

BEATING depression

Timely advice from the Psalms

One of the glories of God's Word is that it speaks of human experience just as vividly now as when first written. For a detailed account of the vicissitudes of old age look no further than Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, which describe fading eyesight, poor dentition, tremor and fear of falling. Or perhaps Proverbs 23 :29-35 for the experience of the bloodshot, bruised, swaying and hallucinating alcoholic. Depression is commonly diagnosed in general practice and up to half of us may suffer depression at some time in our lives. Might there be something in God's Word to describe depression? I believe psalms 42 and 43 give us a good insight.

All of us will come across depression at some time, whether in ourselves or others. These psalms suggest that it is a common part of the human experience and give us a clear view of how it feels to be depressed. The psalmist describes his *mood* as 'downcast' and 'disturbed' three times. He says, 'tears have been my food,' suggesting a *chronicity* to his condition, and perhaps loss of appetite. His depression has physical sensation, 'My bones have suffered mortal agony' with perhaps an indication of morbidly expecting his own death. Depressed people often have feelings of *grief and mourning* either as a cause or effect of depression, 'Why must I go about mourning' occurring in both psalms 42 and 43. He has feelings of chaos, represented by the deeps in the waterfall, and of being overwhelmed: 'all your waves and breakers have swept over me.' Many depressed people do seem to struggle with organising their thoughts and feel out of control. *Planning* in depressed people may become difficult: 'When can I go and meet with God?' *Paranoia-like* feelings may occur in depression and are described in 43:1.

Since there is such a detailed description of depression in God's Word, we can reassure depressed Christians that God understands the depressive condition. Some depressed people report feeling guilty that they do not feel happier,

considering all of God's gifts to them. These psalms give us '*permission*' to be depressed.

The cause for the psalmist's depression is not clear. The cause may be *spiritual*; a felt separation from God. One of the striking features of these two psalms is this feeling. From the beautiful and well-known opening verses of Psalm 42 describing thirsting for God, he asks rhetorically, 'where can I go and meet with God?' and poignantly, 'why have you forgotten me?' This separation is felt rather than real as Romans 8:39 reassures us that 'neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' His sense of separation from God may be either a cause or a consequence of his depression. Certainly no Christian can be content or complete without fellowship with God.

Perhaps it is his *circumstances* that are causing his depression. He is separated from his fellows and may be lonely living in Jordan away from his Jerusalem home. Perhaps he has withdrawn from his friends as a result of his depression. Persecution undermines the toughest man (Ps 42: 3), and the depressed Christian maybe more susceptible to mocking, 'Where is your God?' *Physical symptoms* can be a cause or at least a precipitation for depression. It might, however, be argued that the psalmist rejects any of these as the cause of his depression as he repeatedly asks why he is depressed. The Christian depressive and his attendants may find it difficult to separate cause and effect; spiritual, physical or emotional. Since the answer eloquently stated in these psalms is to turn to God, this may not matter very much anyway.

Some of the *distortion and slowing of mental processing* which may occur in depression can prevent the depressed Christian from praying to God for himself. The practical effects of this means that his *Christian friends* may need to do the praying for him. The very fact of the depressed person's inability to pray can add to his feelings of guilt. Since he may already have low self-esteem and low

KEY POINTS

Psalms 42 and 43 give a good description of the clinical features of depression and provide assurance that depression is both part of normal human experience and understood by God. The psalmist describes the depressed person's mood changes, loss of appetite, grief and mourning, difficulty in planning and paranoia. The immediate cause is not clear – but may have been due to circumstances, as a result of physical symptoms or spiritual. Depressed people often find prayer difficult so need friends who will pray for them, encourage them to put their hope in God and remind them that better times will come.

self-confidence or even paranoia, he will not find it easy to express this inability to Christian brothers and sisters. These two psalms then give us one way to pray for, and counsel, the depressed Christian. We can point out that the depressed person should try to put their *hope in God*, for he sends forth his light and truth, which will guide our depressed brother. We can reassure our brother that he *will praise God* again and that God will be his delight (43:3-4), even if he doesn't feel it possible at that moment. The psalmist makes a deliberate decision

to put his hope in God (42 :5, 11, 43:5). He is entirely confident that God will *respond* - that God will send forth his light, guide him, and that he will be with God on his Holy Mountain, where there is no chance of depression.

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Psalm 42

For the director of music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah.

¹As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O 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 men 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 with the multitude,
leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving
among the festive throng.

⁵Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and⁶ my God.

My 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 are you downcast, O my soul?
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, O God,
and plead my cause against an ungodly nation;
rescue me from deceitful and wicked men.

²You are God my stronghold.
Why have you rejected me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?

³Send forth your light and your truth,
let them guide me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.

⁴Then will I go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.

⁵Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Further Reading

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- Williams C, Richards P, Whitton I. *I'm Not Supposed to Feel Like This*. Hodder and Stoughton 2002. £6.99 Pb 280pp, ISBN 0340786396
- Lockley J. *A Practical Workbook for Depressed Christians*. Authentic Publishing, 2nd edition 2002. £12.99 Pb 478pp, ISBN 18624226X
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Depression

Non-drug therapy

Psychoanalysis

- Classical Freudian psychoanalysis is based on a naturalistic philosophy and underlying determinism
- Psychoanalysis of Carl Rogers is based on liberal humanism
- Both conflict, at least in part, with Christian theology

Behavioural Therapy

- Based on behaviourism and determinism
- This robs man of his significance and personal responsibility

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

- Loosely based on behaviourism but this is much less strictly adhered to
- The morality of the therapy can be determined by the shared beliefs of the therapist and patient, making the technique adaptable to Christian counselling

Drug therapy

- Well established and evidence-based
- Morally neutral but may fail to recognise the psychological, social, spiritual and environmental factors in the development and maintenance of mental illness

For further information see articles written by Consultant Psychiatrist Nick Land: *Psychiatry and Christianity* (parts 1 and 2)

1. *Nucleus* 2002; July: 13-19.
2. *Nucleus* 2003; April:12-20.