

Psalm 42's Strategies for Dealing With Depression

How do you feel when things don't go your way, when life seems to crash around you or in you? Have you been there? Are you there today?

This is the picture we see in Psalm 42 when the psalmist, one of the sons of Korah, asks himself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted in me? Hope in God, for I will yet thank Him for the help of His presence" (Ps. 42:5). Things are not going his way. In fact, he is being shaken to the core, and is questioning his Maker, "Why have you forgotten me?" Depression has set in. He is dealing with an internal battle, concluding that his God is no longer even aware of his existence; "Out of sight, out of mind" characterizes his thinking. Now this makes for a really bad day, month, year or even decade.

Years ago, on my birthday, my journal thoughts included many of the sentiments found in Psalm 42. It would be the beginning of a season of self-evaluation, pain, sadness and confusion that ended in a new season of refreshment, retooling and rejuvenation. But the valley of the shadow of death had to come before my joy returned. My perspective on this day was riddled with setbacks, failure, regret, guilt and sadness as I, like the psalmist, remembered happier times, thirsting for their soon return. The internal, unseen region of my soul needed help, healing and the benefit of time.

What action do you take when facing times like the one described in Psalm 42? How do you respond to these painful inner struggles, the ones no one sees but you and God? Not all responses are helpful. Some respond by simply ignoring that these issues even exist; they keep repeating the same patterns, over and over again, throughout their life. As a

pastor and Christian leader for many years, I have seen this temptation in my own vocation and with many of my colleagues. Others excuse and justify these issues as simply, "This is just who I am, who God made me to be!", putting off the truth for another day. Some take the easy road and place blame on others: it's my spouse's fault, my employer's fault, my parents' fault, my congregation's fault, my child's fault, the elders' fault or ultimately, it's God's fault. Still others seek relief from their pain through destructive and dangerous alternatives. They want to deaden the pain for just a few moments of relief, to escape and experience even momentary peace. During my 63 years of life, at one time or another, I too have chosen some of these responses, which of course, only proved to be unproductive.

So, after writing three journal pages under the heading "My Worst," I made some life choices that, over time, have brought healing to my soul, my relationships, my life perspective and my personal mission. Now wait just a minute. I should restate what I just said, so it's more accurate: God took the initiative and led me, guided me, took me by the hand; by His grace, mercy and deep love, He allowed me to experience healing in my soul, my relationships and my purpose for living. There, that's better!

The first step in this process was owning my stuff. With the help of others, I had to work through some of the emptiness I was embracing in my dilemma. I had to examine existing patterns, letting go of those which were unhealthy and not helpful. It was during this step that I recognized clearly, for the first time, the power of guilt in my life. It was a controlling factor, more than I'd ever known, and had been for a long time. God wanted me to experience His love and forgiveness in places where guilt had taken up residence. This was sobering but good news, eventually helping me to make significant forward progress.

Next was the benefit of outside eyes and ears, people who

could help coach and navigate me through these stormy waters. There were a few people I allowed up close and personal with me during this time. People to whom I would entrust some of my deepest hurts and pain. The Scripture teaches us: "Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16a). This is the principle of authenticity, of being real. There is something therapeutic to the soul when we seek, find and entrust ourselves to God through others. This has been life-giving to me over the years and remains so to this day.

My pain and desire for God's help drove me to the Scriptures in a new and desperate way. The psalmist writes, "As the deer pants after the water brooks, so my soul pants after You, O God" (Ps. 42:1). I drank in the truth of God's living and active word as though it was my daily food. I found great comfort and hope in the writings of the Psalms, embracing the honest emotion of how people really felt in difficult situations and how God proves Himself faithful again and again. This began to slowly breathe life back into my soul.

Twice in Psalm 42 we read these words: "Hope in God, for I will yet thank Him for the help of His presence" (Ps. 42:5, 11). In the midst of pain and confusion, he writes these words of hope, true for anyone who looks to God for help. As time passed, my soul began to be renewed with the hope of one day being in a different place, a different season, where God's work in me would reveal itself as something beautiful, just as the Scripture promises: "He has made everything beautiful in its appropriate time" (Eccl. 3:11a).

Praise be the name of Jesus, my Savior and Healer! He has filled my soul with hope once again, but even better, with the news that He is not yet done completing in me or you what He promised: making us into the very image of His Son. Wow, what a ride! And just think, the best is yet to come! {eo}

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