

# Understanding Depression as Christians (Session 1)

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you, Louise, very much. It is very good to be here. Not only was I born here and lived here until I was six, but my wife who's here with me I think has said without exaggeration that Edinburgh is her favorite place on earth. So it's wonderful for us to come back. And yes, my contract requires me to mention that there are some leaflets about Oak Hill Theological College on the back table.

And if any of you who live with access to a city like this would like to come and study theology in London, you'd be very welcome. But I can't imagine there's going to be a big market for that today. We are turning our minds together. We've prayed for God's help and we'll need it to a topic which is vast. It's huge in its scope because it affects so many people and it's huge in its depth because it affects us if we suffer from depression or if we know those who've suffered from depression. It affects us in the very depths of our souls. It asks questions of what we think it means to be alive or what we think it means to be human. And we'd love, wouldn't we, to come to an afternoon and go away knowing how to fix it? Wouldn't that be the most extraordinary thing if we could know how to put an end to depression? And you know, God will. On that day, when Christ returns, God wipes every tear away. But there's a reason why the Bible says it's God who does it because only he can. And the reason why it says it's on that day because until then there will be tears. And I know that some of us have particular reasons for crying right now. And that's because the world is broken and waiting still for its redeemer. And we experience that up close in our lives.

I'm praying that we can leave not with the answer that fixes depression but that we might leave with understanding that will help us, with compassion that will help others, more able to help what is one of the most demanding issues that we and those in our churches face. I hope we'll have a clearer idea what it means to love those with depression. And of course, love does not mean simply feeling good towards people with depression. Love means bearing the cost of depression in ourselves that we might bless others. We've got a couple of sessions to think about these things. In the first talk, now I want us to try and think a little bit about depression from the perspective of being Christians. How do we understand depression as Christians? In the second of these talks, I want to think about how we respond to depression as a church. And in this first session, then, where we're trying to think about understanding depression as Christians, I guess I'm trying to help us think through three questions. One, what is depression? Secondly, does God understand depression? And then to ask a question which seems to me we can't avoid asking, well, what about suicide, which is a feature of depression for some? Now, what is depression? Then, that's our first question in this talk. Here are some common features of depression.

[ 4 : 12 ] Depression means something about having a low mood. I'll say a bit more about that in a moment, about having reduced energy. One person wrote about depression and how when it caved in on her, she basically went to bed for two weeks, couldn't get out of bed and was experiencing low energy for the whole of a two-year period. A lack of enjoyment would be another typical feature of depression.

The complete inability to take pleasure in anything. One of the powerful questions to ask is when did you last laugh? And for someone who has a severe depression, it might be a very long time ago. Or pessimistic thinking, that as hard as I try to cheer up, I can't find anything positive to hold on to that makes any difference in my being. That question of mood, here's a diagram of, I don't know if you like graphs, but it's not very complicated. That's a normal pattern of mood. So our normal

human experience is that our mood goes up and down. Sometimes we've got no idea why. Sometimes it's because the sun is shining and sometimes because it's raining. Sometimes it's because, and something wonderful has happened, we've just heard great news. Or we've met someone whose company we really enjoy. Or sometimes it is because we've heard very difficult news. Or we've met someone who we find very difficult to talk to. We can often tell why our mood goes up and down in that normal kind of way. And sometimes we can't tell why our mood goes up and down in that normal kind of way. But it is normal for us to experience highs and lows. When we're talking about depression, we don't just mean that I'm feeling a bit down in the way that we all feel a bit down from time to time in the normal run of things. If we were to plot a mood chart for someone with depression, it would look like that. And there are two things that are significant about that. The first is obviously that all the action is happening at a much lower point on the graph. That the average mood is much, much lower. And the second thing is it's a much narrower range. And sometimes people who experience depression describe that the most difficult thing to come to terms with is not just that they're feeling low all the time, but they're not sure they feel anything of response to what is going on around them.

They just feel flat. Now depression takes many different forms in many different people. So here is, here is, these are all invented names by the way, just in case one of the names connects. I've not checked them with anybody. They're just invented names. Here is Claire. She has profound depressive episodes. They seem to be unrelated to anything going on in her life. And they've been happening for her the whole of her adult life. Or here is David. He's had a sudden new and catastrophic depression arising very directly in response to issues at work. Quite without any warning, one of his best colleagues in a small firm stabbed him in the back in front of an important client. And his world's fallen apart. Or here is Esther. She's experiencing something milder, a low-graded depression. There's little fluctuation in it.

There's little relief. She feels like all of her life has had some black paint poured into it. Or here's Frank. He's plunged into an impression following a criminal act against in which he experienced. And he's showing among other things prominent symptoms as obsessive compulsive disorder. So depression often comes in combination with other features of mental illness. But these are four very different people and they would look very different if you met them and their stories would be very, very different. And there are many different labels that get given to various kinds of depression. Here is some psychotic depression or postnatal depression. The depression which is characteristically associated with childbirth and the weeks immediately afterwards. And there's baby blues, some version of which is a very common thing, but then a serious postnatal depression which can affect a smaller proportion of mothers in the normal run of things. You might have heard of seasonal affective disorder, which is a kind of depression that comes on in the winter. And today would be a good day for those of us suffering from that. But as winter comes, we'll be beginning to feel that we're hitting that time of year again. There's depression that's associated with anxiety. Might be called anxiety, anxious depression or depression with anxiety in a textbook even. And the reality is that the word depression covers a whole load of different titles that some of which have long and complex sounding medical names. And it's worth being aware of those things just so that we avoid the easy step to make when we're talking about depression, either our own or someone else's, that we each know what we mean by the word.

[ 9 : 17 ] But we won't really know what we mean by it until we start asking questions or listening to people's description so that we understand more carefully what are they talking about, what's it like for them, what are they experiencing.

Depression is exceptionally common. It is estimated that your lifetime risk of developing depression is between 10 and 20%. So between one in 10 and one in five people will develop depression that a GP would diagnose as such. It's very, very common. Twice as many women as men suffer from depression and the World Health Organization estimates that it will be the number two cause of disability worldwide by 2030. That's an extraordinary, it's currently number four but it's climbing. And it would be fascinating to have a series of talks investigating the reasons for these changes in trends. I can't even begin to address, I don't have the expertise and we certainly don't have the time, but just to know how common it is and it's getting more common and how affecting it is and that it's the cause of disability, it's worth knowing, isn't it? A third of all visits to general practitioners are associated with depression. It's reckoned. And if you like weighing things up in financial terms, sorry, about eight billion pounds of lost productivity is caused by depression annually in the UK. So

there's a strong economic argument even for addressing these things effectively. In other words it's huge. But the question that we want to move on to now is to think about what it like to have depression. What is depression in numbers and statistics and titles and words, but what it like to have depression? And one of the things about this, and you may know this from your own experience, is that depression seems among other things to rob you of the ability to find words to describe.

It's very hard indeed to express what it's like to have depression and the more severe the depression, the harder it is to find words that connect with yourself internally and with others externally. Communication itself becomes much harder.

And so for that reason people have found pictures very helpful in communicating depression and literal pictures like this one from a book by Matthew Johnstone, a book called *I Had a Black Dog*. Winston Churchill was one of many famous people to suffer from depression and he famously began referring to his depression as the black dog. The black dog had come to stay with him again, was aware of saying he was having another depressive episode. And Matthew Johnstone has pictured his own depression in a series of pictures in a brilliant book called *I Had a Black Dog* and here's one of them, the text there says that activities that brought pleasure suddenly ceased to. So flying a kite in a blue sky should bring pleasure but the black dog is sitting on the string and it just doesn't work like it used to. Or in this one the text says he chewed up my memory and my ability to concentrate as the black dog burrows into his skull and his brain and shreds it.

Or in this one the black dog he liked to wake me up with repetitive negative thinking at 3.20 a.m. and his head is filled with stuff pressing in on him from outside that doesn't go away, it doesn't change, it's just negative constantly. It's a brilliant book to understand depression but other people have found pictures that they paint with words to describe their depression.

[12:54] And here are some, if there is a hell on earth it is to be found in a melancholy heart. JB Phillips referred to them as hellish torments and JB Phillips translated the New Testament, he knows what hell means and he refers to them seriously as hellish torments. Or Spurgeon talked about a veritable howling tempest in the brain, Winston Churchill, JB Phillips, Charles Spurgeon, famous names whose lives were characterised by deep depression we could add to that list of names. It goes on and on, names like William Cooper, the great Christian poet, Abraham Lincoln, comedians like Spike Milligan, Robin Williams, Stephen Fry, Tony Hancock and great sportsman too, sport and exercise is often very helpful in depression but sportsmen are not immune from depression. A veritable howling tempest in the brain, I could weep by the hour like a child and yet I knew not what I wept for, inexplicable gloom that's overwhelming and unremitting. Abraham Lincoln said this, I'm now the most miserable man living, if what I feel we're equally distributed to the whole human family there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. So he feels like he has enough gloom in him for one life to manage that if we were to spread it to every human being it would ruin everybody's life. It's a powerful sense of the weight for one person to carry from one of modern history's most effective leaders. If you want to get hold of a book to understand the experience more Gwyneth Lewis's book, *Some Moving in the Rain* is brilliant, she's trying to write a cheerful book about depression and in many ways it is. Right at the beginning of that book she's the one who describes that she was driving to work and had to pull over because she was crying, she went home to fix her makeup, went to bed and didn't get out for two weeks and it was two years before she felt significantly different and she has used her pen with words reflecting on her experience to describe what it's like to have depression. A recently published book by Mark Maynell called *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*, which we'll return to in a moment as we discover where they came from, and he's used five pictures to describe his experience of depression as a pastor in a busy London church. The picture of a volcano in which the volcano that's bubbling lava out, that red hot lava that just engulfs everything. You've seen that video of lava pouring out from a mountain and just swallowing up everything, a tree gets burnt instantly, houses get demolished, everything's swept away, depression's like lava sweeping everything in front of it, or a cave, that sense of great loneliness that depression gives as he's cut off from people who don't understand how he feels, which is almost everyone. There's no one with him in the cave, no one understands, it's incomunicable, so there's an intense loneliness in the cave of depression. There's a great weight that he felt in his depression, a great guilt in fact, a constant drag of feeling wrong, that he must be doing wrong, of seeing that he's doing wrong to others because he's not loving them, he's not caring for them, he's just overwhelmed with his own, and sometimes being told that you're wrong adds to a massive weight of guilt in depression. He uses the picture of an invisibility cloak to

describe his longing to hide, that shame brought on him, as his depression gave him a sense of himself as wretched, that who he was was wretched, the things that others have done to him have resulted in him wanting just to hide, just to become invisible. And his fifth picture is a picture of closing, of death, of shutting everything down, because in the great pain that he experienced in depression, without a sense of purpose, no reason to live, embracing darkness seemed to him to make sense. Five powerful word pictures of what it means to have depression. To which one of the things that we must want to know as Christians is does God understand depression? Does God understand depression? It's a powerful human experience, but maybe there's not much overlap between the world of the

Bible and the world of the depressed person, and isn't that one of the great problems with it? Here is, I don't expect to be able to read that, but I took a seminar at our church in depression, and the purple writing on the left-hand side of that slide is things that are hard about depression, and there's a long list. And the blue writing on the right-hand side are what are the things that are hard as a Christian with depression? And there's another long list of really hard things that being a Christian makes hard, because it's not just that you feel rubbish, you feel like a rubbish Christian. Christians are supposed to be full of joy, we're supposed to rejoice in the world always.

And if that's happened at our church, someone in the pulpit says, you know, if you're not feeling joy as a Christian, then maybe you're not a Christian. Then anyone who's struggling with depression in that moment is going to feel rubbish as a Christian. Christians are supposed to be loving others, and depression feels like you're sucking everything into you. That sense of shame and guilt has a particular Christian shape to it, doesn't it? Shame before God. The feeling of being stuck, not growing. There's a lot of talk in our churches at the moment about real change, real growth, but people with depression don't feel like they're going anywhere, they feel stuck. And a complete crisis of assurance. It feels like, for the Christian with depression, it feels like the enemy has your soul, and isn't letting go. Mark Menel writes in the turning point of his book, but at the darkest moment, the sole reason why I felt I could still do business with God in my bewilderment was what he allowed it to be included in the Bible. From Psalm 42, my tears have been my food day and night. All words at the end of Psalm 88, your wrath has swept over me, your terrors have destroyed me. All day long, they surround me like a flood, they have completely engulfed me. You've taken from me friend and neighbor darkness is my closest friend. I've read those words and realized that in Psalm 88 at least, there was evidence that, yes, God understands depression. If you still got Psalm 88 open or can have a look at it, just look down with me and see what we heard read, see what it really says in God's word.

Here is a writer crying out in verse 1 to the God who saves me. That's what God is, a savior, isn't he? God is the God who saves. We know him as that. He reveals himself as that from almost the first page of the Bible. Lord, you are the God who saves me day and night. I cry out to you. I'm crying out to the God that you might save. May my prayer come before you. Turn your ear to my cry. This is your job, isn't it? And yet, look at the staggering depth of his trouble. First three, I'm overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I'm crying out, but this is where I am. Overwhelmed, near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I'm like one without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who were cut off from your care. We read about hellish torments. That's what's being described in

[ 21 : 41 ] Psalm 88. Death cut off from God. But there's an even more shocking truth here in Psalm 88 in the very next verse, verse 6. You have put me in the lowest pit.

The writer's talking to the God who saves, the God who's supposed to be our answer, the God who's supposed to be our help and our strength and our shepherd. And he's having to say, you put me here in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves. You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. God, aren't you in the business of putting people back together? Well, in my state at the moment, I'm no good for anybody. My relationships are all falling apart and that's your doing because of where I am in my life at the moment.

There is a desperate loneliness there for verse 14. Why Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? And verse 18, you've taken from me my friend and neighbor. I have no meaningful relationships left. My relationship with you, God, feels utterly destroyed and my relationship with other people has been taken away. I have one friend left. Darkness is my closest friend.

Now, suffering like that raises all kinds of questions and they're poured out. And you and I might think if we were writing the Bible that that kind of offering for admission to the Bible ought to be left in the file of things that are not quite up to it. We would really like to preserve Psalms from people who are in a little bit of a better place. So we wouldn't put Psalm 88 in. But God did because God fully understands the experience of depression. God knows what it's like to feel that darkness is my closest friend. He inspired and preserved these words. And that means not only can we be certain that God fully understands, but also that the person who feels like this utterly belongs still among God's people. Psalm 88 gives the Christian feeling these things, words to use to talk to God about and words to use to open to a friend and say, well, this is how I'm feeling. This is what it's like at the moment. Yes, God does understand depression. He understands it perfectly. He understands it better than I do and better than you do. He knows it so well. And if nothing else, for us to know that if we want to connect with the experience of depression, one of the richest places we can go is into the

[ 24 : 47 ] Bible and read Psalm 88 is a very precious thing for us to know. It's not that we have to go elsewhere to find out how to make sense of it and leave the Bible on one side and go to other experts. We can find in scripture in the context of someone who is clearly in relationship with God, we can find understanding and we can find belonging. But this man is so desperate. It seems inevitable that we should ask the question at some point and if we can't ask it on a day like today, when can we? What about suicide? I guess it's true that the greatest trauma my immediate family has known was the death of a teenager very close to our family about 18 months ago from suicide. And I know that there are people here who have experienced this one-of-a-kind of trauma. It is so hard to process when it's happened close to you and it's very hard to understand how on earth could that happen? How could it have come so bad? How could people not have known? It seems like a crazy thing for someone to have done. It seems like a very selfish thing for someone to have done as you realize the huge ripples that are left as the gap kind of closes but they're not there and the inquests and the adjustments and the counseling and the help and the support and the many many people who are affected deeply brought to tears, tears that don't stop for such a long time. But we've thought already about how in depression it so overwhelms you that it becomes impossible to take any other perspective as true. It's very common in depression such as that feeling of inability to enjoy, that feeling that all that happens is that your grief and your gloom spreads out onto others. It's not very far from noticing those things to become convinced that really the world would be better off without me. And it takes so much energy to fight the battle and frankly I'm exhausted after years of this. Wouldn't it be easier just not to wake up let alone worry about whether I've got to get out of bed? We can understand surely how if our minds are infected in those kinds of ways and affected with some of those things and bearing those some kind of burdens and convinced by some of those things that press themselves in on us inescapably when we're experiencing depression surely we can understand how people get to that point. And at that point our question is does God understand that even? Because you know our God is a very big God he created the universe he lives outside of space and time he's absolutely massive he says he knows the ends from the beginning it says that he ordained everything since before it began he's so huge could he know the experience such a dark and hopeless experience so well and we read in Matthew 26 this that God when he came into our earth and took on human flesh didn't just come to die as a kind of technical arrangement in a pleasant moment of drug-induced euthanasia as he faced his crucifixion he could cry out my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to

the point of death Jesus's experience as God made flesh took him this far and I don't think in this moment he's referring to the fear of crucifixion he's describing the anguish he experiences now that that has brought him to the point of death Jesus Christ doesn't see his children suffering from depression and entertaining the thought of suicide and saying I don't get it what's wrong with you Jesus Christ says I understand I know what it's like to find sorrow so overwhelming that death seems more pleasant in Jesus's wisdom at that moment of the garden he took people with him his instinct was to share that experience of overwhelming sorrow to the point of death with others wise advice for us that our first instincts if we're getting to that point in in our own lives and our own experience is to find someone who we can share it with someone who we can bring with us into the dark garden sadly Jesus's friends were fairly useless they fell asleep and left him on his own may God help us to manage a little better if it happens to our friends so imagine that death feels like it's the only way out with that sort of intensity imagine feeling that other people would be better off

without you and those are convictions that don't just flit across your mind and stay there as many of us will have experienced but they don't shift they convince you they lie to you and they persuade you perceptions are terribly distorted in such a mental state that no one will miss me they'll be better off without me it's a lie it distorts the truth those who are left after suicide know how much of a lie it is it's far worse but here's the thing it is wrong to take any human life it's wrong to take our own life it's following a lie it's turning away from the giver of life but Jesus only ever saves us by grace not by works he doesn't save us because we don't turn away from the giver of life we do that every day when people turn away from that metal and take the option of suicide they're not condemned for that moment of madness in which they give up the battle we would all be sunk if that was how we were saved and we're not condemned because our last act is one that we can't rub out with good works and we can't make up for it but we never could I don't make up for my sin by being good when I've stopped sinning

Christ died for my sin past present and future and Christ said this all those the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never drive away for I've come down from heaven to do the will of the one who sent me that I shall lose none of all those he has given me but raise them up at the last day Louise mentioned that I used to be a doctor and it became a regular part of my experience as a doctor to see people die in the end every human doctor loses every single one of their patients to death sometimes death from cancer sometimes death from a complication of a medical procedure sometimes death from suicide but Jesus never loses one not one of all those the Father has given him but he'll raise them up at the last day so what we've seen in our first session is that long before we ever develop the psychological category of depression long before psychologists and psychiatrists even existed God understands depression and because Psalm 88 is in the Bible we realize that people with depression belong among the category of believers people with depression belong in the church people with depression belong in this room people with depression belong alongside us they belong in our families if we're someone who struggles with depression we belong right where we are if we know someone who struggles with depression they belong right alongside us and with understanding that

Jesus knows how to keep all of us in order to raise us up out of depression at the last days not before all of us who struggle with depression even giving into that ultimate temptation to take our own life Jesus knows how to keep all of us through death he knows how to keep all of us through the struggle of living close to people with depression he knows how to keep every single one of us and in session two we'll think more about how he can use each of us to help us get there as he keeps us let's bow our heads and the moment's quiet and then I'll leave us in a short prayer our dear father we've been speaking about some of those experiences which are the hardest there are for human beings to have we thank you that you know you know what it's like to feel these things we thank you if we're those who feel them we thank you that Psalm 88 tells us you understand we thank you that Jesus knows what it's like to be overwhelmed with sorrow we thank you if we're those who who don't suffer from depression but we see other people struggling with depression and we feel like we don't understand so thank you that we can learn from you because you understand you can teach us to understand too and we thank you too that not only do you understand so that you can connect with us at every moment of our experience but you promised that at the last day you know exactly how to keep every single one of your children and hold them and preserve them for resurrection for new life for tears wiped away and so as we continue our time together we ask that you'd help us and equip us to get from where we are now to that day in the power of Christ. Amen.