oftentimes, it can feel like trying to wrap our arms around an ocean—just one big, dark, overwhelming problem with no bottom and no help on the horizon. *Why do I feel so bad?* we may ask ourselves. But trying to understand the reason just feels useless and hopeless.

Jeremiah 17:9–10 declares, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick; who can understand it?” The answer comes from the Lord, “I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his

deeds.” In other words, only God is truly able to understand the depths of our troubles and depravity to deal with us accordingly.

But this does not mean we should not try to understand our hearts. Repeatedly, the Bible commends self-evaluation. Second Corinthians

In dealing with spiritual depression, we will come to see that self-examination is vitally important to recovering and growing in godliness.

13:5 exhorts believers, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” We are called to take a long, hard look into our own spiritual condition. Furthermore, we are told, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). God intends for us to do the hard work of looking into our own condition, examining our hearts so that we might know how to proceed by repentance and faith.

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The Importance of Self-Evaluation

It is likely that King David penned Psalm 42 while struggling with intense spiritual despair. While we do not know the exact conditions surrounding this psalm of lament, it becomes clear that it is one of complete misery and sadness. Line after line, the poor sufferer wears his heart on his sleeve:

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. . . .
My tears have been my food day and night,
While they say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” . . .

O my God, my soul is in despair within me. . . .
Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls;
All your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me. . . .
I will say to God my rock, “Why have You forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”
(Ps. 42:1–3, 6a, 7, 9)

We can almost hear the sobs uttered between the verses. Frankly, Psalm 42 is heartbreaking yet not unfamiliar to those swallowed up in grief and sadness.

In the midst of David’s soul-exposing prayer, we find a repeated refrain. It appears twice in Psalm 42 (vv. 5, 11), as well as in Psalm 43:5, its companion. Punctuating the two psalms is the question: “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me?” The English Standard Version translates the phrase this way: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?”

What is noteworthy about this question is that, at the height of David’s depression and misery, he has the wherewithal to interrogate his own soul. *What’s wrong with you, soul? Why are you miserable?*

Remarking on the principle demonstrated here, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones surmises, “I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression in a sense is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self.”¹ Instead of permitting oneself to become swallowed up in depression, we are exhorted to speak to our own souls. “The main art in the matter of spiritual living,” continues Lloyd-Jones, “is to know how to handle yourself.

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You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself.”²

Where do we begin our examination? It is not enough to simply tough-talk ourselves into feeling better. We need to exercise some discernment. We need to ask, think, evaluate, ponder, resolve. Because if we can understand *why* our souls are in distress, then we can begin to administer Scripture’s cures. But first, we must determine the cause.

Understanding the Causes of Depression

Human souls do not just collapse into spiritual depression for no reason. There is always a cause, or more likely, multiple causes. In fact, it must be admitted that determining the exact causes of our spiritual depression is difficult because of the complexity. There may be a number of adverse situations, catastrophic events, growing problems, emotional reactions, and/or sinful habits that are contributing to our present condition. Untangling the knot is often painstaking and confusing at times.

However, if we can step back a little and look at our lives, I believe it’s possible to place at least some of the problems into helpful categories. Admittedly, this is not an exact science. There is no foolproof process. It may be a little messy. But I believe that it is helpful to see the causes of spiritual depression in two categories: *specific* and *broad*.

Specific Causes

The first category involves trying to identify specific causes for our depression and despair, which we will examine in chapter 2. These do not consider the larger context (e.g., the loss of a loved one, a debilitating disease, etc.) but rather the more immediate and intimate factors that contribute to the grander problem.

For example, the overarching problem of feeling distant from God

is most likely a result of the consistent pattern of *spiritual starvation*—a lack of being nourished daily on the Word of God. Feelings of hopelessness and despair may be connected to *spiritual confusion*—misunderstanding or misapplying biblical truths.

The challenge in self-evaluating the reasons why we are depressed lies in the fact that our downcast condition is likely the combination of several specific causes. I have experienced times where I felt distant from God, only to realize that there were several causes working together: spiritual laziness, spiritual starvation, open rebellion, spiritual confusion, and faithlessness. However, it is imperative to identify the exact causes. It may prove labor intensive but will be invaluable to seeking healing.

Broad Causes

The second category of causes (chapters 3 through 8) deals with the broader context or the bigger picture. This effort looks at whole situations, events, or conditions in order to zero in on how to understand our depression. These are often realities that are common to all people at different times in their lives. And while the details of our situations are unique, the general categories are basic.

In studying the Bible and observing daily life, I have identified six broad causes that contribute to spiritual depression. These are calamity, opposition, long-standing affliction, melancholy, fear and anxiety, and persistent sins.

For example, the death of a spouse is an example of *calamity*—a catastrophic event that can plunge a person into a whole array of painful emotions. Constant antagonism by a work colleague may be a source of *opposition* that drives a person to daily despair. A pornography addiction is an example of a *persistent sin* that wages war on the soul,

driving a person into the doldrums of spiritual depression.

It is important to note that some of these broader causes may not be the fault of the person who is struggling with depression. The loss of a job due to company-wide layoffs, a deadly car accident that occurs because of a drunk driver, or a cancer diagnosis—these are the kinds of things that seem to come out of left field and can devastate us without warning.

It is important, however, to recognize that even if something terrible happens *to* us that drives us to temporary despair, we are called to respond to adverse situations with faithfulness and godliness. Many times, spiritual depression develops when we respond to negative situations with ungodly behaviors. It will often be our sinful *response* that will perpetuate and escalate our depression far beyond the effects of the initial cause of our trouble. We must learn how to respond to our trouble using the Bible's prescriptions.

Seeking to Be Examined by God

While engaging in self-examination is necessary and good, there comes a point when we must surrender it all to the Lord. Truthfully, this must occur throughout the entire process. At the end of David's brilliant

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exploration of the wisdom and knowledge of God in Psalm 139, he offers an earnest prayer for examination: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way" (vv. 23–24).

All of our questioning, evaluating, interrogating, and pondering will amount to

nothing more than vain introspection if we are not earnestly seeking God's help. After all, He created our souls; only He truly knows how to heal them. Ultimately, it is not merely about examining ourselves but being examined by the One who can heal us.

Seeking to Be Helped by Others

While wrestling with spiritual depression feels very much like a personal battle, it does not need to be a lonely battle. In fact, Ephesians 4 teaches that spiritual growth is a communal effort, as “we are to grow up in all aspects into Him [Christ] . . . from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies . . . causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (vv. 15–16). In other words, the members of the body of Christ are tasked with the blessed responsibility of helping other members of the body grow in holiness (see Heb. 10:24–25).

Believers are to “bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Applying this concept takes wisdom. It may not be helpful to stand up in the middle of a congregational meeting and air out all of your spiritual problems. But seeking counsel from mature, godly members of your church may prove extremely helpful. Furthermore, talk to your pastor or church leader who can give biblical counsel and encouragement. Beyond this, there may be tremendous value in seeking the help of a qualified biblical counselor. I would recommend counselors certified by the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) or the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF).

While we joyfully declare that God is more than able to minister to us through His Word and by His Spirit, we should recognize that He has provided help and encouragement through the community

of the saints, the body of Christ. In evaluating the cause(s) of your condition, Scripture teaches that there is wisdom in an “abundance of counselors” (Prov. 11:14).

In seeking to evaluate and understand, the next seven chapters will examine both specific and broad causes of spiritual depression.

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