

Time of Grace Ministry
God's To-Do List for Depression
Psalm 42 and 43
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Pastor Mark Jeske

Have you ever struggled with feelings of depression or do you know somebody who has? Pastor Mike Novotny has some encouragement for you from God's wonderful word for you today.

Pastor Michael Novotny

Dan's friends had never seen him depressed. But the day he lost his job, he seemed to lose everything they loved about him – his energy, his enthusiasm, his laughter, his jokes, his positive mindset – seemed to walk out the door when the boss shared the news. But being good friends, they wanted to help and so they invited Dan when they were going out but Dan just wanted to stay at home. They texted him job opportunities and applications and openings but Dan never seemed to follow-up. The friends started to get frustrated with their depressed friend and so, they did what any good group of Christian friends would do; they googled it. And Google gave them a whole list, a treasure trove of wisdom: Do this and don't do that. Stories of people who escaped and overcame depression. Do eat right and don't forget to exercise. Do get out of the house even if you don't want to and don't forget to connect spiritually. Do be open and honest about your struggles but don't forget therapy and medication. They were so excited about all these practical ways to escape depression, they invited their friend out, they shared the list – do this, don't do that. We're going to help you through this; we're going to walk with you through the darkness. And they gave him an entire easy-to-follow list.

But after a day, none of the boxes got checked and then after a week, and then after a month, and the paper stuck to Dan's fridge with a whole list of unchecked boxes made him feel even more depressed.

Have you ever been there? Seven percent of U.S. adults struggle with some form of deep depression in any given year. Depression actually comes from the word "depressio" in Latin, which means to press down. And it's not the drops of sadness that rain on all of our heads in this broken world; it's the storm that clouds the forecast for weeks on end. And if you've ever lived under that storm or if you've ever loved someone who's going through that storm, you know that depression is not so simple to fix. It invades our lives in so many different ways. Maybe depression is part of your genetic story. Mom struggled and grandpa struggled and now you struggle. Maybe depression surprised you after the birth of your child; a postpartum bout that made those late nights and lack of sleep even more difficult. Maybe it happened after the loss of someone you loved; a death you didn't expect that seemed to crack your soul. Maybe it happened because of an addiction; maybe when you started going to divorce court. Maybe after you lost your job or declared bankruptcy. In a thousand ways, depression invades our lives and if you've been through it, you know all about the list. We Google it in our desperation: "How

do I beat this?” And like Dan’s friends, you’re going to find a whole lot of incredible, practical medical and scientific wisdom: Do exercise, even if you have to cry on your treadmill. Get out of the house; raise your natural dopamine levels. Do stay connected with family and friends. Be honest. Express your thoughts. Don’t believe your feelings; depression invades us with lies in disguise, negative emotions that aren’t even close to true. Talk about them. Do set goals. Don’t forget to volunteer. Do this and don’t do that.

And then, if you’re a Christian, there’s a whole other list, isn’t there? Do pray and don’t stop going to church even if you haven’t showered all week. Do stay connected to Christian family and friends; open confession with your pastor. Don’t forget to be grateful. Do remember the promises of God. And all of it is good. In fact, I would say all of it is great advice but do you know the problem?

A friend of mine shared the story when she battled genetic and then postpartum depression and her husband had all these good ideas: We should be thankful. Think of how bad some people have it. Think of how good our family has it. And then not only was she depressed, but she felt sinful and ungrateful, unappreciative, spoiled, and the depression got worse.

And that’s why I’m so excited to share this with you today because right in the middle of your Bible is a song that was written out of a deep and dark depression. And in the middle of this song, we find God’s to-do list for the depressed. It comes actually from a pair of psalms that were written about 3,000 years ago; Psalm 42 and Psalm 43. And we find out the author was a worship leader who seemed to be in a pit of despair. But the thing is, God inspired this song. God wanted it included in the Bible. God actually wanted his people – not just back then, but even today – to sing songs like this. And you’re about to find out why.

So listen what one of the Sons of Korah says in Psalm 42: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’”

Those are good questions that depressed people ask, right? When and where? When will this be over? God, where are you? Why don’t you fix this? This marriage and this mess, this cancer, this chemo, this chemical imbalance, this divorce, my children, my body – God, when will I see you and when will you fix this? Like a deer who is running from his predators, he says, “My soul is thirsty; my soul is panting for God. I’m sick of running. I want to find a new day. I want to find crisp and refreshing water for my soul.” He is down and he is out.

So what will he do? Well, he has an idea. He sings next: “These things I remember as I pour out my soul; how I used to go to the house of God,” under the protection of the mighty one, “with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.” That sounds a bit more hopeful, doesn’t it? Shouts of joy, songs of praise. See, he’s remembering how we used to go to God’s house and be with God’s people and the thought of worship revives his spirit and that’s really good advice, isn’t it? When you’re down, to remember, to think, to count your blessings. And we can focus on all the things we don’t have or we can choose to focus on the blessings that we

do. Or maybe that's the to-do that will cure depression. Or maybe not. Did you catch that phrase? He said, "Used to." Oh, I remember how I used to! When I used to go to church instead of not wanting to get out of bed. How we used to shout and sing and raise my hands instead of curling up in the fetal position at home; I remember. How my body used to work, how my family used to be, how much I used to enjoy my job, the vacations we used to take and the thought of what used to be and what is now just drives his depression deeper.

And so, he tries something else. He breaks out into the chorus of the song; words that he's going to repeat three times in these two psalms. He sings, "Why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." Now he turns the song into a solo and he sings directly to his own soul. He says, "Soul, why are you downcast? Why do you feel this way? Why are you so low?" He starts to interrogate his own heart; he starts to examine his feelings. He preaches to himself, in a sense. He says, "Heart, I will praise God. I will put my hope in God. I'm not going to follow you just because I feel this way. No, this is my God and my Savior." And that's really good advice.

I learned from talking to many depressed people that one of the top things that happens in your heart are lies are hatched by the minute; just negative, spiraling thoughts that have no basis in reality. God's not here, God's not going to fix this. There's no plan for this; this will never get better. My life will always feel this sad. And so, the psalmist has great advice. Question your heart. Point a finger down at your insides and say, I know we feel that way, but feelings are not facts. And I don't have faith in my feelings; I have in the facts. God is with me – fact. Jesus is my Savior – fact. God has a plan for the biggest messes in life – that is a fact. Maybe the to-do that makes depression done is talking to our own hearts, questioning our own feelings; maybe that will work.

Or maybe not. Because the very next words after the refrain is done say this: "My soul is downcast within me." I want to grab this guy and say, "Wait, what? Didn't we go through all this already? Like we talk to our hearts, God's our Savior, put your hope in God not in all this other stuff. Didn't we fix this?" But maybe that's the point; maybe you can't cure depression with a catchy chorus even if the chorus is about Christ. And if today you'd read the rest of these two psalms, you would find this manic, depressive, rollercoaster of faith and doubt that lasts into the very final word. After expressing his doubt and downcast soul, he says, "God, all your waves have swept over me. It's like I'm drowning here and you send wave after wave after wave until I just want to cry out, 'Seriously?'" Has anyone ever prayed that prayer? Seriously, God? Now? I'm going through the divorce and now this happens? And then my car breaks down after I lose – seriously, God?

But then the very next verse, verse 9, he returns: "But I say to God my Rock." I say, Yes! That's going to fix the depression. Don't put your faith in the shifting sand of your circumstances. God is faithful and God is solid. He's on the right path until the very next line which says, "God, why have you forgotten me?" I pray and I pray. Do my messages go right into your junk mail, God? Because you are not fixing this. So he sings the chorus again: "My soul, why are you downcast? Put your hope in God." Then the very next verse: "God, why have you rejected me?" And then he goes back to the chorus and then the song ends.

And that's in your Bible and I love the fact that it is. It's never going to be inspirational enough for a Kidz Bop album, right? But it is so good for grown-up faith because what does it teach us? It teaches us that you can be an inspired author; that God can choose you to write the songs that his people will sing for millennia and there is no quick fix. There is no "just believe this" or "pray that" and the depression will leave. In this broken world, it's something that God's people in the church, who love God, who believe that he is their hope and their Savior, struggle with.

Maybe I can picture it like this: You know who this is? It's Sadness if you haven't seen the kid's movie "Inside Out" like I have 1,017 times. If you've seen the movie, you know that Sadness is always depressed. Half the movie, she's flat on her back, lamenting about what if and worst case scenarios and negative spiraling thoughts. And Joy tries to cheer her up but if you've seen the movie, you know that Sadness gets up and then back down. And she takes the first step and then she's flat on her back and Joy has to drag her along all the time and because the depression doesn't leave quickly.

You know what some people think in the church? Some people think that if Jesus would show up and if he could just say the right things and believe the right promises and repeat the right prayers that we'll just jump up to our feet and the sadness will be gone. If we just give the right advice, if we just say "do this and don't do that," and if we have a chapter and a verse to prove it, well then, depression will leave. But then you read this psalm and it's not that simple.

So what am I supposed to say to you today? Pray more? Count your blessings! Make sure you go to church. I'd be right but it probably wouldn't fix it. So I'm going to give you something else today. My absolute favorite part of this psalm. You ready for it? I want to give you a Chiasm. You don't seem excited. You ever hear of a Chiasm before? C-h-i-a-s-m. A Chiasm was an ancient technique in writing songs where the author would put the main point of his poetry right in the middle. In modern pop music, we put the main point in the hook or the chorus, right? Justin Bieber writes a song, you know the main point because he'll sing it 78 times so you'll hum it and you'll sing along with it, even if you don't want to. That's what we do. That's not what they did. They would take a song and they would find the very middle of it and sometimes they would just say the line once but if it was in the middle, you know that it mattered. It was like a song sandwich, right? All the ingredients God chose, but he's going to put the meat of the message in the middle.

And do you know what happens if you take Psalm 42 and 43 and find the very center? You'll find three stanzas that each end with a chorus, go to the second stanza, find the very middle verse, and you will find God's to-do list for the depressed. It's the only time in the entire psalms that it's not "God, I feel this way," or "God, you should do this," or "God, please help me with this." It's the only time that God is the subject of the verb.

This is what it says in Psalm 42:8: "By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me." That's so good, let me read it again: "By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me." Day and night, when the sky is down and out, God directs his love. In the midst of all the crying and moping and doubting and forgetting, God directs his love. You know, the word

“direct” in Hebrew is the same word as command. Normally, we think of the Ten Commandments where God tells us, “do this” and “don’t do that.” But this time, God is commanding not us but his love. Picture his healing and sustaining and empowering and forgiving love at his side and he’s commanding it; he’s saying, “Go! My sons are so sad; my daughters are so depressed. I’m commanding you, I’m directing you, go be with them. Go help them and go heal them.” It turns out that God’s to-do list for the depressed is not something we do; it’s something that God does.

So what exactly does that look like if you’re depressed? If someone you love is down and out, that God is directing his love? Well, I’m going to give you five examples. The first one is that God directs his love through pastors. Can I tell you one of the best things about having a pastor? Your pastor could care less about how you feel. I don’t mean that pastors don’t care about people, we don’t care about your feelings. But before we get up to preach, did I ask any of you today, “Hey, how are you feeling about God’s love? Because if you’re kind of doubting it, I just won’t say it.” No, we pastors get up and no matter how you feel, we say what God says. If you feel like a loser? I don’t care; you’re more than a conqueror through him who loved you. You feel all alone? Who cares; God is with you; he’ll never leave you and he’ll never forsake you. You don’t think there’s a point in your suffering and pain? I don’t care if you think that because there is. Everything – all things – work together for the good of those who love him. You feel ugly and worthless, that life is not worth living? No, I don’t care. I know the plans – one of the best things about a pastor is he hears from God and he preaches it whether you feel it or not. So you can think you’re unforgiveable, unlovable, your life is pointless. You can look in the mirror and hate yourself but a pastor will say, “I don’t care. God loves you. Fact.” God directs his love through the leaders of his church.

Number two, God directs his love not just through pastors but through the Scriptures. Have any of you ever had the scary experience of trying to buy a Bible from a Christian bookstore? Have you ever gone into the like super intimidating aisle of 17,000 translations and there’s the NIV and the ESV and the KJV and the new KJV and the message and the NASB. I’ve stood before those walls but do you know what I’ve never seen? I’ve never seen a copy of the RDV – the Really Depressed Version. That takes all the promises of God that end in periods and exclamation points and edits it for question marks. God so loved the world? I don’t know; probably not. Because God doesn’t care, right? He just doesn’t care what you feel in that moment. He is coming with an authoritative word that cannot be questioned. And so when you’re depressed, if you open the Book and if you raise your hands to rejoice or if you cry on the page, it will still say God’s mercy is new every morning. I will be with you always, Jesus will say. Period. Not ellipses, as if it’s in doubt. God directs his love through a word that does not change and cannot be broken so that we know his love for us will never be changed or broken.

Number three, God directs his love through you. One of my friends who battled a deep depression said the best thing she experienced was what she called the “We” version. You ever hear of the “You” version, the downloadable Bible app? The “We” version, she said, was just Christians who didn’t try to fix her; they were just there. They knew there was no quick answer to depression so they were with her and they prayed with her and they spent time with her and it meant the world to her.

Mary Keith is a Christian who's battled depression and admitted that she didn't get all the to-do's done. She once confessed on her blog: "My shield of faith was mostly lying next to me on the ground. And I didn't make a gratitude list and I didn't trust God and I didn't count my blessings," and she would sometimes cry out, "God, where are you?" But then he showed up in the two Christian friends who knocked on her door who came unannounced with a meal and said, "We cooked. I know it's hard when you don't feel great." And she realized that God's presence and God's love was right there in the people that God directed and sent to love her in her darkness. God directs his love through pastors, through Scriptures, through brothers and sisters, and number four, through doctors.

You know, some Christians don't believe that. I heard an incredibly depressing story of a woman battling depression and anxiety whose friends and family told her, "If you really trusted God," as if pills and promises were on a teeter-totter and you could only have one or the other. One of my friends is a pastor who has diabetes. Do you think I tell him, "Well, it's either insulin or faith; you pick!" No, we would never say that. If a kid broke his leg would you say, "Well, it's either a cast or Jesus Christ; what are you going to pick, bud?" "Oh Johnny, I see the crutches, you of little faith." No, we would say when something happens to our body, we thank God for medical advances and technology and medicine so what would be so different if it didn't happen here or down here but up here? And so, God directs his love through good medication and wise doctors and I want to say to some of you: There is nothing small about your faith if there are pills in your bathroom because God directs his love through good doctors.

But most importantly, God directs his love not just through pastors, Scriptures, brothers and sisters and doctors, he directs it through the Savior. You know what I love when I think about Jesus? That the Bible says he didn't just come to give depressed people good advice. Isaiah 61 said that Jesus would come to bind up the brokenhearted and Psalm 34 tells us how. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted. The great prophecy of Isaiah said that Jesus will be a man of sorrows; a man who would thirst like a deer panting for water. A man who would go to the cross and cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Why did he say that and why did he do that? So that you and I and our loved ones would know that Jesus is not up here waiting until we pick ourselves up and work our way up to him. No, here's how God directs his love: He comes down and he sits with the depressed. When they're not better, when they're still broken, when they feel hopeless, when they feel unlovable, they won't have to look up to the top of the ladder and wonder how long will it be until they're with God. They would look to the side and know that God is already with them.

So if you battle depression or someone you love does, Google it and take the advice. But more than anything, remember God's to-do list; to love his depressed sons and daughters who didn't get anything done.

Pastor Mark Jeske

You know, sometimes we don't like to admit being weak. I sure don't; I don't like the people around me seeing me as weak. And so, if I'm really struggling with some self-doubt or with

some self-hatred, I might try to bottle it up or deny that it's there or pretend as though it hadn't happened. But that isn't really safe or very healthy, is it?

My counsel to you when you encounter those feelings is to share them with someone you trust or with your pastor and, above all, with our Lord. You know, there's no shame in admitting that you sometimes have feelings of depression. Talk to your friends about that; talk to your pastor. And, above all, talk to your God. Let's pray right now, shall we?

Heavenly Father, sometimes, you know that I feel pretty low. I don't like myself very much. I feel like a fool and a failure. At times like that, I really need you. Send your spirit into my heart. Speak your words to my ears and let your spirit then encourage my heart so that I will see myself as the wonderful creation you have made; loved and redeemed by Christ and the spirit of the Lord lives in me. Give me strength to fight the devil's temptations to be blue. I pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske, celebrating God's amazing grace with you and it all starts now.



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God's To-Do List for Depression

Psalm 42: ¹“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. ²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ ⁴These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng. ⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. ⁶My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar. ⁷Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. ⁸By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life. ⁹I say to God my Rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?’ ¹⁰My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ ¹¹Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Psalm 43: ¹Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. ²You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? ³Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. ⁴Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. ⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Points to Ponder

1. Have you ever suffered with feelings of depression or know someone who has? Why is it so hard to break out of?

2. In the first few verses of Psalm 42, the writer expresses common thoughts and questions that someone who feels depressed might ask. List some of those thoughts and questions.

3. As you read Psalm 42, you can feel the up and down nature of the writer's depressive thoughts. Why is this an excellent description of the Christian's struggle with trouble and faith and doubt? What facts can you point out to yourself about your God to combat those negative thoughts?

4. Read Psalm 42:8. Is God's to-do list for depression something you need to do or something God does for you? Explain.

5. Pastor Novotny lists five ways that God gets his to-do list done (directs his love) for you. Can you list all five?

Feelings of depression involve a complicated struggle that has both chemical and spiritual components. This message looks to the psalms to resonate with "down and out" Christians and to remind them of the God who walks with them in the darkest valleys.

What else does God say?

Psalm 34:18: The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Romans 5:8: God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.