

Trevor Stammers is a doctor who has had recurrent depression

TREASURES OF THE DARKNESS

key points

From scripture, the author, a GP and academic, describes lessons learned during a previous long period of depression as 'treasures hidden in the darkness'.

Confessing that 'the commonest weakness of Christians in medicine is probably our determination to have our own way' he came to realise that 'when broken, we learn that his way is all that matters'. This releases us from anxiety about the future and also from guilt from the past.

Finding strength to persevere in depression has led him to empathy and understanding, to hearing from God in the stillness, and as he finally denied self-sufficiency and pride, to accepting help from others.

*And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness
– secret riches.*

*I will do this so that you may know
that I am the Lord,
the God of Israel,
the one who calls you by name.¹*

One sufferer has graphically described depression as an 'internal darkness, an emotional anaesthetic, a freezing of the spirit'. It is a common and crippling condition. Can any good ever come from it?

The promise above from Isaiah 45:3 was originally given in a totally different context to the pagan king Cyrus, but many Christians have shared with me how either during, or more often following an episode of depression, it has been used by the Holy Spirit to show them that depression can bring secret riches into their lives, even though discovering those riches may take many years.

It is now over seven years since my last episode of 'the darkness', and over two years without treatment, and is therefore a good time to reflect on some of the 'treasures' that I have found and continue to uncover in my own life.

God's sovereignty

I don't pretend to understand how it is that God uses even our sins and weaknesses in his purposes, and causes even human anger and opposition to praise him,² but I know now that he does. Depression not only freezes the spirit but often

shatters it completely when in this brittle state. This can be unbearably painful at the time, not only for the sufferer but perhaps more so for friends and family who witness it. It is one way, however, that the Lord uses in our lives to teach us the importance of knowing that 'we are the clay and He, the potter'.³ I did not realise how angry these verses used to make me. The commonest weakness of Christians in medicine is probably our determination to have our own way – for the good of our patients of course! When broken, we learn that his way is all that matters.

This releases us not only from anxiety about the future, but also from guilt from the past. So many committed Christians live in guilt, regret and fear that they have taken a wrong turning – are in the 'wrong' job, married to the 'wrong' spouse, or in the 'wrong' church. We need to learn that God calls us to work out our own salvation where we are. Ruth Bidgood's wonderful poem *Roads* is so liberating and true in its opening line:

*No need to wonder what heron-haunted lake
Lay in the other valley⁴*

On the day the truth of that sank into my soul, a profound sense of peace and security came with it that has been tested since but has never departed.

Strength to persevere

'I came so close to the edge of the cliff! My feet were slipping and I was almost gone.'⁵

Thoughts of ending it all (or at least of having it ended) are common in depression. Yet facing that as a possible option, and rejecting it, subsequently brings to life a new power to persevere: 'My spirit may grow weak but God remains the strength of my heart'.⁶

There are many opportunities which I would never have had the courage to take up if I had not experienced God's help in the seemingly impenetrable darkness. When we know his power to bring us through even that, tasks for which we have even a glimmer of light prove much easier to undertake.⁷ For example, I did not fully realise the extent to which I was a prisoner to my professional reputation. Fear of tarnishing it would make me tend to decline doing anything at all adventurous where I might fail. However, when you know that but for God's power, you might be dead, it does make you less fearful of accepting new challenges and helps you to trust him!

Empathy and understanding

The Psalmist almost certainly used the phrase 'Deep calls to deep'⁸ to convey the ceaseless pounding he felt from the waves of troubles he was under. In the light of the following verse however, many Christians see it both as an expression of the depth of God's love reaching out to them in their trouble and, by extension, the deep understanding of other believers who have suffered similarly, even if they do not actually say very much.

Since being open about my own vulnerability in this area, I have found that many people find it easy to talk to me about the issue of depression, and I speak on it frequently. A few years ago I was asked to give the eulogy at the funeral of a friend who had taken his own life. It was one of the most difficult acts of public speaking I have ever done, but I think the family knew that I would understand. I shared through my tears some lines from a favourite poet who knew all about depression's curse:

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep.*⁹

Our endurance sometimes cannot bear the height and depth of our depression any more but 'this High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin'¹⁰ and he will in no way cast us out, even if we should yield to the temptation to end our lives.

Stillness

We live in such a brash, celebrity culture of noise that it can be very hard to hear God's voice. Of course, he sometimes speaks in thunder¹¹ but when it is in 'the sound of a gentle whisper'¹² we will often miss it.

Depression makes us go quiet and in some severe cases even mute. It's a black experience, but our

hearing is often keener in the dark. Depression can drive us to a desperation to hear God speak, and can tune our ears to hear him on his wavelength when he does. Of course, we do not have to sink into depression in order to be quiet, but I suspect that as with pain, depression is another one of God's megaphones to rouse a deaf world.¹³ We often sing the well-known scripture 'Be still, and know that I am God'¹⁴ but how often do we put it into practice?

our hearing is often keener in the dark

Dependence

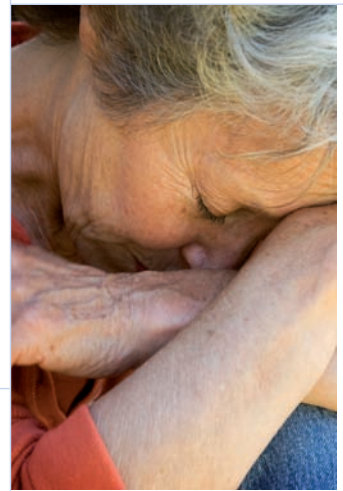
When I was a medical student, I remember a consultant psychiatrist member of CMF telling me self-deprecatingly that his vicar had told him: 'Even the witch-doctor is a member of the tribe'. Though vulnerability is often seen in secular society as weakness, the Bible paints a very different picture and portrays us as mere jars of clay but containing a real treasure within.¹⁵ 'We are meant to be burdens' as John Wyatt reminds us¹⁶ and he is right.

Depression reduces us to a state where we have to rely on the help of others. At the point many years ago where I was visibly unravelling at a Christian conference, a Christian GP and his wife took me aside on the Sunday morning and said 'You are coming home with us'. I was in no position to argue with anyone, so I did and stayed with them for a short while. During that time, I realised that self-sufficiency and pride had both played their part in the increasing internal pressures that were threatening to explode inside me. Humanly speaking, I probably owe this couple my life, and though I still don't regard myself as a great team player, I certainly recognise my need to be part of the team.¹⁷

Conclusion

In sharing a few of my own 'treasures of the darkness' I would add that I am not saying in any way that depression is something to be treasured for its own sake. I would not wish it on anyone else, and certainly hope I do not have to endure the experience of it again myself. However, if it comes back to me or has come to you, we can together take heart that he causes everything, including depression 'to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them'.¹⁸

Trevor Stammers is a GP, a lecturer in Bioethics at St Mary's University College in Twickenham, and was Chairman of CMF from 2007 - June 2009



further reading

- Williams C, Richards P, Whitton I. I'm not supposed to feel like this - A Christian self-help approach to depression and anxiety. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002. www.cmf.org.uk/bookstore/?context=book&id=82
- Lockley J. A Practical Workbook for the Depressed Christian. Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2002. www.cmf.org.uk/bookstore/?context=book&id=113

Both available online from the CMF Bookstore.

references

1. Isaiah 45:3 (New Living Translation, NLT)
2. Psalm 76:10
3. Isaiah 64:8 (NLT) and see also Isaiah 29:16; Jeremiah 18:1-6; Romans 9:20-21
4. Bidgood R. *Roads* in Davies O and Bowie F, *Celtic Christian Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1995; 202
5. Psalm 73:2 (NLT)
6. Psalm 73:26 (NLT)
7. Psalm 139:12
8. Psalm 42:7
9. From Gerard Manley Hopkins: No worst, there is none theotherpages.org/poems/hopkins1.html
10. Hebrews 4:15 (NLT)
11. eg Exodus 20:18; John 12:29
12. 1 Kings 19:12 (NLT). Literally 'a crushed silence'
13. 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.' Lewis C S. *The Problem of Pain*. London: Fount, 1998
14. Psalm 46:10. See also Psalm 4:4 and Isaiah 30:15
15. 2 Corinthians 4:7
16. Commenting on Galatians 6:2 in the 2009 Rendle Short Lecture *Witness in the Workplace* given 25 April at The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick
17. 1 Corinthians 12:12-31
18. Romans 8:28 (NLT)