

Should [Or Can] Christians Ever Be Depressed?

Dear Rick:

Enjoy your lessons; they are very informative. Find myself waiting each month. I can't hear you on the radio anymore - loved your sermons.

I am a cold Christian at this point in my life. Why? Lost my 47 year old daughter - died to pancreatic cancer. She lived by the book (her diet) and life style. Trying to get back into serving the Lord. My daughter was baptized in her teen years. She wasn't a faithful Christian. (Of course, I worry over that.)

Didn't go back to church for a long time after _____ passed, am slowly trying to get back. I was a very faithful Christian. I got so upset at God, went into deep depression. I had just lost my husband a few years before. Almost lost a son 7 times to drugs. (7 times on life support) Was accepting my son but never my daughter.

My Sunday School classes and Wednesday night study was what I really enjoyed.

Could you send me some scripture that could help me along the way? I have never heard anyone in my church that even thinks depression is real. Committed Christians were not supposed to encounter depression one lady said.

Is it wrong for me to take medication? I have had a dread of going to church last weekend since my daughter passed.

Thank my Lord for giving me another chance to get back in church and his word. Pray that I can get back in church and back to studying his word.

In Christian love,
_____¹

Dear _____ -

Thank you for your letter. Seldom do we receive from anyone as long a letter as you wrote. We appreciate your taking the time to do that. As you requested, we have enclosed our book, Conversions In The Book Of Acts. We hope that it will be a good supplement to whatever you might be studying on your own or in the local church that you attend.

Your letter was both very "moving" and disturbing; we will respond the best we know how. First, we are very sorry for the loss of your daughter. Forty-seven is indeed a very young age to die. By coincidence, only a couple of weeks ago

¹ It is not our usual practice of revealing the entire letter of anyone who writes to this ministry but we believed that in this case it was important to make known the writer's entire letter in the hope that we would be able to encourage others who may have the same "problem" as does the writer of this letter.

a dear friend of mine, also aged 47 years, died. It came as a real shock to me so I cannot imagine what you might be going through with the loss of your daughter following the death of your husband only a few years before that. (Though people do so in an effort to comfort, it is not possible for those of us who have never lost a child or spouse to understand entirely what those who have experienced that must go through.) On top of all of that, you have had to "deal" with the near-death encounters of your son - seven according to you - who has been addicted to drugs. Truly, you have been confronted with extremely hard and difficult family problems; you have had to face several very difficult decisions.

In spite of what one of your sisters-in-Christ said, there is no Biblical reason to believe her statement to be true; I do believe that Christians are subject to having to deal with periods of depression the same as do unbelievers. I know of more than a few Christians who have had to battle the same thing that you presently fight in your life; over a period of time, some seem to go through their personal valley of shadows and darkness for a only short time while others wage this battle of the mind for a much more prolonged period.

I am neither a medical doctor nor a psychiatrist and therefore will not be so foolish as to present myself to you as being an authority on the subject of depression through either of those two lenses. As a "layman" in those two disciplines I have read materials and listened to panel discussions concerning the subject of depression. As I understand it, one cause of depression (there is more than one cause for depression) is attributable to chemical

imbalances in one's brain. It is an established fact that these imbalances can be treated successfully with proper, prescribed, and supervised medication. So, to answer your question, "Is it wrong for me [as a Christian] to take medication," without being professionally schooled in the subject, my immediate, short reply is an unequivocal "No! No, it is not wrong." It seems to me that it would be no more wrong for a Christian to "medicate" for this physical/mental malady than it would be to "medicate" for headaches or any other "ache" or "pain" that our bodies suffer from time to time.

As I said, I am not a "specialist" in the proper treatment of mental or physical "disorders." But I do consider myself a "specialist" in God's Word, at least to some degree. So, I will answer your concerns from a Biblical perspective by considering a couple of examples in the life of the Apostle Paul as well as two other cases.

But first, one would be "hard pressed" to find anyone in the Word of God who suffered more than Job. Reading *Job 1:13 - 19* one learns that Job lost: his oxen, his donkeys, his servants, his sheep, his camels, and his sons and daughters! And yet, *"In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong."*²

In *chapter 2* Job was struck *"with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head."*³ *"...his wife said to him, 'Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!' But he said to her, 'You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed*

² *Job 1:22*

³ *verse 7*

*accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips."*⁴

And yet, even though Job would not lay fault at the throne of God for what had happened to him, *Job 3:1* says that he *"opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth."* After saying, *"May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which it was said, 'A male child is conceived,' "*⁵ he asked a series of questions that reveal how distraught (depressed?) he was over the transaction of the afflictions he suffered:

verses 11-12

"¹¹ Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? ¹² Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse?"

verse 16

"Or why was I not hidden like a stillborn child, like infants who never saw light?"

verses 20 - 23

"²⁰ Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, ²¹ who long for death, but it does not come, and search for it more than hidden treasures; ²² who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad when they can find the grave? ²³ Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, and whom God has hedged in?"

⁴ *verses 9-10*

⁵ *verse 3*

Consider this: Job was a man of great faith, so much so that he would not *"curse God,"* as his wife suggested, for the tragedies and disasters that befell him; nor would he *"charge God with wrong."* And yet, he wished himself to be dead. Are these two facts contradictory? That is, is it a contradiction for a person to maintain his faith in God and yet wish for death because of tragedy in one's life? Have there not been "saints" of God on their deathbeds and who have suffered horrible, debilitating illnesses who have asked God to "take them?" _____, my take-away from this Biblical account, coupled with my personal experience in ministering to people in such circumstances is that it is possible to be a faithful, child of God, as was Job, and at the same time be in a state of great grief, discouragement, and despondency (depression?).

I cannot cite the case of Job without pointing out that in the end *"the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters."*⁶ May this be an example for you: that by persevering in your faith unto the end, you will reap greater blessings from God than you have experienced to this point in your life - if not in this life, then most assuredly in the life to come.

But now, let us turn our attention to the New Testament.

The first such case that comes to my immediate memory is the record written

⁶ *Job 42:12-13*

in *Acts 23:11*. Beginning at *Acts 21:20* (and I strongly encourage you to read *Acts 21:20* through *23:11* to understand the whole matter), Paul had been subjected to harassment from his own Jewish brethren, brethren of his own flesh - not his Christian brethren - which led to his being incarcerated by Roman authorities (ironically for Paul's own protection from those who would have him killed). During this span of time, on multiple occasions, he was forced to defend himself against charges that were false. The last defense of himself in this section of Scripture was in *chapter 23* which culminated in his being taken "*by force*" by a Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, and brought "*unto the barracks*" where he would be protected from being "*pulled to pieces*" by a mob that was under the leadership of the high priest.

While Paul was incarcerated in the Roman "*barracks*" came a word from the Lord Jesus Christ: "*Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.*" (*Acts 23:11*) Briefly, here is my point for citing this verse: why would the Lord Jesus exhort Paul to "*be of good cheer*" unless he was *not* in a state of "*good cheer*?" In view of what Jesus told him, can we really believe that Paul, in the set of circumstances in which he found himself, was "floating" on a celestial "cloud nine," filled with optimism about what would come next? (This was far different from his incarceration experience in *Acts 16*. There he had Silas with him and there were other prisoners nearby also. Here, in *Acts 23*, he is in solitary confinement.) He was a Christian, certainly; and, he was a chosen Apostle on top of that, but, do these facts demand that we think he

was exempt from being discouraged - dare I say, depressed? He obviously needed some personal encouragement from Christ Himself. Does this mean that Paul was a failure as a Christian and unqualified to be an Apostle? I think not! I believe it means that Paul, made of human flesh like you and me, was subject to the "failings," weaknesses, and emotional "ups and downs" that all human flesh experience, even as a Christian. (The idea that Christians are to wear an eternal "happy face" or to be "happy all the time: is an idea that is foreign to the Word of God. We are to be filled with joy but being filled with joy does not exempt us from having periods of unhappiness, disappointment, discouragement, or even depression at times, as I note in the following.)

A second example of Paul *perhaps* being afflicted with depression - and maybe this is taking what I am about to cite too far - is his statement in *II Corinthians 1:8*. "*...we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia; that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life.*" One teacher I know said, "Paul was considering suicide when he penned these words." I disagree with that teacher's assessment of Paul's state of mind but I do understand the teacher's point: Paul had resigned himself to dying for the cause of Christ. Whatever Paul's mental state was I will not be dogmatic, but in the course of going through whatever he was going through, it seems to me, by the statements that follow *II Corinthians 1:8*, his confidence remained in God that He would ultimately deliver him. And so must yours!

I have always liked the passage of Scripture in *II Corinthians 4:8 - 14*. I hope you will read it and, because of the question you asked about the possibility of Christians being depressed, that you will pay particular attention to *verses 8 and 9*: "*We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed - .*" Paul went through many trials in life but always maintained his confidence and trust in God. And so must you!

Because of the seriousness of your question and the obvious concern you have about taking medication for the physical/mental "infirmity" you have, and which some have suggested that there is something "wrong" about having an "infirmity" such as this and/or taking medication for it, I want to cite three more examples of what I think could be cases of depression in the lives of two great servants of God Almighty. These examples are recorded in the Old Testament.

One is the case of John the Baptist who in *Matthew 11* found himself in prison for preaching truth from God's Word as he had been commissioned to do. Through "*two of his disciples*" he actually asked Christ, "*Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?*" Now here is the man about whom Christ said, "*among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist!*" Yet, John, because of his personal circumstances at the time, sent his two disciples to Christ, whose questions suggest that John had doubts, serious doubts, about who Jesus really was. Do you think John would have been depressed sitting in a prison cell that probably did not even have a

window that allowed sunlight to enter - a cell from which he could not even see the outside world? I believe that it is completely unreasonable to think that John the Baptist was not having to deal with "bouts of depression" in the midst of the circumstances in which he found himself.

Two is the case of Prophet Elijah. *I Kings 19:1 - 17* records the account of his encounter with Ahab and Jezebel. *Verse 3* says "*he arose and ran for his life,*" fearing what Jezebel was planning to do to him. *Verse 4* says "*he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, 'It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!'*" Dropping down the page that records this account it is written in *verse 9* that "*...he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place...*" When the LORD asked him what he was doing there he answered in *verse 10*, "*I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.*"

Those who can visualize all of this and then get beyond what we are told how we should react in circumstances like this just might be led - and rightly so - to think that Elijah was discouraged and despondent - depressed - about the state of affairs in which he found himself. Whether or not he should have been in this mental state may be subject to debate but it does not seem unreasonable to me to think that Elijah sat in that cave by himself depressed. He was a great Prophet of God who had done great

to me to think that Elijah sat in that cave by himself depressed. He was a great Prophet of God who had done great miracles and who, at times, had been a pillar of strength, but, like Apostle Paul and John the Baptist, he too was housed in flesh, subject to all the failings and infirmities and weaknesses of his mortal flesh and to the questions and doubts that resided within his inner man.

I believe that when one reads closely the Old Testament records and examines the various ministries of the Prophets such as Jeremiah one will see times when those great men of God were also discouraged and despondent because of what appeared to them to be failures in their ministries. Again, to repeat myself, throughout the Word of God, in both Old and New Testaments, we see human beings housed in weak flesh sometimes struggling with the battles of life common to many of us.

I find it to be silly, unrealistic, and phony piety to suggest that Christians never struggle from time to time with depression, to whatever degree that might be. (A preacher friend of mine said that his mother, who was a good Christian, never complained about anything and was always saying everything in her life was "fine and dandy, sweet as candy." Well, I must let my brother's "yea" be "yea" but I cannot relate to that myself. That is not the way it was with my mother and I can't say that that is the way it has been all during my own personal life. And, by the way, it was ironic and well-known that this very preacher's own wife was subject to "bouts of depression" - causing her to miss many of the local assemblies - although she too was a "Christian.")

We hear it preached frequently - and rightfully so - that we Christians ought to encourage each other. In fact, that is one of the reasons for assembling ourselves together each Lord's Day. *"...let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching"* wrote the writer of *Hebrews 10:25*. This brings to our remembrance Barnabas who was called the *"Son of Encouragement"* in *Acts 4:36*. (Ironically, the Apostle Paul was an encourager in *Acts 27:33 - 36*.)

I have perhaps written too much. So I will conclude by saying this:

First, if you are not now praying for God's strength, support, and guidance to minister to your depression you need to do this regularly, beginning now. Read *Psalm 23* over and over again until you really believe it. That *Psalm* is not for the dead and dying; it was not written to be read at funerals. It is for the living who are going through *"valleys"* in life.

Second, at least attend the worship assemblies of your local congregation. (Hopefully, you will become "active" as you say you once were, but at least be present in the assemblies where you can hear the Word of God and be in the presence of those of like precious faith. There is great power in God's Word not only for salvation but also for encouragement.)

Third, try to find at least one person in the family of God, locally or otherwise, who will love and understand you enough that you can have frank, open,

and honest conversations with him or (preferably) her about your personal "struggle" to get back on the right track of your Christian journey.

Fourth, invite someone to your home to have a Bible "discussion/study" with you once each week, a person with whom you can have fellowship in the Word of God, a person who has an understanding and compassionate heart, a Christian who is strong in the faith. I believe a study of the book of *Psalms*, especially those in which David cried out to God for strength would be helpful. This study doesn't have to go on forever although that would be good.

_____, there is more that I probably could or should include in this letter, but I hope this will help in some way for you to, as you stated, "get back in church and back to studying his word."

My prayer is that you will regain the spiritual strength that our mutual adversary, the devil, rejoices has been suspended in your life and that you will be strong enough to say to him, "*Get behind me, Satan!*"

Lord willing, periodically, I will begin to send you some CD's of my messages and lessons that you are no longer able to hear through our radio ministry. You will remain in our prayer thoughts. And, please, stay in touch.

A Gospel Defender!
(Philippians 1:15 - 17)

Preacher Rick