

Biblical Counseling Center publishes **eCounselor's Weekly** guide, to encourage counselors and all believers in discipleship and daily growth

### Spiritual Depression's Slippery Slope

By Dr. Ron Allchin

Let me preface this article by recognizing that some depressions have a legitimate physical cause that must be addressed and controlled through the advancements of medical science. Diabetes, hypothyroid, other glandular problems may be directly connected to the depression a person feels. I will let the medical doctors give help for those medical issues originating in bodily sicknesses that affect the emotions.



"Spiritual Depression" is rooted in some spiritual issue(s). We describe it as a slippery slope that has four very distinct levels moving emotionally and spiritually downward. The person who starts his slide can move downward through these four levels very quickly, depending on his beliefs and maturity in Christ and the Word and his habituated patterns of thought. The Good news is that a person can stop his downward slide at any level and move back up to the top out of depression if he will bring God and His Word to bear on his thought patterns. When he applies Biblical truth to his thoughts, beliefs, and actions, he will see his emotions change.

**Disappointment** is the first level. It is not sin to be disappointed. We are all disappointed at times for various reasons. Disappointment comes when a person doesn't get something he really wanted or thinks he deserved. Maybe he didn't get the pay raise or the recognition he expected. Maybe he is disappointed by the gift he received, expecting something better. Maybe the baby wasn't the desired gender, or there was no baby at all after many years. On and on, disappointments come with hopes and dreams dashed.

There is also disappointment when a person gets something he didn't want or deserve. Maybe it was a layoff or loss of a job unexpectedly, or a breakdown of a relationship. Physical problems, life-threatening illnesses, or loss of loved ones are disappointments we all experience but certainly don't expect or ask for. We experience grief and sadness over a loss, and confusion over unfulfilled expectations. How our heart responds to these disappointments determines the direction we go, either reaching up to God or down the slippery slope of depression.

Christ Himself faced many of disappointments, yet He never sinned by allowing Himself to slide downward the next level. He continued to place Himself in the hands of a sovereign, loving God, just as each of us must. We must know God who has a purpose for every disappointment. Disappointment must be seen as **HIS Appointment** for us. Trust in HIM, that He has never made a mistake in what He allows in our lives, and He never will.

When a person fails to deal with situations at the Disappointment level he slips downward to the **Discontentment** level. He won't be satisfied without getting what he expected, what he thought he deserved. He won't find contentment in a condition or circumstance he believed he did not deserve. Disappointment has slipped into discontentment, and discontentment is sin. It is dissatisfaction with what God is doing in his life at that moment, a self-righteousness that says he knows better than God, or a self-pity that sees himself as the undeserving victim of unfair circumstances. This leads to anger and bitterness toward God and others.

A person can learn to live with disappointment and find contentment, but only as he sees God as bigger than the disappointment. God has a far greater, sovereign purpose for the disappointment in his life than he is able to see at the moment. Paul said that contentment, even amidst negative situations, is something that every believer can learn (Php 4:13). He also instructed Timothy, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1Tim 6:6). The inverse is also true, that ungodly thoughts and attitudes with discontent is great loss.

When we slip from disappointment to discontentment, **Despair** is the next descending emotion down that slippery slope. The Greek word means "no way out, no way through." Despair believes there is "no way out" of the discontentment over disappointing circumstances. The discontented person is dissatisfied and believes there is "no way through" to reach contentment or a better circumstance. This is where many give up on responsibilities and check out of life, thinking it will never be better.

Of course the person in despair is deceived by his own desires (Jas 1:14-15). He believes a lie that "there is no way out." He is blinded by disappointment and won't be content until he gets the result he wants. He is stubbornly seeking his own way and not God's way out (1Cor 10:13). The despairing person will find no way out until his will, his wants and desires are submitted to God's desires for him. When he continues looking for a way to escape the pain by trusting only his own understanding (Prov 3:5) he will never find the right (God's) escape route.

Someone must be there for him to confront the lie he is believing and to show him the truth and the way of escape. He must be reconnected to a Faithful God who has indeed provided a way to escape and who will help him bear the disappointment and not break under it. He needs to experience and practice the truth of and trust in the Lord with all his heart, and to let this faithful, loving and sovereign God direct his path out of the disappointing circumstance in his life.

As the person in despair is lovingly and gently guided to see the lie his heart has believed, he must be encouraged with hope. A wise brother must help him to see and then walk with him through the application of Biblical Truth that will replace the lie. This brother must counsel him to develop his trust in God and eventually to see God's sovereign purposes every time for all of life's disappointments (Rom 8:28,29).

If the person in despair continues to be convinced the lie is true for him, he slides further downward to the fourth level to the **Destructive** mode. He finds himself at the bottom both emotionally and spiritually. The desperately destructive person could act in a way out that would damage his employment, finances, or even his own life or the life of another. This purposeless, despair-driven direction ultimately damages his spiritual and emotional life even more.

Until the person looks upward to realize that the God who loves him is still with him and wants to help him through, the person may seek foolish, destructive ways out of his low spiritual and emotional circumstance. He needs a brother to walk through this difficult but hopeful time with him. Will you be that brother or sister?

*It is necessary to compassionately instruct this person with the truth and show him God's way out. Jonah found God's way out of the destructive fourth level of the slippery slope when he wrote in Jonah 2. "When my life was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to you and into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake the HOPE of your steadfast love. But I with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; Salvation belongs to the Lord."*

*Study Jonah's life to see how he followed this pattern two times in four chapters. He found hope in God in the belly of the whale and finally obeyed. But again he went down the slippery slope and wanted to die, angry at God for sparing the Ninevites, and until we can ask Jonah how it all ended for him, God didn't reveal that last chapter to us.*

*But we are still writing our own last chapter. Let's learn from Jonah's slippery slope to trust in God rather than to despair!*

#### Biblical Counseling Center

Main Office • 3233 N Arlington Heights Rd, Suite 302 Arlington Heights, IL 60004  
 Schererville Office • 833 W Lincoln Hwy, Suite 115W Schererville, Indiana 46375  
 Fox Lake Office • Fox Lake Community Church, 25 W Big Hollow Road Fox Lake, Illinois 60020  
 Email [info@biblicalcounselingcenter.org](mailto:info@biblicalcounselingcenter.org) • Telephone (847) 398-7193

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