



TIME OF GRACE®

God's To-Do List for Depression

Study Notes

Summary

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.

- **Psalm 42:** ¹As 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 three ways that God gets his to-do list done (directs his love) for you. Can you list all three?

Homework for Next Week

Read Luke 1:5-25.

Time of Grace Ministry
God's To-Do List for Depression
Psalm 42 and 43
December 6, 2020

Pastor Mike Novotny

When we're depressed, to-do's often don't get done. It can be good, it can be right, it can be clearly biblical, but when we've lost our drive and our motivation, sometimes even the best things remain undone.

The word depression actually comes from a Latin word, *depressio*, and it literally means to press down; like all the optimism just gets pressed down and squeezed out. All the energy and enthusiasm seems to get squashed and it scurries out the door.

And I wonder if you can relate to that? Maybe depression is just part of your family's story and your grandpa had it and your mom had it and you've been dealing with it as long as you can remember. Or maybe depression popped up suddenly after you had your last baby and mixed with the joy of having a child was a sadness like you've never felt before. Maybe depression is that seasonal snowbird that shows up every winter and you fear it's coming and you beg God that it would leave early this year. Depression can show up when you go through a divorce, when someone you love is incarcerated, when you've been through chemo, or when you've lost someone that you really love. There are a lot of causes of depression but the result is the same: We feel like we lose so much - so much of our passion, so much of our drive, so much of our hope, and sometimes so much of our faith.

Now if you've been down that road, I bet that you know all about the to-do list; everything that medicine has discovered in recent years about how to fix and to tweak and to change and improve that chemical imbalance in our brains. It's probably not a shock to you that if you're depressed, you should get a good night's sleep, even if you don't want to. And in the morning, you should get up and get going, even if you don't want to. But that's why today, I'm so excited to share this with you. Did you know right in the middle of your Bible is an ancient song about 3,000 years old that was written by a guy who, it appears, was super depressed? A guy who didn't think that a church service or the right prayer or the right Christian song would fix it. He knew and had experienced what a continual battle with depression was. And in the middle of this ancient song, we find not Google's list of ways to fix it but God's way and that's what I want to share with you today. I want to share with you God's to-do list for depression. So if you're interested in hearing what God has on his list, let's open our Bibles today to Psalm 42 and 43; two psalms that actually made up one ancient song. In a fascinating way, the psalm starts like this: "For the director of music." Now let me pause there and smile at that line. This depressed guy wrote a worship song and it is for the director of music. Can you picture the time when he wrote it? He maybe shuffles into his church, hasn't shaved in a few days, and he finds the church choir director or the worship leader and he says, "Here." And the director of music reads the

lyrics for the first time, "Oh. Well, this is honest." It's raw, it's gritty, it's a sometimes-dark, it's not an easily resolved - you know, it's the kind of song that would never show up on pop radio, and yet, God wanted this song in the word. He wanted this depressed artist to have his work published in the sacred Scriptures. The Holy Spirit inspired him to write it and God actually wanted people like me and you to sing it because in the middle of the song is God's to-do list for depression.

So let's explore these words together. Psalm 42 begins this way: "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?' 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." Aha! Now that just might be God's to-do list for the depressed; to remember. Used to. And as you remember what used to be, the life you used to have, his depression pressed down even more. Which is why he breaks into the chorus. The next verse is actually the chorus and it's going to appear three different times in this song. It's important and here's what it says: "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." Which will fix the depression, right?

Wrong. The very next words, verse six: "My soul is downcast within me." Wait - weren't you just fixing your soul? Weren't you just correcting those false emotions in your heart? Weren't you putting your hope in God instead of anything else? The answer is yeah, he was, and a second later, his soul felt the same way. Apparently, according to the Bible itself, depression is such a battle that you can't cure it with a catchy chorus even if that chorus is full of biblical truth. And that's how the song ends.

I don't think this song is inspiring enough for the next Kidz Bop album. But I find it incredibly helpful for grown-up faith. You see, sometimes we naively think in the church that if we would just sing the right song, if we would just pray the right prayer, if we would just take hold of the right promise, that all of our anxiety and all of our fear and all of our depression would just go away. But this song is proving something different; that there is a man who knew God and he loved God. Not just some impersonal, distant Lord but the God he calls my Savior. He has a personal relationship, and yet, we see the struggle and the battle and the struggle and the battle. It's like he's over here and God's way over here. You know, he's trying to run to him and he just falls on the face of his faith and he tries to stumble to his feet and he takes a step and then another step and then he just sits there and that's the song. It's the song that God wanted his people to sing for the last 3,000 years.

And so, when I think about you and I know that so many of you have carried the burden of depression for a long time, some of you even on your shoulders right now, you feel the depression, the pressing down, of that burden. What am I going to say to you? On the top of my sermon notes here, I actually wrote myself a note: "Picture their faces." The friends that I have with depression and the family members that I've seen with depression; like what would I say to

them? What solution would I give to you? If I love you and I want you to experience the joy of God, would I tell you just to pray? To make God your stronghold, your rock? All those things would be true; they'd be as true as exercising and eating right and medication and volunteering and going to church. It's all good but my fear is if that's the solution, what if you don't? What if like Dan's friends, I give you the perfect list of to-do's and you don't get them done? What kind of friend would I be? What kind of pastor would I be?

But that's actually why I love this song. Because when I read Psalm 42 and 43 to you, there's something that I skipped; I skipped God's to-do list for depression. To teach you what that to-do list is, I need to teach you an ancient technique in psalm writing called a chiasm. Ever heard of one before? I'm guessing at home you don't look too excited. A chiasm was an ancient way of making a point in your poetry. In modern pop music, we normally make a point by repetition. You know, a Justin Bieber song sticks in your head because there's the verse, the chorus, the verse, the chorus, the chorus, the chorus, the bridge and then the chorus six more times and you can't stop humming it. Through repetition, we learn what the big idea is. But in ancient Hebrew poetry, you didn't make a point by repetition; you made a point by chiasm. And chiasm is just a fancy literary term to say to put something right in the middle. If you picture a song like a big X - you know, everything in the first part's getting to the center and everything in the last part goes back to the center - if we could find what's in the middle of the center of that big X where the lines cross, we would know the point and this song has exactly that. Psalm 42 and 43 have 16 total verses and if you would go right to the center, you would find the point of the song and you would find God's to-do list for depression.

Ready to hear it? I love this. Psalm 42:8 says this: "By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me." You've heard of the Ten Commandments? That's where God is telling you, he's commanding you, directing you do this and don't do that. Except in this verse, God isn't commanding you to do something. Who's he directing and commanding? His love. You know, picture our heavenly Father and here's his heart, his love, his mercy and his compassion and he is ordering, directing, and commanding all of his love - go! And he's directing his love down to the lowest spot; down to his depressed daughters and down to his sad sons. In other words, God's to-do list for the depressed isn't something he's commanding you to do; it's something he himself is getting done. Because our Father knows that when you're in that spot, when you can barely get out of bed, giving you a list of laws to keep would never bring you hope. But making a promise that he himself will singlehandedly keep, well, that just might help.

It makes me think of my favorite stuffed animal. I actually brought him to share with you today. It's from my daughter's stuffed animal collection; she has too many - dozens of sloths, her favorite animal. But her favorite stuffed animal of all is this guy: Jesus. It's a pretty amazing stuffed animal, isn't it? Now every night before my youngest daughter goes to bed, I pull out Jesus - actually, she hands me Jesus - and we do a Jesus story. I don't know if you think that's goofy or cheesy but I pull out Jesus and he comes walking up my daughter's toes, up her knees, down her legs, and he sits down on her stomach and Jesus talks to my daughter and he makes her laugh, he sometimes acts a little bit goofy, he repeats words that he said in the Bible, he always

says that he's with her and that he loves her. And after the story, he kind of snuggles up next to her neck and she holds onto him and she falls asleep.

And it hit me as I was thinking about all those stories that never once has my daughter had to get up and do anything; she's just there. If she's a happy kid, a sad kid, an ecstatic kid, or a crying kid, she never gets out of bed and goes to find Jesus; Jesus always goes to find her. And that's the point of this psalm. By day, the Lord directs his love and at night, his song is with me. And I know I'm not at your house right now with some stuffed Jesus but that promise is true. What God wants to do for you, what he is doing for every Christian right now, is being present. He's coming to you, not with a list of commands to keep, he's coming with his love. God has commanded his own heart to be with his people so that every night, as dark as those nights can be, his song, his compassion, and his grace is with us.

So let me tell you three practical ways that God does that. If he's going to keep his promise and send his love to be with us, well, how does God do that? Here's the first one: Through the Scriptures. Even today, as I've been teaching you with this open book, God has been directing his love into your ears, your mind, your heart, and your soul. And one of the things I love most about the Bible is that there still isn't an RDV translation of the Bible - the Really Depressed Version. You know, that's the version where all of God's promises are erased or all those beautiful things that Jesus said with a period at the end are turned into question marks. "I'm with you always?" "God is love?" No, that doesn't exist because here's the amazing thing about Christianity - it's not based on how you feel. And you might be on your face, you might feel so unworthy, you might think that God is so far away and while God respects your feelings, he doesn't agree with them. And he's not waiting for your feelings or your heart to give him permission to love you; he just does. And he insists I am with you. And my mercy is new every single morning. And I will never leave you and I will never forsake you. That there is nothing in all of creation - angels, demons, present or the future, anxiety or depression - nothing that can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ, our Lord. God directs his love. Every time we watch Time of Grace, every time we open our Bibles, every time we struggle and stumble into church, when we hear his word, he is directing his love.

But that's not the only way he does it. Yes, he does it through his word, but he also does it through his people. I think of a great story I read from a Christian who's battled depression named Mary. Mary, as her depression wore on, would often cry out to God, "Where are you? Why don't you show me your love?" And then one day, there was a knock on her door. And Mary opened it and there were her friends, Scott and Nicole, dinner in their hands, uninvited. They smiled at Mary. "We know you're not feeling great. So we brought dinner." And even though she wouldn't have invited them over, even though she wasn't up for guests, after they left, she realized an important truth: Where was God? In her friends. Where was the evidence of their love? In their hands. One of the best ways that God loves to help us in our lowest moments is just by people who give us a little glimpse of God's patience and his compassion and his kindness and his mercy.

And so, I want to say that to those of you who maybe don't battle depression. We can't always fix it; honestly, we rarely can fix it. It's hard for us to come up with the perfect list of do's and don'ts. It can be frustrating and draining but one of the best things you and I can do is just be there; to refuse to give up on someone just because they're in a dark spot. To refuse to walk out the door just because they've been pessimistic today. Love endures and God shows his love when we endure in our relationships.

But the third way that God directs his love is my favorite: It's through Jesus. You know, sometimes when my daughter and I do these Jesus stories, I think about what Jesus had. Up in heaven at the right hand of the Father, Jesus was far above all the pressure and depression and stress and overwhelming feelings. He could have stayed there where there is no darkness; just a God who is light, surrounded by angels of light. But what did Jesus do? God the Father directed his Son to come down to us. He saw all of us who were on our faces, lost and depressed, and what did Jesus do? He came to be with us. There's this famous prophecy from the Old Testament where God said about his Son, "The Lord sent him to bind up the brokenhearted." And I think for Jesus to bind us up, he had to get close enough to see what was broken. And so he came near and sometimes he felt sad and the Bible says that he wept. Did you know the Bible even calls him a man of sorrows? One time, before he died, Jesus felt so overwhelmed with dark emotions that he begged his friends for help. Why's that in the Bible? For the same reason this song is in the Bible; so that you would know that the Jesus we love and worship is not just a God who stays far, far away in heaven. He's the God who gets it.

And that's what I want to say to you if you're depressed: Jesus gets it. He's felt it. He's wrestled with it. And so much more importantly, he's right there with you through it. I hope with the strength of God you carry out all those do's and don'ts to help make depression more a part of your past than your future but here's what I know: God's to-do list for depression isn't primarily something you do; it's something that Jesus does - to be with you. I pray that that simple promise, whether you feel its beauty today or not, is a gift.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, I haven't personally carried this yet but so many of your sons and daughters have. I pray, God, because you are God that you would work a miracle, that the pressure would lift and people would feel better, faster. God, you can do that; it's not even hard for you. And we know that you love us because of what Jesus suffered for us on the cross. We know that he went through the greatest pressure so that one day we could have the hope of eternal life so we know that you care, God. So we're asking you, in your mercy, to change something. But God, even if that change has to wait, even if depression is a burden that we carry for many years, thank you so much for being with us. I know sometimes when we're depressed we're not fun to be around and sometimes our roommates and our spouses and our parents, they need a break from us. But you're so much better and you're so different because you never take a break, you never step out of the room. You're just there for us at our best moments and our worst. I thank you, God, for being a God who is so faithful and is so present; an ever-present help in trouble. Finally, Father, I pray for churches like mine and like all of ours; that we would be safe places to

talk about anxiety and depression and suicidal thoughts. Help us not to carry those burdens alone but to realize that you so often help us through people. So help us to be honest with people and help those people to respond to us with grace and with truth. I thank you today, God, for your promises and I thank you even more for your presence. We pray this all in Jesus' name, Amen.