

PASTORAL DEPRESSION
By Bishop Rev.+ John Johnston

The work of a pastor is a task of great magnitude. Here are frail creatures of dust, mere mortals, given life by the Holy Spirit, and called to be overseers of the church which Christ purchased with his own blood. Such a high yet humbling call, for it is a call that is often difficult and costly. We often allow the trials which accompany pastoral service to overshadow its joys. These trials are varied and numerous; some common to all pastors, others peculiar to certain men for one reason or another. One thing is sure - unless trials are dealt with correctly, they will result in pastoral depression. From the crucible of experience, I wish to briefly state some causes, signs, and cures for pastoral depression.

There are three main areas in which trials arise that can lead to depression. First, there is the area of the pastor's private life. His time is not his own. There are the demands of study, prayer, visitation, counseling, meetings, and telephone calls. Any pastor who takes his task seriously can soon find himself physically exhausted. With the great need of finding spiritual food for the flock he may neglect to take spiritual meat and drink for himself, thus soon finding himself on the verge of spiritual starvation. There are the besetting sins of his own life which must constantly be dealt with. As John Flavel once said:

"Brethren, it is easier to declaim against a thousand sins of others, than to mortify one sin in ourselves." If other pastoral acquaintances appear to be "succeeding" in the ministry, and he is not, the pastor may feel that God has deserted him or that he has been placed upon a back burner.

Secondly, there is the area of the pastor's immediate family. Financial needs are often pressing him as he struggles just to pay the bills. He may find himself seeking additional employment which of necessity must take away a great amount of time from the work he truly loves. He must also spiritually feed his family. The salvation of his children is his great concern, for he cannot bear to think that for years he might preach to others but see his own children perish unconverted. And, perhaps he has a burning desire for the glory of God and the advancement of the kingdom, but his own wife has become unconcerned and callused.

Thirdly, there is the flock, his charge. A sickness here, a death there, financial woes here, divorce there, apathy here, stunted growth there. Perhaps the pastor is faced with the loss of church, home, and resources at the sinful hands of professing Christians whom he has offended by his preaching. The pastoral ministry can often seem like the job of a firefighter, running here and there trying to put our little brush fires.

With all of this the best of men are only men at best and as such can fall into mild and even severe depression. One needs to learn to recognize the signs of depression in order to deal with them properly. Here are just a few:

1. Loss of physical energy and stamina.
2. Loss of spiritual appetite for prayer and worship.
3. Bitterness in mind and heart towards the people of God.
4. Envy and jealousy of the ungodly and their temporal prosperity (Psalm 73).
5. Feelings of being only a hireling instead of a true shepherd.
6. Doubts concerning God's wisdom and love.

7. Verbal expression of such doubts.
8. Rapid and frequent mood changes.
9. Feelings of failure or uselessness.

These dangers signals can must be dealt with. Here are some suggestions for getting out of the lion's den:

1. Learn when you are prone to depression. Is it after a conference as you leave the confines of the brethren and return to your lonely part of the vineyard? Does it occur when you take certain medications?

2. Acknowledge your utter weakness before God. You are not sufficient for these things, but Christ is. In your weakness his power can be made known.

3. Learn to cry and express your emotions at the throne of grace. You may need a release from the pressures of your deepest feelings.

4. Maintain a disciplined reading of the Word, praying the Scriptures as you read them.

5. Feed yourself spiritually. Listen to tapes of solid expository preaching, saturating yourself with the milk and meat of the Scriptures.

6. Meditate upon the mercies of God's providence towards you in the past. It may help to keep a spiritual diary where you can record God's blessings for future reference.

7. Correspond with other pastors by letter or telephone. You are not alone, dear brother. Let others know that you are hurting so that they might exercise their spiritual gifts of exhortation and mercy-showing. It is here that I send out a call to the brethren to keep in touch and communicate with one another, and to be doers of the Word by expressing brotherly concern.

8. If the depression worsens or continues, see a medical doctor. Undetected illnesses such as diabetes can result in sluggishness and fatigue. A certain food may be disagreeing with your system. A chemical imbalance may need to be corrected. I would recommend the reading of Dr. John White's book, "The Masks of Melancholy: A Christian Physician Looks at Depression and Suicide," published by InterVarsity Press.

Here then are some causes, signs, and cures for pastoral depression. None who engage in the holy work of the eldership are exempt from the onslaughts of depression. Brother, if you are depressed, be it mild or severe, I say this to you out of the depths of my heart, the precious Lord Jesus cares for you and awaits your petitions at the throne of grace, where "we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). We must allow the Holy Spirit to do his supernatural work in the inner man. And, as he brings us back into a right frame of heart and mind, let us remember the words of the Apostle Paul who wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."