

The
B **Branch**
V **ine**

How JESUS *Gave*
Me FREEDOM
from DEPRESSION

The Branch and the Vine

Copyright page (addition)

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ISBN: 978-1999151416

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*To Wangu and Isaac
In Memory of Glen and Roberta*

Acknowledgments

Many people have helped me on my journey through my dark times while I suffered through depression, and many have also supported me in other ways, staying on the sidelines praying for me.

Although I have not named anyone in this work, they know who they are in the story, and no implication is made or intended that anyone is to blame for what happened to me.

I am grateful for, love and respect my family and for them and who they are. I also thank all the friends who helped and supported me along this journey. Everything that happened to me took place for a reason and was for the glory of God.

Last but not least. I am grateful to my mother who helped to edit this book. I am also grateful to God for everything that happened on my journey.

Introduction

I see that you've picked me up. Stop looking at the world around you and look back onto the page. No one is reading your mind. You are holding me open to read and find out what is inside, because either you suffer from depression or you know someone who does. Each time I hear or read about the death of someone famous by suicide, I'm moved to tears. Perhaps that is because it could have been me. But it seems that there is something else going on.

The tears confirm God's call on me to write this book and others. Will you find freedom from depression? I don't know, nor can I guarantee it. Now even if you are not a believer in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, the ideas I express in this book are worth the read for the chance you might have to gain freedom from depression. I know only one other thing about you, and this might be most important: you desire freedom and healing from depression. You are done with it. I can only describe living with depression as a mystery. Most anti-depressants lead us deeper into depression. I have not ever taken any medication nor had any prescribed. Many other treatments also don't work.

I know only one thing about depression. It is the most difficult thing I have ever had to bear, and my friends and family past and present have also had to bear it vicariously, even if they didn't know I suffered. Depression also defies description, as my description will be different from how the next person might describe it, and once I start describing it, I might have to confess membership in an on-and-on anon group, because I won't be able to stop. It is a deep, dark, inescapable pit where up and down cannot be discerned. It is a quagmire world of derision from endless sources. It is a waterfall of a variety of poisons contaminating the most precious and sacred landscapes, causing outcries of horror. It is a darkness so dark that darkness would call it darker than itself. In truth, it is where the enemy wants us all to reside for eternity, and forever brainwashed to believe the perception that no solution exists. A deceptively lit tunnel that turns dark once we enter to any depth, we cannot exit the way we entered. Okay! I have to stop! It's taking up too much space!

Of all the possible struggles and conditions I have ever experienced or read about, depression is both the most challenging and the most demanding thing to live with in my opinion. The reason I say this is that if I get a cold, I know it will go away soon enough and it won't kill me; if a knife or a stone injures me, I know the wound will heal soon. Even if I become critically ill, I know that I will heal or I will die. If I die, I have a green pasture to look forward to in eternity. None of those things is worse than being stuck in a slimy prison where the slime causes the locks to change so that the keys no longer fit (I know! I tried to describe depression again!).

Having become free and healed from the condition that we call depression, I soon after heard God's call to share my story, but I didn't know how or why. I knew that many others had written down stories of overcoming depression. I asked God what makes my story so different from the others. I've shared my testimony before and wasn't that enough? No. People need to hear how it happened. People need more than hope through a tale of healing that they believe cannot happen to them. People need a revelation that we must not reduce depression to a mere disease to remedy with drugs or electro-shock treatment, and we definitely can no longer tolerate "living with" depression, and others are tired of seeing their friends and family lose their lives to the ravages of suicide and spiritual death.

As I say, there is no guarantee this will work for anyone, because there are so many factors. Whether you are at the point of complete desperation or concerned about friends' or relatives' mental health, I offer hope through my story and this book. That's enough. I've taken up enough of your time. Let's get started!

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

—John 15:1-4

Part I
Detached from the Vine

One - I Am Not Who I Was

The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What! You too? I thought I was the only one."

—C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves¹

My battle with depression was rough, and I talk about it in the past tense because God's plan is to keep it away. But to get to this point was a process, and I didn't go through it alone. I leaned on God, and I have a mentor and accountability partners who helped and continue to help me. Before I get much further, I'll just say that all is in the past and forgiven. Amends have been made and relationships reconciled. Most important to me, that includes my family.

I am the eldest of three siblings, born and raised in Latin America of British parents who loved us and did their best as parents. We moved every two to four years.

At age 10, I joined the Boy Scouts and began to learn and gain recognition for skills and knowledge. The merit badges I earned gave me recognition that fulfilled a need for approval. But they also sparked a dream to achieve greatness in the top rank of Eagle Scout. With that goal in mind, my leaders advised me to seek the mentorship of a local priest. Little did I know that my Boy Scout days would soon end, and I had to give up that pursuit.

But I had another dream—a bigger dream. I'd flown on airplanes a few times and even been invited into a cockpit in flight. I dearly desired to become a pilot. It wasn't because it's a high-paying job or holds any prestige; it was just cool!

At home, there was frequent bickering and quarreling between my siblings and me. The fighting led my parents to decide to send me to a military boarding school when I was 11. They included me in the decision, so I can't put everything on them for this. The thought of flying lessons offered by the school—and graduates would have opportunities in the US Air Force or as civilian aircraft pilots—convinced me to go. I might learn to fly? I might be an airline pilot? Yet somehow, those flying lessons didn't get started, even though my peers talked about their

experiences in the flight program. Attending this school killed both of my dreams—to become an Eagle Scout and to be a pilot!

The teachers were strict and rarely encouraged students. Many of the other students attending were cool and good friends, but they were not family. The school also failed to teach me the wisdom of discipline, which was my parents' intent in sending me there. Instead, I saw many boys rebel against authority in ways I had never heard of. I saw many boys bully and try to make themselves lords over others, demanding praise like gods, while I needed a fatherly role model to follow, not even God.

That experience was horrible, and for many of us it might be enough to send us spiraling into depression. But I know that it was only a factor. Deep within me, I landed in the deep, dark hole of depression because of what happened back in grade one five years earlier. The teacher had each student stand up individually to count to 100 once per day until achieved. When I did trip on a number, the teacher would stop me and tell me to sit down and try again the next day. My classmates jeered and mocked me, but as unbearable as that was, the teacher's lack of grace was worse. I have noticed that, even these days, I have a tendency to trip over my words while trying to perform the same feat.

I can't really remember what the teacher looked like, but the tone of her voice telling me to sit down became terrifying. I remember feeling so traumatized that I sometimes "forgot" to go back to class after lunch or recess. It was a serious hit to my self-esteem and confidence. I didn't tell my parents about this issue, but soon after that, fights with my brother became quite frequent.

Fast forward to the boarding school of hell. After three semesters, my parents allowed me to come home. But the family reunion would only last a year as my parents separated and later divorced. My parents decided that my brother and sister would move to Canada with my mother, while I stayed in Brazil with my father. Although I had a part in that decision, living with my father was a bad decision for me. I know that he loved me, but he didn't father me and worshipped the gods of golf and other weekend pleasures. Even while at home the rest of the

week, he was very distant. And in my earthly father's abandonment, there was no one else I could trust enough to unload my burdens.

I began to break from the Vine and become lost.

I sought the attention and approval of my peers, through partying and alcohol. It was during this time that I began to believe some lies about myself:

- I'm not good at anything.
- I have no talent.
- I'm not smart.
- I'm not manly nor courageous.
- I have no future.
- Nobody can forgive what I've done.
- I'll never change.
- I need to fix these problems on my own.

I was barely hanging onto the Vine because of these lies and because in those days, we did not attend church for even a single Sunday. In my senior year of high school, I willfully turned away from God, telling my father that He could not possibly exist. His dismay surprises me even now, because we did not attend a church except maybe once or twice through those high school years. I can clearly remember thinking that Jesus must have just been a magician performing tricks instead of miracles. Clearly, I was undereducated on the subject of Christ. I snapped off the Vine completely.

Academically, I was doing fairly well, but I had no plans beyond high school. It was as if I thought the plans would all take care of themselves, as if I was a passenger on my own journey. And I was completely unprepared for life as an adult. I chose a post-secondary school before choosing a major because I had no passion or calling to do anything. It was all kind of arbitrary and lacking direction and vision. Having no perseverance, I gave up on earning a degree after two years of university.

By that time, I was deep into an addiction that sent me headlong into self-isolation, and I couldn't escape the chains of shame and self-condemnation. The frustration that manifested in the sibling rivalry of childhood continued in verbal abuse, attempts to control others and fits

of rage. The chains that imprisoned me became a new normal—my comfort zone.

Looking back on that reality from where I am now, I realize I had many short and broken friendships. Dating life seemed normal but it never reached any level of beauty by any standard. The chains on my soul hampered even my first marriage. I blamed the failure of that relationship on the pain of her affair with another man. The reality was that I was in denial of my addiction. The shame of that addiction would come to light much later.

After that difficult time, I had a short relationship with a woman whom I can only say had a short temper and was easily offended. It ended with my arrest on an assault charge. That would later be resolved with a peace bond. Looking back, these two relationships had a dreadful effect on my ability to trust the women I would invite into my life. After that, I had a long string of short relationships that were a result of my odd dating expectations and attitudes including the trust issue.

Then for about three years, God used a girlfriend who said she was Christian to invite me to church. The Holy Spirit started to graft me back into the Vine, but the enemy still had his grip on me, keeping me in the darkness of depression, trying to hack my branch back off. I later declared Jesus as my Lord and Savior and I became a new creation.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

—2 Corinthians 5:17

I do not deserve His salvation and I could not earn it. It comes by faith.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

—Ephesians 2:8-9

That I regained my faith in God might seem to be the end of my maladies. However, that was not the case. My addiction didn't stop and neither did depression, but in hindsight healing was on my path for the first time in a long time. Jesus is the Living Water and the Vine watering the seed of my life.

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

—John 4:10

The most important thing I heard after that time was that as a unique person in the world—as is everyone on Earth—I am loved just the way I am. And so are you. You may not believe this, but you are beautiful.

I know! I know! You're sitting there in your chair reading this book wondering how the author can say such a thing not knowing the reader. But I know something you may have forgotten. God made us all in His own image.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

—Genesis 1:27

I know that you have something in you that you can offer the world. You might not know what that is, but it is there. You just haven't realized it yet. God made us for a purpose.

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

—Colossians 1:16

After starting a Christ-centered recovery program, my addiction ceased. The frustration of the same moments that would have caused anger from that old comfort zone gave way to a wisdom of knowing when silence is the best response.

A small residue remained of my former reality within a milder depression. The enemy kept holding onto my branch to rip it from the Vine. God still used it to keep me humble enough to ask for help. Even after that, I found out salvation doesn't make us perfect. And worse, I could still fall apart.

By that time, I had married my beautiful bride and we had a son. I wanted to provide better for my new family so I took on a door-to-door sales job on commission. After about 100 days of door knocking and very few sales, negative self-talk started to take me back to the old me,

believing lies again. This time the lies were, “I’m no good to my wife and son,” “I’m not a worthy husband or father,” and “I’m a liability to them.” I didn’t want to live. I even made plans to end my life. But God has a good plan for me.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.
 –*Jeremiah 29:11*

I’m not sure how I lost sight of this promise, but it is likely that the lies clouded my vision. Prayer is why I didn’t follow through with those plans. God shook the enemy off my branch and I remained in the Vine.

Now, I urge you that if you are serious about beating depression and leaving it behind you to find a mentor or accountability partners to help you through your journey. As humans, we have greater potential to rise above our struggles together rather than individually. Jesus can restore all our branches to the Vine as well.

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!
 –*Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

Receiving Jesus as my Lord and Savior means that I no longer had to bear the weight of the shame of my past, in the light that I had eternal life.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
 –*Romans 5:8*

He forgives my sins and cleanses me from all my wrongs.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
 –*1 John 1:9*

I didn’t need to be a better person. I didn’t need to get my life in order. I didn’t even need to get right with God! All I needed to do was to believe Jesus.

After God freed me from depression and restored me to the Vine, Jesus also empowered me to endure something that on the surface

should have devastated me. One of my family members lost her battle to a rare form of cancer. I clung to Jesus asking Him to help me through it, and He kept me from sinking back into the depression that had caused many hardships in my life. Determined not to sink into that dark hole, I relied on Him for the strength that I came to know only He could provide. I am grateful for all that and for the place of safety and security that He gave me.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, May the reader of these pages see through parts of my story they relate to that they are not alone in the world or that he or she is not the "only one". Help to see that You can deliver anyone with enough faith to believe it is possible. I pray that you increase our faith daily and give us Your joy, Your peace, Your hope and a good future. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

- Do you have an attribute in you that makes you stand out or shine?
- Would you say that your faith in Jesus is strong?
- Do you pray often? Daily? Weekly? Only when you think you need to? Not at all?
- Would you say that freedom from depression is possible?
- What role does God have in your life, if any?

- Informally, rate your level of hope from one to ten.

¹ “The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’” C.S. Lewis. *The Four Loves*. HarperOne, 1960: 96.

Two - A Path to Destruction

Without doubt, the most common weakness of all human beings is the habit of leaving their minds open to the negative influence of other people.

–Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich*¹

I packed quite a lot into this chapter by exploring many of the possible causes of my depression. As I'm not an expert on depression, I might miss what caused your depression. I can apologize for that and I do. But at the core, I believe that depression is caused mostly by two things. First, there is the separation from God. It is the same kind of separation that many people in the Old Testament refer to when they say God has forsaken me.

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."

–Isaiah 49:14

A second cause for depression is a lack of good and positive thinking in our lives. I don't believe difficult life experience or circumstances can cause depression, although I would have said otherwise while I was still suffering.

Before I go into the positive influences we might lack in our lives that would bring joy, I discuss the secondary contributors that I believe took me down the road into depression.

1. Not Grieving or Mourning

One part of life that led me into a deep, dark hole was my inability to grieve. Any time a family member or friend died, I didn't know how to handle it. I would typically retreat into isolation, attempt to be stoic or just fail to move on. Other than not knowing what to do, I don't remember why I did that, but it's reasonable to expect that I didn't want anyone to know how I felt or what I thought. This was probably because I didn't know what to say to anyone who sympathized or would grieve with me. I probably was also afraid of what other people might say to me if I spoke up about it. I don't even remember what I did think, but I do remember a numb, empty feeling.

Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described five stages of grief in her book *On Grief and Grieving*. These are the five stages: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.²

My thoughts on these stages as she studied and documented them are that they are the natural progression of how we heal from loss, but refusing to grieve is a recipe for a disaster.

Disaster is one way to describe what happened to me without God. After the death of one friend, I probably went from denial/isolation straight to depression and remained there. Now, I'm not one to tell anyone how to pass through each of these stages. However, I do believe that it is a safe bet that we need to accept the fact that someone died or that something has changed our life irreversibly before we can move on in a healthy way. That is the ultimate goal.

The difficulty is that this is hard to hear as advice in the moment we are grieving, so as advice it's good to hear it before we need it, and it's easy to grasp once the grief is over. Unfortunately, we typically hear this type of advice at the inopportune time of a loved one's death.

I can also say that grieving is a process that is unique for each person. I would not be surprised to find that someone out there has gone through the stages out of the listed order and even gone back and forth through them at random.

With no awareness of the stages I should have been going through and no guide to do so, I was probably stuck in the depression stage with little or no way out on my own knowledge and strength. Eventually, I discovered through experience that grief is not at all something we merely endure, and if we persevere through the denial, we have the chance to get past the anger and bargain with God or ourselves. After that, depression shouldn't be so severe that we can't get to acceptance where we find a new normal without the person or thing that changed. The loved ones we lose won't come back, and that's undeniable. And we won't forget them, but we need to press on in our own lives and not let our life be solely a tribute to them.

However, the solution Jesus gives us is much simpler than the one Kübler-Ross wrote about. The first part of God's vision of us is that we are more valuable than we can imagine. He sees us as,

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

–Psalm 116:15

As followers and believers of Christ, we are His saints, and as such, we have accepted two gifts from Him: first, we accept His comforting love; second, we have embraced the Father's gift of eternal life through belief in His Son and His work on the cross.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

–Matthew 5:4

¹³But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

–1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

The pain of loss is evident when the experience is in the present. Jesus' statement has less to do with the tomb where we lay our dead and more to do with the eternal life the dead will enter.

The loss does not have to be a person who died. It can be the end of a relationship. It can also be a change to how we live. These kinds of changes can be difficult to endure. Now, what kind of change am I talking about? It could be an unexpected or unplanned change of career or a demotion from our employer. Or it could be a change from a life of sin or addiction to one righteous and closer to God. The latter seems odd, because it is a positive change. Now, let's understand that for most us, it seems safer to hold onto a known and comfortable-but-detrimental present existence than an unknown-but-blessed future.

I experienced holding onto my life in the comfort zone. Until I let that go, God did not allow me to move on to the blessed life He had for me.

Whether Jesus was talking about the death of a loved one or a drastic life change, the process is similar.

The Apostle Paul put it this way:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

–2 Corinthians 5:17

After accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, we embrace our new self, leaving our old self behind—we live in a new normal. The similarity to dying, being buried and redeemed into eternity is there, although going home might seem to be a preferable solution. Perfect and attractive as it might seem, if we have a purpose to live out, we need to wait until God takes us home.

After we pass through the stages of grief and become the new creation God needs us to be or have accepted our new normal, we may meet others who still struggle. We need to help them. But how?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, talking to a grieving person can be difficult, but it doesn't have to be. It is more important to listen to the person than to know what to say. We need to listen to the grieving person. At most, we should only say that we understand or agree that the process and the situation are difficult. After we hear them, we need to listen some more. When grieving people understand that we hear them, they are often comforted and realize that we are available to listen.

As we grieve our own loss, we need to look for someone to talk to about it rather than sinking into isolation. We need to pay no attention to anyone who wants to tell us how to grieve or who might tell us to forget about it. We need to talk to that friend who will listen and communicate understanding and agreement on the situation. Beyond that, we need to pray together.

One principle I learned by attending the funeral of my step-father was that only Jesus has any right to tell a grieving person about mourning. The only thing we can say to a grieving person is that Jesus understands, because He went through it as His friend Lazarus died (if you haven't read the story it is in John 11:1-44).

Jesus wept.

—*John 11:35*

We can also remind a believer that we have the assurance of eternal life in our faith.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."

—*John 11:25*

If we find ourselves grieving, we need to talk to someone about the grief we endure. Healing can come through those conversations, by hearing that we are not alone and a reminder that we have that promise of eternal life. Until we start these conversations, we may never know how we might help the person we call on for help.

2. Stuck in Comparison

Comparing myself with other people in my world led to me focus on what I didn't have rather than on the blessings in the things I did have in my life.

A friend in my high school drafting class already seemed to know a lot about the architectural drawing we were learning. He had a gift for it, which I coveted. But thankfully, I realized that it was a skill I could learn while accepting that for others it is a gift. To complicate matters, he had a hot girlfriend! Not only did I want to be gifted, I wished so much to be the one to put my arms around her.

I was stuck in the comparison trap such as the episode above describes many times, and being stuck contributed eventually to my depressive state, because it simply led me to be ungrateful among other issues to come.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

—James 3:16

A better choice would have been to remember the direction I was going when I wanted to reach the rank of Eagle Scout in the Boy Scouts. If I had committed to pursuing what was behind meeting the priest at the church, I could have followed God instead of comparing myself with someone I considered perfect. What a delusion! I'm certain that if I had prayed at that time, Jesus would have said, "What is that to you?"

²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"

—John 21:21-22

In this passage, Jesus refers to His second coming while telling Peter, "If it is God's will that John remain alive until my second coming, it has nothing to do with you!" The second coming was not going to be

tomorrow or the next day. It was to be thousands of years away. Jesus is asking Peter a rhetorical question while telling him not to compare himself with anyone else. We need to follow this example. You be you. I'll be me.

Either way, seeing that I fell into this trap of comparison, I'm grateful that I managed to work through it and move on.

3. Perfectionism

Before I get started on this area of our lives, let me say that from the point of view of a perfectionist, it's a frustrating lifestyle. From the point of view of someone else, perfectionists are unattractive.

If you haven't met a perfectionist or you are not one yourself, saying that expectations are high is an understatement, because extreme is more like it. I'm talking about expectations of other people as well as those of the perfectionist of himself. In my perfectionism, I had the high expectation that my closest friends could perfectly meet my demands.

I not only expected others to be perfect, I believed I was perfect. Even when I made mistakes or even wronged someone, I was perfect because those things were not significant. As I was perfect, everyone else had to be as well. Offensive? The man I am today agrees.

For anyone who has not been a perfectionist, my description might seem a little tame or somehow unlikely to cause depression. However, the potential for depression is in the resulting disappointments and procrastinations. In hindsight, my perfectionism held me back from achieving many goals and so compounded my depression. But the worst part of perfectionism is that it increases the burden of daily life. As perfectionists, we will see more work or chores to be done in the day, and there's no putting them off until the next day, because good enough couldn't exist. But in the frustration, procrastination is the order of the day.

Convinced that I was always perfectly right and stubborn in my insistence that I was living a good life, regrets were heavy and frequent.

Regrets were largely the result of delaying tactics in attempts to act at the perfect moment to achieve some meaningless goal. Frustrations came from insisting on being right when being well would have been better.

Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you insane your whole life.

—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*³

We need to understand that there is only one who is perfect, and His name is Jesus—the one without sin and with perfect love and our Lord and Savior. Would you agree that if perfectionism causes us to act as I describe above, we would not be fulfilling God’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves?

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

—Matthew 22:39

I would add that perfectionism such as this does not show love for the image of God in those other people around us.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

—Genesis 1:27

I would also say by not loving my neighbor as myself, I don’t know God.

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

—1 John 4:8

By expressing disappointment to others for their apparent deficiencies, we judge them and judge poorly, and Jesus said not to judge or we’ll be judged.

¹ Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

—Matthew 7:1-2

Most people see behavior they deem poor or ill-mannered and act or react accordingly, but when they do those same things, they’ll say they meant it for good intentions, just the way Stephen M.R. Covey puts it:

The reality is that we judge ourselves by our intent and others by their observable behavior.

—Stephen M.R. Covey, *Smart Trust*⁴

As the title of the first chapter says, “I am not who I was”; the man I am now sees my former self as a fool who couldn’t know any better. Now that I am a believer, I know that God defines love and is love. Love as defined in most secular circles is nowhere near the same, or at least it wasn’t for me as new definitions came to me every week! I was broken. I still am. That thought led me to the revelation that I could not ever be perfect, and that I was in need of a savior. I came to realize that my brokenness was not the result of my own doing, but of the first man Adam.

The curses spoken by God to Adam and Eve after their sin tell us just how we are so broken.

To Eve He said, “I will unquestionably increase your childbearing pain. Your natural desire will differ from your husband’s, but he will rule over you.” To Adam He said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate of the tree from which I commanded not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it in pain all your life—thorns, thistles and all—you will eat of the plants of the field. By the sweat on your face, you will eat bread until you return to dust, as I made you from it. You are dust, and to dust you will return.”
 –Genesis 3:16-19 (author’s paraphrase)

This was the reason we cannot be perfect people and why we say “we are human after all.” Yes, God made us in His image, but not in His perfectness.

To err is Human; to forgive, Divine.
 –Alexander Pope, Pastoral Poetry and an Essay on Criticism⁵

In our human existence, we can strive for excellence, but perfection is unattainable. We must accept that, and we must accept that others will make mistakes as well, and those mistakes, whether sins or not, are ours to bear unless we give them to Jesus.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
 –Hebrews 4:16

Without grace, the world would be a place of total spiritual death and depression, with all people doing as they please, because they would

all shoulder the burden of their own sins or mistakes. The world is a much better place when we humbly accept this grace and let Jesus rule in our stead and allow Him to take our burdens.

4. Good Things We Lack

Positivity, rewards and godly pleasure in our lives are good for our mental health. The lack of these things in our lives can cause despair or depression—at the very least unhappiness. The trials I discuss above resulted in none of the above-mentioned good things. Usually despair and depression are short-term conditions. However, if we go through life without some of these three good things for a long time, depression is likely to become chronic and difficult to overcome.

We need to engage in positive, rewarding, and pleasurable activities, like encouraging movies and music, playing a sport we enjoy, going for lunch or dinner with friends, enjoying and attending a Bible-based local church with opportunities for fellowship and volunteering, to mention a few.

Any of the potential causes from 1 to 4 above can wither away at our connection to the Vine if not sever it completely.

5. Changes

For some of us—myself included—after enduring depression for an extended time, it's hard to say when it started or what the cause was. Our past is now an unchangeable history (I realize that is redundant!). Either way, the knowledge of how or when our depression started is not as important as it is for us to focus on our present and to accept that change and healing are not only possible, but also intensely and genuinely needed. We need to start doing the things that keep us off this destructive path that leads to depression. As you might see in my story, I faced a lot of difficult stuff that led me into a dark, toxic hole.

I made a few changes that seemed to make a difference in my life. The first was to go to church. It didn't really seem significant at the time—because I wasn't a believer. I felt forced to go, but that was not true at all. I had the choice to stay at home, but in the end, God enticed me to go. The Holy Spirit drew me to Him. With His strength and leading, I

attended and enjoyed the company of godly people while seeing positivity all around me.

It didn't seem to make much sense at the time, but once I started to attend church, the good things I discuss in the point above came my way.

When things started to change, the little faith I had grew. I started to meet friendly people who really wanted to get to know me. And I got a better job too!

6. Exercise

I left this item for last in this chapter, and I almost forgot it! Exercise is important for our mental and physical health. It is, but discussing the lack of it along with all the other issues might have been confusing. Thus, placing it here now seems appropriate.

It is vitally important to get exercise in our lives. But at the critical times in my own life when I needed it most, I neglected to do so. Instead, I isolated myself even more, so both my mental and physical health took a hit. I remember when I was in high school and into my early twenties I ran ten kilometers per day. That activity kept me fit, and I actually felt good physically, even though I was struggling mentally at the time.

The exercise was probably what sustained me through those rough times, because exercise is beneficial to our mental health. I wish I hadn't stopped running, but my knees were taking a beating because of the impact of each stride. I didn't really have a choice but to stop. My cardiovascular health was also great while I exercised at that level.

Since then, I found low-impact sports that I could engage in, like bicycling and cross-country skiing. I played golf from an early age and continued to do that as walking is good exercise as well. And golf is a mentally challenging game, which is also good for mental health. It's important enough that if we are not already engaged in regular exercise, I urge that we all maintain our health in this way.

Even in my best times, deep down in my soul, I knew I was missing the mark. It was then that I would wish that I could change my circumstances and turn life around. But I was not only powerless to do so. I had no roadmap and no hope that it would happen. Everything I did appeared to be useless, because the fruit was the same. Nothing

changed as long as I tried to change it on my own. By relying on God, I had the power, a roadmap, and a purpose. My branch began to bear fruit.

Prayer

God, help the reader to see that happiness is not in comparing ourselves to others around us. Help to understand that circumstances have no power over us. Help to end the need to control or manipulate people around us. You are in control and we don't wish to take Your place. Help also discover what manipulative language we may be using so that we can stop speaking that way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

Before you started to read this chapter did you,

- become depressed for a long time after the death of a friend or family member?
- compare yourself with others, coveting what they had? Do you still do that?
- believe you were perfect?
- lack positivity, rewards, godly pleasure, or exercise?

¹ “Without doubt, the most common weakness of all human beings is the habit of leaving their minds open to the negative influence of other people.” Napoleon Hill. *Think and Grow Rich*. Electronic Facsimile Edition. Opportunity Informer. Meriden: The Ralston Society (1938), 2000. PDF. 2 March 2019: <http://eventualmillionaire.com/resources/thinkandgrowrichebook.pdf>: 250.

² Five stages of grief and grieving. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*. New York, NY: Scribner (Simon and Schuster), 2005. 8-28.

³ “Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor; the enemy of the people. It will keep you insane your whole life.” Anne Lamott. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Anchor Books, 1994: 28.

⁴ “The reality is that we judge ourselves by our intent and others by their observable behavior.” Stephen M.R. Covey, Greg Link and Rebecca Merrill. *Smart Trust*. First. New York, NY: Free Press A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2012: 144.

⁵ “To err is Human; to forgive, Divine.” Alexander Pope. *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text with Selected Annotations*. Ed. John Butt. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963: 160.

Three - Power in Optimism

Optimism is a happiness magnet. If you stay positive, good things and good people will be drawn to you.

—Mary Lou Retton, Mary Lou Retton's Gateways to Happiness¹

There is tremendous power in our thoughts, because as we think, our actions follow accordingly. And there are a few ways this works. It works for us and against us.

Why do I say it works for us and against us? It is because for our own thoughts to have a positive effect on us, we need to employ a great amount of effort and self-control to remain consistent. If that is not enough, we also have to turn Satan away as he tries to flood our minds with lies that almost sound true. He delights in intruding at the most inopportune times to keep us from seeing God's glory in our lives.

Many successful professional athletes visualize their plays before they perform them. Golfers see the path of their ball through the air and over the terrain as it heads towards the cup. Billiards players imagine the action of each ball on the table and the interactions between each of them to accomplish their objective. Basketball players look at the net, judge the distance and allow muscle memory to make the shot. Racecar drivers set their eyes on the part of the track they want the car's tires to cover as they steer. Even amateurs use this visualization technique. What does it have to do with optimism? Everything. We prophesy to our own minds before we act. If we visualize a positive result, we have a better chance that the outcome of our action will be good. And the opposite is true; if we visualize a negative result, we enhance the possibility of an adverse experience.

I have a couple of stories of when positive thinking and visualization had a positive effect on my attitude in the moment.

I used to play golf three or four times per week. I played enough to know how the ball would react when I swung each club. I was an amateur because I could only live for moments like this one. It was a relatively short par 4, but my drive went into the trees on the right. As I looked the lie over, I saw a couple of options. There was little to no grass

under the ball and no underbrush, so a bump-and-run to the green was possible except that I would have to negotiate a deep sand trap. Or I could go high except that there was lots of foliage. I looked up and saw a hole in the foliage about a foot across. I figured that for the distance, I needed a sand wedge and began to visualize the ball going through the hole in the canopy. I could see the shot! That was when I noticed a group of onlookers at the refreshment bar next to the previous tee box. I took a couple of practice swings and lined up for the shot. Just after I swung my club, I couldn't follow the ball's flight, but it landed on the green, and my spectators applauded. I successfully negotiated the birdie putt too! It was my great moment of the day that kept me coming back to play again. It made my day!

In later years, I played lots of pool—both eight ball and nine ball. And again, I learned through experience how the balls would react to my technique with the cue. And again, I'm an amateur player, just playing for great moments. Many players know that the some of the most difficult shots are when the object ball has a long distance to reach its intended target. One day, I was playing Scotch doubles eight ball with a former pro, Joey, as my partner. On the other team were his competitive close friends. I didn't like letting him down, so pressure was high. As an aggressive player, I rarely ever played safety shots, and the situation was somewhat difficult. We had only one ball before the eight ball left on the table, and the only shot I could see making was a long one where the object ball was next to one of the bottom corner pockets, but the cue ball was on the bottom rail next to it. The only available pocket was at the opposite diagonal corner, the longest possible distance for the object ball to reach the pocket. I envisioned shooting the object ball at a crazy angle into the cross-corner pocket with some serious backspin on the cue ball to leave my partner a shot on the eight ball for the win. As soon as I cued the shot, I heard Joey exclaim, "What a shot!" He knocked the eight ball in for the win. I could easily have played a safety shot and even snookered the other team, but I opted for the shot of greater glory, believing at the time that the safety shot might lead to giving the other team the upper hand and the win.

Maybe the reasons I wasn't good at basketball or car racing were that I didn't visualize positively in those activities. I have never been in a racecar.

When I was about 10 years old, my father brought home a book about the power of positive thinking. When I asked him about the book, he simply said that positive thinking was a good thing (or something like that; sorry Dad!). Although it did sound really good, I didn't want to read it then, and it was adult reading. I thought I might read the book someday, but I haven't read it yet. However, that conversation with my dad planted a seed in my mind that thinking positive is always a good thing—that remains to this day. I did water it a little and it grew ... a little.

However, I would say that a little is enough. A few years before God freed me from the darkness of depression, I still wondered how much power positive thought would have in my life. I wondered long enough and just decided to give it a shot. No, not to read the book, but to make sure that every thought I had was positive and to see how that might change things.

A transformation did start to happen quite slowly, but I could not completely change myself into a better man. I am certain that not one of us can do that completely on our own. What I believe did happen at that time is that I began to have a desire and a hope deep within my subconscious that positive thought and freedom from depression were possible. I actually believe now that it was through the Holy Spirit that my glimmer of hope in positivity came to me. With that in mind, it's likely that my stubborn heart refused to see that believing in the power of God could release me from the prison that held my soul and battled the Holy Spirit to keep me in that prison we call depression.

Two things can help develop a positive attitude within us, and these tasks are not mutually exclusive and can work very well together.

1. We can determine for ourselves that we will maintain a positive attitude as much as our human mind can

In this way, we would need to set our minds to remain positive no matter what we encounter in our daily lives. It takes a great amount of concentration, willpower and determination. However, even when we

are not gripped by depression, using this method alone leaves us prone to failure. If we can get past the failures and leave them behind us, we can succeed with this. However, if we allow the failures to drag us down into the pit of despair, we risk worsening or deepening our state of depression.

2. We can pray for God to give and to maintain the positive attitude we need

Of course, and prayer can supercharge our positivity in more ways than I can imagine. There's no guarantee, because of many factors. It depends greatly on our faith. Let's not forget that Jesus said that with faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains.

He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

—Matthew 17:20

I have read this verse many times thinking, "No way!" But why not? If He can shift nature to stop the flow of the flooded Jordan River to allow the Israelites to cross on dry ground, why not relocate a mountain?

Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

—Joshua 3:17

If He can cause rain to fall for forty days and nights and cause a flood that would drown everyone on the face of the earth,

And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.

—Genesis 7:12

why not transfer a mound of earth and rock to another place? If He can cause Goliath to fall victim to a single sling of a stone slung by a shepherd boy,

And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground.

—1 Samuel 17:49

Why can't He move a hill? Because we don't believe. That's why. Therefore, it is both easier and harder than I just made it sound. I hear you saying, "What do you mean?" In practical terms, it's easy to see that what Jesus means when he says that faith can move a mountain is that faith is all that we need for prayer to work. It gets hard when we think that because our faith is small, God won't answer our prayer. That's just wrong thinking. God grows our faith when we turn to Him.

Therefore, it's only hard when we try to stay positive on our own strength.

Without faith, a positive attitude is merely us working under our own strength and weak power. I believe that even a negative attitude with faith is more powerful than that, because with a prayer to God the Father in the Name of Jesus, we can overcome that negative attitude and turn it into a positive one, leaving us with the positive attitude to change our lives.

I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.

—Philippians 4:13

Business people also use visualization and positive thinking. They strategize and envision how a deal will happen before they enter the boardroom. Many of these people do this with intentionality and planning. They also know that when they can see a deal happening in their minds, it is possible.

The other thing many business people do when they pray is to ask God for His favor in a deal. The combination of the prayer and visualization has great potential in our lives.

While in depression, the difficulty with my thinking was that it was positive only in my stress-free activities and not limited to recreation. When life was stressful and thinking was critical, fear crept in and negative thought followed, which led to undesired consequences. It was as though some bad yeast got into the dough.

Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

—Matthew 16:6

The verse above actually refers to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were experts in Mosaic Law. But we can apply it to

negative thinking as well, because when we try to remain positive and allow negative thinking to creep in, it is like an internal hypocrisy. It is one of the devices of the enemy to draw us away from God.

It is probable that negative thinking comes from viewing the world through the world's own wisdom. However, relying on God's truth and wisdom will result in positive thinking. Therefore, we need to recognize that Jesus is the truth, the way and the life, because when we stand on His promises, God will surprise us.

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."
—John 14:6*

Part of my personal faith is to trust God for everything. I don't always succeed at this, but when I do this, I get good results.

If we have difficulty understanding what God is saying to us, we need to ask Jesus or someone more spiritually mature.

*⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
⁶In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
—Proverbs 3:5-6*

As I discuss above, we prophesy to our own minds how everything will go before it happens, and when the movie director of our mind calls "action!" our bodies execute the plan. And for many of us, that happens without intentionality or the diligent planning that athletes and business people use. Awareness of these things has great power, but again, it can have both positive and negative effects depending on which way the self-prophecy points us.

When we are stuck thinking about unfortunate circumstances or what we don't have, negative thoughts can come more easily than positive ones. For that very reason, without God, we can become alienated from Him in our ignorance. Satan is easy on anyone alienated from God.

*They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the
life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their
hardness of heart.
—Ephesians 4:18*

Yet positivity is all around, even in not-so-great circumstances. It's a matter of perspective. Back to my experiences in golf and billiards: those positive times on the course and at the table were mere moments of glory that continue to draw me back to the playing field for moments of frustration. I can remember many times standing over my golf ball thinking it wasn't going to go well, and I shanked it or otherwise erred as I "always did." I can remember many times aiming my cue for a shot thinking I would miss and it happened just as I visualized, poorly.

My love life was almost nonexistent, so I thought I was doomed to being single for life, which was not according to my plan. But being single is okay! We need to be comfortable with who we are before we can expect a potential mate to be comfortable with us. When the events of the day don't go according to our plans, negative thoughts can creep in and take over or drag us down and make us feel unfulfilled.

We can get stuck asking ourselves questions we can't really answer like, "When is this life going to turn around?" or "How can I live with this?" Perhaps the questions should rather be statements of encouragement like these: "I am here for a great purpose," "Life is still ahead of me," and "I can write a new ending." I once heard that saying these statements in the second person is even more encouraging. These statements would be, "You are here for a great purpose," and "Life is still ahead of you." "You can write a new ending." Their power is in that when we say them, it is as though we are coaching ourselves.

After the turmoil I endured at the military boarding school, life was never the same again, and I don't mean that I grew up a little. Fear of loneliness had a grip on me. This fear developed from the lies I heard from the enemy that I was not good at anything, had no future and I wasn't manly or courageous.

Sometimes our negative thinking can damage our self-esteem because of the actions we take and because we believe the lies, even if only for a moment. Those thoughts have the power to give us a false identity and can send us down the wide path toward destruction.

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

—Matthew 7:13

Just like the negative self-talk that led me to make plans for suicide, which sent my mind into a state of self-destruction that went against the grain of my being: that thinking had to get out!

We need to set positivity into our hearts, because from that deep place in our souls comes everything we think, say and do.

¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

—Matthew 15:18-19

Whatever we think of ourselves, it is true. If we think that we are no good, it's true, until we tell ourselves, "You are the greatest!" If we tell ourselves we can't hit a 300-yard golf drive, we can't, until we tell ourselves, "You can do it." If we say we can't find friends, we will doubtless stay at home all day every day, until we say, "Someone wants to be your friend." If we think we cannot be successful business owners, it's true, until we tell ourselves, "The doors to your business ownership are open."

We can turn our own lives around with positive thoughts about our circumstances and ourselves. It's a change of perspective. We need to visualize mission-critical moments with a positive vision for the outcome. Our thinking can make anything happen. Is it going to be positive?

That's just positive thinking about our future. But sometimes, our outlook on our past can have a powerful effect on our present. I'm not talking about dwelling on the distant past. I'm talking about taking a quick peek into the last hour or even the last minute.

If we are involved in an accident of some kind, we can complain about how it shouldn't have happened or what someone did wrong. Or we can be grateful we are alive, unharmed and moving on. Even if we are injured, we can take a similar view that being alive to see family and friends for another day is a good result.

If we lose our employment, we can ruminate over it, grumbling about many things no one will ever hear, or we can be grateful for the time we had with that employer and move onto some other form of income or position.

I cannot think of anything more positive than my own personal relationship with Jesus to help and guide me through difficult times when negative thoughts would dominate. He has helped me overcome those difficult times and given me the light to see situations from the positive side. It was with His power and authority that I cast out the spirit of suicide from my soul. It was not my own doing.

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"

—Luke 10:17

The confidence that I could cast a demon out of my own body was in that Jesus sent seventy-two disciples into the cities and towns to preach the gospel, and they returned saying that demons were subject to His name. If they could do it, I could!

Jesus can transform our minds from negativity to optimism. We need to believe He will do it. If He can cast out demonic spirits from the many people the disciples referred to in this story, He can do it for us just as He did for me. If He can do that, He can transform our minds.

Not only is it possible to transform our minds, it is God's will. I went through this and it benefited me greatly. Again this was not on my own strength.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:2

Although the way this verse is written does not sound like God has any part in the transformation, it works best and most powerfully for me when I allow God to work in me to get it done, because through prayer nothing is impossible with God.

All of this may seem wonderful to hear, but it's not the whole truth yet. I doubt that any of us knows someone who has a perfect life with no bumps or unexpected mishaps of some kind.

But again, this is all a matter of perspective, because even in the struggles of life, God helps us. Through the Holy Spirit, we find meaning for some of the struggles, or we find that everything—good and bad—works together for good if we love God and are called to His purpose.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

–Romans 8:28

When we first read this verse, it didn't sound that great. But in one way, this is about what some people call karma. As believers we love God, so when people do evil things to us because they have the gift of free will from God, we also know that they will have to give an account for their evil deeds. This results in a blessing from God. The blessing is in that people who do evil will account for their actions on Judgment Day. This is what empowers us to endure struggle after struggle.

We need to trust God in everything. Why? Because He is always with us.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

–Joshua 1:9

God does not stay with us wherever we go to spy on us, but to care for us because He loves us, and He proved His trustworthiness by sending His one and only Son to die for our sins.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

–Romans 5:8

Positive thought can restore our connection to the Vine or it can rot it away. What are we choosing to think?

Prayer

Father in Heaven, thank You that you can transform our thinking from negative to positive, whether by miraculous intervention on Your part or by process. Help us to keep all of our thoughts positive and captive to Your Son. Help us also to grow in relationship with You so that we can know Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

- Are you a positive thinker?
- Do you use visualization positively?
- Did you believe before reading this chapter that positive thinking can help you through your day?
- If you are already a positive thinker, do you rely on Jesus' strength to maintain that?

¹ “Optimism is a happiness magnet. If you stay positive, good things and good people will be drawn to you.” Mary Lou Retton. *Mary Lou Retton's Gateways to Happiness: 7 Ways to a More Peaceful, More Prosperous, More Satisfying Life*. First. New York, NY: Random House, 2000: 113.