



# Dealing with Depression

## Summary and Goal

David wrote that the dark valley is part of our human journey. No matter our experience, our comfort is knowing that God offers His presence.

### **Main Passages**

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

### **Session Outline**

1. Valleys are Part of Life, Even if Following God (Psalm 23:4a; 1 Kings 19:1-4, 10)
2. God's Presence Never Wavers in the Valley (Psalm 23:4b; 1 Kings 19:5, 11-13)
3. God Acts on Behalf of the Valley Traveler (Psalm 23:4c; 1 Kings 19:15-18)

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### **Theological Theme**

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

### **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.

# Historical Context of the Psalms

## Purpose

There are myriad messages scattered through the 150 psalms, but overall, this record of the responses of God's people in worship and prayer serves the purpose of teaching us how to relate to God in various circumstances of life. The psalms also demonstrate God's sovereignty and goodness for his people in order to instill confidence in those who trust in him.

## Author

Since the book is a collection of many different psalms written over a long time, there is not just one author for this collection. By far the most common designation in the titles is "Of David," which may refer to David as the author of those psalms. David's role as a musician in Saul's court (1Sm 16:14-23) as well as his many experiences as a shepherd, a soldier, and a king make him a likely candidate for writing many of these psalms.

## Setting

The book of Psalms consists of many different hymns and prayers composed by individuals but used by the community. If one were to take the names in the titles as authors, the date of composition ranges from the time of Moses (fifteenth century BC) to a time following the exile (sixth century BC or later). Some of the titles do contain historical information that might indicate the setting of the composition, although even this (like the authorship) is ambiguous. They might not refer to the date of composition but to the setting of its contents, being composed some time after the events had taken place. This is a more likely scenario since some of these psalms describe life-threatening situations, where composing a psalm in the heat of the moment would not have been a top priority. In many cases, these psalms include thanksgiving sections as well, showing that they were written after God had answered the prayers.

## Special Features

The word for psalms in Hebrew is Tehilim, which means "praise." The English title is derived from the Greek translation (LXX) Psalmoi, which means "Songs of Praise." Praise directed to the Lord, the God of Israel, is certainly the primary emphasis in the Psalms. Some have referred to the Psalms as Israel's hymnbook, which is partially true but overall is insufficient to account for all that is in the Psalms. More than one-third of the collection is made up of prayers to God. Therefore, it contains both hymns and prayers that were used in the context of Israel's worship.

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## Session Plan

# Dealing with Depression

### ? For Further Discussion

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

### Introduction

*Before your group time, show this video: <https://vimeo.com/364392105>*

- ? Coming into the lesson this week, what is your perception of depression in the believer's life? On what is that perception primarily based?
- ? What was your response the first time you encountered a valley season in your walk with Christ? How did it change you?

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)

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.

- ? 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 history of following Christ. Make particular note of how those seasons shaped your view of God? Who were the most helpful people to you during that season?

## 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.

- ? 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 do you employ those practices on a regular basis?

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

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.

- ? 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?

## Conclusion

- ? 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?

### ? For Further Discussion

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?



## Expanded Session Content




# Dealing with Depression

### Introduction

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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."<sup>2</sup> 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?

#### The Darkest Valley

Tremper Longman notes that the more familiar rendering of verse 4, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," was translated on the assumed splitting of a single Hebrew word "salmawet." In its original form, the word meant "the darkest valley." However, dividing the word in two ("sal mawet") can be translated "shadow of death."<sup>1</sup>

-  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.



## Rod and Staff

The word for “rod” was derivative of a Hebrew verb that meant “to smite or slay.” The origin of the word for “staff” was from a verb that meant “to lean or support.” The nature of the tools addressed both the vanquishing of foes and the protection of the flock.

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?

## Prayer of Response

*Close in prayer, thanking God that He does not leave us alone in our depression but is present with us and acting on our behalf.*

## Additional Resources

- *Spurgeon's Sorrows* by Zack Eswine
- *When the Darkness Will Not Lift* by John Piper
- *Christians Get Depressed Too* by David Murray

## For Next Week

### Session Title

- 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

### 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

## Extended Commentary

### Psalm 23:4

23:4a-b. Taking this image a step further, David portrayed the shepherd as being able to protect his sheep in their moments of greatest danger. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, David stated, I will fear no evil, for you are with me . The shepherd would lead his flock from one grazing place to another, a move which would often involve passing through a narrow valley between high jagged cliffs, often filled with potential dangers such as wild animals. The sun would be obstructed from shining into the valley, creating darkness or a shadow. Such a shadow in the valley would often become a place of death for wandering sheep, hence a “shadow of death.”

Yet even in such danger, the Lord was present to guard and guide his flock, dispelling all fear of evil as he led them into paths of righteousness (v. 3).

23:4c. Keeping with this shepherd imagery, David declared, Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The shepherd’s rod was usually an oak club about two feet long. It was used to defend the flock against wild animals such as lions or bears, as well as for counting, guiding, and protecting his sheep. And the shepherd’s staff was his crook. Bent or hooked at one end, it was used to pry sheep loose from thickets, to push branches aside, to pull fallen sheep out of holes, to lead them along narrow paths, and to drive off snakes.

Such tools were sources of comfort for fearful sheep and for David. He lived his life often surrounded by multiple dangers, yet God’s Word and loving hand were the most effective means of guiding and guarding his faithful servant David.<sup>3</sup>

### 1 Kings 19:1-18

19:1-21 This chapter presents facts that argue for the truth of both chaps. 18 and 19. The preceding chapter was one of the best examples of a power encounter in the Bible, but chap. 19 demonstrates that God’s miraculous works did not bring about repentance, at least not on a scale broad enough to mention. Understandably, Elijah collapsed into an almost hysterical pessimism about what he took to be the failure of God’s purposes. The clear lesson is that while power witness is both biblical and effective, sinful people can still reject the greatest of God’s signs (Lk 16:31). So too, faithful disciples are wrong to suppose that they are all alone or that God’s purposes have truly failed.

19:1-2 Jezebel's rejection of God's signs and the determined, defiant way in which she later faced death (2Kg 9:30-31) demonstrate her character as a person who did what she wanted, no matter the consequences. Sin breeds this self-destructive heedlessness.

19:3 Elijah's faith may have crumbled due to physical and emotional exhaustion. Although his future still included several tasks, it may be significant that his next task was to choose his successor. Beer-sheba, about a hundred miles south of Mount Carmel, served as a traditional southern boundary for Israelite territory (Jdg 20:1; 2Sm 24:2).

19:4 A day's journey would have taken Elijah out of Judean territory and into deeper desert. The broom tree under which the prophet sat provided shade, and its roots could be used for heat and food. Elijah was in deep depression.

19:5-8 God's miraculous provision was resumed, this time purely for the prophet. After Elijah ate and rested, he returned to the place where the covenant had been given, Mount Horeb, or Sinai. There Elijah would have his personal faith renewed by God's presence.

19:9-10 Elijah explained his presence at Sinai by referring to his discouragement. Israel's immediate future, as hindsight shows, gave good reason for despair. Judah was to have one more period of God-given prosperity under the four good kings from Joash to Jotham, but during that time, Israel was to be deported to Assyria.

19:11-13 God first reveals his presence to Elijah in his greatness and power, but he did not speak from that position. The Lord instead spoke to Elijah in a soft whisper, showing himself to be a God who communicates via a still, small voice as well as powerful displays. His power is especially present in his word.

19:14 Elijah is given a second audience with God to make his case against Israel.

19:15-16 God's commands first pointed to judgment. Elijah was to anoint Hazael as king over Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor. God was still controlling events.

19:17 This command indicated the extent of God's judgment—death at the hands of Hazael, at the hands of Jehu, and even at the hands of Elisha through his pronouncements of judgment.

19:18 The second part of God's response gave hope. God still had seven thousand people through whom he could work in the future.<sup>4</sup>

## References

1. Longman, Tremper III. *Psalms*. TOTC, vol. 15-16. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014.
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3. Lawson, Steven J., and Max Anders. *Psalms 1-75*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003.
4. *CSB Study Bible: Christian Standard Bible*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017.