

## **Breaking Through the Darkness of Depression**

1 Kings 19:1-21

When I was in college, my family lived in Seneca, SC. Seneca is a lovely city in the northwest part of South Carolina. Among people who are familiar with the state, it is an area that is known for its recreational areas, like lakes and hiking trails. For others, it's known for what it is near...Clemson University.

Within Seneca there was another "city", one which most people did not even realize existed. It was called "Sycamore City", a small reconstruction of a western town in the backyard of a man named D Land. The "D" stood for Daniel and he described himself as a "historian, builder, wild horse tamer and rural philosopher" who created "Sycamore City", a miniature Western town.

We had lived in Seneca for a while before I ever saw this place. We were hosting some international students during their Christmas break and we took them to see this place. D had taken advantage of his time as an honest-to-goodness cowboy out West to find "ghost towns" that dotted the desert. After he retired as a cowboy (the most bow-legged man I have ever seen), he purchased some of these abandoned buildings from the old West, disassembled them and brought them back to his home in South Carolina. He had a little more than an acre for his back yard, and there he reassembled those buildings to fashion his own Western town, complete with a Sheriff's office, a church, a livery stable and a saloon.

The saloon, not the church, was the place where D would regale people with stories and dispense his philosophy. On my first visit there, he sat down in a chair, took his boot puller (which I can't describe in mixed company) and pulled his well-worn cowboy boots off his feet. After he wiggled his toes for a moment, he grabbed his boots by the straps and pulled them back on his feet. He tugged at his bootstraps a little bit more and then he said, "You know, I never could figure out how to pull myself up by my own bootstraps. I always needed a little help." With those words, he reached out a hand and I pulled him to his feet.

I gained a real affinity for cowboy boots that day, and I've tried to keep a couple of pairs to wear, especially during the winter, ever since. Every time I pull my boots up by the bootstraps, I remember what D said. You see, none of us can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. When someone is struggling, it's easy to get frustrated and say with exasperation, "they just need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and deal with it." I'm here to say today that that's not the way things work. Sometimes we ALL need a little help. God calls us to depend on Him and He has built a community around us so that we can depend on each other.

Sometimes such mutual dependence is difficult, especially in the church and especially with issues related to depression. When people are depressed...when WE are depressed, we start to feel like there is something wrong, not just psychologically or physically, but spiritually. Christians are supposed to be joyful...the joy of the Lord is supposed to be our strength. In addition, the struggles related to depression aren't always apparent to everyone, like other physical illnesses. As a result, people struggling with the darkness of depression find themselves often suffering in silence, or worse, in shame.

Today I want us to take a look at depression. In the next weeks we are going to take a look at some other silent struggles that Christians face, many of which also lead to depression. We are going to take a look at the darkness of depression today as we see the struggles of Elijah. Then we will consider the darkness of defeat as we look at Moses, the darkness of disobedience from the life of David and the darkness of doubt as seen in the examples of Abraham and Thomas. As we consider these silent struggles, let's remember that there are others around us who are dealing with issues like chronic pain, chronic fatigue, grief, fear or any one of a number of things that may not always show on the outside. God can help us not only deal with the darkness in our own lives, but He can also make us sensitive to the struggles of others.

When I am speaking about depression, I see it most simply on three basic levels. First, there is mild depression. This is a significant, though short-lived time of sadness. Sometimes we call this "the blues." The fact that we call this mild depression does not diminish its significance, because when we're mildly depressed our outlook and our ability to meet day-to-day situations is not what it should be. Mild depression does not

often call for any kind of intervention, although it is helpful to talk with someone who will listen and it is certainly important to commit our struggles to prayer. Usually mild depression last a short time, like a day or a few days and one day we realize that we are starting to feel better.

If those sad feelings, lack of energy and lack of focus continue for several weeks, a person may be moving into major depression. Major depression occurs when our sadness begins to significantly impact our ability to work or to relate to others. People struggling with major depression may very well see serious disruption in appetite or in sleep patterns. In cases of major depression, some kind of help is called for, whether that help be counseling, therapy or medication.

Clinical, or medical depression is a medical condition that has psychological or psychiatric manifestations. A person who is clinically, or medically depressed will find it nearly impossible to function. They may have serious psychiatric or even psychotic symptoms like hallucinations or hearing voices. In this case medical intervention and sometimes hospitalization is necessary. In all these cases, compassion, understanding, support and prayer are not only helpful, but essential contributions from the family of faith.

Being depressed is not God's intention for us, but it isn't a sin, either. Whereas people who get depressed often feel ashamed, it is important for us to recognize that there are many examples of depression in the Scriptures and in every instance where a person placed their trust in God, there was light at the end of the darkness.

Today we want to take a look at the prophet Elijah. His story is recorded for us in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Kings. Before we read this portion of his story, it is important for us to get some context. Elijah is at what should have been the highest moment in his life. He has just confronted 400 priests of Baal and exposed their religion as a false one. God has answered Elijah by fire and the people who were gathered at Mount Carmel have affirmed that Elijah has been telling the truth about the Lord. In addition, God has ended the drought that had plagued Israel for three years. The rains have begun to fall and everything is looking up. As I said, this should have been the best time of Elijah's life, but something very different happens. We begin in verse 1.

**Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had filled all the prophets with the sword. [2] Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and ore also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow. [3] Then he was afraid, and he 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 broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, I LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." [5] And he lay down and slept under a broom tree...**

I want to pause here for a moment to point out that Elijah is demonstrating several of the symptoms of depression here. He is fearful, he doesn't want to be around other people, he wants to sleep, he has no appetite and he even is beginning to feel that life is not worth living.

**And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." [6] And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. [7] And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." [8] And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.**

**[9] There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" [10] He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." [11] And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke 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] And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. [13] And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" [14] He said, "I have been very**

jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and filled your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” [15] And the LORD said to him, “Go, and return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. [16] And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. [17] And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. [18] Yet I will leave seven thousand 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, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elisha passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. [20] And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” [21] And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

The story begins with Elijah fearful and depressed; he has given up and wants to die. It ends with Elijah carrying out the purpose of the Lord and making preparation for the continuation of the prophetic ministry. Elijah has come through the darkness of depression and emerged in the light of useful service, carrying out God’s purpose for his life once again. As we take a look at Elijah’s journey, we can find some keys to defeating the darkness of depression in our own lives.

As we look at Elijah’s dramatic story, one of the first things we see is that when we are depressed we need to **accept the help the Lord makes available**. Elijah had given up. He had stopped eating and fallen asleep under a broom tree, waiting to die. God sent an angel to wake him up and give him some food. Elijah ate the food, but then he went back to sleep. God sent His angel a *second* time to give him food to eat, and to help him get to the place he needed to go.

One of the first temptations we face when dealing with depression is the temptation to go it alone. We think we should be able to get over this ourselves. D Land reminded me that the idea of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps is foolish. Sometimes we need help; and the Lord has made help available to us as we walk through the darkness of depression. In Elijah's case, the immediate need was food and God supplied it. When we are depressed, God has made help available to us as well. Of course, the Holy Spirit is within us and He can help us; but there are other sources of help that God has made available as well. The Lord has given us each other; He has given us counselors, therapists, doctors and medication that can help us at times when we can't help ourselves. We must never think that availing ourselves of the help He has made possible means that we aren't trusting Him. On another note, those of us who are part of the family of God need to realize that we may very well be the help that God has offered to someone who is struggling. We need to be compassionate and always ready to lift one another up.

A second thing we see in Elijah's story is that when we are depressed we need to **listen carefully for what the Lord is saying**. Romans 8:28 reminds us that God is always at work in the lives of His children. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that God's plans are always for our benefit. Even in the midst of struggles, God is still at work in our lives and there are truths that He is longing to teach us. In times when we are struggling, those words from the Lord are not always easy to hear. When God came to speak to Elijah, He didn't speak through the mighty wind, the powerful earthquake or the consuming fire; He spoke through a quiet whisper. I believe God chose to speak through a whisper because it required Elijah to pay close attention...to listen closely and carefully. In the midst of his despair, Elijah needed to listen as carefully as he could to what the Lord was saying. If we will seek God continually and listen carefully, He **WILL** speak, even in the midst of difficult times.

A final truth we can see from Elijah's story is that when we are depressed, we need to **remember that God is at work, even when we can't see it**. Elijah thought that God had forsaken him. He was convinced that God had left him alone and he didn't want to go on living. While he was asleep, thinking that he was by himself and on his own, God sent food to sustain him. Even after such miraculous provision, Elijah *still* thought that God had forsaken him, that he had been left alone. In his despair he said to God, "Kill

me now!" The Lord told Elijah, "I am not finished with you. There is still much more that you can and *will* accomplish with your life. I am sending you to set up a new king for Syria and a new king for Israel. In addition, I am sending you to choose and train the one who will continue your work after you really are finished. Oh, and as far as being all alone is concerned, I have my eye on *at least* seven thousand others who have remained faithful."

The Lord's work in our lives is not always as obvious as it is at other times. When we are struggling, it may seem that we have been forsaken by God. That's when we need to listen closer, look harder and trust more completely than at any other time. In the midst of such times, God can and will speak to us and show us his purpose.

When we are walking through the darkness of depression, it may seem as if there is no hope. Just like Elijah, we may be tempted to believe that we are finished, or that God is finished with us. The Scriptures remind us constantly that it is God, not anyone or anything else that always has the last word...and that word is VICTORY for His children. God's promise of victory does not mean that the way is always easy, but if we place our trust in Him, we see that His purpose is always best.

Within the family of God, we need to feel the freedom to express our struggles, not only to God but to one another. That means we need to be sensitive to those who struggle and compassionate about that which is challenging them. The Scriptures tell us that when we bear each other's burdens we are fulfilling the law of Christ. In that way we can all see the light of God's purpose shining brightly.

## **Breaking Through the Darkness of Defeat**

Exodus 2:1-24

No one likes to lose, and defeat is not a pleasant experience. But there are times when defeat is even more unpleasant than at others. Sometimes defeat comes at a time when we didn't expect victory, where we know that the cards were stacked against us from the very beginning. In these times, while we're not very happy about losing, defeat is not totally unexpected. At other times, however, there is every expectation of victory and when things don't turn out the way we expect the defeat can sometimes be very bitter. This can lead us into feelings of sadness and even depression as the result of defeat.

Years ago I was chaplain for a local high school football team. The team had winning seasons every year but they never made it through a season undefeated. This means that at some point during the course of the football season the players had to deal with the reality of defeat. After the team lost a game, you could immediately tell upon entering the locker room whether or not they had expected to win. If the defeat had come at the hands of a physically superior team, the players would be disappointed, but not devastated. But if they had taken the field and lost to a team that was considered inferior, you could see in the eyes of the players a look of devastation, defeat and sometimes even anger. Those are the experiences of defeat in our lives that sometimes threaten to drag us down. Sometimes those kinds of defeat make us want to give up and quit. But often it is in the midst of such a time that God may be teaching us some of the greatest lessons of our lives and laying the foundation for some of the greatest victories we will ever experience.

Let's hear the story of someone who experienced just that kind of defeat. The story is recorded in the second chapter of Exodus.

"Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to come and nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to



her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, "Why do you strike your companion?" He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid, and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come home so soon today?" They said, "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock." He said to his daughters, "Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread." And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land."

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Moses' story begins on a dire note. By all reasoning, Moses never should have reached adulthood. Pharaoh had decreed that all the male Hebrew babies were to be put to death. In spite of this, Moses' mother and father decided that they would, for as long as they could, disobey the king's decree. They not only preserved Moses' life but they hid him for three months until concealment was no longer possible. Victory came out of an experience of potential devastation and defeat.

Moses' mother sent him floating out in the Nile and Pharaoh's daughter found him. Once again, by all reckoning she should have turned him over to her father and he should have been put to death, but she determined that she would adopt him as her own. Unknowingly she even gave Moses own mother the job of nursing him and raising him up until he was old enough to go and live in Pharaoh's court. Instead of being put to death he was raised as a prince in Egypt. He had all the wealth, all the education, everything he needed to succeed.

When Moses became an adult, by some estimations as old as 40, he was out walking among the Hebrews who were working, presumably on the construction of the pyramids. He saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrew slaves. He never had denied his heritage, so when he saw what was happening to a fellow Hebrew he struck the Egyptian and killed him. He fully expected that that would make him a hero among the Hebrews. Here one of their own, who could have turned a blind eye, stood up for his countrymen. But instead of being hailed as a hero, when he sought to step in and break up a fight between two Hebrew men he found that they looked down on him and regarded him as an enemy and a murderer; so at a time when he should have been drinking in the sweet nectar of victory Moses found himself literally a man without a country. The people of his birth had turned their back on him and saw him as a murderer. His adopted people, the Egyptians saw him as a fugitive and Pharaoh sought to have him put to death. Instead of drinking in the sweet savor of victory, Moses ran away in defeat. He found himself in the wilderness of Midian with no one around, nothing to do and eventually the prince became a shepherd.

We remember from reading the Old Testament how God took a shepherd, David, and made him a king, but this is the opposite. We celebrate how God elevated David from the flocks to the throne room but we see the opposite in Moses' case. He went from the throne room to the flocks. Can you imagine the feeling? This must have seemed to him to be an experience of complete and utter defeat.

Maybe you have had an experience like that in your life. Perhaps you might say, "Things just don't ever seem to work out," or maybe at a time when things were going just exactly the way you hoped they would go something happened that just knocked the props out from beneath you. How do we respond in situations like these? I think we learn some important lessons from this part of Moses' story that can help us in our own circumstances break through the darkness of defeat.

One of the first things we in Moses' story is that often **defeat is the result of our choices, not God's judgment.** Moses' experience of defeat came as the result of

choices he made. He chose to exert himself in behalf of a Hebrew man. He chose to insert himself, not only into this conflict but also into a conflict between two Hebrew men the next day. Moses made those choices. God wasn't sitting in Heaven saying, "Let me see how I can ruin Moses' life." A lot of times when bad things happen that's the way we think because none of us really want to claim the responsibility for the defeats in our lives. It just seems a whole lot easier and much more satisfying to blame our defeats on someone or something else. Sometimes we blame God. At other times we blame our circumstances. Sometimes we blame other people for our failures. It's very important, however, to understand that we stand a much better chance of moving past the defeat in our lives to the victory God intends for us if we own up to our role in our personal experiences of defeat.

I was watching a football game yesterday between the University of South Carolina and the University of Georgia. These are always interesting games to me because we've lived in both states. You pull for one team but if the other one wins, that's okay. The University of South Carolina pulled the game out at the very end. In the midst of the excitement on the field, a reporter got to USC coach, Steve Spurrier to ask him about the game. Her question was, "What do you have to say about this hard-fought victory?" Coach Spurrier mentioned the Georgia coach, Mark Richt, and he said, "I told Coach Richt that sometimes one team's meant to win and today that was us." What he intended to say was that the teams were evenly matched and that they were fortunate to come away with a victory. What he actually implied was that somewhere someone with the power to decide chose for South Carolina to win and Georgia to lose. It was almost as if Steve Spurrier was trying to say that God wanted South Carolina to win that game. I feel almost certain that there was a different opinion on the other side of the field.

You see, that's not the way things work. God doesn't simply sit around choosing winners and losers. More often than not, the things that happen in our lives are the results of choices that we have made. When we experience defeat, especially in spiritual matters, it is usually because we have chosen our way instead of God's way. The sooner we are honest about that the closer we come to moving out of the darkness of defeat and into the light of victory. We need to understand that sometimes it is our choices, our actions that put us in the midst of defeating circumstances. Moses made some choices; and they were wrong choices. As a result, he found himself struggling with personal defeat.

A second thing we see from Moses' story is that, rather than being the end of the road, **defeat offers us the opportunity to learn**. God spent the next 40 years teaching

Moses and preparing him for the most important thing he would ever do. Moses could have chosen to sit back and spend his days wallowing in self-pity. He could have lived and ultimately died leading only a bunch of sheep but when God called Moses to go back to Egypt to be the voice of deliverance for His people He called someone who had been thoroughly prepared for the task. Just look at the ways God prepared Moses for his historic task. Moses had been raised in the court of Pharaoh as a brother to man God sent him to confront. During the time when Moses was separated from his own people he was learning all the ways of the Egyptians. This put him in the position where he would have access to Pharaoh. Do you think any other Hebrew slave could walk into the court of the king and demand that he let God's people go? Only Moses could do that. Moses led sheep through the wilderness for 40 years learning the ropes so that he could lead people through some of the same wilderness for the next 40 years. He learned the land and he learned how to survive in the wilderness. These were essential skills for leading the upcoming exodus. Rather than dwelling on defeat, Moses moved on and learned all he could learn from his circumstances.

What do we do with experiences of defeat in our own lives? Do we sit back and lick our wounds or do we take the opportunity to learn what God would teach us from those experiences? Do we focus merely on surviving defeat or do we learn the truth that God would teach us, even in the midst of the dark times, as we seek to move forward in obedience to His will. God gives us a chance to learn, even in the midst of the dark times.

Perhaps the most important teaching we can take from this story in the life of Moses is the understanding that when God is the One in charge **defeat never has to be the last word**. Moses had more than one opportunity to give up. He could have given up when he was accused of murder and spurned by his people. He could have given up during any one of those long days when he was by himself in the wilderness with just the sheep to keep him company. He could have given up as a defeated person but he came to God ultimately showed him that defeat wasn't the last word. That attitude served him well because if you read through the rest of the book of Exodus you will see that the Israelites whom he was called to lead were not a bunch of happy campers. They were campers, to be sure, but no one could accuse them of being happy ones. Every time things went contrary to what they expected, they were ready to kill their leader and go back to Egypt. Instead of giving up, at every difficult situation Moses was able to prevail with God's help because he had learned that defeat is not the last word God purposes to speak over His people.

Think about Moses for a moment. 40 years preparation in Egypt and one decision derails him and sends him off into the wilderness. He could have said, "That's it!" but defeat was not the last word. He went through 40 more years of preparation in the wilderness so he could go back to Egypt and lead God's children to freedom. They set out on what was supposed to be a one-year journey into the Promised Land but that plan was derailed as well. When they came to the land of Canaan, Moses sent spies to check out the territory and 10 of the 12 who were sent said it would be too difficult to take the land to which Moses had led them. When the people of Israel decided that they could not take the land, God told them, "Fine, then you won't. I will wait for a generation who will believe what I tell them." That could have been the end of the story, but Moses had learned in his relationship with God that defeat is never the last word. There were 40 more years of wandering in the wilderness, but once the generation of unbelievers were all gone, the next generation took the land. Moses lived out in his life what I believe he came to know in his heart; no matter how severe the experience of defeat may seem to be, it is never the last word.

We can read through the Scriptures about all kinds of bad things that happen. In just one book, the book of Revelation we can read about all sorts of bad things happening, but the last word is victory. Because the Lord is a God of victory, the last victorious cry of Revelation is, "Even so, Lord Jesus, come!" When we remember in our lives that defeat should never be the last word, that God is always at work, He will give us the light of victory that takes us through the darkness of defeat. If we are willing to put our hand in His, to trust Him for the future and walk with Him through every experience, even the dark times, His victory will be ours.

## **Breaking Through the Darkness of Disobedience**

Psalm 51

We have been focused on issues related to depression for the past couple of weeks. On the first Sunday I shared about the reality of depression and spoke to the fact that often depression is not acknowledged in the lives of Christians. We saw that God's people CAN and DO experience depression but that God gives us keys to breaking through the darkness of depression in His Word.

One of the things it is important to understand is that when we experience depression at any level, the serotonin level in the brain decreases. Some recent reading on the subject pointed to the prospect that not only does a low level of serotonin cause depression, but oftentimes the sad feelings we experience or mild depression that continues for a period of weeks can actually impact the level of serotonin in the brain. In essence, low serotonin causes depression and depression causes low serotonin. That may sound like a play on words, but it shows us something very important. With this kind of knowledge we can see that there are dark experiences in life that can lead us toward depression if they go unnoticed and unchallenged. God offers us some keys to victory in life that can help us to try and break through the shadows before they develop into major depression.

Last week we looked at how sometimes we experience the kind of defeat in our lives that can threaten to overwhelm us and plunge us into a dark time. We saw from the life of Moses that the experience of defeat does not automatically mean that God is punishing us. Sometimes we make defeating choices. Even if that happens, though, God can take those defeats and turn them into learning opportunities that help us to grow toward victory. Because God loves us and has a perfect purpose for us, defeat NEVER has to be the last word.

Today we want to take a look at how disobedience can bring us into dark places in our lives. One of the keys to overcoming the darkness that can lead to depression is the strength of our ongoing relationship with God. Having a strong personal relationship with the Lord is no guarantee that depression will NEVER happen, but the strength of our relationships with God can help us through some of those dark places before they

deepen into depression. Disobeying God, however, disrupts that relationship with Him and casts shadows over the light He offers us.

There was a time in my life many years ago when I sensed God leading me to make a specific decision that I did not want to make. As I chose to go in another direction, it became clearer and clearer to me that I had disobeyed God's clear direction in my life. In my quiet times alone the darkness seemed to get more and more overwhelming. I wondered if God would ever use me again, or if He would allow that disobedience to disqualify me from accomplishing His purposes for my life. One night as I was sitting alone, feeling completely broken, the tune to a song came to my mind that moves me to this day. We heard it earlier in the worship time today and the words go like this:

**Give thanks with a grateful heart;  
Give thanks to the Holy One.  
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.  
And now let the weak say, "I am strong;"  
Let the poor say, "I am rich,"  
Because of what the Lord has done for us.  
Give thanks.**

You might be thinking, "What does this have to do with the experience of disobedience in your life?" I was reminded of a loving Father who looks at our failings through the prism of His Son's suffering and sees something beautiful on the other side. I had an overwhelming sense that the One who gave His Son for me would not cast me aside so easily and the only way I could respond was to do what the song encouraged me to do...give thanks.

When we disobey God, the resulting disruption in our relationship with Him creates a dark place in our lives that can overwhelm us if we don't take intentional steps to see our relationship with God restored.

David was confronted with the harsh consequences of his disobedience when he was confronted by Nathan with the realities of his sin. Perhaps you remember the story. David had been blessed by God in ways that he probably never had imagined. The Lord had taken him from the fields watching sheep, protected him from a deranged King Saul

and finally established him as the king of Israel. He had taken a magnificent capitol city in Jerusalem and had built a splendid palace there for himself. The kingdom was expanding to the point where nearly all the territory promised by God generations before had been taken. David's armies were so well trained and so well led that it was not really necessary for him to even accompany them into battle anymore.

On one of those times when his armies were away from the city, David saw and lusted after the wife of Uriah, one of his faithful soldiers. He sent for her, brought her to the palace and there they engaged in an adulterous relationship. When the woman, Bathsheba, sent word to the king that she was pregnant, David sought for a way to hide his sin. He brought Uriah home from the battlefield and encouraged him to go home and enjoy time with his wife. Uriah was a faithful soldier and he refused to indulge in the comforts of home while his comrades were still on the field of battle.

When David saw that his plan would not be successful, he sent Uriah back to the battle with a note for his commander. Uriah was to be placed at the front of the fiercest fighting. The army was to withdraw from him so that the enemy would kill him for sure. David's orders were carried out exactly and Uriah died. As soon as Bathsheba had had time to mourn her husband, David took her into the palace and made her his wife. David thought that he had successfully hidden both adultery and murder until the day when Nathan came to see him. The prophet told him the story of a wealthy man who had abundant flocks and herds. Another man in the same city was poor, and had nothing except one lamb. The lamb was more of a pet than livestock. One day the wealthy man had guests come to his house. Instead of taking one of his lambs to prepare for a meal, the man took the lamb that belonged to the poor man, killed it and prepared it for his guest.

When David heard this story he was enraged. He said, "As surely as the LORD lives, this man deserves to die!" At that point Nathan told David, "You are the man!" David knew that his sin was known to his confidant, Nathan. More important than that, he knew that God was aware of what he had done. At that point, David admitted his sin and received the gift of God's forgiveness. It is evident from the words of Psalm 51 that David had already been suffering because of his disobedience. Here what he had to say...



**Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.**

**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!**

**For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.**

**Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you may be justified in your words  
and blameless in your judgment.**

**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.**

**Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.**

**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.**

**Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.**

**Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.**

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.**

**Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.**

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.**

**Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.**

**Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.**

**O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.**

**For you will not delight in sacrifice,**

or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise.  
Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem;  
then you will delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

David had come to a crossroads because of his disobedience. His relationship with God was fractured and it was causing spiritual, emotional and even physical pain. In Psalm 32, David wrote, *"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."* We can't say for sure that David wrote Psalm 32 in the context of his sin of adultery and murder, but we can compare this with the words of Psalm 51, where in verse 8 he says, *"Let the bones you that you have broken rejoice,"* and see that the darkness of disobedience can create a spiritual pain that is just as debilitating as the pain of broken bones.

At this dark moment in David's life, he had two choices. He could have chosen to continue in the darkness of his disobedience or he could begin taking the steps that would lead him back to the light of a restored relationship with God. David chose the path of recovery from the darkness of disobedience and in following the instruction he gives us in word and example in Psalm 51 we can learn how we, too, can find our way out of the darkness of disobedience and into the light of restoration.

One of the first things we see in David's prayer is that **recovery from disobedience begins when we acknowledge our sin**. David could have chosen the path of denial and concealment, trying to hide his disobedience from God, from others and even from himself. He learned from painful experience that this is a recipe for disaster. Did you hear what David said in Psalm 32:3? *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away...* We see from Psalm 32:5 the decision that David made. *I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity.* In Psalm 51 David makes his guilt plain. *I know my*

*transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."*

My grandmother died at an early age from a cancer that could have possibly been cured. She knew that something was wrong, but she chose not to be seen by a physician until the disease was so far advanced that there was very little they could do for her. How many times do we allow unconfessed sin to grow and fester inside us? None of us likes to admit wrongdoing. It is a natural human tendency to try and cover up our shortcomings. I say it is a natural tendency, but it is also a destructive one. While we deny the reality of our sin, we step deeper and deeper into a spiritual darkness that for some Christians takes on the physical and psychological dimensions of depression. All the while we have the promise of 1 John 1:9 right before us... **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

The promise of 1 John 1:9 leads us to the second step away from the darkness of disobedience. In order to move beyond the darkness we need to understand that **recovery from disobedience is enabled by God's forgiveness.** David's plea to God is anchored in his conviction that God would hear his confession and grant him forgiveness. He says in Psalm 51:7, *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."* In Psalm 51:10 he asks, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."*

When we were kids growing up in California, my friends and I all envisioned ourselves as star professional athletes one day. One day one of the guys across the street came out with weights fastened to his ankles. We were getting ready to play some football out in the street, and when he came to join us we inquired about his new weights. He informed us that if he wore those weights, when he took them off he would absolutely be able to run faster and jump higher. We all decided that that was our ticket to the pros, so we set about trying to secure weights for ourselves. I remembered that my Dad had gotten some weights to help him rehab an injured shoulder. They fastened around his wrists and he would lift them to build up the muscles. I rooted through the house and found those wrist weights. Since I was only twelve or thirteen years old, the weights for his wrists fit perfectly around my ankles; I was all set to go. After a day of wearing

those “ankle weights” around, I doubt that I was any faster or that I could jump any higher, but when I removed the weight that was holding me back, it certainly *felt* like I was faster.

That’s the way God’s forgiveness works in our spirits. When we admit our disobedience and accept God’s gift of forgiveness, it lightens our way and brightens our spirit. Psalm 32, where David describes the anguish of unconfessed sin, begins with the words, *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”* David knew the joy that comes from accepting the forgiveness of God that moves us from the darkness of disobedience into the light of restored fellowship with God.

There is one final thing we must realize about the path from the darkness of disobedience into the light of a restored relationship with God. The forgiveness of God does not bring light to our lives until we accept the reality of God forgiveness firsthand. We can’t enjoy the light of God’s forgiveness if we continue to wrestle with guilt. God calls us to walk *away* from our sin, receive His forgiveness and walk *on* with Him.

**Recovery from disobedience is realized when we move forward.** Notice what David says about his life once the joy of God’s salvation has been restored. *“Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.”* He ask God to deliver him from guilt, then he says, *“and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness”*. The significance of these words is found in the fact that David is already focusing on what he will *do* upon emerging from the darkness of disobedience. That’s an important key for us in our relationship with God. The light in our lives become real for us when we take the next step, walking daily in the light of a renewed and restored relationship with God.

None of us is perfect. Because we are fallen creatures, even though we have committed our lives to Christ there will be times when we disobey. Most of the time we know to ask God to forgive us and we simply move on. In those times, however, when the disobedience seems to weigh us down and plunge us into darkness, it is important for us to openly admit the sin in our lives, accept God’s wonderful gift of forgiveness and then move on in our relationship with Him. God promises us a new start if we come to him in our brokenness. David reminds us in Psalm 51:17 that *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”*

## Breaking Through the Darkness of Doubt

Genesis 12:10-20 & John 20:26-29

In the path of service, whether it be as a deacon, a pastor a church member...a Christian in any realm of life, there are those times when we experience doubt. Maybe we doubt God's answer to a prayer or maybe we doubt that a certain scripture will be fulfilled. In some dark times we may doubt the goodness or the grace of God. Sometimes when we are going through particularly difficult struggles we may doubt that God loves us. Doubt and faith balance are two sides of a scale. God gives us the gift of faith as a way of combatting our doubt but both are present at various times.

Throughout this month we have looked, not only at the reality of depression (particularly among believers) but also at some of the things that can lead to depression. Oftentimes there are experiences in our lives that, if left unchecked, can drive us deeper into darkness and ultimately into depression. Doubt is one of those experiences. Maybe what begins as a flash of questioning or uncertainty can blossom into doubt. If left unchecked it can bring us to the point of questioning our relationship with God and perhaps even questioning whether or not God really seeks our good. In such challenging times those who are part of the family of faith, who have known the light of walking in fellowship with God may find themselves plunging deeper and deeper into darkness because the very beliefs which have been the foundation of our lives are suddenly called into question.

We think that Christians should never have doubts. In the best of all possible worlds that is probably true. But human beings, as part of a fallen Creation *do* have doubts. There are ample examples of this in the Scriptures; I have chosen two. The first is Thomas, and his moment of doubt is found in John 20:24-29...

**Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."**

**Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and**

**said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

Thomas' story begins as he encounters the other disciples after the Resurrection. Thomas was already in a time of despair. He had devoted at least three years of his life to ministering with Jesus and learning from Jesus. Thomas felt his devotion to the Savior very deeply and he probably felt devastated at Jesus' death. People often call Thomas, "Doubting Thomas," but the fact is he was a man of deep devotion. In John 11 Jesus tells his disciples that they are going to Bethany because Lazarus has died. They knew the danger that entailed, but Thomas was ready to stand with his Savior. In verse 16 his words are recorded, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas was not a weak person. Ten of the disciples were gathered together in the Upper Room after the crucifixion. Most likely they were gathered there because they were afraid and found security when they were together. Thomas was not with them. Whatever his reasoning, he did not consider it necessary to have the protection of the other ten disciples so he was not there when the risen Lord first appeared to his disciples. After such an unbelievable experience, the ten found Thomas and told him what had happened. In that time of crisis and despair, this news probably seemed like a cruel joke to Thomas. His response to them, probably fueled by grief, anger and frustration, was, "I won't believe any of this until I see it for myself!"

Let me take a moment to say that, to the credit of the other ten disciples, they were not offended by what their brother said in his outburst. The reason we know this is because when they were gathered together eight days later Thomas was with them. He could only have come into that locked room by invitation. The disciples still counted Thomas as their brother and showed us a good example of how we should deal with the struggles and failures of others in the family of faith.

Eleven of Jesus' disciples, including Thomas, were gathered and the risen Lord appeared to them once again. Jesus invited Thomas to have his doubts resolved. He told Thomas, "Look! Touch!" but the disciple no longer needed such proof. Thomas went to his knees and cried out, "My Lord and my God!" In order to make sure that the

teachable moment did not pass, Jesus said to him, "You have believed because of what you see. The truly blessed ones are those who have not seen and still believe."

The other story comes from the life of Abraham and is found in the book of Genesis, chapter 12, verses 10-20...

**Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that is may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is you wife; take her, and go." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.**

The beginning of chapter 12 is a great story of faith. God appears to Abram and tells him to leave his homeland. He gave no destination, no guarantees, and no contract. He simply told Abram, "Go where I tell you and I will make you a great nation." Abram responded in obedience and went to the place where God directed him. Abram settled there, and no sooner did he get settled well than a severe famine struck the land. Abram had removed himself from all his security, all that was familiar to him and now there was trouble. This must have generated a crisis of doubt for Abram. God had promised to make him a great nation, but he had no children. God had promised to take care of him, but there is no rain and no food. Abram gave in to his doubts, took matters into his own hands and went down to Egypt. When Abram got to Egypt, he said, "These Egyptians are ruthless people. When they see you, Sarai, they will kill me

and take you for themselves. If they know you are my wife, there is nothing to protect me. Say you are my sister, and not only will they let me live but they will treat me well because of you.” They carried out the ruse, but when the truth became known to Pharaoh, he confronted Abram. Abram, the one who had heard the voice of God, had to suffer the indignity of being chastised by a pagan king because he succumbed to his doubt.

We can see, even from the Scriptures, that doubt is a reality. It even afflicts those who know God and should have no reason for it. So, when doubt comes into our lives it’s important to know that there are things we can do to deal with those doubts so they don’t plunge us deeper and deeper into darkness. We can find some of those clues to understanding and defeating doubt in these two stories.

The first thing we can pick up from these stories is that **doubt usually comes as the result of a crisis**. For Thomas it was the crisis of Jesus’ death. For Abram it was a famine in the land and the suffering and insecurity that came as a result. Generally, we don’t have any reason to doubt if everything is rocking along the way we expect. But let a crisis come along, let us face difficult challenges at some point and all of a sudden the seeds of doubt are planted. That is just a statement of reality, but it also should serve as a warning to us. When times of crisis come along, we need to be aware that doubt can arise as a result so we must watch what we are thinking, especially when the way seems dark. We need to reassure ourselves in the tough times with words from the Scriptures and words from encouraging fellow believers that build within us that reservoir of faith and trust that can take us through seasons of doubt.

A second thing we see from these examples is that **doubt takes hold when we look at ourselves instead of our Savior**. For Thomas, when he began focusing on his own circumstances he forgot that Jesus had told them plainly what would happen. Jesus had said that he would be turned over to evil men. He told them that he would be tortured and eventually be put to death, but that on the third day he would rise from the dead. When Thomas became fixated on his own circumstances instead of remembering what the Savior had said, doubt was able to take hold in his life.



The same thing was true in the life of Abram. God said, "Get up, go to the place I will show you and I will make you a great nation." But when the food dried up, Abram said, "I am in trouble. What am I going to do?" He forgot the promise of God. Instead of remembering that everything depended on the LORD, he began to think it depended on *him*. He took his eyes off the LORD. If you want to watch how this happened, read the entirety of Genesis 12. One of the things you will see is that when Abram was following God, he built an altar and worshiped at every place he pitched his tents. When Abram gave in to his doubts and took matters into his own hands, he stopped worshiping. Once Abram decided to go to Egypt, there is no record of him building *any* altars on his journey. He took his eyes off of the LORD and His promise and focused them instead on himself. That's what happens to us. In times of crisis doubt can grow if we focus on ourselves and our circumstances and take our eyes off the Savior. At those times of doubt, we need to increase our focus on worship, we need to increase our focus on prayer and look deeply into the Scriptures to hear what God would speak. In this way we can take the initiative in keeping our eyes on the Savior.

One of the things I have learned in many years as a pastor is that people tend to withdraw from worship and from fellowship with other believers at the times when they need that support the most, when they are dealing with crisis and doubt. This has proven to be the case so often that our new church software is built to help pastors deal with members in crisis. If the attendance of the congregation is tracked effectively, the software is designed to send an email when a regular attender has missed several Sundays of worship or Bible Study. The assumption is that if a person has withdrawn from worshiping God and fellowship with God's people, there is something going on that needs the pastor's attention. This feature was designed by those who have come to understand that in times of crisis we have the tendency to go the opposite way from where we need to go. We run away from God and from God's people instead of keeping our eyes trained MORE fully on Him. If we are going to avoid the darkness, we need to make those times of crisis and trial the times when we get more intentional about our focus on God and His plan for our lives, no matter how difficult that may seem.

A third thing we see from these stories is that, **while the Lord is grieved by our doubt, He will strengthen our faith.** Jesus was grieved by Thomas' lack of faith. There is

sadness in his assessment that Thomas came to belief because of what he *saw*. In spite of that, he strengthened Thomas' faith. Tradition has it that Thomas made his way to South Central Asia with the gospel and it is believed that he gave his life for the Savior in that area. God also strengthened Abram's faith. The very same man who ran to Egypt to escape famine instead of trusting God is the one who was willing to sacrifice his own son on an altar just because God told him to do so. So it is with us; even though our doubts may grieve the Lord, if we strive to walk with Him He will strengthen our faith. Doubts will come; but they don't have to plunge us into darkness. If we understand the threat and keep our eyes trained on the Lord.