

A Biblical Prescription for Depression

By Steve Lehrer

Prescribing a purple pill to take all your troubles away might actually make you feel better. A few shots of whiskey might also make you feel better. But just because you are feeling better does not mean that you have actually dealt with your problem. It is like having a smoke alarm in your house begin to scream in the middle of the night.¹ This is an extremely unpleasant experience. But the main problem is not the annoying loud noise that the smoke alarm is putting out. You will be in a world of trouble if you simply shut off the smoke alarm and go back to bed. Treating depression with purple pills or whiskey is like shutting off the smoke alarm and thinking everything is fine because it is quiet again. Instead you need to take the warning that the alarm is giving you very seriously, find out where the fire is, and get ready to put it out! Your feelings are like a smoke alarm. They tell you that something is potentially wrong. Don't shut them off, but investigate what caused them to go crazy and become so disturbing. In medical lingo we might say, "don't treat the symptom and ignore the cause!"

In our day it is hard to get away from medical language when dealing with human suffering. So, I propose we think about the process of dealing with depression in the terms of a medical prescription. This biblical prescription will help you to treat the cause of your depression and in the process the symptoms will certainly be alleviated.²

1. Take a dose of realism.³
2. You must immediately follow that by taking a large spoonful of sovereignty (if you just have realism without joining it with sovereignty you are sure to get an upset stomach).
3. Get involved in the therapy of thanks immediately.
4. Administer several shots of Scripture to yourself daily.

In the biblical treatment of depression we begin with step one of the prescription: **take a dose of realism**. That is we need to have a proper understanding of how the Christian life works. There are those who teach a "Keswick", "Higher Life," or "Victorious Christian Living" understanding of the Christian life. That is, they teach that there is a key that unlocks the power for Christian living that will allow you to rise up to a struggle-free Christian life. That "key" has been said to be many things: yielding to the Spirit; letting go and letting God; praying a particular prayer; consistency in devotions; having enough faith; etc. But the problem with all of these views is that they promise to deliver the Christian to a struggle-free life that was never promised in Scripture. This side of heaven, the believer is promised that he will always struggle with sin and the effects of living in a sin-cursed world until he dies.

We are not supposed to live smooth or struggle-free lives. Paul writes to the Galatians about this very issue. They are struggling with sin, both doctrinal and moral failings. Paul tells them that the Christian life is a struggle and although they will ultimately win if they are believers, it is a fight:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law (Galatians 5:16-18).

Paul is exhorting the Galatians to fight by living by the Spirit. In the context of this passage, this means to fight for the understanding (and the life that flows from it) that their salvation is by grace alone and not gained by obedience to the law. Paul is telling the Galatians to be motivated by love for God because of the grace He gave them and the new hearts He created in them. The reason the Galatians need this exhortation is given in verse 17. As a believer there are temptations at every turn and your life is a spiritual war in which you fight every day. Sin still seems enjoyable to us and we must fight against it by stoking the fires of our love for God so that they burn higher and brighter than our desire to sin.

We need not worry whether we will win the war against our sin because of verse 18. Paul tells us that “if you are led by the Spirit,” that is “if you are a believer” then “you are not under law” or “you are not an unbeliever being confronted with God’s law and yet powerless to live for Him.⁴ If you are led by the Spirit, you have been fundamentally changed and you ultimately love God more than you love your sin. You *will* overcome. But that does not change the fact that “the flesh wars against the spirit,” that the Christian life is a battle. Therefore, as you find yourself struggling to live for God and battling against your sin, don’t get discouraged thinking that you are doing something wrong or that you should no longer have to fight if you are really faithful! Instead, realize that you are doing exactly what God tells you to do which is to fight against sin and to fight for your love for Him.

One of the things that must happen for a person to become a believer is that he must be able to look at himself in the mirror, understand the depths of his sinfulness, and that he deserves God’s wrath. Once someone becomes a believer that realization doesn’t go away. A believer will experience an ever-increasing understanding of his own sinfulness. When I first became a believer, cursing, drunkenness, and immorality were sins I had to struggle to put off. But now, many years later, my struggles are more inward and, in many ways, more intense. I don’t struggle with the same outward sins. Consider my struggle with cursing: I don’t struggle with cursing out loud, but I do struggle with grumbling in my heart about a situation. Now I understand the seriousness of the sin of grumbling⁵ far better than I understood the seriousness of my outward sinful behavior when I first believed. If I am not careful, my ever-increasing understanding of my own sinfulness can cause me to get discouraged and to think (erroneously) that I am not growing. This leads to what I call the “bummer effect.” The more you see and understand your sinfulness the more discouraged you get.

There are a few ways to avoid the bummer effect. First, when you begin to feel discouraged, talk to other believers who know you well and ask them if they have seen growth in you. If they haven’t seen growth in you, you may have reason to be disappointed and you might need to repent about some sin in your life. But often it is the people around me who have a better and more objective perspective on how I am

growing in Christ. Second, look at the many promises God gives in Scripture about what He will accomplish in the lives of His children:

...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6).

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:4-10).

We must always keep in mind that we live on “this side of heaven.” The salvation that we experience now is only a small portion of what is ours once we get to heaven. We still live in a sin-cursed world having to live by the sweat of our brow in bodies that get sick. Tears, pain, and grief are part and parcel of this life even when our sin is not getting in the way! In Scripture, the salvation that we experience is called a “deposit.” We are sure to eventually get the fullness of our salvation. But right now we are like children who can smell the wonderful fragrance of dessert cooking in the oven, but we don’t get to dig in just yet:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

The Apostles experienced poverty, peril, and abuse.⁶ Timothy experienced a chronic stomach ailment.⁷ Health and wealth are the exception that proves the rule that the lot for Christians right now is suffering.⁸ Therefore, remember that you live in the time when suffering is expected. Look forward to the time when God will take away all of your pain and hardship...come Lord Jesus, come!⁹

As you grapple with the painful reality of living as a sinner in a sin-

cursed world, you must be sure to move onto step two of the prescription: **take a spoon full of sovereignty** so that you can gain perspective. We must all keep in mind that everything that happens has been determined ahead of time by our God. There is no question about it. God has told us in Scripture that he is in control and determines everything that happens in the universe from the most mundane events to those happening that shake up world powers:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered (Matthew 10:29-30).

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" (Daniel 4:34-35)

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).

Even evil, in a way that we do not fully understand, is a part of his predestined plan:

The LORD works out everything for his own ends- even the wicked for a day of disaster (Proverbs 16:4).

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness (Acts 4:27-29).

Acts 4:27-29, as quoted above, references the most evil act ever committed in the history of the world. It was the cold-blooded murder of the only truly innocent man, Jesus Christ. It was simultaneously a crime committed by sinful men who "conspired" to do evil, and an event that was "decided beforehand" by God and caused by His "power." As we work through difficult issues and situations in life, we must remember that God is behind all of them. He is never to be blamed for evil,¹⁰ but, in a very real sense, He causes all things to happen. Have you been sinned against, lost your job, been injured, come down with a debilitating illness, or lost a loved one? Have you gotten entangled into a terrible mess of sin? Are you bitter, angry, or depressed over these situations? Well, make no mistake about the fact that God was the divine author of these situations.

There is a softer side to the hard truth of predestination. For the unbeliever (God's enemy¹¹), the fact that God is the author of all events in the universe should be terrifying. God is orchestrating everything in the universe to twist the knife in the ribs of his enemy!

This should motivate the unbeliever to repent and submit his life to God. But for the believer, absolutely everything that the Father brings into his life is motivated by the Father's love for him. Even the sin that the believer commits, while leaving the believer fully responsible for it, will be used by God for the believer's good: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). If you are a believer, you are at the center of the universe. God is orchestrating absolutely everything in the universe so that every little detail of your life is tailored just for you. From the difficulties with your spouse, to the particular sin with which you struggle, to the particular kind of cancer which is slowly killing you, it is all carefully planned and chosen just for you from the hands of an all-wise God who loves you intensely.

The third step in the prescription is essential for getting rid of depression: **take part in the therapy of thanks**. Once you understand God's sovereignty you are able to understand the importance of giving thanks. The believer is never a victim. Paul writes: "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Since nothing is random, and for believers all things are put into our lives for our good, then all circumstances are good gifts for which we should give thanks. The ramifications of this teaching are far-reaching in my own life. My mother is 65 and 2 years ago she was diagnosed with a somewhat rare brain disease. The symptoms are very similar to Alzheimer's disease. Within months of the diagnosis she lost much of her personality. Today she is like a child yet unable to grow and learn. She is also an unbeliever and is now unable to even conceptually understand the Gospel. Emotionally and circumstantially it is difficult for me. Giving thanks is not merely saying the right words, but it is the hard work of transforming our minds¹² so that we can look at things from God's perspective. No matter how unjust I "feel" my circumstance with my mom might be, I must face the reality that this circumstance was a gift that God has given to me out of His unfathomable riches and wisdom. No other gift could have been better for me than this. Once I digest this truth, I can truly thank God even for the most difficult of circumstances.

Notice how our feelings are forced to take a back seat to Scripture. Feelings are extremely important in our lives. They are precious gifts from God that turn our world from boring black and white to vivid Technicolor. But feelings are never supposed to be that upon which we base our decisions, as Solomon makes quite clear: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6). The believer evaluates feelings by God's word, making his evaluations on the basis of what God says about his feelings. Look at what Paul has to say about this: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

When I begin to think that life is too hard or that I have been dealt a hand that I simply cannot handle, I begin to "feel" trapped. I begin to "feel" tired. Quite honestly, I begin to "feel" sick. My job at that point is to recall the truth from Scripture that my life is not too hard¹³ and that a God who loves me has dealt me a hand that is a sure winner.¹⁴ Sometimes I have to work hard to recall the truth from Scripture and I need others in the body of Christ to help me to see things from God's point of view.¹⁵ As I begin to recall

God's sovereignty and His amazing love for me and I begin to obey Him even though I am tired and scared, pleasant feelings almost always follow.

The final, and perhaps the most important step in prescription for treating depression is: **consistently give yourself several shots of Scripture daily**. The depressed person desperately needs to be "transformed by the renewing of his mind." He needs God's perspective on his problems. He needs to understand how God is working in his life and in his particular situation. He needs to understand the spiritual danger he is in by reacting to his situation and his feelings by shutting down. The way one is transformed is by reading and meditating on God's Word.¹⁶ The medical world wants us to take pills to deal with spiritual problems. But God has given us something far better than a purple pill. First and foremost He has given us His Son, Jesus Christ, who brings us a sure hope that is an anchor for our souls.¹⁷ He has revealed Jesus and all of His teaching in the pages of Scripture. Paul writes: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Scripture equips us for everything we need to do to please God. It even reveals to us how we can fight against depression and fight for our joy in Christ!

Endnotes:

¹ I originally heard this analogy given by either David Powlison or Ed Welch (I don't remember) on the radio program *Family Life Today*.

² Simply following the prescribed steps laid out in this paper will not necessarily cure you of depression. Depression is a spiritual problem and only the Spirit of God can truly provide a cure. You must depend on God to enable you to deal with your problems. But "letting go and letting God" is not a biblical way of approaching the Christian life. You must pray that God will give you repentance and joy and then you must "sweat for Jesus." That is, you must strive to live faithfully and obediently. God can move mountains, but you must pick up your shovel and start digging! This paper is focused on your part in God's work of moving mountains.

³ I did not include repentance in this prescription. But it is always the first step in the process of dealing with sin in your life.

⁴ Romans 7:5, 8:7. Romans 7:14-25, in my opinion, does not describe the believer's struggle with sin. This passage describes what the law can and cannot do in the life of the unbeliever. The law cannot bring about a changed life. If you are interested in reading a tight exegetical argument for taking Romans 7 in this way see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, 410-477.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:1-11

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:8-13

⁷ 1 Timothy 5:23

⁸ Acts 14:22, 1 Peter 2:21

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, Revelation 21:4

¹⁰ 1 John 1:5

¹¹ Colossians 1:21

¹² Romans 12:1-2

¹³ 1 Corinthians 10:13

¹⁴ Romans 8:28

¹⁵ Hebrews 3:12-14

¹⁶ This assumes that the person is a believer. Transformation is a work of God, but we are responsible to actively work at being transformed. Notice that Romans 12:2 is a command to the believer.

¹⁷ Hebrews 6:19. The hope is the certainty that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done for us and therefore God is on our side. The believer can be confident that nothing can separate him from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39).