

16-05-02 PM - Depression

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Preacher: Peter Adam

[0 : 00] Father, we thank you that you are God, that you have a perfect place for all your people. And yet here on earth we recognize this fallen world has so many imperfections, frustrations, illnesses and problems.

We want to be Christian people in this world, trusting you, whatever the circumstances we or others face. Trusting your promises for a glorious eternity, which we know is ours because of the grace extended to us in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thank you tonight for Peter Adam, for his ministry, his faith, his theological ability. Thank you for the way that you've used him over many years in ministry and Christian life.

And I pray that you will strengthen him and sustain him as he speaks tonight on the issue of depression. Help us, Father, to understand more about this illness.

Help us to see how Christians even might suffer from depression. Help us to be encouraged if we are depressed. Help us to be further equipped if we are caring for others.

[1 : 14] Help us, help us to be more sensitive where we need to be. And strengthen our faith and trust in you, the God of all grace. And we commit this time to you in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, thank you. Thanks, Paul. Well, there's something very appropriate about talking about depression in a freezing church on a winter night. And I hope if you're not depressed yet, you will be by about nine o'clock.

Thank you. You have the outline of the talk that I'm going to give tonight. And I need to say, of course, that there are lots of different kinds of depression.

I've never suffered postnatal depression, even though I was born a long time ago. And there are different kinds of depression, different reasons for depression.

And each person experiences depression. Who experiences depression does so in their own way, I guess, because we're all different kind of people. So one of the things I've learned is that being depressed myself hasn't always helped me understand other people who are depressed and hasn't always made me more patient with them.

[2 : 37] What I want to do tonight is describe, first of all, how my depression began, what it was like, what helped me.

And there's a great little diagram to show you what that's like. And then my understanding of what happened over the page, both in terms of my own life, but also in terms of living in God's real world. I suppose I hope tonight that if you suffer from depression, this will be an encouragement to you. If you don't suffer from depression but know people who do, it may help you understand them a little better.

If you're a Christian who's embarrassed about illness or mental illness, then it'll make you less embarrassed. And if you're not a Christian, it may help you reflect on what would sustain you in difficult times.

Well, let me begin then by telling you about how my episode of depression began for me. It was in 1984. I remember it very vividly because I'd been preaching at the cathedral on Good Friday for three hours and then taking service at St. Jude's over the weekend, Easter weekend.

[4 : 05] Went away for a day and collapsed, started crying and couldn't stop crying for days and days and days. What it was like?

Well, it was really awful. I think one of the things which happened was that I thought there was a really strong glass wall around me, like a diving bell.

And although I could see other people, there was no real communication with them. So it was like being a seal in an aquarium, I guess, where you know there are people out there, but you feel absolutely cut off from them.

And they could wave at you and you could wave back at them, but there was no communication, no real communication between you and other people. And that was a kind of pervasive feeling and at times a very intense feeling.

And so, therefore, I felt, of course, really alone and as if no one could get through to me to help me. At the same time, I had an immense feeling of deep guilt.

[5 : 18] And the awful thing was that I couldn't think what I'd done wrong. So I'd be talking to somebody and then get to the end of the conversation and think, I've said something really awful to that person.

I can't think what it was. So I can't apologise. And I'd walk around thinking I'd messed something up or done something dreadful last week. Couldn't think what it was, but a really deep sense of guilt. And that was really confusing, of course, because it was irrational guilt. That is, it wasn't that I'd done something wrong. But it really confused me in thinking about what was my sin, what I'd actually done wrong.

But I couldn't find that out because my sense of deep guilt and shame was so overwhelming. During this time, a number of my friends tried to help me and to, they stuck with me, which I was very grateful.

Good Christian friends. But I was really frightened of them and I thought they were pretending to help me while they were plotting against me. So I had these really weird ideas about what my friends were doing.

[6 : 29] I remember one couple came to visit me and we spent two hours, you know, talking and coming a cup of tea and praying and so on. Then they left and I thought, I bet they're down there wrecking my car.

You know, well, I can look at it now and think, what a stupid idea. But I was quite convinced it was happening. At the same time, I had great difficulty sleeping and would lie awake at night till three and then wake up at about half past four.

And I had this great black cloud over me. So whenever I was lying in bed, I felt as if there was an immense, thick, smelly black cloud just above me, which was nearly choking me.

And so, of course, I couldn't get through to God because there was this black cloud around me all the time. And I found it really difficult to eat because I thought to myself, every mouthful I take means I'll live another five minutes.

So I don't want to eat. And that was difficult. I tried to think of sensible food to eat when you don't want to eat.

[7 : 47] I ended up eating peanuts and fruit, I think, which was probably quite good for me. And I remember trying to think of a reason to eat.

It sounds bizarre, doesn't it? Why would you want to eat? And I remember that I found a reason to eat. It was terrific. Some friends of mine who'd had trouble having a child finally gave birth to a daughter.

And so I decided that I couldn't eat because I wanted to, but I'd eat because I was thankful because they'd had a daughter. So it was a kind of complicated, shows how my mind works, complicated reason to eat, but at least it was a reason to eat something.

And I had lots of ideas of suicide, really stupid ideas, of course, driving erratically. I did that anyway, but I was driving even more erratically until a kind friend of mine pointed out that I mightn't succeed in killing myself, but just damaging somebody else and being a paraplegic for the rest of my life.

So that was a pretty stupid thing to do. But I certainly would have been very pleased if somebody had killed me or if God had killed me.

[9 : 06] The self-punishment, I think, was blaming myself for everything, thinking that everything that was happening was my fault and that I didn't deserve any comfort.

So I remember my slippers collapsed, I think, and I thought, well, I won't buy any slippers. I don't deserve wearing slippers, which is a silly thing, isn't it?

But I think I spent 12 years not wearing slippers as a kind of way of punishing my feet, if not myself. And I felt an overwhelming sense of being not just a kind of private failure, but a cosmic failure.

That is, everything I'd tried to do, not just that it had gone wrong, but that it was actually destructive. So it wasn't just that I'd failed to help somebody.

By trying to help them, it actually caused them more distress and more damage. So in a sense, I was paralyzed because whatever I did was destructive for everybody I talked to, really.

[10:19] Lots and lots of tears for a number of weeks. And then I think even more alarming for me was that I couldn't cry at all. I don't know why that was, but that was painful.

A real conviction that God couldn't use me in ministry. So if somebody said, you know, that sermon, you helped me by saying that, I'd think to myself, well, that's a stupid thing to say.

I'm glad God helped you, but it certainly couldn't have been through me. Then I suppose at the depth of it all, I may not be a Christian, and I have no hope. And the kind of downward spiral diagram there represents what it felt like going further and further down.

There'd be a slight improvement, and then I'd feel I was sliding downhill very quickly indeed. What helped me?

It's important, I think, that I point out that things helped me, but I don't think I was... It didn't feel like being cured, and I still suffer from depression, but not as dramatically as I did in the mid-80s.

[11:36] And I might say things helped, but it felt as if nothing helped at all. It felt as if whatever I did, I got worse. And it was a curious mixture of kind of partly needing to let myself be depressed and not, you know, accepting that it was happening, while also deciding to try and make some changes to the way I viewed myself and the way I viewed God.

But also, I couldn't try too hard, I didn't have enough energy to try very hard. It felt like making immensely, painfully slow progress, if there was any progress happening at all.

It meant feeling I was going backwards, getting more and more depressed, and trying to hope, but finding no hope in myself at all.

What helped me? Well, I think what helped me was other people's prayers for me. I felt that I couldn't pray, but other people were patient and persistent in their prayers for me.

That is, they assured me they were praying for me, and if we met, they would pray for me, and that was good. It felt as if the person praying and their prayer was a long way away from me, like, you know, almost on the horizon, but at least they were trying to do something that was good.

[13:16] I was immensely encouraged by the kind of gutsy prayers in the Bible. My favourite psalm is psalm number 88, which has no encouragement in it at all.

It's a depressing psalm from beginning to end. Let me read it to you so you can feel really depressed as well. Oh Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you, may my prayer come before you, turn your ear to my cry.

Well, that's quite hopeful, actually, but the rest is pretty awful. For my soul is full of trouble, my life draws near the grave. I'm counted among those who go down to the pit, I'm like a man without strength.

I'm set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. You've put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You've overwhelmed me with all your waves. You've taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.

[14:27] I'm confined and cannot escape. My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O Lord, every day I spread out my hands to you. Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you?

Is your love declared in the grave? Your faithfulness and destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness? Or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

But I cry to you for help, O Lord. In the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I've been afflicted and close to death.

I've suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood. They've completely engulfed me.

You've taken my companions and loved ones from me. The darkness is my closest friend. And I can say it now, and I certainly felt it then, how wonderful that in the Bible you can find honesty.

[15:35] That's wonderful, isn't it? The Bible is honest. Reality therapy means friends saying to me, don't be stupid. That was regarded as being pastorally unhelpful, I know.

But in fact, if I thought I'd poisoned somebody, it was helpful for them to say that I hadn't. Or if I said, you've been destroying my car, for them to say, don't be stupid.

I know that's not what you're meant to do with people who are depressed, but I found it immensely helpful, actually. Don't be stupid. I kept working. I can't imagine how that happened now.

I think I slowed down. Apparently my speaking rate in sermons went from that to about that. It was a kind of word a minute.

But I think I felt if I couldn't keep preaching and if I walked out of church, it would be impossible to walk back again.

[16:40] So I don't think I was achieving a great deal, but I kept some kind of work going and for me that was helpful. People kept on saying it would take time.

People said, you know, in 10 years it will have burnt out, you'll be all right. And it certainly felt as if it was 10 years. I think it probably was, really. Remember the first time somebody suggested I went to a psychiatrist?

I was absolutely horrified and embarrassed. The thought of going to a psychiatrist was just awful for me. But I decided I need to do it and fortunately in God's providence went to a very helpful man and he talked in terms of the good things that God was doing within me, which was immensely comforting.

And I decided then and there that because I'd found it so difficult to go to a psychiatrist that I would tell everybody that I was doing that to make it easier for them if they needed to do the same thing.

So I was trying to get something positive out of my embarrassment, if I can put it that way. I was very reluctant to go on medication and felt really distrustful of those little pills.

[18:03] But I did and found them helpful. I'm still on medication and will be, I expect, for the rest of my life. And I still feel sometimes that I'm a bit of a failure, but then I discover all my friends are on, you know, heart tablets or something like that.

So we all just take our medicine and stop complaining, I guess. But, I mean, I can laugh about it now, but at the time I felt really defeated by having to take medication.

I now think, isn't it wonderful that God provides it and I say grace before I take it. I love the Bible because it was such a real book.

You know, when you read the writer of the Psalms saying, God, you've abandoned me, I think to myself, well, actually, that may not have been the case. Perhaps God hadn't abandoned him, but he was at least able to say what he felt.

Or, I hope you won't mind me saying this, but there's one occasion on which Jeremiah says to God, you've raped me, which is a fairly strong language to use to God. He meant by that that God had overwhelmed him and used him.

[19:21] And I think, well, God's big enough to cope with some bad language. And that was a comfort. And as I've often told people, it's better to say to God, I hate you than not to talk to him at all.

One of the most difficult things was trying to distinguish between the spirit's conviction of sin and false guilt.

And that was, at times, just impossible. So I gave up thinking about my sin. It was just so complicated because I felt guilty about everything that I hadn't done. That was immensely difficult for me.

And I think I probably stopped, appropriately stopped thinking about whether I'd sinned or not because the false guilt was so powerful.

I think the helpful thing I learnt at the time, or have learnt since, is the spirit's conviction of a sin is always exact and precise. This is the sin.

[20:32] And false guilt is always so global and general and imprecise. And that was a useful distinction for me. I used to do a bit of natural thinking, like playing things could be worse.

I could be depressed and blind. I could be depressed and have lost two legs. That may seem a fairly stupid way of operating, but it did bring a few smiles on a few odd days.

Feelings are so difficult, aren't they? They're so powerful. I had to accept the fact that I felt depressed and face the fact that I felt depressed and yet not be ruled by those feelings of depression.

One thing I found helpful was to try and enjoy the world as much as I could. So enjoying looking at sunsets and things like that.

In a way they were impersonal things, but they were things that I could begin to enjoy. I was very moved by the accounts of Jesus' tears in the scriptures, immensely encouraged by the prayers of my friends.

[21:50] One thing which may be useful for you is that people often would tell me that God loved me because Christ had died for me.

That was the way in which they tried to convince me that God loved me, despite the fact that I thought that he hated me. And actually, that probably wasn't the most helpful thing to say to me because God's love in Jesus Christ is for sinners.

So I thought what they were saying to me was, you are really worthless, but Jesus loves you anyway. Do you see what I mean? It was as if they were just reinforcing my sense of guilt, which was mainly false guilt, 95% false guilt.

So, the Jesus loves you, which I do believe that, but that wasn't actually the most helpful thing for me.

The more helpful thing was that God had made me. So I just kept on reading Psalm 139 because what that told me was that originally God intended me, God made me.

[23 : 03] God just not intended kind of humanity, but he actually intended me and therefore he had a good purpose for me. So it was, if you'll excuse me putting it this way, a doctrine of creation, which actually helped me.

You created my inmost being. This is Psalm 139. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I'm fearfully and wonderfully made.

Your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body.

All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. So do you understand that point that talking about Jesus' love was not the most helpful thing to do.

More helpful was saying, well, if God made you, he must have a good purpose for you. So it was the love of God in creation which was the most helpful for me.

[24 : 06] And I suppose leading on from Psalm 139 is that I don't understand what's going on inside me. I certainly felt really confused, but God understands me better than I understand myself.

And that was a great comfort to me that God knew more about my depression than I did. And of course that's where the incarnation is so helpful because God understands human life not just because he creates it, but also because he entered human life.

I think there were some important lessons I needed to learn. It didn't feel like learning important lessons, but looking back I think that's true.

I was a very independent person. I would never ask for help, particularly about kind of personal matters. And for the first time in my life, I had to put aside my pride and ask for help.

And that was a lesson which I should have learnt 40 years before. I also had to learn to talk about myself, which I didn't naturally do, though you may find that hard to believe.

[25 : 27] I was absolutely adept at getting other people to talk about themselves and very helpful when they did, but would never talk about myself. It was too much to hide.

So learning to talk about myself was a good thing and also learning to trust people was a good thing as well. And I found the idea of being a wounded healer very helpful, a way of thinking about Jesus on the cross as a wounded healer.

And a spectacularly new idea for me at the time was that, and this took a number of years to get in my mind and heart, that God could use your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

That was really weird. I'd always thought God gave you gifts, made you strong to do things. God could use the things you did because you're able to do them. But learning that God could use your weaknesses as well was just breathtakingly beautiful.

Exercise was good for me. Swimming, even though I found swimming very frustrating, I would swim in the slow lane and that was pretty tedious.

[26 : 42] And then I'd go to the fast lane and it didn't improve me at all. I just stayed at the same speed. So I found that really depressing. But exercising was good for me.

And the minor pleasures of life, which I was able to begin enjoying gradually. Even if I found one thing in a day which I enjoyed for five minutes, that was a great step forward.

That was the thought, wow, I could actually think of enjoying life again rather than hating it all. I think I had to learn the self-discipline of what I call avoiding dangerous doors.

That is, I could find ways of thinking and I had to think, no, no, I won't follow my thinking that way because that way is suicide. So I won't begin thinking that way.

And the idea I found helpful as well that God is hopeful. God is a hopeful God even if I'm not hopeful.

[27 : 49] So I was really resting on God's hopefulness, not mine. I had believing friends.

That was really encouraging. They believed that I would eventually be relieved of that intense depression. And I couldn't believe, but they believed on my behalf.

That was immensely useful. I had very patient friends for whom I thank God, of course, who stayed with me despite my bad treatment of them and my inability to relate, as I felt anyway.

I had very supportive colleagues at St. Jude's. They were terrific. The other staff kept working and doing their job and trying to sort of keep things going.

That was good. I was encouraged by the description of Job as a patient man, though he seems to spend all his time complaining. Of course I thought, why have I got depression other people haven't?

[28 : 58] Then I decided actually life was unfair. Because I have fresh, clean drinking water every day and millions of people in the world don't. And I have a roof over my head and millions of the people in the world don't.

And I have more than enough food and some people starve. So, if you wanted a fair life, you'd have to give up your home and your food and your drinking water. A sense of moral duty was important for me.

that I had a duty to try and get better. Some may think I had an overwhelming sense of duty, but that helped me give a sense of perspective to my life.

And humour I found useful. Little sayings like, every silver lining has a cloud. That was a great cheer up for me. Well, I'm sorry that's been a bit depressing.

Let's try and cheer you up by giving you an understanding of what happened. Looking back, I think I was a naturally melancholy person all my life.

[30 : 07] part of my enjoyment of music was that I was able to escape into a world of romance, if you like. So, I think in a sense the depression wasn't a great surprise.

It was certainly a much more intense experience than the general melancholy with which I'd lived for many years. Mind you, I have found being a melancholic person quite useful.

Whenever I'd be suggested anything I'd always say it won't work, it'll fail. And I often had the opportunity to say you see I was right. So, that gave me the reputation for wisdom.

As some of you will know I was at St. Jude's for 20 years which is a long time to have a melancholy vicar. I went to the induction of Richard Condy last Friday night and he said during the service that he was an optimist and I thought to myself well that'll be a change for some Jews.

I hope they enjoy it. I mean I'm sure they will enjoy it is what I mean. I bet he gets depressed soon.

[31 : 38] Sorry, we shouldn't be laughing about it. These are serious matters, you know. I think part of the clue to my depression is that I for various reasons in my family became much a loner I think.

I love being alone and avoiding difficult things in my family and I escaped into books and into music and I remember after my mother died thinking well thank goodness that's over I can never be hurt again which is not a very sensible way of thinking about your life is it?

I think there are a number of unfortunate experiences early in my life which I won't talk about now it's not appropriate but I think they promoted a sense of a low self-esteem and low self-worth and a general kind of melancholic view of life and then I think in a way the circumstances of my life at the time brought the depression to the surface I think it was there all the time just when we brought to the surface and I'd been in England for 10 years I'd come back and discovered that all my friends had left Melbourne that was a great shock and I missed England a great deal and I found the pressures of parish life to be very strong indeed and so I think there were good reasons why it kind of came to the surface then but I think it would have come to the surface sometime just that happened to be the time so that's a kind of self-understanding which may make some sense to you but then

I needed to get some understanding of what happened from the scriptures of course and here's a little description of the history of the world good, bad, new, perfect that's taken from John Stott I seem to remember good that is the creation is made good things go bad at the fall things are being renewed in Christ by Christ's death and resurrection and now yet things won't be perfect until the end and I found that idea of being kind of in the new time but not the perfect time very helpful because will God heal me yes when Christ returns then my perfect healing will come in the resurrection or changing into Christ's likeness so kind of accepting that this world is a mixture of good bad and renewed but not yet perfect I found very helpful indeed so is the creation good yes

and God made human beings good we're fearfully and wonderfully made and I have to believe and trust in my creator has the world gone bad yes it has there's sin there's also random illness if you like why should I have depression somebody else has cancer somebody else a heart attack those things happen that's the way the world is and we each have to face the illness that comes our way when it comes yet also in the midst of that sin for which

I'm responsible and that random illness for which I'm not responsible there is nevertheless forgiveness through Christ what is it to live in a world which is being made new by Christ if anyone's in Christ he or she is a new creation new creature well being new means experiencing God's slow mercy and I now think of my episode of depression the ten years of it as being a breakthrough really not a breakdown that is I think God needed to take me apart to put me back together again the right way or a better way and I thought a lot about why God works slowly in our lives changing us and I think the answer is that if God were quickly we would probably collapse or implode psychologically that God works as quickly as his compassion allows him to change us and I found that a very helpful idea

[36 : 12] I think that my healing was both natural and supernatural that is God used wise psychiatrists God used the medication that I took and am still taking God also used supernatural healing if you like he used the prayers of my friends and I was happy to take healing however it came and part of living in the time of new means trusting in Christ and that means trusting in a Christ who has not yet returned but hoping in Christ and the perfect future of course is the age to come it means hoping in Christ for eternity it means that there's room for hope to grow in my life as I look forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus for now well I have to live with that if you like weakness in my life

I have to be careful not to get too tired if I get too tired then all the symptoms of depression return or if I'm stressed as I was recently by a bereavement that immediately brings back all the symptoms of the depression it feels like it's all coming back again so I have to try and live wisely that way I have to try and keep myself from being isolated try and maintain good friendships try and get enough exercise try and keep eating and drinking praying and I have found I think particularly in the last seven years what I call positive praying very helpful let me give an example you can pray the following kind of prayer to God please help me to trust you today when life gets busy well that's okay to pray that but a positive prayer the kind of positive prayer

I pray now is to say to God I do trust you today that you'll give me enough time and energy to do the works you want me to do and I found that positive praying very helpful in fact it even slowed down my driving which shows the age of miracles is not yet over that is prayer can often be expressing our worries to God I try now to make my prayers expressing my trust in God so do I trust that God will keep me for eternity yes I do do I trust you God that you'll keep me today and give me energy and time to serve you yes I do so praying those positive making those positive affirmations to God if you like I have found a very positive way of living before God so God I do trust you even though I may feel depressed today I do trust that you'll work through me even though at the end of every sermon I think well that was a waste of time

I do trust you that you'll hear and answer these prayers though it doesn't feel as if it's worth praying so trying to put my trust in God on the line if you like and to pray that way I found to be very helpful I don't mean it's a miracle cure but I mean that it's a way of kind of changing one's attitude towards God I think that God has used my depression really to be of great benefit to me I've learned some marvelous lessons of God's grace through it and it's been of a measurable benefit in helping other people I don't mean people who are depressed I actually find people who are depressed quite difficult to help but I'm much more able to be sympathetic to people in trouble and much more hopeful that God will work good through their lives who porn you you you