

**Why Do I Feel This Way?**  
**Anxiety, Depression, and the Christian Life**

**Leader's Guide**

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## Lesson 1: Out of the Depths

### What are we talking about?

This study is entitled “Why Do I Feel This Way? Anxiety, Depression, and the Christian Life.” Anxiety and depression won't, however, be the only things we'll be talking about; indeed, there are at least three levels of the topic that we'll be addressing.

#### *1.) Anxiety and Depression*

The first level, and probably what most of us have in mind, is the particular issue of anxiety and depression. These sorts of struggles are something that we are increasingly aware of — whether it be because of our own experience or that of our friends and loved ones. Some think it's happening more often; others think we're simply being more open about it. Regardless, it's something that we need to take seriously.

Let's be sure up front that everyone knows what we're talking about. These definitions are taken from a very mainstream source (psychiatry.org), but similar definitions can be found in many different sources.

Depression: “a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person's ability to function at work and at home.”

Anxiety: “a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations. It can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention. Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness, and involve excessive fear or anxiety. ... In general, for a person to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, the fear or anxiety must: 1.) Be out of proportion to the situation or age inappropriate; and 2.) Hinder your ability to function normally.”

*Leaders: For those unfamiliar with this experience, one helpful way to summarize it is that it is experienced, not as something you are actively doing, but as something happening to you.*

#### *2.) Mental Illness More Broadly*

The second level of what we are addressing is the sorts of things often associated with mental illness in general. While the experiences of anxiety and depression are the primary level we are addressing, the way we address these experiences can also be applied to any number of other similar struggles: eating disorders, addictions, mental illness of various kinds.

### *3.) Spiritual Darkness*

The third level is actually what this study most has in mind: the level of struggling with any sort of spiritual darkness and suffering. Anxiety and depression are simply two examples of a broader Christian experience, the experience of being driven to cry out to God “out of the depths.”

We'll develop that idea a bit more in a moment, but first we need to ask another question:

#### Who should care about this?

All of us come to this topic from various perspectives and circumstances and relate to it in different ways. Some of us know — painfully — exactly what we are talking about, while others may be thinking about it for the first time. All of us need to deal with this, and to do so, it is helpful to identify three main categories of people who might be considering this topic.

#### *1.) Acute and Chronic Sufferers*

First, there are almost certainly some here who know exactly what we are talking about because they feel trapped by it at this very moment. One of the goals of this study is to encourage and comfort those who face this challenge. There are not always easy answers, and even when answers seem elusive, the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks comfort and grace to us. It is also helpful for all of us to remember that these sorts of sufferers are likely in our midst, and we should be seeking to grow in wisdom about how to help them.

#### *2.) Occasional Low-Level Sufferers*

Second, there are also those of us who relate to this sort of thing, but most of the time don't suffer from it and rarely feel trapped by it. Perhaps you fight anxiety, but it's not really a thing you feel overwhelmingly burdened by. Sometimes this group is neglected, but this sort of suffering is important to acknowledge as well.

#### *3.) Those who don't struggle with this at all*

Third, there are those who still aren't sure they know what we're talking about, because they simply don't struggle with it. Be thankful if you are in that group! But that doesn't mean you can check out of this discussion, for three reasons: 1.) These struggles can develop later in life, and it is good to grow in this sort of wisdom. 2.) Your brothers and sisters in Christ need your help, and studying this will help you be a blessing to them. 3.) All of us struggle with the brokenness of the world, and anxiety and depression are simply two examples of the sort of thing all of us will face in life.

## Out of the depths

The darkness associated with depression and anxiety is a spiritual reality expressed clearly in the Scriptures:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!  
O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my pleas for mercy! (Psalm 130:1-2)

*Leaders: Emphasize that this sort of thing is expressed throughout the Psalms; seek out some of your own examples with the students.*

As difficult as it is to acknowledge, it is good news that the Bible speaks of this sort of thing, because it means that this sort of thing is what the gospel is intended to address. If you struggle with depression or anxiety, you need to know that the Bible acknowledges it, that God's promises apply to you in the midst of it, and that Jesus can bring healing.

You also need to know this if you are going to be a blessing to others who suffer. Our goal in this study will be to grow in wisdom in such a way that we can help others. In the meantime, take comfort in the good news that the Bible acknowledges this dark reality and that the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses not only some but all of the darkness of this life.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Nobody should feel pressured to talk about this, but for those who are interested: in what ways have you had to deal with anxiety or depression, in yourself or others?

*Leaders: Be sure to encourage all three ways of relating to this that have been addressed in this first study, including the awareness of others who experience such struggles. Level 2, “Low-level sufferers,” might be the most important to explore. Diagnostics to ask: “Have you ever felt trapped by sadness or worry? Have you ever been worried in such a way that the worry itself scared you?” Etc.*

2. More broadly, have you ever faced circumstances in which you felt like crying out to God “out of the depths”?

*Leaders: It's important that we not be afraid to mention relatively “minor” examples. It's true that we should remember that other people often suffer far worse things than we have suffered. But it's also true that trials are real, even if small, and even relatively small trials can raise challenging spiritual questions.*

3. Why do we find it difficult to express these sorts of struggles, even though the Psalms speak of them so freely?

*Leaders: Possible answers, many of which will be explored later in this study: discomfort with “feelings” in general, the idea that being truly spiritual means having everything figured out, etc.*

## Lesson 2: The World Is Broken

### Jesus and the Death of Lazarus

We begin our study of the topic of anxiety and depression with a story from the gospels: Jesus after the death of Lazarus. Jesus' friends told him that his friend Lazarus was dying, hoping that he would come and heal Lazarus. After a strange delay, Jesus finally went to Lazarus and found that he was already dead. Then we read this:

***Leaders:** Emphasize the dramatic movement of this story, emphasizing a sense of surprise about the fact that Jesus wept.*

<sup>32</sup>Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. <sup>34</sup>And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus wept. (John 11:32-35)

Let's make sure we're clear on the context: Jesus waited until after Lazarus died to visit him, and he did so purposefully. Indeed, he made this clear earlier in his conversation with Martha:

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (John 11:23-27)

Jesus is fully divine. He knew that he had good reason to wait until after Lazarus died. He knew what he was going to do. He knew that by his death and resurrection death was going to be defeated, and that as a sign of that victory he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Perhaps most importantly, keep in mind that in all of this, in all of his words and feelings and actions, Jesus was without sin.

So given all of that, when Jesus saw people weeping at the death of Lazarus, what did he do? When we face bad circumstances — like the death of a loved one — we are tempted to think that if we have all of our theological and spiritual ducks in a row, we'll be just fine. We'll smile and say “God has a plan, everything's going to be okay, I'm filled with joy!”

But what did Jesus do? We find the answer in the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35: “Jesus wept.”

This is perhaps the most important point to keep in mind as we address this difficult topic. At the death of Lazarus, Jesus wept. He didn't act like everything was okay. He didn't put on a smiley face and say "God has a plan so there's nothing to be upset about." He wept.

### The World is Broken

Why did Jesus weep? He wept because the world is broken. Sin and evil have invaded God's good creation, and now it is cursed. Sin and sickness and death are foreign invaders that have twisted and broken it.

In response to that reality, Jesus wept. Don't try to be more spiritual than Jesus!

This means that some of what we call anxiety and depression makes sense. There are things in the world worth being sad about, and there are things in the world that it makes sense to be anxious about.

This needs to correct those of us who are tempted to dismiss struggles with anxiety or depression with easy and simplistic answers. And this should encourage those of us who are tempted to fear that there is something deeply wrong with us when we feel this way. Remember: Jesus wept!

### We Are Broken

Not only is the world broken, but we are broken. Our humanity is broken. This is made clear right away in Genesis: a primary consequence of our sin is the invasion of sickness and death in the world. But not only are our bodies broken; our entire humanity is broken, every aspect of who we are: body, soul, spirit, feelings, mind, emotions.

Keeping this in mind will affect how we wrestle with anxiety and depression. Every aspect of our humanity is created good by God, and every aspect is twisted by sin.

This means, for example, that our feelings are both good and broken. Feelings are created good by God! We should not be afraid of acknowledging them. But they are broken, which means that they are not ultimately trustworthy. We must remember that in a culture that seemingly worships feelings.

### Brokenness Remains

Here is the real good news in all of this: brokenness remains! How is that good news?

You see, many Christians are tempted to think that once they become a Christian, they shouldn't be struggling with brokenness anymore. And if you think that, you'll be up against a problem: If you think Christians aren't supposed to struggle with brokenness, and if you do in fact struggle, then you'll be tempted to think, *maybe I'm not really a Christian.*

In that situation, remember the good news of John 11:35 - Jesus wept! That means your weeping, your struggles, your brokenness are all perfectly consistent with faith in Jesus Christ. Our faith is in the Jesus who wept at the death of Lazarus, and that's good news!



## Discussion Questions

1. Does it surprise you that Jesus wept? What does this tell us about his humanity?

***Leaders:** The key here is that Jesus is fully, truly human, as the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes. We often have views of Jesus that neglect or underemphasize his humanity. As difficult as it can be at times to understand, we should never treat Jesus' divinity and humanity as though they cancel each other out or merge into a third nature. Jesus is **both** fully human **and** fully divine.*

2. What does the fact that Jesus wept tell us about God?

***Leaders:** Jesus reveals God's heart to us! When we are tempted to think of God as cold and distant, Jesus reminds us of God's heart in the midst of our suffering.*

3. What aspect of our humanity do you find it most difficult to remember is broken? What are you tempted to trust more than you should — either in yourself or the world — despite its brokenness?

***Leaders:** In our church contexts and cultural contexts the most important topic to discuss here is our feelings. On the one hand, our church contexts often act like feelings are bad. God created feelings good, and we should not be afraid to talk about them. On the other hand, our culture worships feelings and teaches us to give absolute trust to our feelings. But our feelings are fallen and broken and do not deserve that ultimate trust. When we are sanctified, being made more like Jesus, the goal is not getting rid of feelings, but rather having our feelings rightly oriented to God and guided by his Word.*

4. Have you ever struggled with something to the point of doubting whether or not you were really a Christian?

***Leaders:** This can take many forms: perhaps specific struggles with anxiety or depression; battles with sins that don't go away right away; doubts about specific aspects of our faith. On the matter of doubts, it is important to distinguish between sinful doubt (a purposeful attack upon God and his Word) and faithful doubt (the acknowledgment that we do not feel as sure as we would like and that we desire for our faith to grow).*

## Lesson 3: Some Practical Advice

In this lesson we will consider some practical advice for dealing with the issue of anxiety and depression, keeping in mind the diversity of ways in which we encounter this question. Some of us suffer in direct ways; others of us encounter this struggle in more occasional low-level ways, and still others need to grow in wisdom on this topic for the sake of others.

### Use medical help (when appropriate)

In the course of this study we have already established theologically, on the basis of Genesis 1-3, that our humanity is broken by sin, and that this includes the brokenness of all our humanity: body, mind, soul, spirit, feelings, emotions. The brokenness of our bodies means that we have every reason to think doctors and medicine could have something to say in our struggles with anxiety and depression. Yes, we are broken spiritually, but we are also broken physically.

When the question of going to the doctor is raised, many of us think of the debate over whether or not we should use medication to treat anxiety or depression. The matter of using a doctor, however, is actually much broader than that. A doctor can help us with advice about our diet, exercise, vitamins, sleep, and overall general health. All of those things can affect us emotionally, and we must be wise and humble enough to take the advice of a doctor seriously.

The question of medication is a bit more complicated, as there are dangers on all sides: on the one hand, if we are too quick to use medication, and do so unnecessarily, the medication can keep us from dealing with the real spiritual and emotional issues we need to be addressing. On the other hand, if we wait too long when medication really is needed, there can be dangerous consequences. We can summarize the difficult balance in this way:

1. Never shame someone simply for using medical help.
2. Some situations *require* medical help.
3. Medical help is not always the answer (and can sometimes make the problem worse or serve as a “crutch” that keeps us from dealing with the real issue).

What this means is that we need wisdom for the complexity of situations we face. Despite the complexity of specific situations, as a general principle we can affirm that we have good theological reasons to think the brokenness of our bodies may often be a factor. (For those who would like to study this question further, I highly recommend the writings of Reformed pastor David Murray.)

**Leaders:** *This is a very complicated discussion, and you should make it clear that we are only talking about very broad principles here. Every situation is different and there are real dangers on both sides of the question.*

## Just do something

Others of us, especially those who are occasional low-level sufferers of anxiety and depression, need a different sort of advice: just do something!

In different seasons of life, especially in times of transition and decision, it can be easy to get trapped by a kind of malaise of aimlessness, even a sort of laziness. What does God want me to do with my life? Whom should I marry or what career should I pursue? What is my calling? What should I be doing?

That sort of struggle can be paralyzing: because God doesn't whisper an answer into our ear, we find ourselves doing nothing, being passionate about nothing, pursuing nothing. But God isn't going to whisper an answer into your ear. Instead, in the way of following Jesus and seeking God's glory you are called to just do something!

Now, that doesn't mean just anything. It doesn't mean you can decide you feel called to be a bank robber. But if you seek wisdom, get advice from others, and stay within the parameters of God's law, you are free to just do something. Indeed, often our struggle with anxiety or depression comes from a failure to pour ourselves into life as we should.

Martin Luther offers this sort of advice to Prince Joachim of Anhalt (1534) who suffered from what was then called “melancholy and dejection of spirit.”

“I should like to encourage Your Grace, who are a young man, always to be joyful, to engage in riding and hunting, and to seek the company of others who may be able to rejoice with Your Grace in a godly and honorable way. For solitude and inwardness are poisonous and deadly to all people, and especially to a young man. Accordingly, God has commanded us to be joyful in his presence; he does not desire a gloomy sacrifice. [Luther here quotes Ecclesiastes 12.] No one realizes how much harm it does a young person to avoid pleasure and cultivate solitude and sadness. Your grace has Master Nicholas Hausman and many others near at hand. Be merry with them; for gladness and good cheer, when decent and proper, are the best medicine for a young person—indeed, for all people. I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom, now seek and find pleasure wherever I can. Praise God, we now have sufficient understanding of the Word of God to be able to rejoice with a good conscience and to use God's gifts with thanksgiving, for he created them for this purpose and is pleased when we use them.” (Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955], pp. 92-93)

Perhaps that advice surprises you! “For solitude and inwardness are poisonous and deadly to all people, and especially to a young man.” Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world good, and he created life good, and we are meant to pour ourselves into life in God's good creation. Find what it is God has given you to do, that which is wise and within the boundaries of his law and that you are able to enjoy, and pursue it. Just do something!

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the dangers in being too quick to use medical help when struggling with anxiety or depression?

*Leaders: The danger here, especially if medical factors in fact are not the cause of the struggle, is that the medical help can be a kind of “crutch” that prevents dealing with the real underlying issues - spiritual, emotional, relational, etc.*

2. What are the dangers in neglecting medical help?

*Leaders: In particularly bad situations, anxiety and depression can lead to extreme consequences, even thoughts of suicide. Even in some situations where medical factors were not the initial cause, medical help can be needed to stop it from getting worse to allow time for the underlying causes to be dealt with.*

3. What are some areas of life that we can forget are created by God to be used and enjoyed as part of his good creation? When you are tempted by “solitude and inwardness” what are some things you can pursue in the way of “just doing something”?

*Leaders: Some examples could be school, work, hobbies, sports, friendships, food, outdoorsy-stuff, art and music, reading, intellectual pursuits.*

4. As appealing as all of this sounds, what keeps us from just doing something?

*Leaders: Here the goal is to encourage more introspective, personal answers. What are we afraid of? What sorts of things seem “unspiritual” or unimportant to us? What are we waiting for? Guidance, maturity, opportunity?*

## Lesson 4: Be the Church, Learning to Lament

Last time we focused on some practical advice; there is one more piece of advice we need to add, both for those who suffer anxiety and depression and those who do not:

### Be the church!

Young people are often told “you are the church of the future.” As true as that is, (we're all part of the church of the future!), you are in fact part of the church *now*, the church of the present, and it is deeply important for your spiritual well-being that you *live* as part of the church now.

The way we phrase this is key: not just *go to church*, but *be the church*. When you struggle with anxiety or depression, beware the temptation to disengage from others, to embrace isolation or loneliness. All of us, whether we suffer from this or not, need to seek real, rich *intergenerational* relationships of spiritual mentoring in the church. You need, and this is absolutely indispensable, real relationships with people in the church who are not your family and who are not your own age, people who are older than you and with whom you have a relationship precisely because you are part of the congregation.

Moreover, seek to be the church in such a way that you can minister to others who struggle with anxiety or depression. Maybe you are tempted to think this sort of struggle doesn't apply to you very much, but your brothers and sisters in Christ need you; they need you to be wise about this sort of thing, and they need you to live in real relationships with them as the church.

There are two primary ways we need to be more faithful in being the church for others: by learning to lament together, and by embracing gospel encouragement together. Next time we'll focus on that gospel encouragement, but first let's be encouraged by the biblical permission and calling to lament.

### You are free to lament

A lament, according to the dictionary, is “a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” Biblically, a lament is an expression of sorrow poured out to God, often without supplying any answers about why the cause of sorrow has been happening. It is simply a matter of expressing to God the fact that what is happening is bad and that it is causing sorrow.

The Psalms are full of this sort of thing. Consider, for example, Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but I find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)

Remember also the passage with which we began this study:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!  
O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my pleas for mercy! (Psalm 130:1-2)

And, of course, remember the example of Jesus. At the death of Lazarus, Jesus wept. He lamented. When you face circumstances that seem like they could be causes of anxiety or depression, remember this biblical pattern: it is perfectly good and faithful to pour out your lament before God.

But wait, how is this encouragement? Why is this good news? Isn't lament a bit of a downer of a topic?

As Christians, as we've already noted in this study, we're tempted to think we're supposed to act like everything always makes sense to us. Since God has a plan, we're tempted to think we're supposed to always be spiritually happy.

If that's the idea you have in mind, and then if you face circumstances that make you feel like lamenting, you'll face a crisis: maybe I'm not really a Christian, maybe my faith isn't real, maybe God doesn't really approve of me.

It is good news, therefore, that the Bible tells us that the world is the sort of place that will drive us at times to lament. It is good news that the Bible anticipates and describes this sort of experience. It is for your encouragement that the Bible gives you permission to lament and mourn. Indeed, it calls us to do so for and with each other:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15)

You don't have to pretend everything makes sense; you are free to lament. More than that, this freedom that God gives to us is a freedom we need to give to each other. We need not only to lament before God, but to acknowledge our struggles and our mourning to each other so that we can truly mourn with those who mourn. You are allowed to lament, and that's good news!

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so hard to develop and pursue intergenerational relationships?

*Leaders: There are lots of factors that could be discussed here. Our broader American culture, especially in popular culture, tends to emphasize differences between the generations. Our churches often structure programs in such a way as to encourage the generations to be separated from each other. And sometimes simple factors are the main thing: social anxiety, lack of time, etc.*

2. Why is it so easy to forget that we are the church now, and not just in the future?

**Leaders:** *This is an open-ended question intended to generate discussion. Perhaps the question should begin by diagnosing the fact of the problem before identifying causes. So we might ask: in what ways are we tempted to act like we are not yet really part of the church? For example: If we hear about someone in the hospital who could use visits, do we assume we are as responsible as anyone else to make such a visit? If we don't, why not? And so on.*

3. Why are we tempted to think we're not supposed to lament?

**Leaders:** *This has already been explored in the course of the study. We think that if we are truly spiritual, we'll act like we have everything figured out. And our churches are often uncomfortable with expressing feelings in general; lament is simply one part of that problem.*

4. What are some situations in life when lament would be appropriate? How can we encourage each other to “mourn with those who mourn”?

**Leaders:** *There aren't really any right or wrong answers here. As noted earlier in the study, be sure not to discourage relatively minor examples. Everyone's trials are relative to their own experience and should not be dismissed on the basis of comparison to others. Of course, we don't want to make light of the topic by way of frivolous examples either.*

## Lesson 5: Gospel Encouragement

We conclude this study by seeking encouragement in the gospel of Jesus Christ. For some of us, anxiety or depression may be something we struggle with our whole life. We will all face the reality of darkness and brokenness in this life, whether we face this particular struggle or not. And all of us should be growing in our ability to speak the gospel to each other.

### Encourage One Another

Our goal should be twofold as we consider this gospel encouragement together. First, seek how your own faith can be encouraged by this good news. And second, use this study as a way of practicing how to speak these things to each other.

After describing the good news of the promise of Christ's return and the resurrection of the body, Paul says:

“Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thess. 4:18)

As we are encouraged by these things, we must also seek to encourage one another.

### You are loved in Christ

To hear the gospel in a fresh way, especially as it addresses struggles like anxiety or depression, we need to consider the idea of shame.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

When we think of what Jesus did on the cross, we usually emphasize that he took care of the guilt of our sin. And that is certainly true. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin, solving the problem of our guilt before God, so that we can be forgiven.

But if that's all we say, we can be left with a lingering feeling of shame. Yes, we have been forgiven, but we continue to feel shame — dirtiness, messiness, filthiness — because of what we have done. Struggles like anxiety or depression can simply add to that sense of shame. We think “if I were really trusting Christ as I should I wouldn't feel this way.” And of course, our faith is never as strong and true as we'd like it to be. Put all of that together, and the result is a feeling of shame, even when we know we are forgiven. We know God forgives us, but we don't think he likes us very much. We imagine him sort of “holding his nose” while he forgives us.



But Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus went to the cross not only to pay the penalty for our sin, but he did so “despising the shame.” Jesus covered your shame. He took it away. He dealt with it once and for all. What this means is that you may be absolutely confident in this covenant promise that God has given to you: you are loved in Christ.

For some of us, this is a very real struggle. You worry that the gospel is not enough for you, that Jesus is not enough for you, that God couldn't possibly love you in your situation and with your struggles and your brokenness. We say: “if you only knew what I struggle with, you wouldn't be so sure!” But God does know, and he knows perfectly, and the promise that he calls you to receive by faith is this:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1)

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

When you look to Christ in faith — including weak, imperfect faith — you get to say with Paul that you live:

“by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

At the cross of Christ, evil did its worst, and in the resurrection Christ defeated all of it, and he did so for you.

This is therefore God's promise to you, for your faith: God loves you. God forgives you. God smiles upon you. God delights in you. In Christ, God likes you. You are God's daughter, you are God's son, you are God's beloved adopted child in Christ.

### You are engaged in kingdom drama

With that confidence, God calls you then to engage life with a sense of kingdom drama. Because Christ has defeated all the powers of sin and death and hell, and because he is seated at the right hand of God ruling and reigning over all things, you are enabled to face real enemies and real danger with real boldness and real confidence.

There are forms of darkness and brokenness in life that we will struggle with until we die or until Christ returns. And even this we can embrace by faith because Jesus has won the victory and we now get to live as citizens of his kingdom. This is what we are up against, the real kingdom drama that we are living in.

We are called to share in Christ's suffering, to pour ourselves out for the sake of others, to be engaged in a life and death struggle with the forces of evil. We need to locate the temptations and struggles we face in the midst of this calling.

When we do so, as intense and dramatic as it may sound, we find it encouragement, because it is for the sake of this struggle, for the sake of this kingdom drama, that God has given us his promises. The

Apostle Paul struggled with all manner of fearful circumstances, perhaps even with anxiety or depression, and this is what he wrote in the midst of it all:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)

Whatever you face, God is with you, in Christ and by his Spirit. Whatever you face, God has promised that we are more than conquerors in Christ. Whatever you face, God has promised that nothing can separate you from his love.

And whatever you face, God has promised a glorious future in which every tear will be wiped away (Revelation 21:4). Let's acknowledge what this means: until the new creation, there will be tears. Remember that Jesus wept! And then let's take comfort in the promise: the Jesus who wept, who is with us even now in our tears, will come again to wipe every tear away.

## Discussion Questions

1. Which aspects of this gospel encouragement do you find it easiest to forget? Why do you think that is?

*Leaders: There are several possibilities here: the guilt of sin (that our sin deserves a penalty that Jesus has satisfied for us); the shame of sin (that Jesus has cleansed us of the feeling of dirtiness that comes from our being involved in a broken and cursed world, including ways in which we might feel like our anxiety or depression are related to sin); the calling to encourage each other (we might believe it for ourselves, but forget that we are meant to encourage others).*

2. Why do we find it hard to be encouraged by the gospel?

*Leaders: Again, there are several angles from which to get at this. Sometimes we ignore our need to be encouraged; we don't really believe or feel that we are sinners in need of grace. Other times we are so convinced of our own sin that we don't believe the gospel is enough for us; we think that the sin we've been mixed up in is too much for God to deal with. Or perhaps we think of God as merely a distant power who doesn't really like or care for us; in that case, while we might affirm the gospel in principle, we're not really encouraged by it, because we're not focused enough on God's genuine delight in us and love for us in Christ.*

3. Do you find it hard to encourage others at times? Why do you think it can be hard to encourage each other?

*Leaders: It's possible that: we don't realize that others need encouragement because we don't know each other's lives well enough; we may not be convinced as we should be that the gospel is enough for each other; we may not be comfortable talking about spiritual matters in general; and for this we need to grow in maturity, as this is what we should be most eager to talk about!*



**Why Do I Feel This Way?**  
**Anxiety, Depression, and the Christian Life**

**Student Questions**

**Rev. Nick Smith**



## Lesson 1: Out of the Depths

### What are we talking about?

This study is entitled “Why Do I Feel This Way? Anxiety, Depression, and the Christian Life.” Anxiety and depression won't, however, be the only things we'll be talking about; indeed, there are at least three levels of the topic that we'll be addressing.

#### *1.) Anxiety and Depression*

The first level, and probably what most of us have in mind, is the particular issue of anxiety and depression. These sorts of struggles are something that we are increasingly aware of — whether it be because of our own experience or that of our friends and loved ones. Some think it's happening more often; others think we're simply being more open about it. Regardless, it's something that we need to take seriously.

Let's be sure up front that everyone knows what we're talking about. These definitions are taken from a very mainstream source (psychiatry.org), but similar definitions can be found in many different sources.

Depression: “a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person's ability to function at work and at home.”

Anxiety: “a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations. It can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention. Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness, and involve excessive fear or anxiety. ... In general, for a person to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, the fear or anxiety must: 1.) Be out of proportion to the situation or age inappropriate; and 2.) Hinder your ability to function normally.”

#### *2.) Mental Illness More Broadly*

The second level of what we are addressing is the sorts of things often associated with mental illness in general. While the experiences of anxiety and depression are the primary level we are addressing, the way we address these experiences can also be applied to any number of other similar struggles: eating disorders, addictions, mental illness of various kinds.

### *3.) Spiritual Darkness*

The third level is actually what this study most has in mind: the level of struggling with any sort of spiritual darkness and suffering. Anxiety and depression are simply two examples of a broader Christian experience, the experience of being driven to cry out to God “out of the depths.”

We'll develop that idea a bit more in a moment, but first we need to ask another question:

#### Who should care about this?

All of us come to this topic from various perspectives and circumstances and relate to it in different ways. Some of us know — painfully — exactly what we are talking about, while others may be thinking about it for the first time. All of us need to deal with this, and to do so, it is helpful to identify three main categories of people who might be considering this topic.

#### *1.) Acute and Chronic Sufferers*

First, there are almost certainly some here who know exactly what we are talking about because they feel trapped by it at this very moment. One of the goals of this study is to encourage and comfort those who face this challenge. There are not always easy answers, and even when answers seem elusive, the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks comfort and grace to us. It is also helpful for all of us to remember that these sorts of sufferers are likely in our midst, and we should be seeking to grow in wisdom about how to help them.

#### *2.) Occasional Low-Level Sufferers*

Second, there are also those of us who relate to this sort of thing, but most of the time don't suffer from it and rarely feel trapped by it. Perhaps you fight anxiety, but it's not really a thing you feel overwhelmingly burdened by. Sometimes this group is neglected, but this sort of suffering is important to acknowledge as well.

#### *3.) Those who don't struggle with this at all*

Third, there are those who still aren't sure they know what we're talking about, because they simply don't struggle with it. Be thankful if you are in that group! But that doesn't mean you can check out of this discussion, for three reasons: 1.) These struggles can develop later in life, and it is good to grow in this sort of wisdom. 2.) Your brothers and sisters in Christ need your help, and studying this will help you be a blessing to them. 3.) All of us struggle with the brokenness of the world, and anxiety and depression are simply two examples of the sort of thing all of us will face in life.



## Out of the depths

The darkness associated with depression and anxiety is a spiritual reality expressed clearly in the Scriptures:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!  
O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my pleas for mercy! (Psalm 130:1-2)

As difficult as it is to acknowledge, it is good news that the Bible speaks of this sort of thing, because it means that this sort of thing is what the gospel is intended to address. If you struggle with depression or anxiety, you need to know that the Bible acknowledges it, that God's promises apply to you in the midst of it, and that Jesus can bring healing.

You also need to know this if you are going to be a blessing to others who suffer. Our goal in this study will be to grow in wisdom in such a way that we can help others. In the meantime, take comfort in the good news that the Bible acknowledges this dark reality and that the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses not only some but all of the darkness of this life.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Nobody should feel pressured to talk about this, but for those who are interested: in what ways have you had to deal with anxiety or depression, in yourself or others?
2. More broadly, have you ever faced circumstances in which you felt like crying out to God “out of the depths”?
3. Why do we find it difficult to express these sorts of struggles, even though the Psalms speak of them so freely?

## Lesson 2: The World Is Broken

### Jesus and the Death of Lazarus

We begin our study of the topic of anxiety and depression with a story from the gospels: Jesus after the death of Lazarus. Jesus' friends told him that his friend Lazarus was dying, hoping that he would come and heal Lazarus. After a strange delay, Jesus finally went to Lazarus and found that he was already dead. Then we read this:

<sup>32</sup>Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. <sup>34</sup>And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus wept. (John 11:32-35)

Let's make sure we're clear on the context: Jesus waited until after Lazarus died to visit him, and he did so purposefully. Indeed, he made this clear earlier in his conversation with Martha:

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” <sup>27</sup>She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (John 11:23-27)

Jesus is fully divine. He knew that he had good reason to wait until after Lazarus died. He knew what he was going to do. He knew that by his death and resurrection death was going to be defeated, and that as a sign of that victory he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Perhaps most importantly, keep in mind that in all of this, in all of his words and feelings and actions, Jesus was without sin.

So given all of that, when Jesus saw people weeping at the death of Lazarus, what did he do? When we face bad circumstances — like the death of a loved one — we are tempted to think that if we have all of our theological and spiritual ducks in a row, we'll be just fine. We'll smile and say “God has a plan, everything's going to be okay, I'm filled with joy!”

But what did Jesus do? We find the answer in the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35: “Jesus wept.”

This is perhaps the most important point to keep in mind as we address this difficult topic. At the death of Lazarus, Jesus wept. He didn't act like everything was okay. He didn't put on a smiley face and say “God has a plan so there's nothing to be upset about.” He wept.

## The World is Broken

Why did Jesus weep? He wept because the world is broken. Sin and evil have invaded God's good creation, and now it is cursed. Sin and sickness and death are foreign invaders that have twisted and broken it.

In response to that reality, Jesus wept. Don't try to be more spiritual than Jesus!

This means that some of what we call anxiety and depression makes sense. There are things in the world worth being sad about, and there are things in the world that it makes sense to be anxious about.

This needs to correct those of us who are tempted to dismiss struggles with anxiety or depression with easy and simplistic answers. And this should encourage those of us who are tempted to fear that there is something deeply wrong with us when we feel this way. Remember: Jesus wept!

## We Are Broken

Not only is the world broken, but we are broken. Our humanity is broken. This is made clear right away in Genesis: a primary consequence of our sin is the invasion of sickness and death in the world. But not only are our bodies broken; our entire humanity is broken, every aspect of who we are: body, soul, spirit, feelings, mind, emotions.

Keeping this in mind will affect how we wrestle with anxiety and depression. Every aspect of our humanity is created good by God, and every aspect is twisted by sin.

This means, for example, that our feelings are both good and broken. Feelings are created good by God! We should not be afraid of acknowledging them. But they are broken, which means that they are not ultimately trustworthy. We must remember that in a culture that seemingly worships feelings.

## Brokenness Remains

Here is the real good news in all of this: brokenness remains! How is that good news?

You see, many Christians are tempted to think that once they become a Christian, they shouldn't be struggling with brokenness anymore. And if you think that, you'll be up against a problem: If you think Christians aren't supposed to struggle with brokenness, and if you do in fact struggle, then you'll be tempted to think, *maybe I'm not really a Christian*.

In that situation, remember the good news of John 11:35 - Jesus wept! That means your weeping, your struggles, your brokenness are all perfectly consistent with faith in Jesus Christ. Our faith is in the Jesus who wept at the death of Lazarus, and that's good news!

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Does it surprise you that Jesus wept? What does this tell us about his humanity?
2. What does the fact that Jesus wept tell us about God?
3. What aspect of our humanity do you find it most difficult to remember is broken? What are you tempted to trust more than you should — either in yourself or the world — despite its brokenness?
4. Have you ever struggled with something to the point of doubting whether or not you were really a Christian?

## Lesson 3: Some Practical Advice

In this lesson we will consider some practical advice for dealing with the issue of anxiety and depression, keeping in mind the diversity of ways in which we encounter this question. Some of us suffer in direct ways; others of us encounter this struggle in more occasional low-level ways, and still others need to grow in wisdom on this topic for the sake of others.

### Use medical help (when appropriate)

In the course of this study we have already established theologically, on the basis of Genesis 1-3, that our humanity is broken by sin, and that this includes the brokenness of all our humanity: body, mind, soul, spirit, feelings, emotions. The brokenness of our bodies means that we have every reason to think doctors and medicine could have something to say in our struggles with anxiety and depression. Yes, we are broken spiritually, but we are also broken physically.

When the question of going to the doctor is raised, many of us think of the debate over whether or not we should use medication to treat anxiety or depression. The matter of using a doctor, however, is actually much broader than that. A doctor can help us with advice about our diet, exercise, vitamins, sleep, and overall general health. All of those things can affect us emotionally, and we must be wise and humble enough to take the advice of a doctor seriously.

The question of medication is a bit more complicated, as there are dangers on all sides: on the one hand, if we are too quick to use medication, and do so unnecessarily, the medication can keep us from dealing with the real spiritual and emotional issues we need to be addressing. On the other hand, if we wait too long when medication really is needed, there can be dangerous consequences. We can summarize the difficult balance in this way:

1. Never shame someone simply for using medical help.
2. Some situations *require* medical help.
3. Medical help is not always the answer (and can sometimes make the problem worse or serve as a “crutch” that keeps us from dealing with the real issue).

What this means is that we need wisdom for the complexity of situations we face. Despite the complexity of specific situations, as a general principle we can affirm that we have good theological reasons to think the brokenness of our bodies may often be a factor. (For those who would like to study this question further, I highly recommend the writings of Reformed pastor David Murray.)

### Just do something

Others of us, especially those who are occasional low-level sufferers of anxiety and depression, need a different sort of advice: just do something!

In different seasons of life, especially in times of transition and decision, it can be easy to get trapped by a kind of malaise of aimlessness, even a sort of laziness. What does God want me to do with my life? Whom should I marry or what career should I pursue? What is my calling? What should I be doing?

That sort of struggle can be paralyzing: because God doesn't whisper an answer into our ear, we find ourselves doing nothing, being passionate about nothing, pursuing nothing. But God isn't going to whisper an answer into your ear. Instead, in the way of following Jesus and seeking God's glory you are called to just do something!

Now, that doesn't mean just anything. It doesn't mean you can decide you feel called to be a bank robber. But if you seek wisdom, get advice from others, and stay within the parameters of God's law, you are free to just do something. Indeed, often our struggle with anxiety or depression comes from a failure to pour ourselves into life as we should.

Martin Luther offers this sort of advice to Prince Joachim of Anhalt (1534) who suffered from what was then called “melancholy and dejection of spirit.”

“I should like to encourage Your Grace, who are a young man, always to be joyful, to engage in riding and hunting, and to seek the company of others who may be able to rejoice with Your Grace in a godly and honorable way. For solitude and inwardness are poisonous and deadly to all people, and especially to a young man. Accordingly, God has commanded us to be joyful in his presence; he does not desire a gloomy sacrifice. [Luther here quotes Ecclesiastes 12.] No one realizes how much harm it does a young person to avoid pleasure and cultivate solitude and sadness. Your grace has Master Nicholas Hausman and many others near at hand. Be merry with them; for gladness and good cheer, when decent and proper, are the best medicine for a young person—indeed, for all people. I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom, now seek and find pleasure wherever I can. Praise God, we now have sufficient understanding of the Word of God to be able to rejoice with a good conscience and to use God's gifts with thanksgiving, for he created them for this purpose and is pleased when we use them.” (Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955], pp. 92-93)

Perhaps that advice surprises you! “For solitude and inwardness are poisonous and deadly to all people, and especially to a young man.” Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world good, and he created life good, and we are meant to pour ourselves into life in God's good creation. Find what it is God has given you to do, that which is wise and within the boundaries of his law and that you are able to enjoy, and pursue it. Just do something!

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the dangers in being too quick to use medical help when struggling with anxiety or depression?
2. What are the dangers in neglecting medical help?
3. What are some areas of life that we can forget are created by God to be used and enjoyed as part of his good creation? When you are tempted by “solitude and inwardness” what are some things you can pursue in the way of “just doing something”?
4. As appealing as all of this sounds, what keeps us from just doing something?

## Lesson 4: Be the Church, Learning to Lament

Last time we focused on some practical advice; there is one more piece of advice we need to add, both for those who suffer anxiety and depression and those who do not:

### Be the church!

Young people are often told “you are the church of the future.” As true as that is, (we're all part of the church of the future!), you are in fact part of the church *now*, the church of the present, and it is deeply important for your spiritual well-being that you *live* as part of the church now.

The way we phrase this is key: not just *go to church*, but *be the church*. When you struggle with anxiety or depression, beware the temptation to disengage from others, to embrace isolation or loneliness. All of us, whether we suffer from this or not, need to seek real, rich *intergenerational* relationships of spiritual mentoring in the church. You need, and this is absolutely indispensable, real relationships with people in the church who are not your family and who are not your own age, people who are older than you and with whom you have a relationship precisely because you are part of the congregation.

Moreover, seek to be the church in such a way that you can minister to others who struggle with anxiety or depression. Maybe you are tempted to think this sort of struggle doesn't apply to you very much, but your brothers and sisters in Christ need you; they need you to be wise about this sort of thing, and they need you to live in real relationships with them as the church.

There are two primary ways we need to be more faithful in being the church for others: by learning to lament together, and by embracing gospel encouragement together. Next time we'll focus on that gospel encouragement, but first let's be encouraged by the biblical permission and calling to lament.

### You are free to lament

A lament, according to the dictionary, is “a passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” Biblically, a lament is an expression of sorrow poured out to God, often without supplying any answers about why the cause of sorrow has been happening. It is simply a matter of expressing to God the fact that what is happening is bad and that it is causing sorrow.

The Psalms are full of this sort of thing. Consider, for example, Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but I find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)



Remember also the passage with which we began this study:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!  
O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my pleas for mercy! (Psalm 130:1-2)

And, of course, remember the example of Jesus. At the death of Lazarus, Jesus wept. He lamented. When you face circumstances that seem like they could be causes of anxiety or depression, remember this biblical pattern: it is perfectly good and faithful to pour out your lament before God.

But wait, how is this encouragement? Why is this good news? Isn't lament a bit of a downer of a topic?

As Christians, as we've already noted in this study, we're tempted to think we're supposed to act like everything always makes sense to us. Since God has a plan, we're tempted to think we're supposed to always be spiritually happy.

If that's the idea you have in mind, and then if you face circumstances that make you feel like lamenting, you'll face a crisis: maybe I'm not really a Christian, maybe my faith isn't real, maybe God doesn't really approve of me.

It is good news, therefore, that the Bible tells us that the world is the sort of place that will drive us at times to lament. It is good news that the Bible anticipates and describes this sort of experience. It is for your encouragement that the Bible gives you permission to lament and mourn. Indeed, it calls us to do so for and with each other:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15)

You don't have to pretend everything makes sense; you are free to lament. More than that, this freedom that God gives to us is a freedom we need to give to each other. We need not only to lament before God, but to acknowledge our struggles and our mourning to each other so that we can truly mourn with those who mourn. You are allowed to lament, and that's good news!

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Why is it so hard to develop and pursue intergenerational relationships?
2. Why is it so easy to forget that we are the church now, and not just in the future?
3. Why are we tempted to think we're not supposed to lament?
4. What are some situations in life when lament would be appropriate? How can we encourage each other to “mourn with those who mourn”?

## Lesson 5: Gospel Encouragement

We conclude this study by seeking encouragement in the gospel of Jesus Christ. For some of us, anxiety or depression may be something we struggle with our whole life. We will all face the reality of darkness and brokenness in this life, whether we face this particular struggle or not. And all of us should be growing in our ability to speak the gospel to each other.

### Encourage One Another

Our goal should be twofold as we consider this gospel encouragement together. First, seek how your own faith can be encouraged by this good news. And second, use this study as a way of practicing how to speak these things to each other.

After describing the good news of the promise of Christ's return and the resurrection of the body, Paul says:

“Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thess. 4:18)

As we are encouraged by these things, we must also seek to encourage one another.

### You are loved in Christ

To hear the gospel in a fresh way, especially as it addresses struggles like anxiety or depression, we need to consider the idea of shame.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

When we think of what Jesus did on the cross, we usually emphasize that he took care of the guilt of our sin. And that is certainly true. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin, solving the problem of our guilt before God, so that we can be forgiven.

But if that's all we say, we can be left with a lingering feeling of shame. Yes, we have been forgiven, but we continue to feel shame — dirtiness, messiness, filthiness — because of what we have done. Struggles like anxiety or depression can simply add to that sense of shame. We think “if I were really trusting Christ as I should I wouldn't feel this way.” And of course, our faith is never as strong and true as we'd like it to be. Put all of that together, and the result is a feeling of shame, even when we know we are forgiven. We know God forgives us, but we don't think he likes us very much. We imagine him sort of “holding his nose” while he forgives us.

But Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus went to the cross not only to pay the penalty for our sin, but he did so “despising the shame.” Jesus covered your shame. He took it away. He dealt with it once and for all. What this means is that you may be absolutely confident in this covenant promise that God has given to you: you are loved in Christ.

For some of us, this is a very real struggle. You worry that the gospel is not enough for you, that Jesus is not enough for you, that God couldn't possibly love you in your situation and with your struggles and your brokenness. We say: “if you only knew what I struggle with, you wouldn't be so sure!” But God does know, and he knows perfectly, and the promise that he calls you to receive by faith is this:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1)

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

When you look to Christ in faith — including weak, imperfect faith — you get to say with Paul that you live:

“by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

At the cross of Christ, evil did its worst, and in the resurrection Christ defeated all of it, and he did so for you.

This is therefore God's promise to you, for your faith: God loves you. God forgives you. God smiles upon you. God delights in you. In Christ, God likes you. You are God's daughter, you are God's son, you are God's beloved adopted child in Christ.

### You are engaged in kingdom drama

With that confidence, God calls you then to engage life with a sense of kingdom drama. Because Christ has defeated all the powers of sin and death and hell, and because he is seated at the right hand of God ruling and reigning over all things, you are enabled to face real enemies and real danger with real boldness and real confidence.

There are forms of darkness and brokenness in life that we will struggle with until we die or until Christ returns. And even this we can embrace by faith because Jesus has won the victory and we now get to live as citizens of his kingdom. This is what we are up against, the real kingdom drama that we are living in.

We are called to share in Christ's suffering, to pour ourselves out for the sake of others, to be engaged in a life and death struggle with the forces of evil. We need to locate the temptations and struggles we face in the midst of this calling.

When we do so, as intense and dramatic as it may sound, we find it encouragement, because it is for the sake of this struggle, for the sake of this kingdom drama, that God has given us his promises. The Apostle Paul struggled with all manner of fearful circumstances, perhaps even with anxiety or depression, and this is what he wrote in the midst of it all:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)

Whatever you face, God is with you, in Christ and by his Spirit. Whatever you face, God has promised that we are more than conquerors in Christ. Whatever you face, God has promised that nothing can separate you from his love.

And whatever you face, God has promised a glorious future in which every tear will be wiped away (Revelation 21:4). Let's acknowledge what this means: until the new creation, there will be tears. Remember that Jesus wept! And then let's take comfort in the promise: the Jesus who wept, who is with us even now in our tears, will come again to wipe every tear away.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Which aspects of this gospel encouragement do you find it easiest to forget? Why do you think that is?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Why do we find it hard to be encouraged by the gospel?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Do you find it hard to encourage others at times? Why do you think it can be hard to encourage each other?