

Session 2

DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

Psalm 23:4; 1 Kings 19:1-18

Memory Verse

*Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.*

– PSALM 23:4, CSB




Dealing with Depression

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God's presence and care sustains the believer even in the most difficult of life's seasons.

The need for addressing depression from a biblical perspective has increased dramatically in recent years, which reflects culture as a whole. The unique factor of dealing with depression as a believer, however, is the faith element. The reason Christ-followers struggle in addressing depression can have a lot to do with faulty expectations of being freed from such things due to one's Christian faith. In reality, however, the Christian experience of depression can have many different contributors and causes. Acknowledging that it is frequently called by different names (desert season, dark night of the soul, depression, spiritually dry, etc.), people can look historically at how it has been addressed in the life of the church. Doing so points to the fact that seasons in the darkest valley, as David referred to it in Psalm 23, have been common experiences among people, even since the beginning.

The most encouraging thing we learn from this study is that believers can know when dealing with depression is that God is present in it and using it for His purposes in the believer's life. In combing the pages of Scripture, the reader finds numerous examples of those God used in the midst of depressive, valley seasons. Therefore, in continuing through Psalm 23, this week will also focus on the prophetic ministry of Elijah as a case-in-point of what David explained about God's faithfulness in the valley.

 Coming into the lesson this week, what is your perception of depression in a person's life? On what is that perception primarily based?

 What was your response the first time you encountered a valley season? How did it change you?

 Who in your life has demonstrated the most courage and spiritual fortitude in dealing with difficult seasons?

Session Summary

In this week's session, David not only acknowledged the likelihood of dark valleys as part of the believer's experience in following God, but also gave hope by demonstrating how God ministers to His people in those valleys. Because addressing matters like depression is aided by actual examples, the Old Testament example of Elijah also gives a practical example of what Psalm 23:4 looks like in action.

1. Valleys are Part of Life, Even if Following God (Psalm 23:4a; 1 Kings 19:1-4, 10)

There persists a dangerously misleading sentiment in Western Christendom that once one becomes a follower of Christ nothing bad will happen to them again. The expression of such sentiment typically takes on a more eloquent form, but that is the heart of it. This unbiblical theology can wreak havoc with believers when periods of difficulty do come.

The writers of Scripture frequently revealed their struggles with life's hardships in the midst of following God's calling on their lives. Their writings are a gift to future generations for many reasons, but for the purpose at hand we see how their writings demonstrated the ways God worked in the middle of those desert seasons. There was no question that hardship would come. In fact, many mentioned hardship when God called them to their appointed task. David made this clear in Psalm 23:4 with the total lack of any sense of contingency with regard to the darkest valleys. "Even when I go..." did not indicate merely the possibility of a dark valley; it affirmed the reality of dark valleys. That understanding was formational to David's perception of what it meant to follow God.

The valleys that David referred to were an allusion to the treacherous terrain of Judah. According to Allen Ross, the hill country was “broken up by narrow and precipitous ravines, or wadis, difficult to descend and ascend, dark, gloomy, and abounding in caves, the abode of wild beasts, and robbers.”¹ The valleys David envisioned were everywhere in the hill country, making traveling through one an inevitable experience – especially for a shepherd chasing sheep.

? What biblical examples can you think of that would thwart the notion that only good things will occur when one follows God faithfully? Why is it important to let those examples have tremendous influence on one’s personal theology?

? Why do you think it is so difficult for believers to discuss seasons of depression and hardship?

? Application: Make a timeline of the difficult times in your life. Make particular note of how those seasons shaped your view of God? Who were the most helpful people to you during that season? What role did God play in this season?

In looking at the life of Elijah, his most notable season of difficulty involved telltale signs of depression. Interestingly, that season came on the heels of one of the greatest victories of God. God had just defeated the prophets of Ba’al in a showdown on Mount Carmel through Elijah’s prophetic ministry. However, on the heels of that, the evil Jezebel vowed on her life to kill Elijah. Scripture records that “Elijah became afraid and immediately ran for his life.” (1 Kings 19:3) Elijah was so distraught and hopeless that he prayed that God would take his life! He had just witnessed an

incredible demonstration of God’s power and deliverance, but was quickly in the valley, so to speak. In verse 10, Elijah bemoaned that he was all alone and his life was being hunted. Elijah was faithfully executing the task that God had given him, but because it confronted the evil powers that be, Elijah was isolated and became depressed.

The verses that describe Elijah’s hopelessness depict a man that was demoralized, physically drained, pushed to the point of exhaustion, and under immense stress. Following God meant, at the same time, rejecting the ruling authority in Israel. A valley was coming, and Elijah didn’t see it until he was in it.

2. God’s Presence Never Wavers in the Valley (Psalm 23:4b; 1 Kings 19:5, 11-13)

The great news for Elijah, which David so wonderfully explained, was that God’s presence never left. David wrote that he feared no danger because the Lord was with him. Notice that David did not say that he feared no danger because he knew it was all in his head. Nor did David say that he feared no danger because he could immediately see a way out. David was very much aware of the reality of the danger inherent in the valleys. In addition, because of the maze-like structure of the caves and crags in those valleys, finding a way out was difficult and not always apparent.

David’s ability to ward off the encroachment of fear was not based on his own ability or might, but on the character of God in faithfully fulfilling His covenant. God’s unending presence with His people is one of the great themes of the Bible. From the shepherd’s perspective of being in the field alone, in charge of sheep, with danger all around, the deep reservoir of faith to trust in God’s presence for protection and deliverance was critical.



Fear is such a prominent experience in our culture. How do you remain mindful of God’s presence even when reason for fear presses in?



Application: What spiritual practices can believers build into their lives to elevate their sense of God’s covenant presence with them? How could you employ those practices on a regular basis?

If ever there was a man in need of the reminding of God’s presence, surely it was Elijah. His instrumentality in the defeating and slaughtering of the prophets of Ba’al could not be questioned; all who were present witnessed it. His legacy of being a divinely-sent thorn in the side of the evil Ahab and Jezebel was also well-documented. The danger of his life being taken was extremely real, as Ahab and Jezebel had killed before without mercy or even particularly good reason for doing so. What was more, Elijah’s own strength was gone. He was exhausted, depleted of nourishment, and lacking in company or support as he fled.


As he hid under a broom tree in the middle of nowhere and prayed to die, he fell into a deep sleep. Scripture records that an angel from the LORD awakened him twice to tell him to get up and eat. God had provided safety for rest and much-needed sustenance for Elijah. After his second meal, God sustained him for his forty-day travel to Horeb (also called the Mountain of God and Mount Sinai). As if the angelic emissary weren’t enough, God then spoke directly to Elijah, asking him repeatedly why he was there. Elijah complained of his plight and his sense of isolation. While he complained, his complaints were not an exaggeration. It was bad...from an earthly perspective.


1 Kings 19:11 records one of the most compassionate and beautiful interactions between God and His servant in the whole Old Testament. God commanded Elijah to go out of the cave he’d been sleeping in to stand in the LORD’s presence. “At that moment, the LORD passed by.” Bible studies generally spend a lot of ink on the mighty wind, followed by the earthquake, followed by the great fire, and finally a small whisper. The most significant part of the text, though, was that God passed by! He reminded Elijah of His presence. Elijah was not alone; he could never be alone. God’s presence with His people never wavers.

3. God Acts on Behalf of the Valley Traveler (Psalm 23:4c; 1 Kings 19:15-18)

The action of God on behalf of David, and representatively all of His people, fell into two categories in David's psalm. First, the rod was a tool for battle and, as such, was directed at the threat. If the threat were of earthly nature and pertained to David's historical situation, perhaps it was the defeat of the lion or bear that came to attack David and his flock. In a more lofty, eternal perspective, the rod would be God's might to defeat the cause and danger of whatever valley His people were in.

Second, the staff was for support and guidance. Typically crooked in shape, the staff would be used to pull sheep out of danger in the numerous crevices and caves located in the craggy valleys. It was also used to bump sheep to keep them going in the right direction as the shepherd navigated the dangerous trek through the valley. The sheep were never left to their own devices, but were constantly protected and guided toward safety.

 How does the comfort David explained offer help and support during depression? What fears or challenges does it address?

 Application: What are some ways that you can identify that God is leading you right now? Where might He be using His staff to rescue and deliver you?

Once again, Elijah's journey gives a great example of God intervening and acting on his behalf. God did not just reassure Elijah of His presence and offer him rest. God communicated a plan for next steps for Elijah. He offered Elijah a glimpse into the way in which He would meet Elijah's felt needs in such a way that gave him life. Specifically, God gave Elijah a job that would render successors for two kings and, most importantly, for himself. With tremendous specificity, God told Elijah to go and find Elisha and anoint him as his successor. Additionally, God revealed that it was not just the two of them that would be His servants, but another 7,000 faithful ones would be left in Israel. Elijah was not alone and would no longer be isolated. God was still at work in, through, and on behalf of Elijah.

Conclusion

Reading Psalm 23 offers tremendous hope to those who find themselves in the darkest of valleys. If you are a Christian, here are some important things to consider with regard to dealing with depression:

First, if you are a Christian, dealing with depression does not mean that you have failed spiritually. This is perhaps one of the most dangerous and widespread misunderstandings about depression. As seen in the life of Elijah, sometimes depression can come about in a person's life even after a season of tremendous spiritual victory. For many people, dealing with depression is made more difficult due to the addition of misplaced guilt over a perceived spiritual failure that led to such a valley.

Second, valleys will come, so it behooves a person to seek God and invest mightily in spiritual growth now. Particularly in seasons when depression is not a pressing issue, practicing spiritual disciplines, spending regular time in God's Word, and living the Christian life in biblical community are critical for growth. Doing so fortifies the believer and emboldens his or her faith. These regular practices do not ensure that valleys will no longer come, but they do prepare you to approach the next valley with more robust faith and a willingness to be led by the Lord.

Third, depression thrives in isolation, so dealing with depression demands that you participate regularly in biblical community. That's not the same as just attending a class or doing some social things. Biblical community involves having other believers that know one another and can discuss the struggle of being in a valley with transparency and support. Granted, community of that maturity takes time to develop, which is why now is the time to start. Sometimes the groups needed are groups that specialize in dealing with depression, loss, or grief. Contact the church office for info on these groups @ 615.324.6100.

Fourth, find Scriptural models that have dealt with similar valleys. Learning how God dealt with them and seeing how they struggled through can offer great insight and support. It also helps alleviate the lie that a person is the only one to ever feel this way—especially since those who experienced depression in the Bible were used mightily by God and are preserved forever on the pages of Scripture. The examples in the Bible underscore that God's presence never leaves and that He is always working, even when those figures were not aware of His actions.

? What has your experience been with depression? Have you ever dealt with it personally? Have you walked with a friend or loved one through seasons of depression? What has it taught you?

? Which of the three points from Psalm 23:4 resonate with you most deeply? Why? How does it change the way you're approaching the week ahead?

? What does God's compassionate interaction with Elijah tell you about the manner in which He deals with you? How does it help to understand God never changes and never leaves?

CHRIST CONNECTION: Jesus was the ultimate example of how God works in the valley. In facing down death and hell, God the Father raised Him from the grave, providing eternal victory.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Understanding the depths of anguish Christ endured to provide salvation, believers are equipped to not only deal with their own seasons of depression, but also offer hope to others in the midst of their dark valleys.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Loneliness

Main Passages

- Psalm 23:5-6

Session Outline

1. God's Abiding Presence, Even in Danger (Psalm 23:5a)
2. God's Presence Soothes and Heals (Psalm 23:5b)
3. Life Lived in God's Constant Presence (Psalm 23:6)

Memorize

*Even when I go through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.*

- Psalm 23:4, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Psalm 34:17-18
- Tuesday - Matthew 11:28-30
- Wednesday - Psalm 143:7-8
- Thursday - Psalm 30:11-12
- Friday - Isaiah 40:27-31
- Saturday - Revelation 21:1-4

References

¹Ross, Allen P. *A Commentary on the Psalms, vol. 1 (1-41)*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011.