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Facing Loneliness,
Depression, and Anxiety
with the Power of Grace

CLARENCE SHULER

WITH MONIQUE S. GADSON, PhD, LPC



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Finding Hope in a Dark Place: Facing Loneliness, Depression, and Anxiety with the Power of Grace

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FOREWORD

GARY CHAPMAN

As humans, we are all greatly influenced by our past and present circumstances. This influence may be positive or negative. For those who have had negative experiences in their past, the memories tend to follow us, hiding in the shadows. When our present circumstances turn negative, the memories of the past seem to pounce on us, leading us to a dark place where hope seems to take flight. Have you been there? Are you presently in a dark place? If so, this book is for you.

The challenge is to acknowledge our painful circumstances without allowing them to control our behavior. To quote from the book; “Don’t let the pain of your past punish your present, paralyze your future, and pervert your purpose because you have a godly destiny.” The authors fully acknowledge that Christians may experience loneliness, depression, and anxiety. However, Christians have One who walks with them through the dark places. The God who walks with us often uses fellow pilgrims like pastors, counselors, and friends to express his love and assure us that we are not alone.

One of the unique aspects of this book is that in every chapter you will hear the voice of Clarence Shuler, who has walked in

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and out of dark places throughout his life, and Monique Gadson a trained Christian counselor whom God has used to help him not to remain in those dark places.

God will not only walk with us but wants to use our troubled seasons to help others. Paul, the apostle once said: “He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:4–5 NLT). Thus Clarence says, “Sometimes God may allow us to suffer not just for our sake, but so that we may know how to help others who suffer after we’ve come out of our dark place. So our being in our dark place is not just about us.”

In a very real sense, this book is an effort to help those who are struggling learn from the experience of Clarence. He is now an author, speaker, mentor, and pastoral counselor who has invested his life in helping others. Monique is doing the same by sharing what she has learned through the years as a counselor of those who are experiencing difficult mental, emotional, and spiritual struggles.

If you or a friend of yours is in a dark place, this book offers guidance. Clarence is very vulnerable in sharing his own struggles, and Monique was very empathetic with him and with the reader. Her practical suggestions are biblically based and point to Christ who is our constant friend and companion.

As you read, remember the words of Jesus: “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30 NIV). When, in our stress we join with him, we have a divine companion who will never leave us or forsake us.

WILL YOU JOIN ME ON THIS JOURNEY?

Have you ever felt that you were in a dark place? If so, did you ask yourself how you got there? Was it due to some feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, rejection, or loneliness, or a situation like a divorce, a miscarriage, not being popular, or experiencing aging issues?

We can find ourselves in a dark place for a variety of reasons. Possibly you struggle with not being popular; you feel like you don't have any friends or you don't have enough friends. Or maybe you feel you don't have the *right* friends, possibly resulting in your not feeling good about who you are. Transitioning from middle school to high school or college or from college to what is called "the real world" may create a dark place for you because of the uncertainty of so many things.

The coronavirus impacted the entire world! Did it make you fearful for your future? Did you struggle to experience peace during the uncertainty of that virus? The various new strands of the virus probably didn't make you feel any better. This has created anxiety for some.

Maybe aging is an issue. You may have concerns because it seems your body is letting you down. No longer can you do the things physically that you used to do well. And this is affecting how you feel about yourself. Possibly, you are losing your independence.

Finding Hope in a Dark Place

You are now depending more and more on family and friends, or you're living in some form of assisted living. Your mind is still sharp, but those caring for you no longer recognize or appreciate it like they formerly did. Or your ability to remember has become a point of frustration for you. Perhaps you'll retire soon, and society—at least American society—doesn't seem to value your maturity and wisdom, and your future is more uncertain than ever. All of this may cause you to devalue yourself.

It is not uncommon for those in their sixties to begin focusing on death because losing their peers becomes more and more common. For some, this reminds them of their own mortality and may create a fear of death. So if you are younger and your parents or grandparents begin to talk about who died today, be sensitive to them. They may be afraid and not know how to cope with it or express their fears.

Loneliness drives a lot of people to a dark place. Loneliness doesn't discriminate when it comes to our age, gender, culture, or race. Few people enjoy being alone. And those who do enjoy being alone seem to have a choice. But what if you don't have a choice and, for whatever reason, you spend most of your time alone. Are you in a dark place?

If you have found yourself in a dark place, have you been able to get out? If you haven't been able to escape your dark place, why do you think that is? If you have been able to escape your dark place, have you found yourself returning to this dark place more quickly and frequently than you ever thought you would?

If you have found yourself in a dark place, know this: you are not the only one.

More people than you may realize have found themselves in a dark place. Former Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps continues to speak about his battles with depression or mental health. At the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (held in 2021), Simone Biles withdrew from competition to, in her words, "protect her mental health." Dallas Cowboys' quarterback Dak Prescott revealed he was dealing with depression

Will You Join Me on This Journey?

after the death of his brother and the onset of the coronavirus. WNBA player Liz Cambage and former WNBA All-Star Chamique Holdsclaw have spoken about their depression struggles as well.

I, too, have found myself in a dark place, and I've been there more often than I ever expected. In my journeys to and from my dark place, I've learned and continue to learn some principles, steps, and truths that are helping me to spend more time in the light. I want to share them with you.

This book is about my battles with depression. I'm not excited about being so transparent because some of my experiences are embarrassing. Naturally, they will include my failures and possible triggers, but also my victories. I'm sharing them with you because hopefully they will help you and others reading this book.

Counselors say that there is a depression epidemic among men, especially African American men. Whether you are a man or woman, no matter your culture, you will be exposed here to principles to help you face your fears and alleviate your shame.

I will reveal to you how you can make a non-emotional decision about a tremendously emotional situation. Understanding this one concept will open a door to the light in the midst of your dark place so that you don't have to be imprisoned by your dark place. Isn't this good news?

Unfortunately, I can't guarantee that these practices I'm learning and sharing with you will keep you out of your dark place permanently. For some of you, they might. I believe that, no matter what your situation, some of these steps can improve your situation. But I'm hoping that for all of us, these practices will at the very least lessen our time in our dark places and guide us toward the light.

And that these practices will help us to enjoy ourselves and those who love us. This concept is based on Psalm 131:2, which says, "Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child

"This is an exciting truth, that we can play a role in our emotional well-being."

who no longer cries for its mother's milk. Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me." This is an exciting truth, that we can play a role in our emotional well-being. This book will be full of suggestions for you to try.

At the end of every chapter are questions to help you process what you have read and your situation. Don't feel pressure to answer any of these questions, and please don't feel overwhelmed by the number of them. Maybe, for you, one question is all you'll be comfortable answering.

Please take this journey with me because I believe it will bring you hope as you see yourself and your situation from a new perspective.

You'll discover that most chapters have three sections. First, I will share my experiences with darkness. Then, to help encourage you, I've asked Dr. Monique Gadson (Dr. Mo) to join me in the discussion from her perspective as a licensed counselor. Dr. Mo helped me escape a very dark place in my life. After I share, Dr. Mo will respond and make suggestions. Then, you have the opportunity to discover more about your own personal journey by working through the mental exercises at the end of each chapter. Neither Dr. Mo nor I want you to be overwhelmed by the end-of-the-chapter exercises, so don't feel that you have to do them all. There is no deadline for completing them. If you have a counselor, you may want him or her to assist you.

But as you engage in these mental exercises, you may discover your triggers and warning signs, place of hurt, healing, hope, and happiness.

Additionally, samples from our text-counseling conversations will be included in the "Dr. Mo's Couch" section throughout the book. In these conversations, I hope that you will see that Dr. Mo has God-given insights and encouragement for me. They show how she gently pressed me at times to examine myself more than I would do by myself. And she kept in contact with me long after I thought I was healed—over the timespan of almost one year. At the writing of this book, she continues to check on me.

Will You Join Me on This Journey?

To be clear, this book is not attempting to take the place of any professional counselor with whom you may be working. It is a book of hope, written especially for those of you not working with a counselor, that it may provide you with some practical options to experience genuine joy.

I'm so excited that you are reading this book because of the responses I received after teaching about depression at the Fatherhood CoMission and in several churches. The most common responses were, "No one ever talks about depression in church!" and "Your sermon has helped me realize that I'm not crazy!" My prayer is that this book will help you or your family or your friends.

You may be reading this book because you have a loved one who frequents a dark place. This book will help you to better understand and possibly provide love that may be better received after reading it. Some insightful tips for coming alongside a loved one will be given later.

Christina, one of my daughters, gave me permission to share with you a poem she wrote with profound insight into her own personal battle with self and others.

"Shell of an Animal"

*Most people see my shell, as I use it to protect me.
I may use my shell to blend in or to be left alone.
Sometimes, I will use it as I reveal hints of myself.
I use my shell to hide my anger, pain, and fear.
In safety, my animal will emerge.*

It is my hope that this book will help you emerge in safety. Let's start our new journey toward the light!

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POSSIBLE TRIGGERS FOR OUR DARK PLACE

I was seven years old when I first attended YMCA day camp for seven through eighteen-year-old boys. I was a momma's boy, and this was one of my first times away from her. Mom told me she had arranged for the camp director to have me be his assistant on the opening day. I think she arranged this to make sure that none of the bigger boys bothered me because I was small. It would make me special.

However, the camp director forgot to call me out in front of all the other campers to recognize me as his assistant. I felt so embarrassed and rejected. As soon as Mom picked me up from camp, I told her what didn't happen. She called the director, and he apologized to her. But it didn't make sense to do it after the first day.

Nobody ever seriously bothered me at camp, but the feeling of rejection put a chip on my shoulder that drove me as an athlete to be the best. I was constantly seeking the approval of others for all the wrong reasons. This desire for approval was difficult to satisfy and often led me to a dark place. I learned so many bad lessons that I'm unlearning as an adult.

The feeling of being rejected has been a trigger for me throughout my life. The next chapter will reveal where this and other triggers took me. When thinking about possible triggers that may lead you to a dark place, loneliness (regardless of age), feelings of inadequacy, rejection, or issues related to aging are common for people.

Since many situations can lead us to have feelings of inadequacy and rejection, we'll discuss these issues throughout this book. But I want to give some special attention to loneliness and aging issues as we begin our journey together.

We can find ourselves feeling lonely as a single person, or even if you're in a relationship or marriage, or as we age. All of these concerns can lead us to depression. No matter what the situation, our perspective of ourselves and our situation really can make all the difference as we enter a dark place, affecting whether we stay in a dark place or if we are able to find the light to guide us out of our dark place.

Let's take a brief look at loneliness.

Our society is filled with lonely people. I conduct singles conferences around the country, and "Healing a Broken Heart" is a popular session at these conferences. But "How to Be Single and Content" and "I've Been Lonely Too Long" are easily the two most popular sessions among singles at my conferences.

A few summers ago, a counselor led a workshop for parents of teenagers. He shared that his research and counseling experience revealed that many young people, millennials, and those who are aging are often lonely. What really shocked me is that he mentioned an app that would increase the number of "friends" an individual had on social media. These friends are not real people, only numbers.

Ask yourself: Would it be worse to be popular for a moment and lose it or to never be popular?

What is sad about adding these numbers in order to be popular is that you still don't really have more friends. The people

who contact you because of your new popularity will seldom be your friend. They are only associating with you because they believe that association will make them popular. These kinds of people are what my mom called “acquaintances.” They won’t be there when you want them or need them.

As quickly and frequently as technology changes, there is no telling how social media will be communicating in the future, so all the various social media outlets may cease to be. But what will not cease to be is the human need to be wanted and to be loved!

If you feel that you are not popular and that you are alone, here are a couple of thoughts to consider:

- Proverbs 18:24 says, “A man [or woman] who has friends must himself [or herself] be friendly” (NKJV). A practical application of this verse could be that we need to initiate trying to make a friend by being friendly first to someone else. Maybe you have tried this and it didn’t work for you. Be careful as you try to make a new acquaintance that you aren’t trying to please that person at all costs. Don’t lose who you are in this process. A friend will like you for who you are, including your imperfections. A friend will tell you about your flaws and will try to help you to work on them but will be your friend regardless.
- You need to like yourself. Don’t worship yourself, but like yourself. If you don’t like you, people can sense this, and it is unattractive—except to those who want to take advantage of you.
- Give away your time to help those who can’t repay the favor. This will take your mind off of yourself. And you may receive more than you give.
- Try to reconnect with old friends.

When You're in a Dark Place

- Spend more time with God.
- Ask and answer the question, “Why, do I hate being alone?”
- Being alone can be a good time to get to know yourself better.
- If you're not content being alone, you won't be content with hundreds of friends.

These tips and more can be found in my singles book, *Single and Free to Be Me*.

Maybe your issue isn't loneliness, but aging. Having played basketball in college and overseas against Olympic and National teams, I find it strange that, sometimes, my body lets me down. I'm over sixty-eight years old, and the sad reality is that I can't do some things that I used to do quite easily.

Several years ago, I tore my meniscus. I couldn't run. I had to be pushed in a wheelchair in order to make my international flight connection in time to conduct a marriage conference with my wife, Brenda, for our military. I felt so bad and useless in that wheelchair. I felt even worse for Brenda. I didn't and don't want her to have to become my caregiver. My situation also played with my idea of manhood. I wrestled with such questions as “Am I really a man anymore?” and “Will Brenda grow to despise me if I'm no longer able to take care of her?”

“That change in my attitude changed how I felt about myself.”

How did I manage this situation? First, I thanked God for the incredible parents he gave me. They both had great genes! How many guys at 5'7” can dunk? Or could dunk? I reviewed my athletic career and had no complaints. I had to embrace my present state. I said to God, “If my body never gets better, I've had a tremendous ride!”

That change in my attitude changed how I felt about myself. Eventually, I had surgery. I'm back to playing tennis, but my body continues to age. I must learn to accept that.

Do I have aging concerns? Sure I do. I definitely don't want to be put in a nursing home. But I may not have a choice. What I can control is deciding not to worry about it now and to face that situation when and if it comes. This kind of mindset gives me peace and keeps my stress low.

We're just getting started here. We're going to address panic attacks and anxiety and so much more. We're also going to show you how God sees you. This may very well blow your mind—in a very good way!

On the next page, you will meet Dr. Monique Gadson, a counselor and PhD who will respond to this chapter. She will give us some amazing insights from her counseling experience and her faith in Christ. We'll call her Dr. Mo because she likes to be informal.

After your time with Dr. Mo, you will have some questions to process. As you start your own journey by answering these questions, you may open doors to experience some emotional freedom.

DR. MO'S COUCH

As Clarence stated, there are numerous factors that can trigger us and send us to this dark place. Sometimes those are obvious. Other times, it might take more introspection to discover what's underneath that trigger.

Loneliness and aging are situations that can propel some into a dark place. Loneliness can result from strained relationships, unhealed wounds, or as a byproduct of some conditions, such as depression. Loneliness can also be a result of losing a loved one or being separated from loved ones geographically.

Aging is a natural event on the spectrum of human development. Typically, we think of older adults struggling with aging, but all adults—young, middle age, and older—can be adversely impacted depending on their life circumstances. There are physical, social, and cognitive considerations in every stage of adulthood. There is something in some area of life that we realize we can no longer do. Young adults realize that, as careers and families take more of their time, some friendships may diminish. Or there may be less time available to devote to some of those relationships. Middle-age adults are dealing with physical changes, older children, and possibly aging parents. Older adults are experiencing loss of loved ones, spouses, or friends. They notice declining health and productivity. For some, it can bring about feeling as if they are in a dark place.

There is so much that can be said about both of these topics. Most individuals will feel lonely at some point in time throughout the course of life. Most will deal with the effects of aging, not only in older adulthood, but quite possibly in the other stages of adulthood. However, I will attempt to brush some broad strokes in order to bring some perspective.

These areas might be associated with an actual or perceived loss of control. At times, when we realize we have no control over some circumstances in our lives, we can possibly find ourselves in a dark place. Because, of course, if we were in control, we would not allow ourselves to experience situations that cause dark places in our lives. The realization of coming to the end of ourselves, and the recognition we are powerless in some events, can lead us to a dark place. Clarence has given some great questions to ponder at the conclusion of this chapter. As we are thinking through our responses, sometimes we find places where we do have some control. It just might not be where we desire.

Possible Triggers for Our Dark Place

Another point I'll briefly discuss is that the meaning we associate with loneliness or aging (as well as a host of other thoughts) can give some insight about our being in dark places.

Some people are able to embrace aging with excitement and enthusiasm. They may be looking forward to activities and roles they can enjoy when some of the more major demands of career and family are behind them. Others may dread aging and feel a sense of anxiety. Some may start to feel regretful about things they have not done and think they'll never have an opportunity to do. And again, this can happen in any stage of life. Some young adults may feel they will never marry or have children or leave home if they haven't done so by a certain age. These realizations can send some to a dark place depending on the meaning they associate with their plight. Along with the responses to the questions, I ask you to consider: What does loneliness or aging mean to you? The answers to that question can possibly give significant insights as to why some find themselves in a dark place and some do not.

Consult with a counselor if you find yourself in a dark place for a prolonged time period. Also, consider consulting with a therapist just to dialogue about meanings you associate with these areas.

YOUR JOURNEY

What about you, what has been your experience? Take a few minutes to answer the following questions while considering your life experiences. Name triggers or circumstances that may have caused you to enter into the journey to darkness:

1. _____

When You're in a Dark Place

2. _____

3. _____

- How do you define loneliness?
- If you are lonely, why do you think you are?
- What could be some benefits of having time to yourself?
- Have you ever thought about helping someone else who could not return the favor when you have been lonely? Will you consider doing that the next time you are lonely? Why or why not?
- What would make you a good friend to have?
- Are you a positive or negative person? Why do you think that is?
- As you age, what are some of the issues with which you struggle?
- How do you feel about yourself as you age?
- What are you grateful for as you age?
- Are you positive or negative in your thoughts about yourself as you age? Why?