

Out of the Cave

STEPPING INTO THE LIGHT WHEN
DEPRESSION DARKENS WHAT YOU SEE

CHRIS HODGES



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Out of the Cave

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*This book is dedicated to Rick Bezet. For more than twenty-five years, you have been a faithful and trusted friend.
Our constant conversations always encourage me.
Your positive spirit always lifts me.
You are a gift to me from God.
My prayer is that everyone could have a friend
like you to help them out of the cave.*

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Foreword

Sometimes you have to experience darkness before you appreciate the light.

I was reminded of this truth during power outages not long ago at home in California. Some blackouts were planned as a measure to prevent the spread of devastating wildfires while others resulted from fluctuating energy supply and increased consumer usage. But regardless of whether we expected electric power to shut down or got caught off guard, we all knew the frustration, discomfort, and inconvenience of finding ourselves in the dark.

Emotional, psychological, and spiritual darkness is even more unsettling. We lose our anchor points and become disoriented, uncertain of which direction leads us forward. Worry and doubt cloud our thinking as fear and anxiety shadow our feelings. Uncertainty, dread, and despair replace the security, joy, and hope we once knew. Worst of all, we often feel powerless to escape our pain and wonder why God feels so far away.

Depression is the word often used to describe our struggles in these times of darkness, usually a catchall for many kinds of mental illness. But identifying the problem doesn't necessarily help us find the solution. Despite the increase of diagnosing and treating depression, the stigma still lingers, even among people of faith. Followers of Jesus,

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however, should be first responders to those battling the darkness of depression. We should be compassionate facilitators of hope and healing, following the example set by Christ during his time on earth. The church should be a primary resource for eradicating the stigma and serving those in need of treatment.

We've stigmatized mental illness and depression for far too long. It's not a sin to be sick, and your character isn't defined by your chemistry. Your identity is not based on your illness. Your brain, like your heart or lungs, is just another organ in your body. Christians can suffer depression and mental illness just like they experience a toothache, broken bone, or clogged artery, just as any human being does. When our physical health breaks down, we seek treatment, take medication as prescribed, and pursue recovery.

Similarly, when our mental and emotional health causes suffering, we must not ignore it, deny it, or shame ourselves for what we experience. Instead, we see medical professionals, take medication if needed, and face causes and contributors we can modify or change. We work with doctors, counselors, therapists, pastors, and other believers to restore our minds just as we would our bodies. We pursue holistic healing so we can experience the fullness of life God created us to enjoy, the same fullness fueling our ministry to those around us. Rather than hide our struggles to regain mental health, we can find support, strength, and hope by honestly sharing our battles.

Which is why I'm grateful my friend Chris Hodges has written *Out of the Cave*. I've admired and respected Chris since he started Church of the Highlands two decades ago. Right out of the gate, his leadership impressed me and his faith inspired me. God had clearly given Chris a vision for creating and sustaining a thriving, purpose driven church, and Chris listened and obeyed.

I've also appreciated the personal connection Chris brings to his insightful teaching of God's Word, and this book reflects the best of

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both. As leaders, we must be honest about our own mental health challenges. We're just as human as anyone else, and our struggles are just as painful. Becoming a leader doesn't insulate us from depression and anxiety, and Chris has battled them just as I have. He's also discovered that we must never give up in those seasons of struggle but persevere through them, moment by moment and hour by hour, trusting God to guide us forward. And those painful battles are never wasted.

I'm a firm believer that your greatest ministry always flows out of your greatest pain. During the times when I've felt lost in a cave of depression, God never gave up on me and repeatedly met me there and brought me back into the light of his truth. I remember feeling depressed for most of my second year as pastor of Saddleback Church. But God not only sustained me but used that experience as a catalyst for some of the most significant developments of my ministry there.

God never wastes our pain, and followers of Jesus should never shy away from showing people this truth in the context of our lives. When we begin to show our own frailty, we also reveal God's power to bring hope, to restore health, and to redeem suffering. This is the gift Chris gives us throughout these pages. He not only shares his own struggles openly and honestly, but he also guides us alongside the prophet Elijah's journey.

The result is a resource shining the truth of God's Word into your life along with the encouragement of a caring brother. Chris is upfront about his limitations as an expert on depression and mental illness, but I believe he underestimates his wisdom and expertise in treating our souls. He knows what it means to wrestle with the kind of overwhelming emotions that often sideline us. He has walked through the valley of the shadow of loss and felt the deep ache of sorrow and grief.

More importantly, though, Chris has heard the whisper of God's Spirit inviting him, reviving him, empowering him. The same invitation Elijah received thousands of years ago in the utter darkness of his

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own fears, disappointments, and exhaustion. The same opportunity you have right now as well.

Because if you look for him, God will meet you in these pages. Right where you are. The psalmist says, “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:17–18 NIV). Whether you’re struggling with depression or hoping to serve and encourage others in the battle, *Out of the Cave* separates science from stigma, fact from fiction, and instructs as much as it encourages.

So consider this book a match to ignite your faith again, a spark to kindle hope in the power of God in your life. Don’t let the stigma and shame of your suffering leave you wandering in the dark. Because you don’t have to stay there. There’s never a shortage or outage with God’s power. If you seek him where you are, God will meet you there. It’s time to come out of your cave and into his light!

Rick Warren
Founding Pastor, Saddleback Church
Author, *The Purpose Driven Life*

Introduction

An Invitation to Come Out of Your Cave

*P*astor's Suicide Leaves Many Heartbroken

The headline jumped from my phone screen and cut right through me.

Although I had never met him, I knew his name and was aware we had friends and acquaintances in common. The news of anyone's suicide saddens me, but when I read about this pastor's decision to take his own life, I was devastated—for him, his wife and children, his church family, his friends and community. I recalled two other pastors who had made the same tragic choice in the past couple of years, but somehow this latest loss felt more personal.

I could identify with the intense pressure of juggling the many demands of leading a church and shepherding the people entrusted to your care. Often invisible to others, the toll of being in full-time vocational ministry can leave a pastor weary and wounded, vulnerable to burnout and self-sabotage. As a pastor to other pastors, I also knew that even when you have the hope of heaven, the pain on earth can weigh too heavily. The darkness of depression is real even when you're living in the light of God's grace.

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Pastors, along with all followers of Jesus, are not immune from depression.

I've experienced my own battles with depression, but news of this latest suicide prompted me to investigate further, to search for the latest findings on depression's causes, and more importantly, to explore viable solutions. The prospect intimidated me because I'm a pastor, not a doctor. I knew that in addition to Bible study, understanding more about depression would require a deep dive into psychology, neurology, biology, sociology, and various other fields of study.

But I also knew this couldn't keep happening. I had to do something. This latest pastor's suicide opened my eyes. Depression seemed to be gaining ground, even among Christians, and it was time to fight back.

Because I believe what Jesus said is true: "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:46).

Bad News and Good News About Depression

As I began my research on depression, many sources confirmed the bad news: It has become the world's number one health problem, causing more deaths than cancer each year and ranking as the leading cause of disability.¹ In fact, one out of every nine people are on some type of depression-treating medication, and one out of every five people have been at some point. Over the past decade, anti-depressant use has gone up 300 percent and it continues to increase.²

But there's also good news: More and more research indicates we need to rethink some of our assumptions about depression. We may have more control over variables leading to depression than we realize. There's a strong chance that what we often call the symptoms of

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depression come from areas of our lives in need of our attention rather than the disease itself. Conditioning from our culture and choices about how we live contribute to a host of symptoms, illnesses, and conditions falling under the mental health umbrella of depression. The latest studies, many of which are cited throughout this book, reveal many of the daily choices we make may be setting us up to be depressed.

Whatever the causes and contributing factors, one thing is certain: depression and anxiety spill into the lives of more people every year. You've probably already heard this news and, more likely, have met depression face-to-face. And if you haven't squared off against depression personally, chances are you've seen it in the life of a loved one, family member, or close friend.

No matter who we are, where we live, or what we do for a living, no matter our level of education or income, our ethnicity or gender, it's possible we'll struggle with depression at some point. Depression doesn't discriminate. Depression chokes us of pleasure, purpose, joy, peace, happiness, and contentment. It clouds our vision, sometimes quickly but often gradually, and prevents us from seeing ourselves, our lives, and God clearly.

In my own journey, I've struggled with several serious bouts of depression and anxiety. And just like so many other people, I've received medical advice and have been offered prescriptions from well-intentioned doctors focused on helping me cope. Their recommendations may have helped me in the short term, but I suspected that defeating depression in the long haul required more than just the benefits of medication.

Please understand that I'm not underestimating the difference the right prescription can make. I've seen it firsthand in the life of my son, diagnosed at a young age on the autism spectrum. He has a chemical imbalance that makes his life difficult, and several years ago, he told my wife and me that his torment was so overwhelming he wanted to

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die. We quickly did everything in our power to help him find relief from his suffering. We remain grateful that the expertise of his doctors and the medications they prescribed diminished his pain and made my son's life bearable again—and saved his life.

And yet, medication alone can't address an even greater need in his life—the need for purpose. My son, like each of us, wasn't created to merely survive but to *thrive*—to be productive, to make a difference, to experience the fulfillment that comes from doing what he is meant to do in this life. The same is true for you and me—we all need purpose.

I share these personal disclosures because I want you to know from the start that I would never discount what doctors do and advise. They are much needed, and I continue to turn to them, like most of us do, for solutions to a vast spectrum of health issues. But, again, I also recognize that medication alone is not enough when it comes to depression. Even as drug use, both prescription and recreational, continues to rise, many problems—depression in particular—aren't getting better.

There is clearly a need for something else. We must have higher goals than just alleviating the pain. Because for many of us, the underlying pain is still there. We receive treatments for one issue or another, often taking additional meds to address side effects of primary medications. Yet we still feel like our lives are falling apart and wonder if healing is even possible.

Why is this happening to us?

Why do more and more of us find it harder to simply get through the day?

Why do we worry about the future and carry the pain of the past instead of engaging in the present?

How do we fight this thing?

Better yet, how do we win the battle?

Spiritual Solutions

Once I started looking closer at the causes of depression and anxiety, searching for lasting solutions beyond medication, my investigation brought me back to God's Word. Yes, I always believe the answers to any and every problem are within its pages. To be clear, I'm not saying that every solution is simply reciting a Bible verse or passively waiting around and trusting God to drop a remedy in your lap, particularly when dealing with depression and anxiety.

But I do believe we are fundamentally spiritual beings in physical bodies who are created in the image of God. That means we need spiritual solutions as well as medical solutions. I believe there is healing wisdom and power in the Word of God. As a pastor, I haven't been trained to address the physical aspects of depression, but I am equipped to guide you in seeking solutions for your spiritual health. And as I see it, your spiritual health affects all parts of your being, including the physical, emotional, and mental.

So I went to God's Word looking for solutions to depression and found an amazing story about a prophet named Elijah. He experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows—sometimes one right after the other. In fact, after one of his greatest spiritual victories, Elijah wanted to give up and take his own life. He ran away, isolated himself, and hid in a dark cave.

Can you relate?

But God met Elijah right where he was. Rather than rebuke the prophet, the Lord invited Elijah to step forward, leave his cave, and embark on a divinely appointed mission. With a renewed sense of purpose, the prophet then became a mentor for a younger man named Elisha, and together God used them to change the world.

In Elijah's story, I saw several causes for his depression that I recognized and found relatable. Even more exciting, I also discovered

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relevant and practical solutions to address the underlying spiritual issues so many of us struggle with while battling depression. I'm convinced tracing the prophet's journey reveals a way forward and out of the cave of depression. Elijah's story will serve as our metaphoric flashlight, and you'll see it again and again throughout these pages, along with my most important research findings and personal stories, to help you find your own way forward.

There are no easy answers here, but you may be startled by Elijah's raw honesty and God's tender mercies. God met Elijah in the midst of his depression and provided for his needs—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Fighting for Control

Before we enter Elijah's story, however, we must consider a more foundational starting point—one that shows us how our spiritual life significantly influences our emotional and physical health. We are triune beings, with bodies, souls, and spirits. The body is our visible form. The soul consists of our mind, our will, and our emotions. The spirit reflects how we are made in God's image and is the part of us that will live forever. Each of these three aspects of our being has its own needs and desires, and each continually wrestles the other two for control of our lives.

When your body is in control, your priority is satisfying physical needs and cravings based on what makes the body feel good. With the body in charge, you eat what you want when you want, and you make decisions based on how they affect you physically (toward pleasure and away from pain), often with little regard for how those decisions affect the rest of you (soul and spirit). Basically the body says, if it feels good, do it!

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When your soul is in charge, priorities shift to whatever you value most—approval, achievement, beauty, celebrity, power, wealth, control. For example, if your soul calls the shots and knows that being thin and attractive will get you the attention and affection that means so much to you, then it will override what your body needs in order to be thin and attractive.

When the spirit is in charge, the priority is achieving a life of peace in God's presence. Your spirit is what keeps body and soul connected and in check. When your spirit is in charge, the needs of both body and soul are given their due, but they no longer battle for dominance. The apostle Paul wrote:

Those who live according to the flesh [body and soul] have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh [body and soul] is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is *life and peace*. (Romans 8:5–6, emphasis added)

So how do we become governed by the Spirit?

We surrender body and soul.

If we want to overcome depression, we have to strengthen our spirits and allow God's Spirit to empower us and lead the way. We have to let our spirits follow Jesus' example so our bodies and souls align with God's instructions and guidelines for living.

Please do attend to the causes and conditions of depression in your body and in your soul. Seek help from medical doctors and professional counselors. But don't neglect your spirit in the process. Focus on strengthening your faith and growing spiritually while also addressing other causes holistically. When your spirit grows stronger, it will benefit your body and soul as well.

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Depression is a multidimensional problem that requires a multidimensional solution. The invitation of this book is to allow God's Spirit to lead your spirit as you also care for body and soul. God helped Elijah restore balance in his body and soul and get his spirit back in working order. *God will do the same for you—if you let him.*

If you're struggling with depression and losing the battle, maybe you're going about it in the wrong way. What if what you need most is a fresh, intimate encounter with the living God? What would happen if you listened for the whisper of his Spirit and stepped forward out of the darkness around you?

It's time to get your life back.

It's time to stop pretending that Christians don't get depressed.

It's time to get real with God about where you are and who's in charge.

It's time to step forward into his light and enjoy the life he has for you.

It's time to come out of your cave.

PART 1

Defining Depression

Just Like Us

Elijah was a person just like us.

JAMES 5:17 (CEB)

I don't know how I got here.

Worse yet, I don't know how to get out from underneath this heaviness that is swallowing me whole. I'm alive but not tuned in to my life. I'm stuck in a fishbowl, looking out at all I should be so happy about and grateful for, but I can't break through to feel or enjoy any of it.

Seeing my life but not being able to truly participate in it is maddening, but I'm too exhausted to do much about it. Just getting out of bed in the morning feels like an epic accomplishment. It's so exhausting that I just want to crawl back between the sheets, pull the covers over my head, and will the world to go away. It's already moving on without me anyway. The world loves people who contribute, who are productive and efficient, and who remain cheerfully positive no matter what. Right now, I'm none of those things. Was I ever any of them to begin with? Will I ever be again? What is my life worth if I feel utterly unable to live it?

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The dark fog nips at the edges of my soul. And I fear that one day, every bit of light inside me will disappear. Darkness will just swallow me up.

A Mystery with No Clues

This is how I've felt sometimes.

Many people may think of me as some great pastor, but when it comes to depression, I battle it along with millions of other people. Just like you do, I'm guessing.

These feelings summed up my life back in 1999, for sure. There was no one, overriding cause or crisis that precipitated my depression. Just a slow, cumulative, creeping sense of losing touch with my life. And at the time, it made no sense.

As a husband to an amazing wife and a father to a growing number of little kids, I always felt guilty for not feeling happier. I loved my wife and she loved me. We had been blessed with healthy children who brightened our busy lives. But something felt just a little off-kilter inside me.

I often felt like I didn't measure up and couldn't provide what my kids needed. I knew I should be reading stories, helping with homework, and playing hide-and-seek, but many times I didn't have the energy to even try. I knew what I wanted to do—what I thought I should do—but I couldn't muster the willpower to do it. This left me feeling like a failure—a fitting bow on top of the empty package of my intentions.

Life at work wasn't much different. My coworkers and other staff members seemed genuinely happy and fully engaged with their lives and the many people we served at our church and in the community. I can remember sitting in the middle of a team meeting and feeling lost—there but not *there*, not engaged.

At the end of the workday, I'd head home and find myself driving on autopilot. When I suddenly realized I was almost home, I'd turn for no reason, taking a longer route without understanding why I was prolonging my commute.

Once I did manage to find my way home, I still felt like I was going through the motions. I talked to Tammy, asked the kids about their day, and ate dinner with the family. On weekends, I prepared for Sunday services, especially if I was preaching, but I didn't look forward to being at church no matter how much I tried. Sunday nights, I crashed as the adrenaline from the day's activities wore off. I tried to relax but couldn't. The best I could manage was to dive into a bowl of ice cream or tube of chocolate chip cookie dough while watching something on television that everyone else seemed to find entertaining.

I felt like a mystery to myself, a mere bystander in my own life. Part of me was always detached, an observer of my invisible suffering. I tried to lift the weight crushing down on me, but it felt like trying to solve a problem I couldn't yet identify. I was afraid to find out what was really going on below the surface. Afraid I didn't have what it took to look my depression in the eye and win.

When Pushing Through Is Pulling You Apart

Some people seem to be especially susceptible to depression. Some of us try to fake our way through it in hopes it will go away. But that just doesn't work, and inevitably it'll creep back into our lives. Some roles, seasons, and situations, for example, naturally set us up to experience stress, pressure, and more anxiety than we're used to facing. We get married or become new parents, move to a new home or a new state, start a new job or get promoted at our current one. These should all be happy milestones, right? So why do we feel so heavy, so burdened,

so overwhelmed sometimes when they happen? It can be confusing and can tempt us to push away these more negative feelings when they pop up.

It's incredibly dangerous, though, to ignore the ways depression advances. Telling yourself you're too busy or too strong or too spiritual to be depressed won't stop the internal skirmishes from escalating into a daily battle or prevent the grinding battles from gaining ground in the bigger war on your soul. Pushing through will only get you so far. And then you get stuck. And when that happens, the daily battles you once pushed through will begin to pull you apart. Ask me how I know.

But I also know this—you and I can win these daily battles and claim victory in the war.

You don't have to lose touch with the light when the dark cave of depression tries to swallow you. When pushing through is pulling you apart, you can find rest. While there is no easy three-step solution, there are practical strategies for helping yourself, accepting God's help, and reaching out to others. In fact, once you get the help you need, you'll be able to extend the same lifeline to others.

In these pages, I promise to share my own hardest-fought and most painful battles. I will not sugarcoat the jagged, raw reality of depression. But I am also eager to share my victories; none came easily but all were that much sweeter for the struggle. We'll look at different aspects of the causes of and contributors to depression and then focus on a manageable, step-by-step approach to care for your body, your soul, and your spirit.

Look Who's Here

Before I share more of my battles with depression, let me introduce you to one of the truly great people in the Bible. He's considered, both

in ancient times and present day, to be one of the greatest prophets and most powerful miracle workers in history. And although he lived several hundred years before Christ, Elijah makes an appearance at one of the seminal events of Jesus' ministry, usually called the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36; 2 Peter 1:16–18).

When Jesus' earthly ministry was concluding, his body experienced a metamorphosis into pure light and shone like the sun. Christ had verified that he was the Messiah and predicted his imminent death and resurrection. The disciples who witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus also saw Moses and Elijah with him. Their appearance at this event is highly significant. Moses represented the Old Testament law that God had given to the people. Jesus came and fulfilled the commandments of the law and did the things the law could not do, that is, provide an answer for the problem of sin. The law pointed out the problem; Jesus gave the solution: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

Elijah, an outstanding prophet in the Old Testament, testified that Jesus had not only fulfilled the law of Moses but all the prophets. Many people believe Elijah is one of the two witnesses at the end of time mentioned in Revelation 11:3–12. Although he is not named, evidence supports this inference. Either way, Elijah remains a figure of exceptional importance.

During his earthly ministry as God's prophet, Elijah performed many miracles and received many blessings. For example, he caused the rain to cease for more than three years (1 Kings 17:1), brought a widow's son back to life (1 Kings 17:22), and parted the Jordan River (2 Kings 2:8). Elijah also was fed by ravens (1 Kings 17:4), called fire from heaven to burn an altar drenched in water three times (1 Kings 18:38), and mentored his successor, Elisha (2 Kings 2). Clearly, Elijah was someone who knew God well and served him with dedication, authority, and heavenly power.

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With all those connections to God and all that affirmation from heaven, we might think Elijah never struggled in his faith. But you know what? He not only struggled to trust God, Elijah got so depressed that he wanted to die.

That makes him someone I want to know more about.

Someone we can all learn from.

Someone just like us, who faced the same kind of depression you and I battle.

And who somehow won.

Fired Up

As God's chosen prophet to deliver his message to the people of Israel, Elijah warned the Israelites of impending doom if they continued to reject God. Numerous miracles verified the divine authenticity of Elijah's message, but one stands out above the others. His most famous display of God's power involved a showdown with King Ahab and the prophets of a false god named Baal. When Ahab labeled the prophet a troublemaker, Elijah rebuked Israel's king. "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals" (1 Kings 18:18).

To break their stalemate, Elijah proposed a decisive test to reveal the one true and living God: each would prepare a bull for burnt offering but not light it, praying instead for divine ignition. The altar catching fire would demonstrate the power of the living God (vv. 22–24). The 450 prophets of Baal got right to work. They prayed from morning until midday, but nothing happened. Elijah taunted them, saying, "Shout louder! . . . Perhaps [Baal] is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened"

(v. 27). So the prophets took things up several notches in the afternoon, shouting louder and even slashing themselves “until their blood flowed” to prove their devotion (v. 28). Still, nothing.

Then it was Elijah’s turn. The prophet chose twelve stones, one for each tribe of Israel, and built an altar. He dug a trench around the altar and arranged wood on top of it to burn the slaughtered bull. He then asked onlookers to fill four large jars with water and drench the bull and the wood—not just once but *three* times! Elijah prayed fervently and got an immediate response: “Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench” (v. 38). Talk about a mic-drop moment!

When the crowd saw what had happened, they fell on their faces and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” (v. 39). And then, to put a fine point on God’s victory, Elijah commanded the people to seize Baal’s prophets, and all 450 were slaughtered that day.

King Ahab was not only humiliated but also outraged by Elijah’s decisive victory. Needless to say, he and his equally wicked queen, Jezebel, were not motivated to repent:

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” (1 Kings 19:1–2)

Given the stunning success of the showdown at Mount Carmel, we might expect Jezebel’s threat to bounce right off Elijah. No one who witnessed fire fall from heaven that day could doubt that God was clearly in his corner. And yet, he immediately fell apart.

OUT OF THE CAVE

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (vv. 3–4)

After facilitating one of the greatest, most dramatic displays of divine power in Israel's history, Elijah collapsed in terror at the threat of an adversary he had just defeated. Seemingly in a matter of hours, if not minutes, he went from the heights of prophetic confidence to the depths of suicidal despair. What happened? What shifted within him that would cause him to doubt God's power and protection, especially in the wake of such a spiritual triumph?

The answer is simple, really. *What goes up, often comes down.* After getting all fired up, it was almost inevitable that Elijah would cave in.

Caving In

You see, depression often comes on the heels of a spiritual and emotional high. When we reach a milestone, attain a goal, or receive God's long-awaited answer to our prayers, we experience exhilaration, excitement, and joy. But we can only sustain this level of high-octane energy for so long, and then our emotions have nowhere to go but down.

Early on in ministry, I noticed that Sunday nights were the lowest part of every week for me. While I often felt relieved, grateful, and fulfilled at how well our church services had gone that day, I also experienced an intense emptiness. I was physically exhausted and emotionally depleted, and my spirit usually followed suit; I wasn't sure how to prevent the downward slide into depression. My defenses felt weak

and often unable to resist the temptation of numbing myself with junk food and mindless TV.

Ironically, while I felt what I was doing was mindless, my mind was definitely at work, creating a distressing narrative. In fact, depression often comes when the mind subtly takes over. In my case, that took the form of obsessing about my performance—specifically, that week’s sermon—and going over what I wish I had done differently. I ruminated endlessly on each facet and judged myself more harshly than anyone else would judge me. I compared how I thought it went with the perfect and unrealistic ideal I used as my standard. Which meant I constantly felt like I was missing the mark.

When I wasn’t obsessing about the past, I was fixated on the future and feeling overwhelmed. I worried about what might go wrong, who might be upset, or when the other shoe might drop. I compared myself to other people and resented their happiness in light of the burdens I was carrying. When I looked ahead, all I could see was what I lacked and how inadequate I felt. Like so many others who struggle with depression, I often thought if only I had those missing pieces—whatever I believed would make me happy and successful—I would finally be content.

But enough is rarely enough. And I’m guessing this dynamic played at least some part in Elijah’s dramatic downfall.

The prophet had been fearless for three long years, culminating in an amazing victory. Yet it only took one threat and he instantly caved and cowered in fear. He turned and ran away to the edge of the desert where depression enveloped him. He hid under a tree until God sent an angel who nourished Elijah with bread and water (1 Kings 19:5–8). “Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night” (vv. 8–9).

Now, if you’ve ever been spelunking, you know how disorienting

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the inside of a cave can be. You can't see in the vast ebony ocean of darkness. Sounds echo and reverberate indirectly. Dank, earthy smells permeate the chilly air. Creatures may go skittering or flapping, felt but unseen. In other words, even when it provides shelter from dangers outside, a cave can be scary and unfamiliar inside—which makes it an especially apt metaphor for depression.

To enter the cave of depression is to retreat alone into darkness. You may feel safer temporarily, but you're also all alone. You've lost your direction. You can't trust your senses and the usual data they provide to help you navigate your surroundings. It isn't long until you're afraid you may never find your way back out.

That's depression. It pulls you into complete darkness, utter loneliness, total disorientation, and sensory distortion.

That's where Elijah found himself.

But with God's help, he also found his way out.

So can you.

God in the Dark

Like you and me and the millions of others who experience depression, Elijah wanted to give up. But he didn't. Instead, God met him where he was by sending an angel to give him sustenance so he could continue his journey and discover all God had for him. God's presence came, and Elijah was touched by God.

His powerlessness met the God of all power.

His feeling of a future in question met the God who controls all the answers.

His fearful hiding place became a meeting place with the God who is everywhere.

Whatever you're going through right now, trust that God will

JUST LIKE US

meet you there. It may be that you're seeking insight about a past season of dwelling in a cave of depression. You're not there now, but you fear you could fall into it again. Or maybe you can't imagine ever slipping into such a hopeless, desperate pit—and I pray you never do—but you know plenty of friends or loved ones who fight an ongoing battle with depression. You wish you knew how to help them, how to pray for them, and how to love them in the midst of their struggles.

You might be hunkered down in a cold, dark cave of depression right now. Your life has lost purpose, meaning, and joy. You go through the motions but feel numb, detached, watching yourself from a distance. The lonely ache of weary, soul-crushing pain gnaws at your bones. Food has no taste. You rarely sleep. You don't know how you got here or what to do to reclaim your life.

No matter where you are, I invite you to believe that this is the beginning of something new—a true breakthrough.

Just as Elijah did, you can discover fresh hope, new life, deep peace, abiding joy, and can't-wait-to-face-the-day purpose. Such possibilities may feel out of reach right now, but taking that first step out of your cave will lead you to discover these key truths:

- God knows what you're going through, and he loves you. He wants to give you freedom, blessings, influence, anointing, and protection.
- God knows your thoughts, and he promises to renew your mind as you learn how to take those thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ.
- God knows your weaknesses, and he promises to give you strength right in the midst of them. Christ in you is stronger than the depression, anxiety, and fear in you.
- God knows your gifts, and he has a unique assignment for you. You can wake up with purpose, direction, and meaning every

OUT OF THE CAVE

day of your life. The world will be different and better because you showed others Jesus by who you are, what you do, and what you say.

Yes, you may be in a cave right now.

So was I. So was Elijah. So were countless others.

But God will meet you there. His light shines through the darkness, and freedom is closer than you think.

Just take the next step.

Turn the page.

And let's take the journey together—into the light.

What You Might Not Know About Depression

Depression is the inability to construct a future.

—ROLLO MAY

If someone asked you to post a definition of depression by describing what it feels like, what would you say? As it turns out, there's actually a hashtag for that, #depressionfeelslike, and here's what some people have said.

Depression feels like:

*You've lost something but have no clue when or where you had it.
A terrible sinking sensation.
Missing my friends but not having the energy to interact with them.
A void that sucks in all your thoughts of being capable, worthwhile,
and loveable, and replaces them with a crushing fear of failure.
Walking around in a big bubble of tar.
You're stuck in quicksand slowly drowning, but only enough to see
the world doing just fine without you.*

Being scared all the time.

Losing who you are because you've been pretending to be okay for so long that you can't remember what you're like beneath the mask.¹

Perhaps you can relate.

Depression has become such a common experience that it might seem like everyone knows what it is, especially since so many of us know what it feels like. And yet it can be difficult to understand by its symptoms and manifestations alone. Even when we suffer from depression, there are many things we might not know about it, including the emotional, biological, and social factors that trigger it.

Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues

You've probably heard someone say, "I'm feeling kind of blue today." Or maybe you've even said something similar yourself to express feelings of depression. People have long referred to experiencing depression as having "the blues," although no one seems to know the origin of this colloquial expression. Nonetheless, the color blue holds a longstanding association with feelings of sadness, loss, grief, and heartache.

Some research has pointed to this phrase being tied to maritime history, perhaps from the seventeenth or eighteenth century.² During long voyages ships would sometimes sail off course and lose familiar bearings, typically because the ship's captain had died. Nearing an unknown or unscheduled port, sailors would raise a blue flag or paint a blue band along their vessel's hull to signal to those on shore that they had lost their captain and their way. They didn't want to be mistaken as pirates or hostile invaders and fired upon when they were merely off course. If this is indeed the origin of the phrase, I'm struck

by the fact that it refers to feeling out of sorts and lost first, which, in turn, naturally leads to fear and distress.

Other sources mention a reference made by the great nineteenth-century naturalist and artist John James Audubon in his journal. In one entry in 1827 Audubon mentions that he “had the blues.”³ A few decades later, a new musical genre known as the blues originated in the South. Started by slaves, former slaves, and newly emancipated African Americans, the blues incorporated African musical traditions along with spirituals and work songs. “Singing the blues” became a way to express the misery, loss, hurt, and misfortune its singers and songwriters felt.

Whatever the origins—whether “feeling blue” came from seventeenth-century sailors or nineteenth-century former slaves—we know the struggle with feeling lost and deeply out of sorts has been around for a long time. And despite being the number one health problem in the world today, depression carries a stigma we can’t seem to shake. Many of us still seem reluctant to admit our struggle with depression, concerned others might think us weak, too sensitive, or undisciplined. We’re conditioned to believe that if we have our lives together, we won’t experience depression—especially if we’re followers of Jesus who live by faith and obey God’s Word.

But depression is real. It’s just as real as cancer, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, heart disease, and arthritis. Mental illness is just as real and debilitating as any physical illness or injury. The causes may be harder to pinpoint and the symptoms harder to treat than some physical diseases, but this only makes depression more powerful in its subtlety. Many people recognize their depression only after it has robbed them of what once gave their lives pleasure, passion, and purpose. The word *anhedonia*, which means the inability to experience enjoyment from previously favored activities, is derived from a Greek word that translates literally as “without pleasure.” People suffering from this

symptom of depression may lose interest in hobbies, exercise, music, church, food, travel, work, relationships, and sex.

Recently, mental health experts have expanded the definition of anhedonia to include losing even the *motivation* for enjoyable pursuits as well as the actual fulfillment derived from engaging in the activity itself. I think this could explain why so many of us default to spending time online rather than engaging our real life circumstances and relationships. Why wrestle with the complex problems of day-to-day life when it's so much easier to battle video game enemies you can quickly identify and shoot? Why do the hard and messy work of loving your friends, family, and coworkers when you can have commitment-free relationships through role-playing games, social media, or online porn?

Another thing that makes the virtual world so appealing is the level of control you have, especially when depression leaves you feeling so out of control. You can hide as much as you want about yourself. You don't have to look anyone in the eye. You can control your image or avatar. You can escape your pain by becoming someone totally different, someone who is unencumbered by the depression swirling within the real you.

Whether it's the virtual world, substance abuse, or any number of other escapist tactics, our attempts to deal with depression almost inevitably cause us to avoid experiencing life in the direct, pure ways God intended. No wonder so many of us are depressed! There's so much we're avoiding and so much pain to process that we are desperate to put off dealing with it. But denying or postponing depression only drives it deeper by masking the symptoms and temporarily numbing the pain.

In order to overcome depression, we have to call it what it is and deal with it directly. To do that, it's helpful to understand the variety of factors that cause or contribute to becoming depressed in the first place. These include emotional triggers for depression as well as biological and social factors.

Emotional Triggers for Depression

While emotional triggers for depression vary, some have universal human resonance. Let's go over just a few of them.

GRIEF

When we experience loss, we naturally grieve. The Bible confirms this process: “Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief” (Psalm 31:9). Consider what people around the world experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of us felt what experts call “ambiguous grief” as we lost not only jobs, income, or even loved ones, but less-concrete, easy-to-identify things like a virus-free mind-set and our previous lifestyle. For some, this developed into chronic mourning because their lives would never be the same again.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Grief often flows into another trigger for depression, which is a sense of learned helplessness. When events happen beyond our control, we feel powerless and untethered from our previous reality. Because we can't do what we used to do, we lose sight of the options that still remain within our ability to choose. Our minds create a false narrative, often based on imagining worst-case scenarios, that leaves us feeling like helpless, hopeless victims. We then draw erroneous conclusions that our helpless condition is personal, pervasive, and permanent.

DISAPPOINTMENT

Even if we don't feel powerless, disappointment and unfulfilled expectations can also trigger depression. I recall times when ministry goals went unmet, often for justifiable and sound reasons, but I still felt let down after holding such high expectations. When we assume

things will go one way and they go another, we question ourselves and the world around us. We often choose to believe these events would have turned out differently if we had made other, better choices, but this is only an attempt to prop up a false sense of control. It's easier to believe we're not measuring up in some way than to accept that life is often unpredictable and full of painful twists and turns.

LOSS OF PURPOSE

Any experience that leads us to believe we're unneeded, irrelevant, or unwanted can lead to depression. When we're not able to use our gifts or make the contribution God designed us to share with the world, we feel inferior, perhaps even invisible. We lose sight of the eternal impact we're intended to have in this life and then settle for distracting ourselves with striving after what we falsely believe can make us happy—money, relationships, sex, fame, or whatever.

Biological and Social Factors in Depression

In addition to emotional triggers, depression also results from a combination of biological and social factors. Doctors, scientists, psychologists, and neurologists agree that depression is rarely the result of a single factor. Instead, it is a complex collection of layered variables, including genetic tendencies, vulnerability due to disease and injury, life circumstances and stressful events, and medications. A change or disruption in any of these areas can cause a domino effect that topples us into depression yet again.

The individualized nature of what causes depression explains why it can be so challenging to find treatments and solutions that work effectively for the majority of people—what helps one person may or may not help another. Nonetheless, because depression has

emerged as such a pervasive problem for millions of people worldwide, thousands of studies have been conducted to identify causes, preventions, and treatments. Many studies focus on the biological and physiological causes and contributors to depression, often called *endogenous depression*, while others focus on the external circumstances and traumatic life events contributing to its onset, known as *reactive depression*.

Ultimately, I'm concerned with the spiritual aspects of depression, which I believe affect us all in ways more similar than other variables. That's because our spiritual beliefs, practices, and outlooks have a direct connection to every other area of life. So, again, even though my overall focus is to provide a spiritual and biblical perspective on depression, I believe that includes looking at depression holistically. I want to be clear and consistent in respecting all other factors, particularly those that are biological.

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Most doctors agree that citing a “chemical imbalance” as the cause of depression is too simplistic. Why? Mostly because many chemicals are involved, both in the brain and throughout the body. Researchers at Harvard write, “There are millions, even billions, of chemical reactions that make up the dynamic system that is responsible for your mood, perceptions, and how you experience life.”⁴

A change in any one of these chemicals can cause a chain reaction throughout the entire body, especially in the healthy functioning of neurotransmitters, the chemical conduits that transmit messages from nerve cells to various other target cells, such as those in muscles, organs, and glands. Neurotransmitters include chemicals, such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine—all very important to the body's healthy functioning and how it reacts to problems, conflicts, stress, and danger. It makes sense then how every bodily system can

be derailed from healthy functioning when there's too much or, more likely, not enough of certain neurotransmitters.

Neurotransmitters often adversely affect the unique ways particular areas of our brains work. For example, the hippocampus is a small, curved part of the limbic system that's tucked into the central interior of our brain's temporal lobe. The hippocampus interfaces with other parts of our brain in processing and regulating memories and emotions. When a snarling dog tries to bite you, your fear registers and forms a biochemical association linked to that memory. Which explains why you instinctively avoid an aggressive, snarling dog the next time you encounter one!

Scientists have found that the hippocampus is often smaller in many depressed people, perhaps as a result of stress hormones inhibiting growth in this vital part of the brain. On a basic level, this may be a physical consequence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—the brain becomes overwhelmed by fearful, traumatic experiences even as it's impaired in its ability to process them. I'm no doctor, and this is an oversimplification, but my point is this: *what happens outside of us has consequences for what happens inside us.*

SOCIAL FACTORS

The relationship between what happens around us and what happens inside us in response can be tricky to assess. Rarely can clear catalysts or causal relationships be irrefutably determined. Nonetheless, in the past decades many studies have focused on trying to isolate social causes of depression and identifying factors that play a role in triggering it. As I began researching depression and exploring many such well-known studies, one stood out to me. It focused on the link between our circumstances, our support systems, and rate of depression.

In 1978, sociologist George Brown and psychologist Tirril Harris published *Social Origins of Depression: A Study of Psychiatric Disorder in*

Women, a book chronicling the findings of their research over several years. Growing up during and immediately after World War II, Brown noted the way many people directly involved in the war effort suffered from depression. This made sense to him, but he also wondered why others, equally involved on the front lines, moved on without apparent ongoing effects.

His curiosity and academic studies led to his investigation, along with Harris, of women from a similar age range and lifestyle in South London in the mid-seventies. Of the 458 women they interviewed, they found a conclusive relationship between the frequency and accumulation of adverse life events (losses, changes in lifestyle, family adjustments, etc.) and incidents of clinical depression.

The women who experienced a traumatic triggering event but who had not endured many such events in their life prior to the war, became depressed but then returned to their normal disposition relatively quickly. On the other hand, women with a pattern of such losses and traumatic events experienced ongoing, more pervasive depression after the war that was more resistant to treatment. Brown and Harris also noted that women with what they labeled “stabilizing factors,” such as supportive relationships with family and close friends, did not experience depression as often as their counterparts who had no such support systems.

The significance of their findings changed the way depression was viewed and treated. External factors, such as the number of traumatic events and adverse circumstances someone experienced, made them more likely to be depressed. The likelihood of depression also increased without emotional support from close relationships. Social catalysts and external circumstances gained attention as major contributing factors to experiencing depression.

A more recent exploration of depression’s causes and most effective treatments builds on the findings of Brown and Harris. Investigative

journalist Johann Hari interviewed the world's leading experts on depression and concluded its primary causes stem from a variety of different disconnections. Based on the scientific evidence, Hari identified nine disconnections contributing to depression:

- Disconnection from meaningful, purposeful work
- Disconnection from meaningful relationships with other people
- Disconnection from personal values with intrinsic rewards
- Disconnection caused by trauma in childhood
- Disconnection from self-worth and self-respect
- Disconnection from the natural world
- Disconnection from hope for a better future
- Disconnection in the body and brain due to genetics
- Disconnection in the body and brain due to trauma⁵

Notice that the first seven of these are social (external) in nature while only the last two are biological (internal). As Hari points out, when these disconnections repeatedly overlap, a cumulative tide of depression washes over a person. The impact of ongoing stressors poking at the tender wounds of chronic trauma, over a lifetime, naturally results in depression.

There is considerable hope in Hari's findings, though. The fact that most of these disconnections are external means they can also be addressed and remedied externally. In other words, you and I may have more power than we realize to influence and control the factors contributing to depression.

Addressing Depression from the Outside In

I'm biased toward these studies about connections between external and internal factors because they not only resonate with my personal

WHAT YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT DEPRESSION

experience of depression, but also with what I find in God's Word. As you'll find in the chapters ahead, the disconnections Hari identified parallel some foundational biblical principles for living a fulfilling life, enjoying the gifts of God's creation, and using our gifts to leave an eternal legacy.

Before you can begin to explore these principles, however, you must be honest—with yourself and with God—about your experiences, your thoughts, your feelings, and your overall health. Identifying the causes of your depression will require some detective work, and that can be frustrating if you're looking in the wrong places or denying your depression in the first place. Some aspects of depression are indeed beyond your control, but I'm convinced many of them are within your power to change and improve.

So what can you do to get started? Here are three steps you can begin to take in this very moment.

ACCEPT THAT OVERCOMING DEPRESSION IS A PROCESS RATHER THAN A QUICK FIX

Depression is complex and reflects each person's DNA, life experiences, physical and mental health, current circumstances, and spiritual belief system. Experts estimate that at least half the cases of serious depression go undiagnosed or unaddressed by those suffering.⁶ So don't ignore that feeling you know is there, like the one I first had two decades ago when I knew something was off-kilter in my life.

BE HONEST ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE EXPERIENCING

Pay attention to your emotions, appetite, sleep patterns, and exercise habits. Write down how you're feeling each day, describing as honestly as possible what's going on inside you. Reflect on what you know you enjoy doing and the last time you felt pleasure doing it. Ask a handful of those closest to you what they see in how you relate to

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them and engage with daily responsibilities. Also note any changes in what or how much you're eating as well as any weight gain or loss. Document how many hours of sleep you get each night and list any disruptions to your sleep patterns. Assess your physical activity—are you active, sedentary, or somewhere between?

ASK GOD TO REVEAL TO YOU WHERE YOU ARE—AND TRUST HE WILL REVEAL HIMSELF TO YOU THERE

Ask for the Lord's help as you begin exploring how to overcome depression; it is one of the most important steps you can take. Trust that he is with you in this, no matter how alone you may feel or how detached you are from church, Bible study, prayer, or spiritual habits you used to practice faithfully. You may need to reconsider what you're assuming about who God is and how much he loves you. He has never abandoned you and he never will. God will meet you in your doubt, your fear, your anger, your anxiety, and in the deep, dark cave of your depression.

God met Elijah there and called him out for a divine purpose.

God will meet you in your cave as well.

And if you're willing to trust him, he will lead you out of the darkness.