

Overcoming Discouragement And Depression

Practical Applications

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Occasionally I get discouraged. I am sure that you do as well. I do not see the progress in my spiritual life that I think should be there and I get discouraged. I watch the news and read news articles about the horrible conditions in this world that downright disgust and depress me.

I hear of children being abducted, abused, and murdered by their neighbors against their parent's will. And, I hear of parents taking their unborn children to clinics to be abducted, abused and murdered by doctors in the form of abortion—more than 40 million in the United States in the last three decades. That depresses me.

I see public schools and the entertainment industry promoting such sickening perversions as homosexuality to our children. Catholic priests have been sexually assaulting children in the name of God. It is almost impossible to not hear about these satanic perversions. You flip the stations on the radio or on the television or you pick up any news magazine or newspaper, and you are going to find some horrific crimes against humanity.

It calls to mind the scripture in Genesis 6 where it says, in God's own words:

Genesis 6:5 "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

That just keeps ringing in my ears every time I see one of these news items or hear of one of these horrible crimes.

Several weeks ago I found myself suffering from discouragement that seemed to have turned into depression. It just would not go away. I felt overwhelmed and frustrated and useless. I wondered why it seemed that I was the only one who was feeling discouraged and depressed.

As I prayed and studied about discouragement and depression, I finally started to come out of it. Thankfully the things I was looking into and studying were very helpful. Since then, many of you have mentioned that you have been suffering from discouragement

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and depression and many of you have mentioned that you cannot put a finger on it or you do not know quite why, but you just feel very down at this time. So I thought, what better subject to speak on today than something that has been bothering me and obviously has been bothering many of you as well.

Biblical characters of great courage, at times, showed their human frailty and weakness when suffering from depression. Noah, Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, and others—all powerful prophets or leaders—experienced deep depressions, some to the point of wanting to die and actually asking God to kill them.

These faithful men and women, eventually, found a way of escape from depression. They and others since were able to access the right power and resources to overcome their fear and worry. They were able to deal with seemingly hopeless situations, and out of weakness they became emotionally and spiritually strong. Notice what the author of the book of Hebrews has to say about this very thing:

Hebrews 11:32-40 And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. And others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

By overcoming discouragement through faith they became more stable, more compassionate, and more mature spiritually. We should be thankful that we have not had to suffer even half of these trials, yet we still fall into discouragement and depression.

Depression has many faces. It is not limited by intelligence, wealth, culture or age.

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Some people do not even realize they suffer from it. Depression is a major problem in young children, and increasingly it is leading to more adolescent suicides every year. And, though depression afflicts all ages, its incidence rises abruptly with adolescent years.

The teen suicide rate has risen a shocking 200 percent in the last 40 years. Today, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds, after auto accidents and homicide.

Five thousand American teenagers commit suicide every year, and according to the National Suicide Help Center, three times as many attempt it. In a recent survey of high school students conducted by the American Association of Pediatrics, 60 percent said they had thought about killing themselves, and 9 percent said they had tried at least once. What a sad condition our nation is in that depression would get to this point.

According to one study, 90 percent of suicidal teens express that no one in their families understood them or listened to their cries for help. Adolescent brains function from a one-sided emotional view-point rather than logical, so it is important that parents take time to listen and help their child understand that life is not as bad as it sometimes appears. What parents have to do is to put life in the true perspective, that we can overcome our problems—especially with God's help.

Depression is a broad range of negative states of mind, in the general sense. At one end of the spectrum, depression shows up as the common, short-term down or sinking feeling after hearing bad news. We have all experienced that kind of depression and probably fairly often. Or, maybe after learning of the loss of something or someone. Sometimes it results from a blow to the ego. Our pride is hurt and we just feel like crawling under a chair. This down feeling may last for only a few hours or days at the most. This is not a very serious depression because it is one that we can come out of on our own for the most part.

At the other extreme are long-term chronic or crippling emotions of futility, hopelessness, emptiness, and a lack of joy and energy. These can be coupled with total loss of self-esteem, unrelenting guilt, shame, and even suicide.

I will ask the questions now: What is depression specifically? Is it something spiritually oriented that you suffer from, or is there far more to it than just chalking it up to being a spiritual problem? To gain a more thorough understanding of this very common problem let us look at the different types of depressions. The majority of depressed feelings begin in response to a specific loss, fear of loss, or adverse occurrence in

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life—something we can pinpoint. There seems no way of retrieving or achieving what is lost or what is threatened with loss. So we start to feel down. If we let it get too bad, or if we have put the item above God, we can let ourselves slip into depression.

The depressive cycle leads to collapse of self-worth, then to self-depreciation, then to a feeling that the situation is hopeless. Hopeless attitudes produce changes in the responses of the mind and body, which begin to immobilize the person.

God inspired Solomon to write it simply in Proverbs 13:12,

Proverbs 13:12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick.

When a person does not see hope in their lives, most of the time they can slip into a depression.

In depression, all systems—mental and physical—slow down. Growing evidence from medical and mental health research indicates changes occur in the chemical balances of the brain and nervous system.

These changed chemical imbalances alter transmission of brain and nerve impulses, which in turn, produce disturbing brain patterns and painful or crippling emotional and physical feelings. This is the physical reaction to that "down," or discouraged, depressed, feeling.

For example, serious depressives often say: "I can't get out of this. ... It's hopeless. ... I'll never get better. ... Things will never change." They have an absolute attitude that it is impossible for them to come out of their situation.

Others feel: "I'm powerless to do anything, what's the use of trying?" Then they give up and slip into a severe depression. They also think: "There are no options. ... I'm drained, empty. I can't sleep. I can't keep going on like this, but I see no way out." There is such despair—especially in this world without God—that people reach a point where they just want to end it all.

In serious depression, almost everything is viewed negatively. The future is seen as bleak, unrewarding, and there appears no way to change it. Depressives mentally stop fighting. They are possessed with their own sad feelings. They often assume others are equally obsessed with the same feelings, when in reality others are not feeling the same way.

One type of depressive, the manic-depressive, swings between periods of extreme optimism and unfounded pessimism. Depressives stubbornly resist reassurances of their worth. Statements to "snap out of it!" or "pull yourself together!" usually have little effect on these types of depressives.

For every serious depressive there are several masked depressives—people who function at far less than their ability in jobs, homes, or at school. They do not realize that their emotional problems and difficulties with a job or other people, or many of their physical ills, are caused by a subtle depression, which they do not recognize. For many of these people, lack of positive emotions and attitudes have become a way of life for so long, they do not realize why happiness and good feelings perpetually elude them.

Masked depressives find little true joy in life. They are constantly restless and irritable. They fill doctor's offices with real or imagined complaints of a lack of energy, chronic headaches, stomach problems, constipation, and similar ills. They genuinely believe they are sick, but their mind is what is causing many of these illnesses. I am not saying that it is depression that causes all of these illnesses, but a person that is depressed can many times have these illnesses. They are a large part of the up to 85% of patients visiting doctors' offices whose health problems are largely mentally induced.

Many of these patients seek a miracle drug to free them of their ills. So we see a society that is so stuck on taking pills for their ailments that we hardly bat an eye at even the illegal drugs that are used for this type of thing, such as heroin, marijuana, and on and on. Children are growing up seeing their parents take a horrendous amount of prescription drugs to try and solve this problem, so they grow up not seeing any problem with taking drugs. A prescription drug abuse website states,

Prescription drug abuse is a modern-day plague. According to one government estimate, over six million Americans have abused prescription medication. As a result of this abuse, families are torn apart and lives are destroyed.

There is not doubt there that there is a serious problem of epidemic proportions in this nation.

The peace of mind and better health they seek will only occur when they develop a positive and constructive state of thinking and way of handling their problems! They will never be able to erase it with alcohol and drugs as you well know. It is amazing that this world does not understand that.

Still others, because their depression is mixed with anxiety, engage in self-seeking, sexual activity or even violence, as we see with these serial killers. Growing numbers of depressives drown their depression in alcohol or drugs to kill the mental pain of weakness, emptiness, and futility that they find in their lives.

In normal grief at a loss, a certain amount of sadness or crying is often helpful and necessary to work through to normal feelings. Grief at the loss of a loved one or something highly valued is not wrong. But, it becomes unhealthy and damaging when it causes total loss of personal self-worth, or the desire to live.

The line between natural remorse and pathological depression may be a subjective judgment that we cannot always put our finger on. For example, a man who loses a job and is unable to mobilize himself to find work for weeks after being fired or losing his job is seriously depressed and needs help and encouragement, if he has let it get that far.

While the cause of a depression is often related to a loss we can pinpoint, which is sometimes called a reactive depression, the cause at times can be much more vague. It may be a mood we do not understand. Depressed feelings can come over a person for no seemingly rational reasons. But in reality there are mental, physical, or spiritual reasons for the depression.

Endogenous depressions are related to less distinct causes that may develop either slowly or suddenly within a person. The cause may be from subconscious or denied fears. They may be from needs or desires that unsettling events now threaten.

Susceptibility to frequent depressions often depends on the kind of encouragement, values, self-esteem, love, or support that we receive in early years of life in our families, or maybe the lack of them. Vulnerability may be related to how we learned to respond to losses or problems in life. In addition, certain personalities seem more sensitive to discouraged moods than others. So it can be something that is "programmed" in us during our childhood or it could be something that we have been "programmed" throughout our experiences in life not to be able to handle in a right and godly way.

A depressive mood can cross the mind for no apparent reason. It could be the result of reaching a breaking-point in a series of adverse setbacks in life. It's something we refer to as "the final straw"! "That's it. I've had it. That is the final straw. I just can't deal with it any longer." A lot of times people have nervous breakdowns at this point.

The breaking of God's spiritual laws sets us up to experience problems or attitudes of

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mind for which there seems to be no hope or help. Doing things we know are wrong results in negative or depressive feelings, as does the influence of demonic thoughts, which is another factor.

Unresolved resentment, bitterness, jealousy, envy, or anger lead to feelings of loss, and as a result the depressed feelings come upon us.

Proverbs 14:30 A sound heart is life to the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones.

For such sins as envy we have to ask for forgiveness from God, and ask others we have offended for forgiveness as well. Then set our values and priorities right and resolve not to do them again. So we have our part to play in all of this.

Never underestimate the influence that evil spiritual forces have on our minds and attitudes. Satan and his demons are alive and active, and having a heyday with unwary humanity. No wonder so many psychiatrists and their patients do not understand many of their negative moods or attitudes!

Ephesians 2:1-3 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

We see there that the world is very susceptible to these principalities and these powers, the prince of the air, Satan. And if we are not careful, he can affect us as well. I do not know if you are like me, but I know that I have been driving down the road before and all of a sudden a thought that is a thought that I just cannot stand will pop into my mind. I will think, "Where in the world did that thought come from?" Sometimes, if I realize right away that it is from Satan, I will rebuke him, but other times I will just be bewildered as to where that thought has come from. I am not thinking about that subject; it just pops right into my mind. We have to immediately rid our minds of that when that happens.

Speaking of putting on the whole armor of God, Paul warned:

Ephesians 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against

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principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

We do know that Satan is out there and he is trying affect us whenever he can. These evil spirits place damaging and negative moods and feelings in vulnerable or unsuspecting human minds. In some weakened people, they implant impulses to want to give up on life. If they do not have God to access, to help them through this, many times they end up in the depths of despair and even to the point of suicide.

We all know that overwork, poor diet, prolonged mental stress, anxiety, or fear can drain our mental and physical energy levels. All depression is not caused directly by spiritual problems. If you go back far enough, you will find a spiritual problem that is indirectly related. Of course, sometimes some discouragement and distress is because of a spiritual problem.

Let us take a look at the physical causes for a moment. These types of causes drain us of our needed strength to cope with life and its problems. I am going to give you just seven general causes of discouragement and depression. I think it is necessary to cover this so that we realize where some of these problems come from in a physical sense.

1. Physical or mental exhaustion may take weeks or years to develop. But it eventually manifests itself in mental energy fatigue—a worn out feeling of being unable to cope.

2. Improper nutrition will gradually set us up for that depression we are wanting to avoid.

Too many refined sugars, starches, or fats in the diet, or other unbalanced nutrition, weakens the body's physical endurance, mental alertness, and ability to handle problems or stress.

Allergic reactions to certain foods or substances can also produce mental dullness, irritability, or depressed feelings.

Even a lack of light can cause our bodies to go into depressive moods.

According to an article entitled, "The Full Arsenal to Fight Depression," that appeared in The Charlotte Observer on Monday, August 12, 2002:

For years, light therapy has been used to treat seasonal affective disorder, a type of depression that afflicts about one in 10 people who live in places with

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short winter days.

We have heard about this for many years that women who live in Alaska have a hard time with depression partly for this very reason.

Now, growing evidence indicates that being bathed in at least 30 minutes a day in bright artificial light [preferably full spectrum light] may be as effective as an anti-depressant in any season. [Keep in mind this article is coming from the medical standpoint.] The mood boosting effects can kick in almost immediately, researchers say. In comparison, anti-depressants may require a month of use before people feel their effects.

3. Improper sleep, diet, and exercise lead to depression. Proper rest, food, and activity will help us come out of a depressed condition and help us to avoid it in the future.

According to the article I just read, "The Full Arsenal to Fight Depression":

Numerous studies have shown regular exercise to be an excellent antidote for mild to moderate depression. Over time, researchers say, it may work better than medication in controlling symptoms. We still don't understand the mechanisms behind this—whether it's a change in brain chemistry or they just feel better because they mastered some challenge," says James Blumenthal, a Duke University psychologist and co-author of a 200 person study on the long-term effects of exercise. [And his last statement in the article is] But we do know it works.

4. Lack of creative activity or achievement is discouraging. Positive creativity or achievement of any kind, even if it must start out small, should be encouraged for depressed people. A depressive's sense of worth and accomplishment must be built up again, one step at a time. Accomplishments should be pointed out positively to the depressive, because their depressed attitude tends to downgrade even things they can accomplish.

I know you have seen that in depressives before, where they reach a point where they do not even think they can drive down the road when they have driven for the last 30 or 40 years. It is an unrealistic state of mind.

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Many deeply depressed people feel they have totally lost all their former skills and abilities, and wrongly conclude they are total failures. This is a misleading feeling caused by the depression. Sadly, it viciously adds fuel to feelings of hopelessness and futility. But the skills and abilities are really still there! They have not lost them. They will return as the person recovers from depression, as they properly reprioritize their lives with positive values and attitudes. Throughout this idea of discouragement and depression, you always see the positive and the negative coming to the forefront.

5. Boredom has a negative affect on our mood. God designed our minds and bodies to need a balanced amount of healthy variety and stimulation to feel alive and maintain equilibrium.

Boredom is the absence or dullness of stimulation and feeling. It produces apathy, lethargy, and a sense of worthlessness. Continual boredom sets us up for depression. I've told my children for years when they would come to me and say, "I'm bored!" I would say, "You're only bored if you're boring! So start working on not being boring." I would encourage them to be creative and do something in that way. We need to have interests, hobbies, varying projects that interest you to work on. Christ said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." God is never bored and He is never boring. He is always working.

6. Abuse of drugs and alcohol are often depressants themselves. Many times they are used to tranquilize the resulting pain or to fill the emptiness in our lives. But, the pain and suffering will not be truly alleviated without an exciting, worthwhile purpose in life.

Depressive feelings can be induced by certain drugs, abuses of alcohol, improperly working bodily functions or viral infections. This is called toxic depression. Wrong use of legal and illegal drugs has surpassed epidemic proportions in the U.S.

Many depressives take barbiturates, sedatives, tranquilizers, or alcohol to alleviate their suffering. These are all drugs that depress the central nervous system. Some doctors carelessly prescribe such drugs for vague physical or emotional complaints not realizing that the problem is not physical—but it is either a spiritual or a mental problem.

According to the article, "The Full Arsenal to Fight Depression":

Anti-depressants are now taken by tens of millions of Americans ... Last year, 111 million prescriptions were written for SSRIs [those are drugs like Prozac], a 14 percent increase from 2000, according to IMS Health, a research firm. But a recent study found that the medications fail to help one-

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third of people suffering from mild to moderate depression and half with chronic depression. The benefits of prescription drugs aren't as great as we all believed," says Dr. Daniel Kripke, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Diego. Researchers don't understand why the medications, which boost the production of the brain chemical serotonin, aren't effective for everyone.

Biochemical responses are already depressing the depressive's central nervous system. These drugs may alleviate certain pain or suffering temporarily, but in the long term they depress the brain and nervous system even more, making it even harder to solve underlying problems with right responses. So by taking the prescription drugs for their depression, they are making it far worse in the long run.

7. This cause is just a general cause. I will call it "other health factors."

For example, imbalances in hormone production can also cause depressive feelings. This may happen from malfunctioning pituitary, adrenal, thyroid, or other glands. Menstrual, post-partum, or menopause hormone changes sometimes produce negative moods.

Diseases such as diabetes, hypoglycemia, thyroid illness, mononucleosis, infectious hepatitis, a heavy touch of the flu, or other poor health conditions can be responsible for some depressive feelings. Obviously, all depression is not caused directly by spiritual problems, but there are some physical factors. As we have seen there are also physical causes as well. But indirectly there are, if you go back far enough, spiritual problems that are causing this.

For example, just in the way of diet. If a person is abusing their body in the way that they are eating and they become depressed from it, then there is a deeper spiritual problem. The person is not taking care of the body God has given them to take care of.

That is seven physical causes for depression. Let us take a look at the spiritual aspect of depression.

God's church is not immune to discouragement and depression. But when we get depressed we feel guilty and ashamed to talk about it, thinking that spiritual people should never feel depressed. But spiritual depression is a recurrent theme throughout Scripture.

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The Bible is full of examples of servants of God who, in the face of intense trials, got discouraged and depressed. Their situations got them thinking negatively and they were tempted to give up. As I mentioned earlier, even Moses asked that God kill him when he got to such a distraught state

Job, for example, felt that his trial was just too much to bear. He was despondent to the point of wanting to die.

Although these people had their trials, they found the strength to fight and win their battles with depression. We, too, must learn to thwart discouraging and depressing thoughts.

The prophet Elijah, despite his great faith, fell into depression, even after God did great miracles through him.

I Kings 19:1 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done....

You remember from the account that he had raised a widow's son from the dead. And also God had performed the miracle through him where the wheat was to last through the whole drought, the three years.

I Kings 19:1-3also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

Even though Elijah had experienced one astonishing miracle after another, he still was fearful and took off to save his life. That is not necessarily wrong. There are many examples of God's people doing that. But as we will find out later, Elijah was doing it because he was terrified of what Jezebel would do to him.

The last thing we would expect is for Elijah to fall into depression, but he did. He allowed himself to spiral downward into despair to the point of desiring his own death.

I Kings 19:4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die,

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and said, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

His fathers were, of course, those who came before him in the nation of Israel who were so evil. He did not feel any better than any of those who had been so despicable.

Elijah's situation reveals several problems that can bring us down. What were Elijah's four major problems here? Let us take a look at that.

1. He presumed the outcome: Elijah presumed that everyone would repent. Things did not turn out the way he planned.

We can easily relate to that because hardly anything we plan seems to turn out the way we want it to. I am sure everyone has looked forward to something, believing we had everything mapped out, when suddenly things change, and throw all of our plans into the trashcan. We know how disheartening it can be just from experiencing it over and over and over again in our lives. The lesson in this is that we have to guard against unrealistic expectations by remembering that God is sovereign. We must never presume upon His perfect will—because God's will is to be done and not ours. We have to have a proper and realistic viewpoint of that.

2. He focused on the problem itself. In the wilderness, at the widow's house, and on Mount Carmel, Elijah focused on the power and greatness of God during those miracles he could see in an obvious way. But Jezebel's murderous threats consumed him and overwhelmed his faith. In his panic, he focused on the enemy's power to destroy him rather than on the power of God to deliver him. That is not only in the case of us being in danger, of us losing our lives, but in anything we try to accomplish. We have to look at the power of God—what God can do for us—and not in our own or our enemies' power.

3. He focused on himself: Elijah was in the depths of self-pity when he said in verse 4, "...I am no better than my fathers!" Elijah's focus had shifted from God to *his circumstances*, and then from his circumstances to *himself*.

4. He was physically exhausted: Another reason we yield to depression is exhaustion (as I mentioned under the physical problems). By the time Elijah got to Sinai he was weak from fatigue and from all of the activities that had gone on before that. He was very down from that.

These four main problems that affected his reasoning are common to all of us at times

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of stress. Nevertheless, our loving Father recorded a remedy to alleviate Elijah's spiritual depression, so that we, too, can apply it in our lives.

Let us look at four elements of the remedy God provided to Elijah.

1. Get some rest:

I Kings 19:5-6 Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again.

God's plan was simple: rest and refreshment. A tired mind and body can more easily become disoriented, discouraged, and depressed than a refreshed mind and body. In God's wisdom, He saw this in Elijah and gave him the help he needed in that area.

2. Get a new faithful focus on our situation. Elijah believed that he was the only one in Israel who was faithful and spiritual. He felt totally alone—which was an unrealistic view point of what was going on.

I Kings 19:7-10 And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you." So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So he said, "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."

Elijah was in touch with his feelings, but he was not in touch with reality. Things were not as bad as he thought, so God came to give Elijah a strong dose of reality. Later, God told Elijah there were 7,000 others who were faithful. The reality was that Elijah was not alone like he believed.

3. Have new hopeful expectations. Once God had Elijah's attention, he set out to readjust his expectations.

I Kings 19:11-12 Then He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LOORD." And behold, the LOORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LOORD, but the LOORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LOORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LOORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

Elijah had unrealistic expectations—God was not in the wind or the earthquake or in the fire. Instead, God readjusted Elijah's expectations, coming to him as "a still small voice." Elijah learned that God's work is most times an inner work of the heart and mind rather than an overwhelming miracle that is provided. God works with us. In those who have God's Holy Spirit, God works in a very big way to implant His will in us and His character. If we have unrealistic expectations of the outcome of situations and God's power, then it makes it tougher for God to work on our character.

4. Take obedient action. When Elijah was up against the wall, God told him to get up and get moving.

I Kings 19:13-15 So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he said, "I have been very zealous for the LOORD God of hosts; because 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." Then the LOORD said to him: "Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria.

God wanted him to make a choice of godly action based on obedience rather than inaction based on his emotions. Elijah had been working totally on his emotions. It made him inactive, and God was not able to use him until he went through these things to turn him around.

I Kings 19:16-18 "Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Most people believe that life's pressures lead to depression. But, it is how we handle these pressures that leads us either to depression or to victory. Elijah, in this case, allowed his depression to come from life's pressures. He was stressed out by the events and did not focus on God.

Whether or not we suffer from stress depends on how we react to the frustrations of life. If depression creeps in—try following God's general remedy of rest, refocus, right expectations, and obedient actions.

It is interesting that several times God says, "Be still." He tells us that so that He can get our attention. Especially in this society where we go to and fro constantly, we need to be still and refocus.

To conquer discouraging and depressing thoughts, we have to recognize the cause of these thoughts. Negative thoughts ultimately originate with Satan. He capitalizes on the difficult circumstances in our lives and uses these trials and negative situations to generate feelings of dejection.

Satan, who the apostle Paul calls, "the prince of the power of the air" in Ephesians 2:2, can also broadcast negative feelings and moods into our minds even when there is no circumstance or apparent reason for us to be feeling down. Many times these thoughts appear in a subtle way (As I mentioned earlier, when we are driving down the highway).

For example, we start thinking about all the things we do not have, but would like to have, but we do not have the money to buy them. Or, our personality or health is not as dynamic as that of some of our friends'. Or, that we get lonely sometimes. We let these things fill our minds and before we realize it we become depressed without even knowing why.

The way to protect ourselves from this kind of attack is to be constantly aware of the source of such discouraging thoughts and to guard against them. And when they do start to grip us, to seek the counteracting help of God. That may seem like an obvious statement, but why do not we do it more often?

James 4:7-10 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

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Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

We see there several solutions: asking God to lift us up, and the state of mind that we have to be in, a humble mind. We have to have faith that God will help us in times of discouragement. This involves drawing on the power of God's Holy Spirit—the mind, attitude, and nature of God Himself. We have that power available to us.

We have to admit that we usually get depressed when we are not as close to God as we should be. It is much easier for negative moods to overtake us when God is not the center of our lives. Again, these are very obvious statements, but we can easily forget them when we are discouraged or depressed.

The solution, of course, is to be in close intimate contact with God continually, especially at times when we feel a mood of discouragement or depression coming on. The nearer we are to God, the easier it is for Him to help develop His mind in us.

What can we do specifically to do our part in combating discouragement and depression?

Let us take a look at seven ways to *prevent* discouragement and depression. They are all very important ways, and any one will help in discouragement. But all of them are excellent solutions.

1. *Focus on your awesome Creator.* Again, a very obvious statement, but it must be first in our minds. In God's own words: "You shall have no other gods before me." Meditate on His great power and mercy. Think about what God has done in the past and what He is doing now to bring about His great plan of salvation for us. When we put our problems in perspective with God's plan, the troubles and trials of life shrink to insignificance.

God has promised the help of His Holy Spirit and His everlasting love.

Romans 8:26-39 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the

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firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is hardly a more encouraging set of Scriptures in the entire Bible. We have that guarantee. I have to ask myself, after reading that, how in the world can I be discouraged and depressed. But the human that I am, it is possible many times over.

Verse 28 does not mean the situation itself is good. It does not mean that it is good when our husband or wife dies. It does not mean that it is good when we lose our jobs.

It means that any situation can work for good if we meet the challenge properly and let God guide us. If we put our lives in God's hands the end result will always be good. There is no doubt there—that it will always be good. There is never a time where what God decides and does has a negative end result.

2. *Remember the spiritual goal.* Another obvious statement that we tend to forget. The long-range goal of every Christian is the resurrection from the dead and our short range goal is to become more like Christ—overcoming Satan, the world, and human nature. We must get our minds off the physical and onto the spiritual; that is, off ourselves and onto God.

Colossians 3:1-2 If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

There is a command that we should follow. God does want us to enjoy life, but not at the expense of our eternal life. We are in training now for a glorious spirit life. God has already chosen us and set us apart for His own purpose in His Kingdom. This is why Christ commands us in Matthew 6:33,

Matthew 6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [i.e., food, drink, clothing, and our protection—the necessities of life] shall be added to you.

3. *Pray and study God's written Word every last single day.* Prayer is conversation and interaction with God. It is a major part of our intimate relationship with Him. Without it, our attitudes are easily battered by the world around us. So we have to pray and study God's written Word every day.

We can overcome the world and its moods by using the stabilizing, strengthening tool of prayer several times every day.

Philippians 4:6-7 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

There we have another guarantee. If we come to God with the right attitude and a humble attitude in prayer and supplication, He will guard our mind and hearts and He will grant us peace of mind that we do not have when we are discouraged and depressed. Paul encourages us in Philippians 3:13 to forget our past guilt for those sins and mistakes we previously made and have repented of, and reach for future spiritual goals and godly character, and to dwell on the things that are positive in our lives, areas that we want to work on, rather than areas that we have already repented of and have made mistakes in.

The Bible contains many encouraging and inspiring examples of faith of people who faced virtually insurmountable odds and yet overcame with God's help, but they quite often had to ask for it in prayer. The Bible shows us the greatness of God and the vastness of the master plan He has lovingly designed for the whole universe, especially for His people. It illustrates His mercy, compassion, and loving-kindness for His creation. It shows God promises to provide all our needs and doesn't want us to be discouraged. He is happy for us to get over it.

The more we read His written Word, the more we take on the mind of God. It is God speaking to us. This is why daily Bible study is essential. We need to make the Bible the basis of our behavior and the basis of the sound-minded, uplifting thoughts that dispel discouragement.

Romans 15:4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

If we are being led by God, we will be moved to seek Him. The more effectively we can develop the habit of responding immediately to the influence of God's Spirit, the more quickly our minds will take on God's thoughts, replacing thoughts of discouragement and depression.

4. *Be patient with yourself, with others, and with God.* It takes time for human beings to overcome obstacles and problems. We get discouraged from struggling to overcome faults and sins. But, we have not failed until we quit trying. Every failure is only a lesson that helps us know better how to try the next time. Growth takes time and effort. It takes time and effort for others in God's church. It takes time and effort for us individually. We have to give God time to work out His plan in us.

We, especially, must have patience to give God time to work out His purpose in our lives as we will see here in Psalm 31.

Psalm 31:22-24 For I said in my haste, "I am cut off from before Your eyes"; nevertheless You heard the voice of my supplications when I cried out to You. Oh, love the LOORD, all you His saints! For the LOORD preserves the faithful, and fully repays the proud person. Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all you who hope in the LOORD.

God is much greater in patience and understanding than we are. If God judged as harshly as we sometimes judge, we would have good reason to be discouraged. But God does not judge that way. He judges fairly, with infinite wisdom and mercy.

5. *Be content, thankful, and generous.* If we are not content and thankful for the blessings we have, why should God give us additional help and blessings?

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The apostle Paul says in I Timothy 6:6, "contentment is great gain."

And, David tells us in Psalm 92:1, "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, and to sing praises to His name."

And, the author of Hebrews 10:24 advises us to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works." We should consider one another to stir up love and good works.

It takes the love of God flowing through us to make a personal sacrifice of time, money, or energy—with no strings attached—without expecting anything in return. But when we serve with this attitude, God's Holy Spirit gives us peace and satisfaction. There are many, many different types of benefits that come from serving. If we plant goodness, we will harvest happiness and peace.

Galatians 6:7-10 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

We should not grow weary while doing good and we should not to lose heart.

An excellent way to overcome feeling sorry for oneself is by being generous. We should especially look for ways to help others when we develop an unhealthy preoccupation with ourselves.

Maybe it is a matter of visiting those who are sick or cheering up someone who is feeling down. It might be a matter of writing a letter of encouragement, or calling someone up who is alone, or serving a widow. There are many ways to get our minds off ourselves and do good to others.

It is a matter of giving happiness to others. Giving is a natural, unbreakable law that produces happiness for the giver. The key is to get our minds off ourselves.

6. *Be positive and active, making each day count.* Many times we fail to solve our problems and needs because we lack a positive attitude and diligent effort. Our human nature likes to dwell on the negative when things aren't going all that well.

This negative attitude manifests itself as feeling sorry for ourselves or we begin to feel trapped. But by taking a positive approach to life we overwhelm those negative thoughts and find solutions with positive truth and knowledge.

II Corinthians 5:9-10 Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Every day is an opportunity to grow in character, serve God and brethren, and produce good spiritual fruit. Life should not be viewed as something we have to endure but an opportunity to do good in God's way of life.

Every day we have an opportunity to make an impact, whether on the job, at home, with our families, with our friends, or elsewhere. Don't mope—accomplish something worthwhile every day in your life!

7. *Be faithful and obedient to God no matter what happens.* God did not design a Christian's life to be an easy one. Everyone whom God calls can expect difficulties. Sometimes these difficulties and problems seem to get the better of us. We have all been through that. When this happens, we must, in spite of how bad things may seem, hold on to God and His way of life and not let go, even until death, if it reaches that point.

In spite of his many hardships, the apostle Paul relied on God and did not allow himself to get depressed. Look what he told the Corinthians:

II Corinthians 4:8-18 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—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. And since we have the same Spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our

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outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Notice in verse 17, it is "light affliction." If we put these situations that come up in our life that discourage us in the right reality of them being "light afflictions," then we can more easily tackle them and overcome the problems of discouragement and depression.

Paul had many reasons to get discouraged. His letters and the book of Acts record many of his unpleasant predicaments. Yet he did not let adverse circumstances depress him!

Philippians 4:10-13 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

We receive some encouragement through the example of perseverance set by the apostles during their lives. But most of our comfort comes through Jesus Christ who is our true source of encouragement! Because we share in Christ's sufferings we also share in the comfort that God provides that helps us endure such suffering and avoid discouragement and depression.

II Corinthians 1:5-7 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.

Paul knew that to share Christ's sufferings always involved God's consolation through that suffering. He hoped this would give the Corinthians the boost they needed to be

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triumphant in their time of trial.

Whenever Jesus Christ's sufferings are multiplied in us, so also is His comfort multiplied in us. The greater we suffer for Christ, the greater the comfort we receive from Christ, and the greater our ability to share suffering and consolation with others in God's church.

II Thessalonians 2:16-17 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.