

# Faith and Depression

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago, the novelist William Styron published a memoir that detailed his lifelong struggle with clinical depression. He titled the book *Darkness Visible*. His description of depression being like a palpable presence in this life resonates with the experiences of lots of people, including lots of Christians in the Church. We now and then can even read echoes of all of this in the Bible. Today on *Groundwork*, we will wonder about depression: How to think about it as Christians, and what the Bible can offer to help. Stay tuned.

## DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now the second program in a fairly short, four-part series we are doing dealing with sort of some spiritual issues—some pastoral issues. So, in our first program, we considered dementia...the various forms of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. We are going to do depression today. Episode three will be on anxiety and worry, and then we will close out this series with chronic pain and chronic illness; things people live with.

## DAVE BAST

And we are really delighted to be able to welcome a guest to join us on this program, and on the next program on anxiety as well. He is Dr. Chuck DeGroat, from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, where he is a professor of pastoral care and Christian spirituality; and also, I might add, Chuck is a licensed therapist himself. So Chuck, welcome to the program. We are glad to have you.

## CHUCK DEGROAT

It's so good to be here.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

What we want to talk about in this program really is kind of clinical depression. It is not just being disappointed one day or having kind of a bad day or feeling bummed. I mean, sometimes, you know, a project you worked on at work didn't pan out quite right and you sort of say, you know...well, somebody says: How do you feel? Well, you say, you know, I'm depressed. It didn't go well. But, we throw that term around loosely, but actual depression is a very different thing.

## CHUCK DEGROAT

Yes, it is different. When we talk about clinical depression, we are talking about a certain set of symptoms that last a period of time. So, it is not just a bad day. It is something that lasts over a period of weeks, and really disrupts the person's life and lifestyle, vocation, etc.

## DAVE BAST

Scott mentioned in the introduction this book by William Styron, *Darkness Visible*. It made me think of Winston Churchill, who struggled quite often with depression. He called it the black dog. So, there is this darkness image; there is this sort of blackness that descends—a cloud descends; and that can go on and on.

## **CHUCK DEGROAT**

It sure can. It can go on and on. I don't talk as much about Winston Churchill as much as Charles Spurgeon, who is a kind of hero of mine, but for decades wrestled with depression...probably a clinical depression that kept him out of the pulpit many weeks; and I wonder even today if a pastor could phone up his associate pastor and say: I am going to miss a Sunday because of depression; like Charles Spurgeon did. I think maybe even back in the day there was more permission to talk about these things than there is in our sort of hyper-medicated, hyper-positive culture that we live in today.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, and you know, sometimes this is also called melancholy...it used to be called melancholy. Abraham Lincoln is said to have suffered from melancholy...

Dave Bast: A melancholy man with much to be melancholy about, by the way.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; for a lot of people, Chuck and Dave, it is a condition with which people sometimes feel that they were born. We don't often read a whole poem here on *Groundwork*, but Jane Kenyon was a wonderful poet, and she did deal with depression and melancholy. She wrote this poem, *From the Nursery*, which I think helps us understand...those of us who don't struggle with depression...what it is like to have this outlook on life. So, here is this poem from the nursery:

When I was born, you waited behind a pile of linen in the nursery; and when we were alone, you lay down on top of me, pressing the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on, everything under the sun and moon made me sad; even the yellow wooden beads that slid and spun along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude; you ruined my manners toward God: "We are simply here to wait for death; the pleasures of earth are overrated."

I only appeared to belong to my mother; to live among blocks and cotton undershirts with snaps; among red tin lunchboxes and report cards and ugly brown slippers.

I was already yours—the anti-urge; the mutilator of souls.

## **DAVE BAST**

Powerful stuff. So, she is personifying depression there, and calls it "the mutilator of the soul."

## **CHUCK DEGROAT**

I think sometimes that is where people don't really understand the nature of depression; you know, that line: You lay down on top of me, pressing... This isn't, again, a momentary or a daylong kind of episode of sadness. This is something that people will report experiencing over long periods of time. They just cannot do anything about it. There is nothing that they can think, say or do that really pulls them out of this desolation.

## **DAVE BAST**

Is this a mystery to us medically, Chuck, or are there some hints at a cause?

## **CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes, that is a good question; and there is some debate about that. There are certainly medical and biological components to this. Serotonin levels are often a piece of this. Your DNA, your family history...those are all important components, too. I think, at the same time, there is just the grief of being born into this world. You know, the great poet George Herbert once said: I cried when I was born, and every day shows why. We live in a groaning creation, and I think we participate in that groaning in a particular kind of way because of the brokenness of the world.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Those words of Jane Kenyon, and now George Herbert, remind us of some of the psalms of lament, Dave...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I am thinking of Psalm 88 in particular...

**DAVE BAST**

Absolutely, right. Yes, we have been talking about different people who have experienced this, but the psalmist seems to express something very similar. There is one psalm; it is unique because it is the only psalm with no hope and no expression of trust in God at the end. It is just dark, dark, dark; and it is Psalm 88, that goes, in part, like this:

<sup>3</sup>I am overwhelmed with troubles; my life draws near to death. <sup>4</sup>I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. <sup>5</sup>I am set apart with the dead like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more. <sup>17</sup>All day long, they surround me like a flood; they completely engulf me. <sup>18</sup>You have taken from me friend and neighbor...(and this is the last line of the psalm) darkness is my closest friend.

So, there is that same image...darkness.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

What a powerful line. You know, there are those moments where we hear someone say: It is just so dark; and we want to lift them out immediately; and maybe this psalm gives us permission to let them stay in that tension. You know, maybe God is actually okay in the silence of this moment with that tension that we are experiencing; maybe God is bigger than our small words at times.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And that is so important, Chuck, to hear and to say; because, yes, sometimes out of the best of motives, we want to fix things, particularly for people we love—we want to fix it, you know—we want to say: Come on; cheer up; but, as you say, it is not that easy; but, I also think, Chuck, you touched on something interesting there; and Dave, you did, too, in setting up this psalm. These psalms of lament are in the Bible for lots of reasons, not the least of which is to say you can be a believer. You believe in God, you are a faithful person, and you can still feel this way. People of faith talk this way...pray this way.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, absolutely; and these words are given to us...all the psalms are given to us...to actually, literally, give us language to pray back to God. So, yes, there is permission here; but, we want to explore a little bit more what it is possible for us to do as a friend, as a spouse, a loved one, if someone we know and care about is dealing with this. So, let's look at what scripture might help us do in that situation.

*Segment 2*

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and today that includes Chuck DeGroat, professor of pastoral care and Christian spirituality at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and Chuck, you are joining us for this conversation, where today we are talking about depression; and we have been talking about the fact that true believers, as reflected in the psalms, can be this way; but we also want to talk a little bit about...a little bit more about that, but also what we can do to support people.

## **DAVE BAST**

Let's dig right back into scripture and turn again to the psalms. Here is perhaps a better known psalm...a much better known psalm than Psalm 88. It is Psalm 42, that begins this way: As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. <sup>2</sup>My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? <sup>3</sup>My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

It strikes me that that is a question that people in depression often ask, probably: Where is God in all this? Am I right?

## **CHUCK DEGROAT**

I think you are right. There is a basic human longing this side of the new heaven and the new earth. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God; but that longing is so much more acute in someone with clinical depression. In fact, there is a kind of blackness...there is a kind of darkness. It doesn't feel like God is anywhere to be found. I think of St. John of the Cross, the great 16<sup>th</sup> Century mystic, who talked about the "dark night of the soul": Where has God gone? It is just so dark.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And it is interesting, you know, in the psalm that Dave just read, the psalmist had some taunters...people who we assume are not believers in God, who are taunting him, saying: Where is your God? You are in such a bad circumstance here, where is your God? Well, as fellow believers dealing with a friend, a brother or sister who is dealing with depression, I don't think we would ever taunt them that way; but, de facto, we almost sort of do when we say to them: Well, just read some church signs. You can drive by churches...I saw one not too long ago: We are too blessed to be depressed; or: Put on a happy faith. That, Chuck, I think is sort of as good as saying to them: Where is your God? Just turn to God; pray harder, and you won't feel this way.

## **CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes, that is right. St. Augustine says: God is more near to me than I am to myself; and I love that. God is present even in the midst of these things; but when you are depressed, it doesn't feel like God is there at all; and small, pithy sayings like you find on church signs are often not helpful in those moments. They don't remind us in deeper ways that God abides even in these darker moments.

## **DAVE BAST**

And it strikes me that we have a tendency to add to people's suffering by putting some guilt on them when we say you shouldn't be doing this. You shouldn't be experiencing this. You shouldn't be feeling this way.

## **CHUCK DEGROAT**

As if there is something wrong with you, and yet, the Canon gives us permission...and many of the women and men that we admire throughout Church history...give us permission to wrestle with God in these ways. You see it right there in the psalm: Where are you, God? My heart longs for you, and yet, you are absent. C. S. Lewis has this great line. He says: Joy is the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing...you know, on this side of the new heaven and the new earth there will always be a stab...a longing. There is something missing; and one of the really significant new insights about depression that I think gets back to the biblical narrative is that more than merely brain science...more than simply chemistry or serotonin...there is a deep and abiding grief in our souls that is unsatisfied. Actually, clinicians are getting back to the ancient narrative, which I find fascinating.

## **DAVE BAST**

The ancient narrative of missing something—missing God?

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes; that there has been this exile since the fall. We have been sort of looking for God, you know; and although Jesus comes to us, and although the Spirit is sent to us, there is still this sense that it is not yet right.

**DAVE BAST**

We are living east of Eden.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

That's right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

That is right; and it reminds me of my teacher, Fred Klooster, who used to point out that in the Heidelberg Catechism—one of the standards in the Reformed tradition—the first section, which deals with sin and the fall, is called Misery; but in the original German of the Catechism, it is *Elend*, which is from the Latin, ex-land, which means we are exiled...we are east of Eden, as you just said, Dave. We are not home, and we sense it; and of course, we all feel that, but again, for people who are melancholic, for people who are dealing with clinical depression, it is not something that is in their conscious control, that they can just pray harder or put on a happy faith and it will be better; and so, they do need treatment; and in some places that has been looked down on. You know, if you've got a slipped disc and your doctor gives you a pill, good. If you have diabetes and you get put on medication, fine; but people who have depression who get put on medication...sometimes other Christians say: Well, you shouldn't need that, should you?

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

You shouldn't need that, yes, for the psychological symptoms versus a physical ailment, right? And we generally...I as a pastor...pastoral counselor, clinician...take a two-pronged approach. One is: Should we evaluate for medication? Is there a need for something to help in a particular season? But I do think that depression is, in a sense, a kind of hardened grief; that there is something more going on there; and I am always wanting to kind of probe more deeply into the story to understand what is missing. What are you longing for? What is aching within your soul?

**DAVE BAST**

You know, one of the things, as you just mentioned that, Scott and Chuck, sort of this unspoken sense that there is a little bit of a cloud over you if you have to be on medication. We often kind of secretly react that way, too, at the thought of someone going to see a therapist. What do you need that for? But, it is a wonderful tool to be able to offer to people.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

I think therapy can be a wonderful tool. I think there are some therapists that are mechanics, though, and I don't always trust that kind of therapy. I do trust therapists who take a multi-pronged approach, and they are interested in delving deeper into people's stories and understanding sort of the nature of grief underneath.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think, too...so, back into Psalm 42 now, nobody can talk themselves out of true clinical depression, and we shouldn't act like they can, and just tell people to cheer up; but there is, you know, even in Psalm 42, moving a little farther, this becomes a refrain in Psalm 42. This is verse 5:

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Now again, this isn't the cure-all, even for the psalmist, but there is some hope there.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

And especially to someone like me who is a graduate of Hope College. That is the motto of the college: Hope in God—put your hope in God; but there is this sense in which he is talking to himself, isn't he?

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

And kind of encouraging himself.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

That's right. There is an active wrestling with God going on, and I think what happens in depression is people stop wrestling. In one sense, their soul gives up, and what we see in the psalms is that there is a re-engagement with God, getting back into the boxing ring or the wrestling ring with God: I am going to share with you everything that is going on. I am going to deal with this; even talking to myself is a form of doing that.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; like Jacob: I will not let you go until you bless me.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

That's right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, indeed; and we have noted this before on *Groundwork*: The irony of the psalms of lament is that they are still addressed to God. Even the psalms that say God is completely missing from my life, aren't you, God? The psalmists are still talking to God.

Well, we have talked about some things not to say and not to do to support people who are wrestling with depression; but as we close out the program, we will want to consider some things we *can* do that will genuinely be spiritually and mentally helpful, and we will turn to that in just a moment.

*Segment 3*

**DAVE BAST**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

And I am Chuck DeGroat.

**DAVE BAST**

And let's turn once more to a brief passage, this time from the New Testament; part of Jesus' farewell discourse from Chapter 16 of the Gospel of John, where Jesus says:

<sup>33</sup>“I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble; but take heart, I have overcome the world.

That really strikes me as our ultimate encouragement.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; and it is important to not ignore the fact that Jesus says: I have overcome the world; but he doesn't say: Therefore, you will *not* have any trouble. You will never have a bad day...or, you know, in this case we

are talking about being depressed. He says: No, you will...you will. I have overcome the world, but you are still going to have trouble; but remember, I have overcome the world.

I think, Chuck, that some of that light that maybe we can point people to...

### **CHUCK DEGROAT**

That's right.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Not in some simplistic way, but point them to it, at least.

### **CHUCK DEGROAT**

That's right. I think about the Beatitudes and how Jesus begins with blessed are the poor in spirit...the *pt?choi sto*...the broken. Blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the hungry and thirsty; that on this side, there is always a yearning—always a longing. In fact...and this may be hard for some to hear, in Revelation Chapter 6, even the saints...even the martyrs in heaven are crying out: How long, O Lord? And so, there is something about this continued wrestling that I think is actually part and parcel of the kind of peace that God longs for in our lives; that in the wrestling, we find that we get the blessing of peace.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes; I mean, there is this sense...we have touched on this...the already but not yet. It is all true, all these great promises, and we do have a kind of peace. We are going to talk a little bit more about that in the next program; but we don't have it all yet. Christ is with us through the Spirit. Christ is also absent. His body is not here. We still look for his return. We long to see him again—the day of his coming. So, that yearning goes on, and it is a healthy part of the Christian life, it strikes me.

### **CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think that is true for all...all believers, right? Now of course, clinical depression itself isn't healthy. We do want people to get through the worst of that; but yes, that tension will remain. I think, Dave, that you made a good point there; and that is also why we should expect that this is going to happen.

When we were getting ready for this program, I went to Google, which everybody does now, and I entered Bible, depression; and I was given an awful lot of websites with titles like: Seven Bible texts to overcome depression, which again, it is far too simplistic to think we can banish all such things this side of the fullness of God's kingdom. So, by all means, we should encourage people to read scripture who are struggling with things...to pray...but we know that the solutions are not going to be instantaneous.

### **CHUCK DEGROAT**

That's right; and you think about how rates of depression are on the rise today. In the midst of all of the technology, all of the resources, I think we are becoming detached from our humanity in a sense—from our longing. We are so satisfied by all of these different things, we are losing touch with the very human conversation; and I think sometimes what medication can do with clinical depression is it can get you back to a place where you can finally begin to deal with the real grief, the real pain, of your life. But we are so distracted nowadays.

### **DAVE BAST**

Plus, we look at other peoples' lives that seem so great, on Facebook or Instagram, or whatever, and it makes us more depressed: Why aren't I more like that?

### **CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes, so much comparison.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; Chuck, tell us some of the things you think might be helpful to share with a person who is suffering from this.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes; I find that...

**DAVE BAST**

Or maybe do...not necessarily say, but do.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Well, I think scripture models it. There is this honest conversation that scripture gives us. There is this constant going back to God with the reality of our pain. There is the earthiness—this rawness—that...you know, that I find...when I talk to people who are clinically depressed, they have gotten away from honest conversation with God. They are looking for satisfaction in things that will temporarily take away the pain or numb; but they have stopped journaling, they have stopped praying the psalms; and so, I think besides the kinds of things we talked about a little bit earlier about getting the kind of medical help that you might need; going on medication, if that is necessary; to get back into that honest conversation with God: How long, O Lord? I find that many people don't feel like they have permission because in large part our churches don't invite us. Lament, frankly, is not modeled in our churches.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; a friend of mind notes that lots of churches have praise teams...

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

But we don't have lament teams...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And we have noted before, Dave and Chuck, here on *Groundwork* that one-third of the psalms are lament psalms, but you wouldn't know that from attending most Christian worship services because you don't hear laments a third of the time; and so, I think you are right, Chuck; people don't feel like they have permission to yell at God. The psalms of lament say: Yell; he can take it.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Yes; I taught through the book of Philippians early on in ministry, and there is that classic passage: Rejoice in the Lord always...you know, but that does come in the context of Paul, in Chapter 1, wondering if it might not just be better to be with Jesus right now, you know?

**DAVE BAST**

Yes: I desire to depart and be with Christ...

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Right; so, it is not like Paul is in this kind of Buddhist trance, you know...no, it is a very earthy kind of rejoicing that acknowledges the suffering of reality.



**DAVE BAST**

Especially since he writes those words from prison...

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

Right; sure.

**DAVE BAST**

Under sentence...potentially sentence of death.

**CHUCK DEGROAT**

In the midst of suffering, right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, it reminds me...we did a series on the book of Job a while back, because a little while ago, Dave, when you were asking Chuck: What can people say; or then you said: Or just do? And indeed, sometimes...you know, we remember Job's friends, when they showed up, they were at their most pastorally effective the first week when they just sat with Job in silence. Once they started to talk, things kind of went downhill rather quickly; and I think for those of us who are fixers, and a lot of us are, who just want to find that magic thing to say, it doesn't always happen; and it kind of also reminds me, therefore, of Matthew 25: I was in prison, you visited me; I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. Maybe we could riff on Jesus' words there, and we could say: I was depressed and you were simply there for me; and sometimes just being there is the best thing that we can do.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and a special thanks to our guest, Dr. Chuck DeGroat. We hope you will join us again next time, as all three of us together examine the help scripture provides us when we deal with anxiety or worry.

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*Printed on November 21, 2024*