

Paul - “Depression As A Tool In God’s Hands”



1. **(DISCLAIMER)** The subject of depression and the believer is both a complex and volatile one. Typically, Christians seem to err on either the side of over-complication or over-simplification. This is especially true in the world of emotional discouragement and prolonged depression. As you begin to discuss this chapter of *To Walk...* with your group, be especially sensitive to each group member as an individual. Some depression is from self-pity, some is from fatigue, some is from organic issues like hypoglycemia. To take a casual or “spiritual” approach to something that is hormonal or organic is to heap more guilt and discouragement on someone. But, to allow someone to wallow in their circumstances and grow in bitterness under the banner of “venting” or “working through” something, may turn out to be just as damaging. Wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit should guide how you respond to comments and the answers your group members give.
2. **(Q1)** One of the most amazing distinctives of biblical faith is the place that suffering occupies. Not only is it a vital ingredient to our own sanctification (e.g. “*To Love...*,” “*To Serve...*,” “*To Yield...*”), but in these verses Paul introduces an idea that is nearly incredible in itself, and certainly unique in the world of religious thought: As a Christian, I suffer not only because of my own choices and the choices of others, but sometimes I suffer *for* others. Not in their place, but for their good. Paul is very clear that one of the reasons believers suffer is to be able to better minister to another believer (or unbeliever) in the future, with the comfort I have received from God in and through my own suffering. This means that it is possible that I may be “called” to suffer for the benefit of someone I have yet to meet. This idea fits seamlessly with a narrative perspective on Scripture; the One Story approach to the Bible. However, it flies in the face of a democratic understanding of redemption, i.e. that it’s “my” relationship with God, etc.
3. **(Q1b)** Paul’s opening statement (vs 8) explains what he is about to do, “*For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the afflictions we experienced in Asia...*” He uses the word *agneō* which means “without + knowledge”
4. **(Q1)** Paul speaks of suffering 8x and comfort 10x in the span of only six verses! In 1:3-7 he lays out several crucial principles and in verse 8 introduces a special illustration of the principle:
 - God’s comfort to me is also for others I have yet to meet
 - God’s church corporately (“we”) can minister mercifully to *anyone* with *any* need
 - Christ’s sufferings (Gk *pathema*) are continually “overflowing” into our lives; There is actually a sense in which He is still “suffering” (cf, Col 1:24).
5. **(Q2)** The words Paul chooses to use here are insightful:
 - “burdened” – (Gk, *bareō*) carries the idea of being incapacitated or overcome by something outside our control (cf. Mt 26:43; Lk 9:32; 21:34).
 - “utterly”(ESV) “excessively” (NAS), “great” (NIV); (Gk, *huperbolē*); the word means to exceed or to surpass something; literally “to throw beyond”
 - “beyond our strength” – uses the word “huper” again
 - “despaired” – (Gk, *exaporeomai*) this is a combination of three Greek words which means to be at a complete loss of the way
6. **(Q4)** This is huge! The Greek here is vital. The differences in the verb tenses separate Paul’s *feelings* from his convictions. Paul *felt* the weight of despair for a season, but did *not* act on those feelings. Sa-

tan’s strategy to steal, kill, and destroy often involves deceiving us into thinking that how we *feel* now is how we will feel forever! Then, he is able to tempt us to make *choices* based on this “fact.” It is damaging and equally dangerous to *deny* such feelings, or condemn them in others. Another vital truth buried in Paul’s self-disclosure here is the absolute necessity of recognizing Satan’s skill and cunning in “circumstance inflation.” He makes us believe something in our lives (i.e. circumstance) is larger, more important, more urgent or more lasting than it is. Then, he tempts us to act on this “fact.”

7. **(Q7)** Genuine ministry is when God touches something that I say or do, and makes it count for eternity. Strength and weakness matter very little in this formula, only submission and availability to God.
8. **(Q9)** The imagery of “tested silver” is throughout scripture. The Greek word, *dokimozo* which we translate “approved,” is a word for silver that has passed the test. Here are more verses that illustrate this principle:
 - “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.” **Isaiah 48:10**
 - “Rejected silver they are called, for the LORD has rejected them.” **Jeremiah 6:30**
 - ““Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are bronze and tin and iron and lead in the furnace; they are dross of silver.” **Ezekiel 22:18**



“Stumbling Stones”

1. **(Q2)** We are not sure what set of circumstances Paul is referring to in this passage. There is nothing recorded in Acts that reveals this level of absolute despondency. It is likely that we have here just one more example of the wide variety of personal experiences for which we have no record in our Bible that may have occupied a great deal of time and emotional energy, yet go undocumented. We need to always be cautious not to assume that the biblical record is exhaustive. It never is.



“Going Deeper”

1. **(Q1)** Make sure that the group sees the *major* “Central Truth” in this question (see BB for Q1 above). “What were your first responses to the idea that you may be called to suffer for the benefit of someone you’ve yet to meet?”
2. **(Q1)** “What *forms* does God’s comfort take?” (NOTE: In the case of this question, Paul’s “comfort” came from the realization that his own tendency to trust in himself, and the folly of that. This step of growth in Paul’s life became the actual “comfort” he was trying to offer to the Corinthians simply by sharing his experience with them.)
3. **(Q6)** “Someone has said that affliction reveals what we really believe to be true about God. What do you think about that statement?”
4. **(Q9-Prov 25)** “Can you think of anything in your life that God has removed or neutralized through pain that’s given Him greater freedom to use you?”
5. **(Q9-Zech)** “How does God reveal Himself through the life of a believer that unbelievers would be attracted to?”