

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 13

Is it a Sin to be Depressed?

Proverbs 12:25 (NKJV)

April 2, 2017

Communion: Robert Domingos

Care Calling: The Saunders'

Host: Genevieve Williams

Saturday 3/25 Clean Up: The Decker's

- 1 ♪ **How Majestic [DH 2238]**
- 2 ♪ His Eye is On the Sparrow [ALL] 624
- 3 ♪ O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing [v. 1, 2] 21
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Proverbs 12:25 (NKJV)

25 Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, But a good word makes it glad.

Who said:

"I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would be not one cheerful face on earth. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I regretfully foretell I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die, or be better it appears to me."

- a) Harry Truman
- b) Richard Nixon

c) Abraham Lincoln

In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Sainte Exupéry wrote, "It is such a secret place, the land of tears."

Depression is personal and private.
And yet, it affects all who are in your circle of love.

Across the industrialized modern world, clinical depression has reached epidemic proportions, despite a staggering increase in the use of antidepressant medication.

In fact, depression is now the single leading cause of work-related disability for adults under 50.

Sister Latona and I are sharing the sermon time this morning, because the subject matter is of such pressing importance. Sister Latona has shared with us the psychological view of depression.

I hope you will engage her in conversation, and ask those deep questions that are stored up in your **"secret place, the land of tears."**

What Does the Bible Say About Depression?

In a few translations of the Bible, the translators used the word "depression."

However, there is a rich list of synonyms in the Bible, including such words as

"downcast"

"brokenhearted"

"troubled"

"miserable"

"despairing"

"mourn"

Throughout the Bible, there are a number of stories about godly, influential men and women of faith, who struggled and battled through dark times of hopelessness and depression.

Many of us may find ourselves struggling there today.
But we don't have to stay stuck there.
There's hope.

I. Is It a Sin to be Depressed?

A. There are those who answer strongly YES.

Dr. Jay Adams in the 1960's was Professor of Pastoral Counseling at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Even though he had his doctorate in Psychology from the prestigious John Hopkins University, he became increasingly against any form of counseling that he deemed not biblical.

In 1970, he released his book *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*.

As Dr. Jay Adams points out in his introduction, "I have been engrossed in the project of developing biblical counseling and have uncovered what I consider to be a number of important scriptural principles."

He called his new approach to counseling "Nouthetic Counseling."

He based his approach on

Colossians 1:28 (NASB)

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Circle admonishing

That word in Greek is *noutheteō*.

Paul uses the word in

Romans 15:14 (NASB)

14 And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another.

noutheteō is primarily used by Paul in the New Testament, and is translated into English as “**admonish**,” “**correct**,” or “**instruct**.”

Dr. Adams began teaching and promoting his concepts in his 1970 book *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*.

It was, and is, his contention that the counselee’s ultimate and all-pervading problem is not mental illness but sin.

He believes that the secular methods of counselors, psychiatrists and mental institutions are in fierce competition with a biblical approach to counseling, because, as he states it, they seek to remove guilt from the counselee by “misclassifying” sin problems. He says that man's basic problem is sin and that the job of the counselor is to point out to the counselee the nature of his sin and then admonish him to confess it and ask God to heal him.

His aggressive promoting of Nouthetic Counseling has permeated the evangelical world.

And Nouthetic Counselors say

"Thus, the first place one is to look when one is depressed is to see if there is some unconfessed sin. Perhaps there is someone he has not forgiven. Perhaps there is some action that he has not taken responsibility for and confessed to God."

There are a huge, and growing, number of conservative churches that now declare that depression is sin.

You might be interested to know that the Southern Baptist have made this their counseling doctrine, and all of their Seminaries have thrown out any form of teaching on psychology that does not make sin the basis of all the counselee’s ultimate and all-pervading problems.

I believe that counseling is more than identifying and confronting sin.

Dr. Adam's narrow approach simply does not do justice to the full range of human problems and situations the way scripture does.

However, it is true that sin can cause depression.

David says

Psalm 38:4 (NIV)

⁴ My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.

But, it is erroneous to say that all depression is caused by sin.

So, Is It a Sin to be Depressed?

There are those who answer strongly YES.

Is It a Sin to be Depressed?

B. There are those who answer strongly NO.

And, these conservative Christians base their reasoning solidly on the Bible.

Let's see how even the Disciples could misunderstand God's grace.

John 9:1-3 (NASB)

¹ As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "It was neither *that* this man sinned, nor his parents;

The disciples ask, "**Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents...?"**

They assume that the blindness is much more than a physical disability.

For them it is a curse of God caused by sin.

The only question is whether this was a personal sin or an ancestral sin.

It is incorrect to conclude that each and every instance of physical ailment or disability is the direct result of sin.

We know from our own experience that sinful lifestyle choices may lead to disease (e.g., AIDS contracted through sexually immoral behavior), but that certainly not all disease may be traced to sinful behavior (e.g., AIDS contracted through blood transfusion).

We all suffer because of our own sins, and because of the general sinfulness of our culture, but this does not mean that degree of disability or illness is a measure of a person's moral failure.

To hold such a view is a way to justify a lack of mercy and compassion to those who are suffering, since it assumes they suffer justly because of God's punishment for sin.

Would you not agree with Paul

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NASB)

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Well, the Bible gives us a number of examples of God's people being depressed.

And, I believe that God gives us these examples so we **may be adequate, equipped for every good work.**

Moses was depressed.

In his feelings of anger and betrayal from his own people, Moses, as a leader, was about ready to quit.

He came down from his mountaintop experience with God, commandments in hand, only to find the Israelites in complete chaos and sin.

His heart-cry to God on their behalf was desperate:

Exodus 32:32 (NASB)

32 "But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"

Job was depressed.

He lost everything, then cursed the day he was born:

Job 3:11 (NASB)

11 "Why did I not die at birth, Come forth from the womb and expire?"

And, his wife gets in on the action

Job 2:9 (NASB)

9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!"

Hannah was depressed.

She was the number one wife in a polygamous marriage.

And Hannah couldn't have children, and her rival provoked her to grief saying God had made her infertile.

1 Samuel 1:8 (NASB)

8 Then Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"

Elijah was depressed.

We are going to look more in depth at Elijah, but we can see that he was depressed when he said:

1 Kings 19:4 (NASB)

4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers."

David was depressed.

David was troubled and battled deep despair.

In many of the Psalms, he writes of his anguish, loneliness, fear of the enemy, his heart-cry over sin, and the guilt he struggled with because of it.

Psalm 6:6-7 (NASB)

6 I am weary with my sighing; Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears. 7 My eye has wasted away with grief;

Jeremiah was depressed.

Jeremiah wrestled with great loneliness, feelings of defeat, and insecurity.

Known as the weeping prophet, Jeremiah suffered from constant rejection by the people he loved and reached out to.

God had called him to preach, yet forbidden him to marry and have children.

He lived alone, he ministered alone, he was poor, ridiculed, and rejected by his people.

In the midst of it, he displayed great spiritual faith and strength, and yet we also see his honesty as he wrestled with despair and a great sense of failure:

Jeremiah 20:14, 18 (NASB)

14 Cursed be the day when I was born; Let the day not be blessed when my mother bore me! ... 18 Why did I ever come forth from the womb To look on trouble and sorrow, So that my days have been spent in shame?

Paul was depressed.

Whenever characters express rejection, loneliness, self-pity, hopelessness, overwhelming grief, and wish they had not been born, it seems they are expressing more than temporary sadness but classic symptoms of major depression.

Paul had classic symptoms:

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 (NASB)

8 For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our

affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹ indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;

2 Corinthians 7:5-6 (NASB)

⁵ For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. ⁶ But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus;

Jesus was depressed.

Even Jesus Himself was deeply anguished over what lay before Him.

He knew what was to come.

He knew that God had called him to a journey of great suffering, he knew what must happen in order for us to live truly free.

Our Savior and Lord was willing to pay the price on our behalf, but it wasn't an easy road.

Isaiah prophesied that Christ would be "

Isaiah 53:3 (NASB)

³ He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

We can be assured, that in whatever we face, Jesus understands our weakness and suffering, our greatest times of temptation and despair, because he too traveled that road, yet without sin.

In the garden, through the night, Jesus prayed, all alone, calling out to His Father, asking Him for another way:

Mark 14:34-36 (NASB)

³⁴ And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved to the

point of death; remain here and keep watch." ³⁵ And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell to the ground and *began* to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. ³⁶ And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will."

The Bible says
Luke 22:44 (NASB)

44 And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.

Finally, perhaps the most poignant verse in the whole Bible is also the shortest, and once and for all demolishes the idea that Jesus doesn't understand your deep emotion:

John 11:35 (NASB)

35 Jesus wept.

God gives us 8 examples of real people who suffered depression. Now, are you prepared to say Jesus sinned?

**What is the commonality of all these 8 examples?
God was with them.**

Psalms 34:18 (NASB)

18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit.

He was there in the good days and in the dark days too.
He didn't condemn them for their questions and pain.
He didn't tell them to just tough it out.
He reached down to their deepest pit of suffering, and lifted them out.
He cared.
He showed compassion.

He offered mercy.
He brought hope.
He instilled purpose.
He gave victory.
And He still works in the same way today.

Our world desperately need joy-givers, hope-bringers, those in our lives who will help us remember what real grace is and where lasting help is found.

The greatest truth is this, we have a Savior who understands our pain, who knows about every weakness and hurt, and reaches out with compassion and hope.

He is Healer. Redeemer. Restorer. And friend.

He will never waste the seasons of suffering we face, but will use it, in some way, to bring good, to instill purpose, to help others, and to make us stronger.

Don't feel the need to try to hide your pain, or struggle through on your own.

Talk to a friend or counselor.

If you find yourself in dark places today, know that you're not alone.

Not ever.

God knows you, and is with you.

II. God's Example of Soul Healing

Everyone here is familiar with the term "psychotherapy."

But, perhaps, what you don't realize is that the term comes from the Greek.

psycho = soul

therapia = healing

Soul Healing.

In 1 Kings 19, God gives us a case study of Soul Healing.

1 Kings 19:1-21 (NASB)

1

Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he

had killed all the prophets with the sword.² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."³ And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers."⁵ He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat."⁶ Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake *baked on* hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again.⁷ The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you."⁸ So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.⁹ Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"¹⁰ He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."¹¹ So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; *but* the LORD *was* not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, *but* the LORD *was* not in the earthquake.¹² After the earthquake a fire, *but* the LORD

was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. ¹³ When Elijah heard *it*, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice *came* to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶ and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. ¹⁸ "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." ¹⁹ So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. ²⁰ He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" ²¹ So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave *it* to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.

Depression is an extremely complex disease.

No one knows exactly what causes it, but it can occur for a variety of reasons.

No matter the cause, the effect is devastating.

But, one causation is seen in this God inspired account of Elijah.

I know you remember the Crystal Cathedral.

Dr. Robert Schuller spent years raising the \$300 million to built it.

It was completed in 1980, at the time I was Director of Pastoral Care for St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

A few months after it's completion, Dr. Schuller became profoundly depressed and was admitted to St. Joseph.

What happened?

Well, it's similar to what happened to Elijah.

Dr. Schuller had become so focused on completing the beautiful complex, that when it was finished, he felt lost and had nothing else to do.

His ministry slowly began to erode, and finally reached the point that the Directors had to sell.

The Catholic Church paid \$57.5 million for the \$300 million Crystal Cathedral.

And, Elijah had the mountain top experience of his life there on Mt. Carmel.

He faced off with 400 Baal priests, and taunted them to demonstrate that Baal was superior to God.

1 Kings 18:25-29 (CEV)

25 Elijah said to Baal's prophets, "There are more of you, so you go first. Pick out a bull and get it ready, but don't light the fire. Then pray to your god." **26** They chose their bull, then they got it ready and prayed to Baal all morning, asking him to start the fire. They danced around the altar and shouted, "Answer us, Baal!" But there was no answer. **27** At noon, Elijah began making fun of them. "Pray louder!" he said. "Baal must be a god. Maybe he's day-dreaming or using the toilet or traveling somewhere. Or maybe he's asleep, and you

have to wake him up." ²⁸ The prophets kept shouting louder and louder, and they cut themselves with swords and knives until they were bleeding. This was the way they worshiped, ²⁹ and they kept it up all afternoon. But there was no answer of any kind.

1 Kings 18:36-40 (CEV)

³⁶ When it was time for the evening sacrifice, Elijah prayed: **Our LORD, you are the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Now, prove that you are the God of this nation, and that I, your servant, have done this at your command.** ³⁷ Please answer me, so these people will know that you are the LORD God, and that you will turn their hearts back to you. ³⁸ The LORD immediately sent fire, and it burned up the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones. It scorched the ground everywhere around the altar and dried up every drop of water in the ditch. ³⁹ When the crowd saw what had happened, they all bowed down and shouted, "The LORD is God! The LORD is God!" ⁴⁰ Just then, Elijah said, "Grab the prophets of Baal! Don't let any of them get away." So the people captured the prophets and took them to Kishon River, where Elijah killed every one of them.

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." ³ And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

Now, why would a man who had preached an impressive message, and had experienced some of the most powerful displays of God's power, why would he suddenly be crippled by fear, hopelessness and despair?

Why would he run away to a desolate corner of the world so depressed that he would seek to die?

Well, there's probably all kinds of reasons, but the fact is he did.

So, let's take a brief look at God's Soul Healing of Elijah.
Elijah's depression, like your depression, is very real.

Look carefully at 1 Kings 19.

Notice that God does not say "Get a hold of yourself, Elijah. You are being sinful."

What God does is allow Elijah to use the marvelous brain he was given.

God knows exactly how your brain works.

Think about this:

Your subconscious takes everything literally.

It has no eyes.

It cannot make a difference between real danger and feeling in danger.

It makes no difference between what's real and what's vividly imagined.

This is equally true for positive emotions.

If you can picture (or remember) being in the Olive Garden down to the last detail, your brain believes it 100%.

If you can really make your subconscious feel you're getting better, you'll start getting better.

Now we're left with How.

And here it gets better.

And even more logical:

Your subconscious is the far faster and more powerful part of your brain.

So powerful that it can heal you if only you choose to listen and speak its own language.

But it doesn't speak English.

It speaks through your images and your emotions.

And it doesn't understand English.

It only understands emotions and vivid images.

If you intentionally project a different reality to it though visualizing things differently, it quickly starts believing you and seeking proof for those new beliefs.

Let's see what God does with that.

A. God Places Elijah in a place of Spiritual Renewal

1 Kings 19:8 (NASB)

8 So he arose and ... went ... to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Mt. Horeb is a place of worship, and a place of worship is one of the best places to deal with Depression.

Back in 1999 Duke University conducted a study of nearly 4000 older adults.

One of their conclusions: "Attendance at a house of worship is related to lower rates of depression and anxiety."

B. God helps Elijah Re-frame his experiences.

There on Mt. Horab, Elijah began to look back and see God's presence.

1) He could remember the time before Jezebel when he did not feel depressed and alone.

He could remember all the times he had a delightful meal with close friends.

He could even remember where he sat, and how he was dressed.

And, so, Elijah could visualize his life with no signs of depression.

2) And God made it possible for Elijah to engage all five of his senses, and experience God's presence in real time, in the present tense, if you would.

1 Kings 19:11 (NASB)

11 So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by!

Elijah could feel the strong wind, he could feel his feet shaking with the earthquake, he could feel the intense heat of the fire, and then he heard the gentle, loving voice.

Engage all your senses like Elijah, and remember, visualize what life was like before you became depressed.

C. God helps Elijah correct the false ideas that were fueling his depression.

False ideas, false beliefs have power put us in bondage. Our lives are built around what we think is true about life. And if the foundations of that reasoning are based on wrong information or impressions, the result can be devastating.

1 Kings 19:14 (NASB)

14 I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

That false belief is often at the bottom of our discontent. We think we are the only one who cares about Orcutt Christian Church, and others are not carrying their part of the load.

Well, God corrects Elijah's false beliefs.

1 Kings 19:18 (TLB)

18 And incidentally, there are 7,000 men in Israel who have never bowed to Baal nor kissed him!"

When our allied troops were making their way across Europe they liberated a death camp, and found this inscription scrawled on a wall:

"I believe in the sun even when it's not shining.
I believe in love even when it is not shown.
And I believe in God even He doesn't speak."

When a person is depressed, they don't think God is doing much of anything.

They have no hope, no confidence, and God isn't easily seen by them.

A person in depression needs to realize just like Elijah that God IS working in their lives even when they can't see Him.

D. God gives Elijah something to do

1 Kings 19:15-16 (NASB)

15 The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶ and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place.

During a lecture on mental health someone once asked the famous psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Menninger: "What would you advise a person to do if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on?"

Most people at the conference thought he would say, "Go see a psychiatrist immediately," but he didn't.

Much to everyone's astonishment, Dr. Menninger replied, "Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find somebody in need, and help that person. Don't focus on yourself, get involved in the lives of other people."

During the 1st part of the 20th century, J. C. Penney was a real man who presided over a very real and powerful empire of over 1,700 stores. At the time he had the country's largest chain of department stores, each one bearing his name.

But, although his enterprise made him incredibly wealthy, J.C. Penney's life was not devoid of setbacks and troubles. In fact, beginning in 1929, events took place that nearly cost Penney his life

When the Great Depression struck the country, it came at a time of great financial vulnerability for Penney. In the good times, before the Depression, Penney had overextended himself and had borrowed heavily to finance many of his ventures. But when the Depression hit banks began to request repayment of his loans sooner than anticipated. Suddenly cash flow was tight, and Penney was finding it difficult to meet payment schedules. Constant and unrelenting worry began to take a toll. "I was so harassed with worries that I couldn't sleep, and developed an extremely painful ailment," he said.

Concerned about his deteriorating health, Penney checked himself

into the Kellogg sanitarium at Battle Creek, Michigan, (kind of the Mayo Clinic of its era). There, Dr. Elmer Eggleston, a staff physician, examined Penney, declaring that he was extremely ill. Penney later recalled "A rigid treatment was prescribed, but nothing helped," He was constantly tormented by periods of hopelessness and despair.

His very will to live was rapidly eroding.

"I got weaker day by day. I was broken = nervously and physically, filled with despair, unable to see even a ray of hope. I had nothing to live for, I felt that I hadn't a friend left in the world, that even my family had turned against me."

Alarmed by his rapidly deteriorating condition, Dr. Eggleston gave Penney a sedative. However, the effect quickly wore off, and Penney awakened with the conviction that he was living the last night of his life. "Getting out of bed, I wrote farewell letters to my wife and to my son, saying that I did not expect to live to see the dawn."

Penney awakened the next morning, surprised to find himself alive. Making his way down the hallway of the hospital, he could hear singing coming from the little chapel where devotional exercises were held each morning. The words of the hymn he heard being sung spoke deeply to him.

Going into the chapel, he listened to the singing, the reading of the Scripture lesson, and the prayer.

"Suddenly something happened," he said. "I can't explain it. I can only call it a miracle. I felt as if I had been instantly lifted out of the darkness of a dungeon into a warm, brilliant sunlight. I felt as if I had been transported from hell to Paradise. I felt the power of God as I had never felt it before."

In a life-transforming instant Penney knew that God, with His love, was there to help. "From that day to this, my life has been free from worry," he declared. "The most dramatic and glorious 20 minutes of my life were those I spent in that chapel that morning."

Would you like to know the hymn that spoke so eloquently and miraculously to J. C. Penney?

Stand with me as we sing our closing hymn on “Be not dismayed whate’er betide” [v. 1, 2, 4] 692

Prayer and Invitation

Unit 2: God's Caring, Saving, and Upholding Love

April 2 Lesson 5

Shepherding Love

Devotional Reading: [John 10:11-18](#)

Background Scripture: [Psalm 23](#)

PSALM 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. **2** He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, **3** he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. **4** Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. **5** You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. **6** Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

KEY VERSE

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.—[Psalm 23:1](#)

Introduction

A. An American Secular Icon—[Psalm 23](#)

William L. Holladay states that [Psalm 23](#) became an American secular icon in the two decades after the American Civil War (1861-1865). Movement toward this status was sparked by Henry Ward Beecher's tribute to the psalm in the years just prior.

The tragic loss of life in that war plus the economic panics of 1873 and 1893 bolstered the popularity of [Psalm 23](#). The general public gravitated toward the lines "the shadow of death" (*KJV*) and "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" for comfort. The psalm's position as secular icon was finalized when funeral homes began to print it on the back of obituary handouts.

B. Lesson Background

Shepherding was a common occupation in ancient Israel through the centuries ([Genesis 12:16](#); [26:14](#); [29:9](#); [30:31, 32](#); [Jeremiah 33:12](#); [Luke 2:8](#); etc.). It should not surprise us, then, that the Bible has scores of references to sheep and shepherds. Sheep were completely dependent on shepherds, making the job of shepherding what we would call 24/7 (note [Luke 2:8](#), which has shepherds "keeping watch over their flock at night").

Since all this was so familiar to the ancient Israelites, the words *shepherd* and *sheep* became metaphors. Moses and David, two of Israel's greatest leaders, had been shepherds in the normal sense ([Exodus 3:1](#); [1 Samuel 16:11](#)) before they became figurative shepherds of God's people (compare [Psalm 77:20](#); [Isaiah 63:11](#); [Ezekiel 34:23](#); etc.). The Old Testament describes

God himself with the metaphor of shepherd ([Psalm 78:52](#); [80:1](#); [Isaiah 40:11](#)). In the New Testament, it is Jesus who is “that great Shepherd of the sheep” ([Hebrews 13:20](#); compare [John 10:1-16](#); [1 Peter 5:4](#)).

The psalms are traditionally seen as five books, and [Psalm 23](#) is in Book I. This psalm is part of an early collection of Davidic psalms, namely [Psalms 3-41](#). A later Davidic collection, namely [Psalms 51-65](#) and [68-70](#), is found in Book II. Our approach to [Psalm 23](#) is in terms of two metaphors: shepherd ([vv. 1-4](#)) and host ([vv. 5, 6](#)).

I. Shepherd Metaphor

([Psalm 23:1-4](#))

This psalm’s superscription attributes it to David. Those who have an electronic version of the Bible will note that such superscriptions are designated as “verse 0” of the particular psalm in view.

A. Identifications ([v. 1](#))

1a The LORD is my shepherd,

The profound nature of the opening statement comes to the fore when we remember that David himself had been a shepherd in his boyhood days (see [1 Samuel 17:34-36](#)) and now he is the shepherd of the people of God ([2 Samuel 5:1-5](#); [7:4-8](#); compare [Psalm 79:13](#)). In proclaiming *the Lord is my shepherd*, the twice-shepherd king of Israel therefore acknowledges that he himself has a shepherd.

That shepherd is none other than God. “He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, and the flock under his care” ([Psalm 95:7](#); [Hebrews 4:7](#) attributes this psalm to David). The king himself admits his own need for the divine shepherd. It is natural for the people of Israel to look to David as their chief earthly shepherd. David’s identification of a shepherd higher yet should keep them from idolizing the king.

What Do You Think?

How do we resist idolizing those who would claim to guide (shepherd) us today?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Recognizing the danger before it happens

Correcting the problem after it happens

Other

1b I lack nothing.

David's next statement is a roundabout way of identifying himself as one of God's sheep. David's shepherding background reminds him that sheep want for nothing only when their shepherd provides for all their needs. He knows that the God of his ancestors supplied all their needs ([Deuteronomy 2:7](#); etc.), and he will continue to do so.

How to Say It

Crimean Kry-*mee*-un.

Davidic Duh-*vid*-ick.

Yahweh (*Hebrew*) Yah-weh.

B. Actions ([vv. 2, 3](#))

2a He makes me lie down in green pastures,

The phrase *green pastures* may bring up mental images of lush, rolling meadows that extend as far as the eye can see. But in reality the land in ancient and modern Israel often bears little resemblance to such an ideal. It is a semiarid climate that experiences little or no rainfall for five months each year. Shepherds lead nomadic lives as they move frequently from place to place in search of suitable grazing for the sheep (compare [Genesis 37:12-17](#); [47:4](#)).

So shepherds often have to settle for the scarce grass that is found on “the hills” and in “grasslands of the wilderness” ([Psalm 65:12](#); [Joel 1:19, 20](#); [2:22](#); compare [Job 39:8](#)). The shepherd has to be skillful in finding adequate grazing in such places and be ready to move on when the likelihood of overgrazing presents itself (compare [Genesis 13:5-9](#)). But that's the point! God is able to provide sources of food that are more than adequate for the psalmist's needs.

The Old Testament sometimes describes God's ideal for the future in terms of abundant pastureland ([Isaiah 49:9](#); [Jeremiah 33:12](#); etc.; contrast [Isaiah 13:20](#); [Jeremiah 25:36](#); etc.). That abundance is accompanied by the blessing of allowed rest, the sense of *makes me lie down* (compare [Isaiah 65:10](#); [Ezekiel 34:14, 15](#)).

NEW GREEN PASTURES

My husband's position was eliminated when the college where he taught downsized. To say we were devastated would be an understatement. We struggled with the stress of uncertainty. Realizing that a move was likely, we thought about the friends we would leave behind and the disruption to our children's lives. We pondered the unknown, about moving to a place where we knew no one.

We did it, though. Another teaching job became available at a Christian college halfway across the country, and we moved. We felt sure that God had opened that door for us, and so we followed him. Leaving loved ones took courage, and we mourned the loss of their constant company. But we believed that God would provide for us in our new area of ministry, our new pasture.

Two years later, I can say that stepping out in faith changed our family for the better. We love our new jobs and have much more family time than before. We have new friends we love, and we have been able to keep up with our old ones as well. Following God as sheep follow the shepherd can bring us to places where we can heal from hard times and experience God's presence anew.—L. M. W.

What Do You Think?

How can we improve at recognizing when God is leading us toward “green pastures”? What can happen if we don't?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding job relocations

Regarding spiritual nourishment

Regarding ministry service

Other

2b he leads me beside quiet waters,

The importance of *quiet waters* is seen when we consider that the alternative of flowing streams introduces the elements of unreliability and danger in Palestine. A shepherd who seeks a flowing stream that was usable previously may find only a dry streambed on arrival (compare [1 Kings 17:7](#); [Job 6:15-17](#); [Jeremiah 15:18](#)). At the opposite extreme, rainfall in the mountains or hills may turn dry streambeds or gently flowing water into deadly flash floods. Even today, tourists are warned about hiking through dry streambeds because of the possibility of being swept away should such a flood come (and tourist hikers have indeed drowned).

This distinction between nonflowing and flowing water should not be overemphasized, however, since positive images of the latter are to be found in many passages (examples: [Deuteronomy 8:7](#); [Psalm 1:3](#); [126:4](#)). Such images sometimes occur in parallel with those of nonflowing water ([Isaiah 41:18](#); etc.). Of greater importance is recognizing that the *he leads me* phrase of the half-verse before us stands parallel with “he makes me” in [verse 2a](#). Thus the image of rest is continued. The place of abundant food and water is not a place where one hastily washes down a doughnut with a cup of coffee before rushing to the next appointment. It is, rather, a place of repose and respite.

What a picture! Surely the Lord takes care of “his flock like a shepherd” ([Isaiah 40:11](#))!

3a he refreshes my soul.

A consideration of the word *soul* is in order for understanding what the psalmist says is restored. The Hebrew word behind our English translation *soul* occurs about 500 times in the original, and it signifies different things depending on context. It can refer to the “life” of a person ([Genesis 32:30](#); [44:30](#)); the “life” of an animal ([Leviticus 17:14](#)); “me” ([Numbers 23:10](#)); etc.

The word *soul* is therefore quite flexible! With all these potential choices of meaning, it can be difficult to know where to start. When we’re stumped in such an instance, a safe approach is to begin by ruling things out; that is, start by determining what it *cannot* mean in the context at hand.

In that regard, we can be certain that the word *soul* as used here does not refer only to the spiritual side of the psalmist’s being, with the physical side left out. The context of the psalm addresses the entirety of the psalmist as the object of the loving shepherd’s restoring care. Many psalms plead for God’s restoring favor (compare [Psalm 6:4](#); [25:16](#); [31:2](#); [69:16](#); [71:2](#); [86:16](#); [88:2](#); [102:2](#); [119:132](#)). This one, however, views that favor as an accomplished fact.

3b He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.

Sheep by nature tend to act as a group rather than independently. This means that a herd of sheep will tend to follow a leader. But which leader? In 2005, nearly 1,500 sheep jumped off a cliff (with 450 dying) when they blindly followed the foolish path of a dominant member of the flock. All this happened while the Turkish shepherds, their usual leaders, were away at breakfast.

Traveling correct paths requires proper leadership. Different Hebrew words stand behind the two translations *leads* and *guides* in [verses 2b](#) and [3b](#), but the psalmist intends them to mirror each other. We see this also in [Psalm 31:3](#) (also by David), where the same two Hebrew words are similarly translated. Perhaps the wording of [Exodus 15:13](#) is David’s model.

Regarding the nature of *the right paths* wherein the psalmist is led, compare [Proverbs 8:20](#); [12:28](#); [16:31](#); [Matthew 21:32](#); and [2 Peter 2:21](#). The phrase *for his name’s sake* confirms the moral tone of the paths in view. Sometimes God takes action (or does not take action) specifically to protect the honor of his name. What David acknowledges in the verse before us he also acknowledges and/or requests outright in [2 Samuel 7:23-26](#); [Psalm 25:11](#); [31:3](#); [109:21](#). Jesus, the good shepherd, always desires to lead us down the

right path. But that becomes reality only as we choose to “listen to his voice” ([John 10:3](#)).

C. Confidence ([v. 4](#))

4a. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, *The darkest valley* is often thought to refer to situations where physical death is very possible or even likely. Although *darkest valley* can refer to danger that threatens one’s physical life (compare [Job 10:21, 22](#); [Psalm 107:10-16](#)), it also can be understood in a figurative sense (see [Job 16:16](#); [34:22](#); [Isaiah 9:2](#); [Luke 1:79](#)). Bible students who are confused by this ambiguity are not alone! Jesus’ disciples often misunderstood his use of figurative language ([Matthew 16:5-12](#); [John 11:11-14](#); [16:25-29](#); etc.).

Metaphors function as figurative, symbolic language by stating or implying comparisons. In the context at hand, the psalmist compares himself with a sheep who is under the care of an expert shepherd. *The darkest valley* compares his life journey with the nature of terrain that actual sheep must enter to find sustenance. Whatever dangers lurk in these places, the expert shepherd knows how to avoid or neutralize them.

At first, we may think that the presence of the word *evil* tips the scale toward understanding *the valley* as standing for the spiritual dangers of living in a sinful world. Though the Hebrew word is translated in a number of ways (examples: hurt, harm, wickedness, etc.), this word *evil* is best understood by its context. It can refer to physical harm or difficulties in some cases (examples: [Genesis 26:29](#); [47:9](#); [Exodus 32:14](#)) while referring to issues of sin elsewhere (examples: [Genesis 13:13](#); [39:9](#); [Numbers 32:13](#)).

Ultimately, it is the phrase “the right paths” in [verse 3b](#) that leads us to think that the psalmist is using *the valley* to symbolize spiritual danger. Even so, the possibility of physical danger’s inclusion in the reference cannot be dismissed (compare [Jeremiah 2:6](#)). We are at least aware that the phrase *the darkest valley* has a more than one possible meaning.

4b for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. The word *for* marks the twenty-sixth Hebrew word of this fifty-word psalm. David does something interesting just after crossing this midpoint: he switches from addressing God with third person “he” to second person *you*. This change serves to heighten the closeness David has or wants with God: *you are with me*.

The *rod* in which the psalmist takes comfort is the shepherd’s weapon to protect the flock (compare [Job 21:9](#); [Isaiah 10:5](#); etc.). The shepherd uses the

crook of a *staff* for rescuing sheep that have wandered off and gotten themselves stuck in relatively inaccessible places.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can we be God's instruments of comfort to those in a dark valley of life?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding physical issues (sickness, etc.)

Regarding mental issues (depression, etc.)

Regarding spiritual issues (doubt, etc.)

Regarding relationship issues (marriage, etc.)

II. Host Metaphor

([Psalm 23:5, 6](#))

Some students believe that the shepherd metaphor extends throughout [Psalm 23](#). But the content of [verses 5, 6](#) favors a shift to a host metaphor; it mirrors the shepherd metaphor but is more condensed.

A. Vindication ([v. 5a](#))

5a. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

Tables of food are prepared by those who host banquets, feasts, or other meals for visitors. To do so is part of one's obligation to extend hospitality in various contexts of the ancient world ([Genesis 19:1-3](#); [Judges 19:15-21](#); etc.). The meal is often an elaborate meal, with nothing but the best from the host (compare [Genesis 18:3-8](#); [19:3](#); [24:31-33](#), [54](#); [Proverbs 9:1, 2](#); [Luke 15:23, 27, 30](#)).

God is presented in the Old Testament as a gracious host to ungrateful people as they journeyed toward the promised land ([Psalm 78:19](#)). But David does not have such an attitude! He is secure enough in the divine shepherd to dine even while *enemies* are present. In writing another psalm, David prays against his enemies that "the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap" ([Psalm 69:22](#)). The provision of food mirrors that in [Psalm 23:2a](#), above.

A TABLE PREPARED

The Tatar people had lived in the Crimean Peninsula for generations before Stalin came to power. After World War II, he decided that they had collaborated with the Germans. To repay their supposed treason and to remove any ability for them to self-organize, his forces rounded up people at gunpoint and relocated them to central Asia. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, survivors moved back to Crimea and began to build villages.

One summer, I walked down their dusty streets. I noticed many times that entire families lived in one-room cinder-block buildings or even large tents. Women cooked and did laundry outside, exposed to the elements. Despite their circumstances, they almost always invited me to sit down for tea or coffee. Often they served me homemade cherry preserves and desserts. Think about it: people who had nothing, who had experienced trauma and despair, offering us such expensive hospitality! Like the host in [Psalm 23](#), they prepared a table for us and treated us well.

God used the example of these hosts to teach me a lifelong lesson. What do you suppose that lesson was?—L. M. W.

B. Reward ([vv. 5b, 5c](#))

5b You anoint my head with oil;

The host honors the guest by anointing his *head with oil* (compare [Psalm 45:7](#); [92:10](#)). Given the fragrances that were available to add to olive oil (see [Psalm 45:8](#); [Proverbs 7:17](#)), such anointing is a soothing and refreshing experience for a weary traveler. This anointing was not done for Jesus when Simon the Pharisee hosted him for dinner, an intentional oversight noted by Jesus ([Luke 7:46](#)).

David (the psalmist) possibly intends a double meaning: he may be recognizing his physical anointing to be king over Israel ([1 Samuel 16:3](#), [12, 13](#); compare [2 Samuel 5:3](#)) while acknowledging God’s continual anointing in spirit.

5c my cup overflows.

Presumably the host has given the guest a large cup of wine (compare [Jeremiah 35:1-5](#)), and the guest is well satisfied as a result. The Hebrew word translated *overflows* occurs elsewhere only in [Psalm 66:12](#), there translated “place of abundance” in a context of being rescued by God. The host has given the guest more than enough to satisfy his thirst. This cup of satisfaction is equivalent to the waters of [Psalm 23:2b](#), above.

C. Deliverance ([v. 6](#))

6a. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, *Surely* there is no doubt about the very characteristics of God that are *goodness* and *love*! Instead of worrying about any enemies who may be in temporary pursuit, the psalmist focuses on the goodness and love that follow him permanently. These two are equivalent to the rod and staff of [verse 4b](#), above. God is the divine host who will always be there for his guest.

In numerous other places, the Hebrew verb translated *will follow* is rendered in terms of pursuit or chasing after (examples: [Genesis 14:15](#); [Deuteronomy 11:4](#); [1 Kings 20:20](#)). David knows what it's like to be both the pursuer ([Psalm 18:37](#)) and the pursued ([1 Samuel 23:7-29](#)). We will be pursued by God's goodness and love when we walk the "right paths" ([Psalm 23:3b](#)).

What Do You Think?

When was an occasion that God's goodness followed (even pursued) you, but you didn't recognize it at the time? How did you grow spiritually from the experience?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In your preteen years

In your teenage years

During various stages of adulthood

6b and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The shepherd and host metaphors mirror each other yet again in that the verb behind the translation *dwell* is from the same root as the one translated "refreshes" in [Psalm 23:3a](#). The verb at issue is extremely common in the Old Testament; it is quite often used in the sense of returning (examples: [Psalms 6:10](#); [18:37](#)). But commonly used words are particularly subject to taking different meanings, depending on context (see discussion on *soul*, above). The old Greek version of the Old Testament affirms *dwell* to be a proper translation. Even without that version, we recognize that *return* better fits a context of a journey home, while *dwell* suggests a final destination.

As David expresses his conviction about where he *will dwell*, we wonder if he is referring to an earthly location or a heavenly one. *The house of the Lord* is the same as the temple (note interchangeable terminology in [Ezra 3:8-12](#)), although that structure does not exist in David's lifetime. After it is built, people of that era view God as dwelling both in it and in Heaven ([1 Kings 8:13, 27](#); [Psalm 27:4](#); etc.). Therefore to try to determine with certainty which is meant here is probably to miss the main point: the psalmist desires to be in the presence of God, wherever that may be, *forever*.

What Do You Think?

What specific things can we do to prepare better to dwell with the Lord forever?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding the imperative of holiness ([1 Peter 1:15, 16](#); etc.)

Regarding the imperative to love ([John 13:34](#); etc.)

Conclusion

A. Not an Icon, but a Test

The metaphors of shepherd and host remind us that God is our trustworthy provider. For all physical and spiritual needs, he is the source.

The ultimate question, then, does not concern God's trustworthiness, but ours. Do we yield to his shepherding leadership, or do we rebel? Do we accept his provisions with a sense of accountability, or with a sense of entitlement? Do we walk only in his paths of righteousness, or do we take little "side trips" occasionally? Think carefully—living eternally in his presence is at stake!

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, refresh our lives with your Spirit as we gladly walk in the right paths you establish. Let us realize that those paths lead us to enter your presence and dwell with you forever. We pray this in the name of the good shepherd, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The shepherd is trustworthy, but are the sheep?

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