

Psalm 42 is the prayer of a godly man. We know he is a godly man because his prayer reflects both knowledge of God and personal experience of Him (how many examples of this can you find in the psalm?). He is a man who delights in God above everything else and longs to be in His presence but, even so, he is a man who is in distress: he says so in verses 5 and 11, and we can see the depth of his distress in his graphic description of his feelings.



*Psalm 42 is the prayer of a man of God who is depressed. Can you think of any other examples of depression in Scripture?*

## A Picture Of Gloom

It is hard to put feelings into words and often the best way is to use picture language. That is what the Psalmist does. The picture painted in the words of verse 7 is of someone at sea. Heavy dark clouds gather above him and rain pours down like a waterfall, hitting the sea round about with a loud roar. He is sinking, and each time he manages to raise his head above the water another great wave comes crashing over him.

If you have ever been really depressed I am sure you will be able to identify with that picture, for that is just what it can be like. The Psalmist adds to the picture. In verses 1 and 2 he reveals a yearning heart. Verse 3 indicates tearfulness and loss of appetite, verse 5 a soul that is bowed down and in turmoil, and verse 10 deep inner pain.



*What are the signs which would help you to recognise someone who is depressed?*

In these studies we have been considering how you, as a member of the body of Christ, can take up your God-given responsibilities toward your brothers and sisters in the Lord. If you have been doing

that you will most probably have come into contact with some who are depressed — it is such a common condition, even among godly people. Some you have spoken to may just have been feeling a bit down or “under the weather”. Others may have been bowed down under a sense of blackness and gloom that seemed to them to be impenetrable. However severe depression is there are some principles in this Psalm which you will be able to apply to bring comfort and encouragement.

### **Biblical Remedies**

Pick out from the Psalm the ways in which the Psalmist comforts himself. To show you what I mean, here are five I can identify. You should be able to find some more.

- He pours out his soul to the Lord.
- He recalls good times in the presence of the Lord.
- He reminds himself of who God is.
- He scolds himself.
- He turns his thoughts back to God.

Now look at these in more detail and, as you meditate on his words, think about how you can sensitively and lovingly apply the Psalmist's methods to help others.

1. **He pours out his soul to the Lord.** It should seem an obvious thing to do, that we should bring all our concerns to the Lord, but so often I find that Christian people are reluctant to admit even to themselves that they might be depressed. They think that a Christian should never feel down and so they are ashamed to come to their sympathetic high priest in their time of need (Hebrews 4:15–16). Depression that is bottled up grows deeper.
2. **He recalls good times in the presence of the Lord.** Of course, when depression comes there is a strong temptation to look back with regrets at the past and to settle into backward looking, introverted self-pity. That must be avoided, but it is good to spend some time looking back as the Psalmist does at the mountain top experiences of life (verse 6) and the times of blessing in the Lord's presence (verse 4), to be reminded that what happened once can happen again (verse 5b).
3. **He reminds himself of who God is.** The Psalmist reminds himself that God is his God, his Rock and the help of his countenance who will again command His lovingkindness. He acknowledges that his God is sovereign (verse 7: “...*Your* waterfalls...*Your* billows”) and the God of his life.
4. **He scolds himself.** “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” This is not the question of someone who wants to know the reason. These are the words of someone who is scolding himself. “You have no reason to be depressed,” the Psalmist is saying. If God is God, then there is hope, no matter what our trials are. There is hope no matter how dark the future may seem and there is always a purpose in going on. Now we must be careful here. The Psalmist scolds himself, but the result is not that he settles down into greater gloom and despondency, condemning himself for being depressed. No, his purpose is to turn his thoughts back to God.
5. **He turns his thoughts back to God.** In God there is hope. With God there is purpose. When we live for God life, however hard, is worth living. Hope, purpose and worth are the very things we need if we are to struggle on in times of trial, but if God is allowed to drop out of His right place in our thoughts, then depressive thoughts grow. Thoughts like, “This is too hard,” “I can't,” “Poor me,” “What is the point?” “Why bother?” “There is no hope,” “Life is not worth living.” Faithless, destructive thoughts which, if allowed develop, lead into a downward spiral of deepening depression.

## Some Warnings

As you apply these principles do not think that they will be the cure of everyone's depression. That will not be the case. Some will find complete recovery by them. Many will have to struggle hard to apply them because for them the thinking of depressive thoughts will have become a habit (you may be able to help them further by referring back to chapter 5). Some will find encouragement and comfort in them but, although they apply them fervently, the gloom will not lift because, in their depression, other influences are at work. Those influences might be ongoing overwhelming trials, exhaustion or physical illness, among other things. Remember this, for if you do not you will soon fall into the folly of Job's comforters who, although well meaning, rather than helping added to Job's distress. To help guard against that let me, in finishing, add some further points to be kept in mind when helping those who are depressed.

- **Everyone who is depressed should consult a doctor.** This is important if only to be reassured that there is no physical cause for the depression, but some will be depressed because of a physical illness which can be treated and others will benefit from antidepressant medication. About 1 in 3 depressed people will benefit from antidepressant tablets and, in contradiction of the ill-informed teaching of some, I would say that there is no good reason why we as Christians should not make use of their benefits, when they are properly prescribed. Do remember though that the doctor's resources are limited. He may not have time to give ongoing support and encouragement and he may not have the spiritual insight to give comfort from the Word of God. You must continue to care and work alongside his help.
- **Be patient and gentle with those who are depressed.** Often they are people who have struggled and tried until they have run out of tries. Never run the risk of destroying hope but rather, drawing upon the Scriptures, give priority to building firm hope that is built upon the promises of God rightly applied. Hope can be life saving.
- **Remember the importance of giving practical help.** Ease the burden of life by doing something useful. Look after the children for a while. Do some washing or ironing. Cut the grass. If there is anything that it is practically possible for you to do to make life easier, do it.



Why do you think depressive thoughts are so hard to change?



In the table overleaf list the thoughts which typically preoccupy people who are depressed. Then, in the second column, for each of the thoughts you have listed give a corresponding right thought which is based on God's Word, noting the passages you have referred to.

Typical Depressive Thought	Corresponding Biblical Thought	Reference