

Spiritual Depression: Causes and Cures

Spiritual Depression

- Today we need talk sensitive subject; something that impacts faith of many people, many us – something called spiritual depression (SD). Not same as clinical dep, although two may sometimes be interrelated. Clinical dep usually involves chemical imbalance in brain, often treatable with medication. Not SD. SD: when you're having crisis of faith; when feel very weak in faith, feel very distanced from God. Just can't find joy in Jesus or gladness in God's grace bec your heart feels downcast, discouraged – that's SD. And these periods of SD can be brief stints of feeling down, or can last long time. They take us to dark place; some people call this phenomenon “dark night of soul.” You're soul is just in dark, joyless, spiritual fog. Ever felt that way – SD? Doesn't mean you've lost your faith in Jesus, unbeliever. But our faith sometimes vacillates, waffles back/forth; and we sometimes feel like man, to Jesus: **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (Mk 9:24)**. So really, SD: internal turmoil or crisis of faith in heart of Xian, when in your head you know truth of God's love, but in heart just don't feel it; feel separated, distanced from God; feel downcast, in a dark place, bec struggling to find joy in Lord – that's SD.
- Bring up this subject for two reasons. 1: Pss 42-43 all about SD. Listen again: vs. 3a (crying; lack of app). Vs. 6a; 5ab (crisis of soul). Theme of these Pss: SD – which, by way, why looking at both Ps 42 & 43 tog. So closely related (even have same refrain), some think at one point may actually have been one Ps. So anyway: both Pss speak re SD. Second reason for bringing this up: I think we can relate to this. I think all of us, at some point in life, or perhaps frequently, go through SD. I can tell you personally, I have, I do. And I'm strong Christian; but there've been many times in my life, pastoral ministry I've fought back heaviness of discouragement, struggled through darkness of spiritual despair. I doubt I'm alone; I bet you've been there, too. Many people have. Just think from Bible: David in Ps 51, **“Let me hear joy and gladness; ...Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (51:8, 12)**. Elijah prayed God would take his life (1 Kgs 19:4); Moses prayed same thing (Num 11:15). Jeremiah is called “weeping prophet” bec of tears, anguish over Israelites. Even Jesus wept over people of Jerusalem (Mt 23:37). So if strongest of the faithful go through these bouts of SD, then I know: psalmist's struggle is our struggle, too.

Causes and Cures

- So what are causes of SD, and what are cures? One of causes of SD: simply tragedies of life. When you have heavy crosses to bear, or when you have compounded tragedies that arise in your personal life (big or small: death of loved one or just unkind coworker; overwhelming debt or just ovrwhlm workload; serious, life-threatening car accident or just little fender-bender on commute – whether big or small), when these tragedies compound themselves on one another, you can begin to feel SD. Vs. 7b. The picture: you're out at beach, swimming in ocean on windy day, waves are esp high; getting dangerous; want get back to beach. But waves keep crashing over top you. And just when get your head above water, another wave crashes on top. Happens again, again; just can't get out from under the waves. Vs. 7b. Ever feel that way, re tragedies of life – just keep crashing over you; can't get out from underneath them? That will cause SD.
- The cure here is prayer, intense prayer, when say, “God, why letting happen?!” That's what psalmist does: **“Why have you forgotten me? ...Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning?”** “God, why!?” Sometimes helpful for us say, “God, why!?” – so long as we realize: God may not answer how you want, or when you want. What I mean is this: God doesn't always give you answer why life's tragedies sweep over you like waves over drowning person. But prayer will always be beneficial, even when upset at God, bec when you fervently pray during darkest times in your life, even if God doesn't come right out and tell you exactly why, God is still listening carefully and planning deliverance deliberately. So intense prayer, wrestling with God, is first cure for SD.
- Another cause for SD is the enemies we deal with. Psalmist talks re his enemies: **“Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? ...My foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’”** He had enemies. Do you? We often speak re our 3 great enemies: Devil, world, sinful flesh. Well, we'll always have Devil tempting us sin; and we may have people in this world we consider enemies. But what about enemy within us, in our sinful nature? We all have sinful nature that screams rebellion vs God. And here's what happens: fall into sin; then conscience feels guilty; then feel distanced from God & his

forgiveness; that makes us feel even more guilty. And guilt is our enemy, bec it causes SD. When you feel burdened by and driven by guilt, that causes SD.

- Cure here is to preach to yourself. Psalmist here preaches to himself. 3x repeats exact same refrain: **vs. 5**. Talking to himself, as swings back/forth between despair and hope. “Why so upset? Why feel this way?” Know something: feelings are subjective; change with your mood. But objective truth: Jesus’ love for you prompted him to suffer cross, death, hell to forgive you. The central message of Xianity: Jesus has forgiven you, yes even you, yes even for what you’ve done. You can’t always trust your feelings, bec feelings are subjective. What’s objective is God’s forgiveness. Psalmist calls God “**my Rock,**” later, “**my stronghold.**” A rock or stronghold is unshakable, unbreakable footing to stand on. And our Savior JC, with his gospel of full and free forgiveness for all sins, is the rock, stronghold upon which we stand by faith, not the sandy soil of fickle feelings. And when we preach to ourselves and remind ourselves of this objective, unchangeable truth, the more we silence those guilt-driven feelings and embrace our Christ-given forgiveness. **Vs. 5**.
- One more cause for SD I see in these psalms: SD can come upon you when separate yourself from church, God’s Word. Sounds so obvious: feel separated from God because you’re separated from his house. But that’s what psalmist says: **vs. 4** (used to – past). Maybe you used to go church regularly; but then something happened; now you’re a once-a-month-er at best. Skipping church leads to downward spiral into SD. You’ll feel SD → so don’t come church → more SD, etc. Downward spiral. But when we stay away from church & God’s Word, we are withholding from ourselves the medicine that cures SD. When sick person stops taking their medicine, they don’t get better; and when we stop coming church, our SD doesn’t get better.
- So, this is cure: **vs. 43:3** – God dwells among us in gospel, through W&S, which we receive at church. **Vs. 43:4a**. Worshiping at church with other Christians is cure for SD! The gospel is God’s medicine. That’s why it hurts me to see so many our members come church so infrequently or sporadically. When you come church, you receive the gospel that you need to cure your SD.

Thirsting for God

- So Pss 42-43 show us some causes & cures for this dark night of soul called SD. The psalmist began this whole discussion with these words: **vs. 1-2a**. Essentially, SD is thirsting for God. There’s one time Jesus met woman thirsting for God. He said to her, “**Everyone who drinks this water**” (literal water) “**will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst**” (**Jn 4:13-14a**). When SD leaves you thirsting for God, remember: Jesus has the living water. He loves you, forgives you. Has not left you, no matter how distanced from him you may feel. So drink deeply of the water of life Jesus holds out to you in his gospel, bec this will quench your thirst for God; this will cure your SD.

Psalms 42-43

For the director of music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah. ^{42:1} As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” ⁴ These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng. ⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

⁶ My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. ⁸ By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life. ⁹ I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” ¹⁰ My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?” ¹¹ Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

^{43:1} Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation. Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. ² You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? ³ Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. ⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. ⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.