



# Gospel Relief for the Despairing

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Speaking Christian Comfort to the Depressed and the Suicidal

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If you have encountered this resource because you are concerned about someone, maybe even yourself, having suicidal thoughts, please reach out and receive help.

**Call or text help lines such as the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255, or the crisis text line at 741-741, or visit [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org) and [crisistextline.org](http://crisistextline.org).**

Do not suffer in silence, wondering what to do. There are people to come alongside you, people who care.

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# INTRODUCTION

**I F YOU HAVE SERVED IN THE PARISH** for any period, you have ministered to someone suffering from a sense of hopelessness. He's a Christian but he's also despairing of life. In his opinion, things will never be the same. His health, his job, his marriage, the pleasure he once found in dearly loved pastimes, are all irrecoverable. Never again will he experience the joys and pleasures he once knew. In severe cases, he no longer believes his life is worth living. Often such a believer has a history with depression or schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, or with alcoholism or substance abuse. Possibly he's been traumatized by a sudden and dramatic alteration of his life's circumstances. Your desire to help should not be regarded

as a substitute for his seeing a clinical psychologist or a psychiatrist. If he needs professional counseling or medication, he needs to see someone trained in one of these fields. On the other hand, a health care professional should not be seen as a substitute for God's Word. From you he requires the comfort and encouragement you have been called to provide through the saving truths of Scripture.

My hope is that the following study may benefit you as you meet with the despairing Christian. After you become acquainted with his source of grief or distress (see Part 1 and 2), please use whatever sections you believe may prove helpful in offering him Gospel relief (Part 3).

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## PART 1: LISTENING AND BEING HEARD

### Confirm Whether *You* Are Hearing *Him*

Two things are necessary before you have a beneficial conversation with someone who is despairing. You need to know he is hearing you. But just as important, he needs to know *you* are hearing *him*. Let him know you are by giving him time to express himself without interrupting. Granted, your first inclination will be to focus on his thoughts of confusion and paranoia and irrational beliefs. Responding to them will seem more important than actually hearing his story. But if you want *his* ear, you must establish that he has *your* ear. Furthermore, true listening can only occur when you have no false assumptions concerning mental illness or your ability to treat mental illness.

### Lose the Stigma

A stigma is a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person. It may relate to one's culture or race, to one's intelligence or to one's health. Understanding how people are stigmatized is especially relevant for servants of the church. Assess what views and feelings you have toward the mentally ill, as they may influence how you minister to them. If you are accepting of the stigma associated with people suffering from depression or mental illness, it will interfere with your ability to listen to them.

### WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

While many today are more informed about depression than some years ago, some are not. For some, depression is not a legitimate illness. It is believed to have no biological or genetic basis and may simply be "in your head." The thinking is that just as you may choose not to live in

a dysfunctional way, you may choose not to be depressed. Others view depression as a spiritual problem, claiming that those suffering from it are lacking trust that God is truly caring and all-powerful.

Depression is not a case of the blues that you simply shake off. It's not a case of someone being lazy or feeling sorry for himself. It is a disease that is often prolonged, with symptoms that are relentless. Sadness, guilt, anxiety, self-loathing and hopelessness are just a few of them.

### MAKING THE CONNECTION WITH ORIGINAL SIN

Many Christians, unfortunately, including pastors and various professional church workers, remain uninformed about depression and other mental illnesses. They fail to trace a person's condition to their sinful nature. As a result, they remain in the dark regarding how to offer real relief based on God's Word. Furthermore, they risk humiliating the clinically depressed. Those experiencing hopelessness, they assume, should be chastised for thinking about dying. A quick and blunt response is in order. But the issue is more complex: Yes, we're talking about sinful thoughts and feelings. But we're also talking about mental illness.

### Lose the Notion that You Can Cure Him

Before visiting with the despairing, it is imperative that you understand something about yourself. Being a professional church worker does not make you a professional counselor. Do not assume that you can reduce a person's depression. Whether a despairing parishioner is suffering from a depressive, anxiety or psychotic disorder, or from PTSD, he or she may require medication or therapy. Speaking God's Word in order to comfort the mentally ill is a noble undertaking. In addition to this,

however, they might benefit from the field of medicine or certified therapy.

### PROFESSIONAL HELP

Your first task in offering the despairing parishioner psychological relief is to get him or her professional help. Relate to the parishioner, “I am not a doctor or a therapist. You therefore may not look to me for medical help or counseling.” Consider relating the following analogy: “Imagine taking a fall outside my home and acquiring a serious gash in your leg. You would not expect me to offer emergency care. Yes, I would get my first aid kit. After attempting to control the bleeding and to clean the wound to the best of my ability, I would bandage your leg. However, I would then take you to an urgent care facility. I would leave it to the experts to provide the medical aid you required. Similarly, when it comes to obtaining psychological and emotional relief, do not see me as your primary health care provider, but as a kind of first responder.”

It will serve you well to generate a list of professional therapists with whom you are comfortable so that you are prepared to make a referral when the need arises. You may contact your district office for a list of reputable psychiatrists, psychologists and other professional counselors. It may also be helpful to talk to the pastors of your circuit for a list of therapists they believe to be competent.

### SPIRITUAL HELP

But what if they need a kind of expertise you are not equipped to offer them, and they need it immediately? You can still offer your help. If they express thoughts or desires about suicide, tell them, “I want you to live. With God’s help we’ll get through this. In the words of the apostle, ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ (PHIL. 4:13).” That being said, they need to see suicide for what it is, not a solution but a problem. Although the parishioner will not see you for professional counseling, assure him or her that you will be their advocate until they find what works. Meanwhile, they may contact you at any time for Christian encouragement and support.

### Getting to the Bottom of His Despair

If you’re a pastor, you know you’ve been called not simply as a shepherd to the flock, but as a physician of the soul. Speaking with his patient, the doctor may ask, “Where do you hurt?” Meeting one-on-one with your parishioner, you may ask the same. Ask him what he’s feeling, what is causing him distress. But recognize how your questions

may come across to the parishioner. If he senses that you are making a spiritual judgment in regards to him, it may only aggravate the despair he’s already feeling. If you are truly hearing what is at the root of his distress, on the other hand, and he opens up to you, expressing his desire to receive help, you may discuss specifics. Is it apparent to you that he’s suffering from a type of depressive disorder? Determine whether the same is evident to him. For him to truly obtain the right kind of help, he must understand the source of his grief and hopelessness. Does it have a biological basis? Is the source genetic or environmental? You are very happy that he is comfortable visiting with you about this. However, he also needs to see someone who may address his condition and its actual causes, whether a professional counselor or psychiatrist.

### BIOLOGICAL CAUSES

Changes to the chemistry of the brain result in detrimental influences on one’s thoughts, mood and emotions. Obtaining help may be as simple as receiving the right kind of medication. Unfortunately, it may be difficult for the parishioner to acknowledge this. Depression’s stigma is very intimidating. From his standpoint, accepting help may confirm that he can’t handle things on his own. Even more, the experience of being hospitalized can make him feel like “damaged goods.” It goes without saying, but if a person convinces himself that he’s not “sick,” he will be far less apt to get help. What’s more, some people refuse medication based on a prior bad experience. A previous prescription they tried may not have helped or had some nasty side effects. In any case, they may not give adequate time for the medication’s dosage to be increased (in many instances over a period of months) so that it actually helps them. Inform the despairing Christian that depression is extremely common, at any one moment affecting 15 million Americans. Regrettably, without treatment, he may expect his condition to last for a very long time. However, depression is not a basis for being shunned or deprived of another’s love. Cite to him the words of our Lord, “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (MARK 2:17).

### GENETIC CAUSES

Everyone has inherited a predisposition for something. Some may be at risk for a stroke, heart disease, cancer or dementia as it runs in their family. Some may also have family members who suffer from a depressive illness. They did not inherit major depression or bipolar, per se. But they did inherit a tendency to develop such an illness as

there are various genes that may make a person a candidate. When a person does develop a particular disorder, they often take it quite personally. More than someone might react to a physical ailment, they feel shame and guilt. Some of this is caused by the stigma associated with mental illness which labels a person as having a weak character, as lazy or dysfunctional. Additionally, they may feel ashamed of how their illness has affected them emotionally or cognitively. The symptoms may include being unable to cope, always feeling sad or hopeless, having no ambition, finding oneself repulsive and loathsome. Remind your parishioner that despite how disgusting he may appear to himself and to others in his opinion, before God he appears without the slightest defect. Despite his sinful nature which he inherited from his parents, from Christ he inherited residence in the Lord's church so that he might be presented to God "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing ... holy and without blemish" (EPH. 5:27).

### ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES

Depression may not necessarily have a chemical or genetic cause. It may be tied to learned negative thinking or unhealthy forms of stress. Determine what kind of standards he has. Are they unreasonable? Is he a perfectionist? How might this affect his sense of self-worth? Ask him why we have worth. We receive our worth from God, not our personal perceptions or evaluations. Talk about what it means for the sinner to be justified, how God declares us to be righteous through the blood of His Son. Expound the words of the apostle, "so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (TITUS 3:7).

Depression, additionally, may relate to mounting or constant stresses. Much of this is linked to what is outside himself and what he clearly cannot control. From your conversation, help him determine whether one of the following, or something else, has caused him anxiety or trauma and affected his sense of hopelessness.

- Recent move
- Job change
- Chronic illness
- Giving birth
- PTSD
- Death of a loved one
- Other serious loss (divorce, firing)
- Isolation (This may relate to any of the above.)

### Can You Sympathize? ... You Can Empathize

When you meet for the first time, much of your visit will consist of listening. You want to know what apparently has disrupted the parishioner's life, and perhaps how he believes he has disrupted the lives of others. Perhaps, you have not been affected by the stigma associated with depression and other forms of mental illness. That having been said, to what extent are you able to relate to his pain? Can you sympathize? Sympathy is the ability to feel the person's pain, inasmuch as you've experienced the same. Empathy is to stand with him, *without* feeling that pain. Apart from having suffered yourself under some variety of mental illness, it is doubtful whether you will have the capacity to sympathize. This does not disqualify you, however, from speaking to him. By expressing empathy, you will encourage the despairing to uncover what is troubling him so that you may comfort him with God's Word. Imagine him saying to you, for example, "What difference would it make if I were dead? I just don't care anymore." Ask him, "What *do* you care about?" Chances are he cares very much about being loved or forgiven. Tell him, "I care about that too. Even more relevant: Christ cares. That's why He came to this earth to relieve you of your sin and sin's burden. Even if it seems to you that no one cares, that no one can truly understand, Jesus can, and He does. As we read in Hebrews, 'Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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' (HEB. 4:14-16)."

### Incorporate Help Empathizing

A parishioner may know that few of his family and friends are truly capable of sympathizing with him or feeling what he feels. For this reason, it may seem like he must endure his pain alone. Assure him that this is not the case. As Christians we may depend on brothers and sisters in the church empathizing with us. It is why Martin Luther advised that those troubled with melancholy "be very careful not to be alone, for God created the fellowship of the church and commanded brotherliness" (LW 54:16). It is also why St. Paul instructs us to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (GAL. 6:2). The Greek word "bear" can be translated "put up with," which has all the marks of empathy. Regardless of whether we can fully *understand* each other's burdens, we may *stand* with one

another in our burdens. Moreover, in addition to offering encouragement to fellow believers, we often depend on encouragement. Tell the parishioner he may do so in his greatest despair, both inside and outside of the church. Some whom he may be encouraged to contact, if he has not already done so, are the following:

- Spouse
- Pastor
- Doctor
- Counselor
- Friends

There may be others he trusts who can help. Perhaps they are not aware of the severity of his situation. If he is unwilling to contact them himself, perhaps he can give you his consent to contact them on his behalf. Do not take this for granted, however. *To share the parishioner's diagnosis and current well-being with anyone without his consent is a serious ethical violation.* If you do get his consent to visit with others about his condition, try to get names, and a means of contacting a certain person or business (address, phone number, etc.)

### Empathize Without Agreeing

Does the parishioner's perception of what is wrong in life correspond with real life incidents? Sometimes listening consists of listening for clues. What is his problem, really? Do his troubles have more to do with what he perceives is wrong due to his illness than actual incidents in his life? You may empathize without agreeing. Yes, his suffering is overwhelming. No, he would not be better off dead. To be sure, the despairing would like to be given a reason to hope. And if he hears your words of hope grounded in God's Word, in time you may help him identify how his illness has affected his perception of things (see Part 3, "When Life Has Become a Paradox"). What should you do, on the other hand, if his illness has deprived him of all hope and he does not comprehend what you are saying to him? If he isn't already seeing a professional therapist, help in whatever way you can to see that needed arrangements are made. Also, if you can get the parishioner's consent, visit with his counselor and see how you two might work together for his well-being. It's quite possible that you may obtain some helpful advice on how to visit with the particularly challenged, such as those suffering from a given personality disorder.

## Confirm Whether He Is Hearing You

When a despairing parishioner agrees to meet with you, this would indicate that he desires your help. He wants his pain to stop. Despite the difficulties he has incurred that are linked to his depression, he desires to hope as a believer. At the same time, he may believe up until now that he hasn't heard anything that would offer him reason to hope. His only chance for real and lasting relief, he may think, is if he dies. How might you assist? Assure him that you will stand by him until he is enabled to change his outlook. One objective of yours is to help him identify the symptoms of his illness. Have his feelings of hopelessness, sadness, worthlessness or guilt hindered him from receiving help? If he recognizes this has occurred, assure him that you and others may be of service to him. Perhaps you cannot offer him medical help or professional counseling. But you can provide encouragement and strength from God's Word.

Having said this, take note: Is your fellow Christian benefitting from what you are saying? Or is something preventing him from hearing you? Is it evident, for instance, that he is obtaining no comfort from your words of Christian hope? Instead, is he repeating his arguments for despairing? In some instances where one is not simply suffering from suicidal thoughts but has devised a plan for suicide, he may be less inclined to listen and obtain help, and more inclined to obsess over a plan of escape. Should you determine that the risk of suicide is at a serious level and that his life is in danger, it is imperative that he obtain immediate professional help. If you are unsure whether he is at risk, do not hesitate to express your concern for his well-being. Ask him directly whether he has any plans of hurting himself or taking his life.

### Assessing the Suicide Risk (Asking the Question)

Many have accepted the myth that asking whether one has had thoughts of suicide could put thoughts into the person's head. It may actually be the first step in removing his shame and helping him open up about his pain. Ask him one of the following questions or something similar.

"Are you thinking about ending your life?"

"It sounds like you are feeling really upset and worried. I wonder, are you thinking about suicide?"

"When people feel hopeless and stuck, sometimes suicide seems like an option. Have you been thinking about killing yourself?"



In addition to his pain of hopelessness, there may be a certain logic to the parishioner not hearing you. Why should he listen to you, if, in his opinion, you can't help him? If you cannot help by offering him relief, however, you may go with him where he *can* get help and relief. Determine whether he has been seeing someone for counseling or medication and whether his treatment has been working. If it has, encourage him to remain in care. If his counseling and medication have not been working (he is expressing suicidal thoughts or yearnings), ask him, "Will you go with me to get help?" Phone the one who has been providing his care or go with him to the emergency room. They are trained for situations where someone poses a danger to himself or others. And they can respond quickly. Do not settle for his promise not to harm himself. He may think his life is not in immediate danger, and maybe it's not. But thoughts of suicide are not normal. In any given case, be prepared, as this person's pastor or as a caregiver of his congregation, to be proactive. If it is not absolutely apparent to you that this person is safe, that he has no ability or inclination to harm himself, reporting is required.

#### **YOUR WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN AND HELP CAN MAKE THE NEEDED DIFFERENCE**

Suicidal people often believe they cannot be helped. Much of the problem is they have tunnel vision. They're looking inward and conclude, "I can't fix it!" They need to be looking outside themselves for help. Your interest and empathy may rekindle hope, making the difference between choosing death and choosing life. Tell the parishioner, "You want to be without the pain. I will help you get through this. With a little help, you can choose life." Relate the Gospel to them.

#### **What Should You Do If You Determine Someone Is Suicidal?**

##### **What Not To Do:**

1. Do not keep it a secret.
2. Do not leave the person alone.
3. Do not offer simple solutions.
4. Do not judge or tell the person he will go to hell.
5. Do not try to be a therapist. Get professional help.

##### **What To Do:**

1. Stay with the person.
  - Ask about his thoughts and whether he has a plan.

- Determine the method and means. Are they lethal? Are they available?
2. Listen.
    - Acknowledge that he is in a great deal of pain and feels hopeless.
  3. Reassure him.
    - Tell him you don't want him to die. Assure him you'll do the hoping for him until he can feel it too. He needs to hear you say this, as he may believe he hasn't the ability to hope.
  4. Get or call for help immediately.
    - Don't leave it up to him to get help.
    - If the crisis is acute, treat it as an emergency. Call one of the following:
      - The suicide prevention lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
      - 911: Ask for a crisis intervention (CIT) counselor
      - The person's counselor or general practitioner
    - Or, take the person to an emergency room.

## PART 2: WHAT HE REALLY NEEDS TO HEAR<sup>1</sup>

**I F THE DESPAIRING CHRISTIAN** is hearing you, express your desire to understand and help. Give him God's Word. There is much you may relate to him that he may take to heart. There is also much, however, that will not prove beneficial to him under the circumstances. Give some thought to what will truly *encourage* the believer who is afflicted with a sense of hopelessness and fleeting thoughts of suicide. What does he need to hear most of all?

### The Attempt To “Scare the Hell out of Him”

In the fourth century, suicide among believers was an epidemic. Killing yourself had become a means of escaping severe persecution and execution. Christians would justify suicide, believing it was a form a martyrdom. In time, the church believed it was essential to speak out on the matter. Eventually, the church father Augustine made a declaration that would become the official position of the Roman church. No man should inflict on himself voluntary death as a means to escape the ills of time. Those who die by their own hand, it was determined, suffer eternal death. The opinion was adopted by virtually the entire church and helped curb the alarming number of suicides among believers. But at what cost? For apparently practical purposes, the church's leaders had used false doctrine and suicide's stigma to address an emergency. Albeit a lie, the unified declaration, it seemed, would protect future despairing Christians. “I will save you by threatening you with hell, hence scaring the hell out of you!”

<sup>1</sup> Part 2 is based partly on a couple of sections from Part 5 of Peter Preus, *And She Was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011).

### Between God's Word and a Hard Place

Most churches today maintain that suicide is forgivable. To some extent this relates to the influence of theologians who have aptly distinguished between sins which destroy faith and sins of weakness. As Luther professed nearly 500 years ago, “I don't share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber.”<sup>2</sup> That Christians recognize suicide as a forgivable sin is also explained by the fact that we know more than we did previously about mental illness and its relation to suicide. We understand that despairing of life is not the same thing as despairing of God's grace.<sup>3</sup>

Many clergy, unfortunately, even if they agree that God forgives the suicide, have speculated that it may be best under certain circumstances to suppress this truth. What about the parishioner who has had thoughts of suicide? What if he's imagined how he might carry out his death? Might we tell him that suicide is an unforgivable sin if it keeps him from attempting suicide? One might imagine a flawed teaching having an admirable use. Or you might mull over whether such words will truly help the desperate from a spiritual standpoint. He may simply conclude, “I'm such a terrible person for thinking such terrible thoughts!” And what if he cannot stop thinking what he's thinking, and you can't help him stop? What shall we say of your unproven method of suicide prevention? You haven't reduced his sense of hopelessness. You've only aggravated it.

We accept it as a basic tenet of Christian doctrine: The Law condemns the sinner. The Gospel comforts the

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 54: Table Talk*, edited and translated by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 29.

<sup>3</sup> See in this study the section entitled “Three Kinds of Despair — The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” in Part 3 under “What God is Telling You.”

believer. So, what are we to tell the parishioner who is afflicted by thoughts of suicide? If you give him the Law, you are sure to feed his despair. But if you give him the Gospel, are you simply encouraging him to give in to his urges and ultimately to sin? Or is your safest bet, perhaps, to say nothing? Should you avoid contributing to his sense of hopelessness, but also delay indefinitely any words of encouragement?

If we consult the Scriptures, the matter will not seem to be so complicated. There is one circumstance under which we are instructed to withhold the Gospel. Jesus declares, “Do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (MATT. 7:6). If it is evident a person will abuse the Gospel, to say nothing about abusing you, refrain from giving him the Savior’s Good News. If, on the other hand, this person has demonstrated his desire to hear the voice of the Shepherd, assume that he belongs to the Lord’s flock, and give him the Gospel. “My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus proclaims (JOHN 10:27).

## An Alternative to Shaming Into Silence

Every Christian who is trapped in a sin or is contemplating participating in a sin needs to hear the Law. Such is the case for the Christian entertaining thoughts of suicide. You may ask him how God would feel about his death.

Is the Lord not aware of his condition? Does he know better than the Lord whether he might still serve a purpose in this life? The Law should be given. But never as the last word. While the Law may curb behavior, only the Gospel can comfort and reduce the feeling of despair. After giving the Law in its full sternness, offer the Gospel in its full sweetness. Do not shame the one who is already feeling shame but assure him of his Savior’s grace.

Should you talk about Heaven? I would not. It may simply increase his sense of hopelessness. He may think to himself, “I can’t wait that long!” Or he may think of heaven as a release from *pain* rather than a release from *sin*.

That having been said, the person who is suicidal is typically not thinking of heaven but of ending his pain. This is the bigger incentive for ending his life. With that in mind, I would talk about the forgiveness of Christ. A despairing Christian is often a shamed Christian. He may feel he’s let everyone down and doesn’t deserve to live. Assure him that he’s not the only one feeling unworthy of forgiveness. Inasmuch as we are all sinful by nature, we are all unworthy of receiving God’s grace. As we recite when confessing our sins, “We are by nature sinful and unclean. . . . We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment.”<sup>4</sup> Even so, Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 JOHN 2:2). On account of Christ’s sacrifice, God is faithful to forgive, despite our unworthiness.

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<sup>4</sup> *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006) 151, 167.

## PART 3: ONE-ON-ONE BIBLE STUDY

**THOSE SUFFERING UNDER** various depressive or psychotic or anxiety disorders may also be struggling cognitively. This also holds true for many struggling with alcoholism or substance abuse. Be mindful of this as you prepare to meet with the anguished parishioner. He may have difficulties concentrating or thinking rationally. Quite possibly he will not be able to sit through a long explication of Law and Gospel talking points. In view of this you may wish to limit your teaching to a number of specifics that he can remember and review. This study may not be most beneficial for someone who is in the depths of despair. Your words may be especially helpful to someone who wants to learn what the Bible can teach him about dealing with his depression.

### When Life Has Become a Paradox (Identifying the Conflict)

The despairing believer, generally, is aware that it isn't normal thinking as he does. This may be why he is meeting with you. You represent someone who is willing to listen and can possibly help. Perhaps his difficulties include a spiritual struggle of sorts. His life is a paradox. God loves him. But he's feeling hopeless. It would seem there's a conflict between what God has promised and what he in fact is experiencing. Either the Lord is not who he had assumed, or his faith is not what it should be. The parishioner needs to see that the real discrepancy is between what his illness is telling him and what God tells him in His Word. Help him do so. If he's suicidal, he generally would rather believe something is wrong with his thinking than act upon what he's thinking.

### What Your Illness Is Telling You

Each of us was conceived in sin. Sin has infiltrated our entire being so that every day we are tempted from within by

our sinful nature. For the person suffering from a depressive disorder, this often includes thoughts of hopelessness and a yearning to escape his mental anguish. His illness, in a manner of speaking, is telling him:

- "I'm repulsive!"
- "I'm a burden!"
- "I'm unworthy of God's love!"
- "My life is beyond repair!"
- "My condition will never get better!"
- "My misery will never end!"
- "I might as well give up!"
- "I would be better off dead!"

*Note: Many of the statements appearing above are clearly false. Other assertions may contain some truth. "I will never beat my depression!" "No medicine or treatment will cure me of my condition!" Relate to him: "Until we know for sure, let's talk about what we do know from God's Word." Regarding any claims that have no basis, ask him, "Is this what you've been taught? Instead of believing your illness, you may believe God's promises!"*

**Read Ezekiel 36:31b** *You will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.*

**1.** What grounds do both you and I have for finding ourselves repulsive?

**Read Isaiah 61:10a** *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.*

**2.** Does God find you repulsive, unworthy of His love, beyond repair, or better off dead?

Why not?

**Read 2 Peter 1:19** *And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

**3.** What is more trustworthy than anything we personally experience, feel or witness in our lives? How is this especially relevant for the Christian who is depressed?

(See also verses 17 and 18.)

### What the World Is Telling You

In addition to being tempted from within, the despairing Christian is sure to be tempted from outside himself, by the world. According to today's society, you receive a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life not from your callings to serve and interact with others but by being an individual. Presumably, it's how you achieve independence that gives you meaning. You learn to do things your way, discover what pleases you, even if you must do so all alone. Our culture's emphasis is unfortunate because we need people in our lives. When we fail to interact face to face our mood suffers, and depression often follows. When we isolate ourselves from those with whom we have the most beneficial relationships, we are less able to cope with the stresses of life and more likely to suffer from suicidal thoughts and entertain suicidal intentions.

For those suffering from despair and thoughts of suicide, today's culture of death has issued the following memo:

- "You are an individual with rights!"
- "Retaining independence is essential for a meaningful life!"
- "You have a right to a life without suffering and pain!"
- "If you have no hope of obtaining relief in living, you may find relief in dying!"
- "Whatever decision you deem best, I will stand by you!"

**Read Galatians 5:13–14** *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

**4.** What is Paul's response to the world's claim that genuine freedom consists of the freedom to choose what pleases only you?

Studies show that depression leads to isolation and isolation leads to depression. Thankfully, the believing community can help break the cycle. We gather together to receive encouragement: 1) from fellow believers; and 2) from God's Word and Sacraments.

**Read Hebrews 10:23–25** *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

**5.** What are the benefits of regularly assembling with other believers?

**See also Ephesians 2:19** *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.*

**See also Romans 15:4** *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

Also comment on the following words of Martin Luther:

"When you suffer from spiritual depression ... gloom, despair or a troubled conscience, you should eat, drink and talk with others" (LW 54:17).

"Flee solitude ... for the devil watches and lies in wait for you most of all when you are alone" (LW 54:203).

Individualism in our culture has cultivated a yearning for isolation. If, in your opinion, you no longer need the world, the world will respect that. It is why today's culture speaks of relief through dying. The claim is that by respecting the wishes of those in anguish we demonstrate compassion. True relief, however, is received not through the *termination* of life but the *embracing* of life. Relief that is both genuine and enduring is granted through the saving message of the Gospel.

**Read John 10:10** *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

**6.** How do the church's promises differ from those of the world?

**See also Proverbs 11:14** *Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.*

**See also Matthew 11:28** *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

**Read Galatians 6:2** *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

**7.** How might I and others in the congregation stand by you and best support you when you suffer from a sense of isolation and worthlessness?

**See also 1 Corinthians 13:7** *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

### What the Devil Would Have You Believe

The Gospel and life sometimes appear to contradict each other. On the one hand, the Gospel presents a gracious God in Christ Jesus. On the other hand, life's experiences present a God who is not in touch with our life but absent in our suffering. Satan wants us to pick up on this and be troubled by faith's paradoxes. If these apparent contradictions cannot be resolved, you can only conclude:

- I cannot trust God!
- To obtain relief, I must look inside myself.
- I may look, but I find no help.
- Both I and my life are worthless and unsalvageable!

It will not surprise us that any time a conflict emerges between what Scripture promises and what life dishes out, it is a conflict Satan would like to fuel. He'd love nothing more than to reinforce the notion that God is unreliable and unfaithful. Depression is a natural tool for Satan in this regard, as it is a condition where you turn inward to yourself to the extreme. Instead of looking for relief outside yourself, you dig deeper inside and conclude there is no help. Your life and you, it would seem, are worthless. Naturally, this aggravates a sense of hopelessness. Advise the despairing Christian that he is not unique in this regard. "Are you a believer? You may expect nothing less than to be afflicted by the devil." It is especially important to know that Christians may suffer spiritual afflictions if they are overwhelmed by life but not hearing the Word. Such afflictions can lead to feelings of worthlessness before God, the questioning of one's faith, as well as extreme sadness, depression and despair.

**Read Luke 17:5-6** *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

**8.** What does the afflicted Christian have in common with the apostles?

**9.** What does the Lord teach us about our faith?

Even the apostles questioned their faith. Jesus had just instructed them concerning the brother who sins against them seven times in one day, to forgive him seven times. But how was this possible? Their feelings toward such an individual would not permit them to forgive him! That's what the extremely depressed may conclude about *himself*. "I can't be forgiven. My feelings tell me otherwise!" The right faith, however, is dependent not upon having the right feelings but on the power of God's Word.

### SATAN'S BOTTOM LINE!

- "Look at your life! Where has God's grace gotten you? Admit it! You're beat! Your fight is over!"
- You will never measure up!
- Your faith will never be good enough!
- You might as well give up and despair!

**Read Job 2:7-9** *So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die."*

**10.** What message would Satan like you to confirm as you listen to your illness with its unyielding accusations?

The devil would have you conclude that the time has come when you would be much better off dying than living. Fortunately, there is a dramatic difference between God's method of communicating and Satan's. Satan communicates not simply through his agents of malice and wickedness, but through our own sinful flesh, including our less-than-reliable feelings, perception and reason. God communicates to us directly and clearly through his infallible Word.

### SERVANTS OF GOD AFFLICTED BY SATAN

**Read 2 Corinthians 12:7** *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*

**11.** What was God's intent in permitting St. Paul to be afflicted by Satan?

Should we expect the same today? In what way?

**Read Job 7:15** *I would choose strangling and death rather than my bones.*

**12.** What did Satan achieve as far as Job was concerned? How is this relevant for you today?

Despairing of his life, Job clearly wanted to die. It is Satan's desire to work the same despair in God's servants today. The devil would rob a Christian of his will to live and his will to fight. He often does, in fact, interfere with the Christian's ability to hear the Word and be strengthened by it. Thankfully, God's grace is more powerful than a person's despair. The Lord sustains us in our faith even when we are terrorized and at such times lack the ability to apply the Gospel to ourselves.

**Read Job 1:9–11** *Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."*

**13.** How was Satan hoping to bring about Job's fall?

**14.** How does the devil try to alienate us from God today?

Read and comment on the following words of Luther.

*"I myself was offended more than once, and brought to the very depth and abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created."*

Like Job, Luther for a certain period wanted to die. The future reformer understood God's Law. The Lord demanded perfection. Luther knew full well, however, that he could not measure up. Sometime later, Luther discovered the truth of the Gospel, that a believer is declared righteous in God's sight by faith alone. (SEE HABAKKUK 2:4.)

### What God Is Telling You

One goal of yours as a pastor or church worker may be to reveal to the despairing Christian that something with his thought processes is not in harmony with his beliefs. What he is presently thinking or desiring is in direct conflict with what he's been taught and always believed. What's more, real help comes not from the inside, but the outside. Tell him, "Your sinful nature (your illness), the world and the devil would have you believe all is hopeless. Let's hear some specifics on what your gracious God and Savior teaches you."

### "WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOU'LL NEVER MEASURE UP?"

Recall God's voice in the Garden of Eden. God called out to Adam, "Who told you that you were naked?" (GEN. 3:11) Adam had sinned. Having listened to Satan, he had to deal with a guilty conscience. Sadly, what it was telling him, much like what the devil asserted, was that the Lord was not his friend. Looking at God's creation and gift, his own body, Adam no longer saw God's nurturing love and care. He saw one whom he must fear. Is that where we stand today? Is God one whom the believer must fear rather than trust? Despite his continuing afflictions and nagging conscience, the parishioner needs to hear who truly gets the last word. It is neither the devil nor the Christian's conscience. God has justified the sinner by dying for us. He has silenced our guilty conscience by the Gospel. The despairing Christian therefore may listen to the Lord.

**Read Romans 8:33** *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.*

**15.** How has God gotten the last word against Satan and our conscience, against sin and mental illness?

**See also Song of Solomon 4:7** *You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you.*

**Read Matthew 16:23** *He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

**16.** What does Jesus teach us in this passage?

**17.** When and how might the believer tell the devil to "take a hike"?

Read and comment on the following words of Luther.

*"You should tell the devil: Just by telling me that I am a miserable, great sinner, you are placing a sword and weapon into my hand with which I can decisively overcome you; yea, with your own weapon I can kill and floor you. For if you can tell me that I am a poor sinner, I, on the other hand, can tell you that Christ died for sinners and is their Intercessor. ... To him I direct you. You may accuse and condemn him. Let me rest in peace; for on his shoulders, not on mine, lie all my sins and the sins of all the world."*

**18.** How do we talk back to Satan?

To confess the Gospel out loud is to direct Satan back to Christ. When we recite the creed or profess out loud, "I believe in Jesus my Savior," the devil is getting the message

loud and clear. “If you want to take me on, you’re going to have to go through Christ!”

### “WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOUR FAITH ISN’T GOOD ENOUGH?”

Even the faithful Christian and regular churchgoer may assume the worst concerning his faith. On account of what he is feeling — sadness, guilt, anxiety, a sense of worthlessness or hopelessness — he believes his faith is deficient. Reassure him that major depression does not reflect a minimal faith. Tell him, “You needn’t judge your faith based on your ability to beat your depression. Judge your faith on the basis of Christ’s promises.” Read in Hebrews, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (HEB. 13:5). Relate to him, “I don’t believe you’ve lost your Christian faith. You’ve lost hope that you’ll enjoy again life’s blessings or that you’ll again find purpose in life. This hope may be restored in you when you hear the Lord’s message to you.”

#### Despite Satan’s Afflictions, Despite Your Despair and Weakness in Faith:

- Your faith is a gift from God.  
“*And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*” (EPH. 2:8).
- Your faith justifies.  
“*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (ROM. 3:28).
- Your faith remains faith and you may therefore expect the Lord’s help.  
“*I believe; help my unbelief!*” (MARK 9:24)

Comment on the following statement.

*“Scriptures and experience teach us that we are never so well armed against falling from grace as when we are afflicted and oppressed.”<sup>5</sup>*

### “WHO TOLD YOU THAT YOU MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP?”

#### Yes, the Devil Will Afflict You and the World Will Test You

**Read 1 Peter 4:12** *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*

**19.** What can every Christian throughout the church’s history expect? How should we react?

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Laetsch, D.D., *The Abiding Word — An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays for the Year 1946, Vol. 2*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 11.

### No, You Needn’t Despair

**Read Isaiah 42:3** *A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.*

**20.** Of what does God assure the despairing sinner?

God doesn’t kick the sinner when he’s down or put the afflicted believer out of his misery. He loves us to the point of taking on the suffering that was rightly ours.

**Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–8** *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair.*

**21.** As sinners we can expect to be afflicted by the devil and by life. So, what is our reason for not despairing?

We can depend on the presence of God’s grace (“this treasure”) in wretched vessels such as ourselves (“jars of clay”). True, we *are* afflicted. If it were up to us to overcome our afflictions, in fact, we’d surely be crushed and driven to despair. Moreover, we find ourselves in circumstances where we cannot help but give in to hopelessness. But we are *not* crushed. Although we’re always at the point of breaking, as sinners under God’s grace, we’re also *kept* from breaking.<sup>6</sup> The Lord keeps us from despairing of His grace through the Gospel and the Sacraments.

#### Three Kinds of Despair — The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

*Note: When meeting with the despairing Christian, it is essential that you know the difference between different kinds of despair. We may identify them as the good, the bad and the ugly.*

- *Good* despair is to despair of our works. We give up on trusting in our works, realizing they cannot save us. For our most righteous acts are by nature like filthy rags contaminated by sin (ISAIAH 64:6).
- *Bad* despair is to despair of God’s grace. A person gives up on being saved by grace through faith in Christ, believing that he cannot be forgiven for what he has done. (SEE MATT. 26:24–25.)
- *Ugly* despair is to despair of life, giving up on the possibility of retrieving the life that once brought you joy and pleasure. (SEE ECCL. 2:17–21.)

**Read Matthew 11:28–29** *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke*

<sup>6</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1937) 974ff.



upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

**22.** What does Jesus encourage the Christian to do who despairs of his works?

**Read John 10:28** *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

**23.** How sure may we be of remaining in the faith under God's grace?

The devil is relentless in his efforts to drive us to despair because of what we view as our despicable life and dismal faith. Even when we sense Satan trying to push us over the edge, however, we may be sure of remaining in the faith. The reason is that we live in a state of grace, where God's grace is stronger than our sin and God's grip stronger than faith's grip. Remember your Baptism, where God put His name on you, *placing* you in the state of grace.

**Closing Prayer:** "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (LSB 556, especially verses 3–4)

Or: "Do Not Despair, O Little Flock" (LW 300)

Or: "If God Himself Before Me" (LSB 724, especially verses 1, 2, 4, 5)

## The Cross That's Too Heavy To Bear (Flawed Attempts To Cope With One's Cross)<sup>7</sup>

### Distorting One's Cross

A Christian's cross presents a paradox. On the one hand, what you believe is certain. God loves you. He doesn't want you to suffer in any way. On the other hand, your suffering is very real! Some believe this paradox can be resolved in one of two ways. Either God desires to correct something in your life, or God desires to bolster your faith. Whether or not this may be true in given instances, the assertion is misleading. What is implied or possibly heard is "God is punishing you for your sins" or "God is chastening you for your lack of faith."

<sup>7</sup> The following section, "Flawed Attempts to Cope With One's Cross," is based partly on Part 5 of Peter Preus, *And She Was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011).

### "GOD IS PUNISHING YOU FOR YOUR SIN."

This claim distorts the Christian's cross and any purpose it may serve. In a very apparent way, it adds insult to injury for the one undergoing suffering. In addition to feeling the burden of his cross, he's made to feel, essentially, that he had it coming, that he deserves to feel anxious, afraid or depressed. Clearly, it is the last thing the despairing Christian needs to hear. For one thing, he may believe it. For another thing, he may be led to believe that his suffering will never end. By the way, major depression may be the closest one will ever come to experiencing hell on earth. Hell is where God is absent, and depression is where the believer may be given every impression that God is absent.

**Read Luke 13:1–5** *There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

**1.** What conclusion may one draw from someone else's suffering or misfortune?

We may deduce in every instance that, because we too are sinners, it is an appropriate time to repent.

### "GOD IS CHASTISING YOU FOR YOUR LACK OF FAITH."

Like the statement above, this claim not only puts the worst construction on things, but distorts the Christian's cross. It encourages one to look inward for relief rather than outside oneself. If you're despairing, predictably, your inclination will be to look to your feelings rather than God's Word. The tragic outcome of such an activity is that the depressed Christian often mistakes his lack of self-worth, or trust in himself, as a lack of faith in Christ. Remind the parishioner that faith is not feeling a certain way. Faith is trust in God.

**Read Proverbs 28:26** *Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.*

**2.** What is the danger of placing all your trust in your thoughts or feelings?

**3.** How do we overcome such a danger?

## Underestimating One's Cross

Counterfeit teachers and counselors sometimes believe they can coach you into coping with your cross. "You can do it!" they jabber. "Hang in there a little longer!" Pastors and parish workers are not entirely immune. We tend to direct our comments at the illness rather than the individual. We suppose that the despairing should conclude that things are not as bad as they seem. "You'll feel better in a day or two," we want to say. They would be better served if we told them, "I won't advise you that you can will away your illness or choose not to think this way. I'd rather give you the Gospel. You don't need coaching. You need God's Word."

**Read Romans 7:18–19** *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*

4. What does St. Paul deeply regret?
5. How are his words especially relevant for the depressed Christian?

Like everyone throughout history, the apostle was incapable of changing his sinful nature. Even as a Christian, he was unable to fulfill his desire or promise to do what is right and good. As ones conceived and born in sin, we have the same nature. Sin contaminates our every thought, desire and feeling. We long for the resurrection when Christ will remove from the believer every aspect of sinfulness. (SEE ROMANS 7:24–25.)

## Magnifying One's Cross

While some minimize the effects of one's cross, others tend to overstate the cross's effects. The counselor may imply, or the patient infer, that one's cross serves as a means of grace, that suffering may produce faith apart from God's Word.

### "WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY CROSS IS A BLESSING?!"

Perhaps we have all heard it said: "Your cross will make your faith stronger!" Although the statement may be understood in an appropriate way, it is just as likely that it will be misunderstood. Is that to say, as we mentioned earlier, that a cross has been allotted to me out of necessity because my faith is deficient in some way? Do I *deserve* to be depressed? Or might I conclude that my cross has some sort of intrinsic ability to increase my faith? Do I *need* to be depressed? According to the Scriptures, the only means

of grace are the Word and the Sacraments. The Lord gives out forgiveness, life and salvation only through the Gospel. While one's cross may drive one to the Gospel, it is the Gospel alone that is the power of salvation.

**Read Romans 10:17** *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

6. How does one receive faith in his Savior and strengthening in his faith?
7. What should the believer do if he feels overwhelmed by life or poor health?

### "AM I TO LIVE WITH THIS CROSS?!"

The fallacy that one's cross is inherently good for one's faith will trigger some obvious questions: Should I live with this cross? For how long? How much suffering is good for me? Does God accept me yet? Statistics indicate that 80% of people who seek treatment for depression are treated successfully. One might deduce that the remaining 20% are obligated to bear their cross because God deems it to be good in their case. Yes, one may *live* with depression. But people also *die* from depression. Do not reduce your message to the mandate "you must *carry* your cross." Assure the despairing, "I will *stand* with you under your cross!"

**Read Luke 14:26–27** *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*

8. Under what circumstances is the Christian bound to carry his cross?
9. How do we obtain courage and strength at such times? (SEE ALSO MATTHEW 5:10–12.)

## Concealing One's Cross

One more flawed attempt at coping with one's cross deserves mention. It is to convince oneself that the cross holds no value, and that a person may therefore abandon his cross. To conceal one's cross is to believe that one's cross may be avoided. Euthanasia advocates and theologians of glory make it a central article of their faith. What they teach in essence is that you have the choice of not living with your cross.

### “DIE WITH DIGNITY!” (Euthanasia Advocates)

Your parishioner has heard the voice of the world as exemplified above. He’s heard the talking points of those who spout human compassion, saying, “You may die with dignity!” “You have the choice to end your suffering!” Tell the despairing the real meaning of death with dignity. You die with dignity not when, by your asserted right and autonomy, you die as a means of ending your suffering. You die with dignity when, by God’s wise and gracious timing, you die trusting that Jesus Christ crucified is Jesus Christ risen.

**Read Philippians 1:21–26** *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

**10.** St. Paul understood how attractive and appealing death can sometimes seem. Why can the suffering Christian believe absolutely that the Lord’s choice whether he lives or dies is the right choice?

**Read Luke 23:42–43** *And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

**11.** Despite his incredible and degrading suffering, how was the criminal on the cross able to die with dignity?

### “LIVE WITH DIGNITY!” (Theologians of Glory)

The worst kind of false prophet is the one who fails to preach the cross. In addition to sparing you any talk about Christ’s atoning sacrifice, he asserts that a life with dignity is a life free of pain and sorrow. “God doesn’t want you depressed but happy!” he bellows. “If you only believe, you won’t suffer!” But how do you manufacture happiness? The theologian of glory maintains that you must look inside yourself to your feelings, your mood. A Christian, however, is not one who “just says no” to his cross. He’s one who, despite his cross, trusts the Gospel. You live with dignity not when you avoid suffering or shame or loss at every cost. You live with dignity when you live under God’s grace. Although your health is bound to fluctuate, the Lord’s Gospel will not.

**Read Isaiah 40:8** *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.*

**12.** What does the Lord promise the Christian who suffers shame and humiliation on account of mental illness?

### Closing Prayer

“If Your Beloved Son, O God” (LSB 568, especially Verse 2)

Or: “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less” (LSB 575)

## The Patient Alternative: Carrying Your Cross (Theologians of the Cross)

*Theologians of glory* refuse to see God as one who works through suffering. Christians, presumably, are to find shame in the cross and nothing more. Those afflicted by mental illness, accordingly, are to be seen as having been diminished and are to be pitied. *Theologians of the cross* recognize an alternative with respect to suffering. In patience, we carry our cross. Having been driven to despair, we wait for God’s grace.

**Read Luke 9:23–24** *And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”*

1. What is expected of Christ’s disciples?
2. What are the benefits of carrying our cross?

### How You Own Your Illness

Commend the depressed Christian for talking about his condition. Talking helps remove the sense of shame that’s associated with his condition and his subsequent pain. This is good, for if he can talk about his hurt with less shame, he can talk about his inappropriate solution to his hurt. In addition, if he can confess his thoughts about dying without fear of being shamed, he may receive help with those thoughts. And, finally, if he can be open to receiving your Christian support, he can be open to receiving from you the consoling message of Christ.

Your message is simple: As a Christian, you needn’t be shamed by a cross which God permits to enter your life, even depression or schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. What you’re shamed by are crosses’ reminders that you are born and bred a sinner. You’re shamed by what you’ve permitted to fester in your heart on account of your cross.

That having been said, you get to own up to your sin by confessing it. That means you get to own up to any way you've let mental illness serve an excuse to sin. And by faith in Christ, you get to own your Savior's promises to the afflicted.

**Read 2 Corinthians 12:9–10** *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

3. What was the apparent benefit of St. Paul's cross?
4. How did the apostle respond?
5. How might you respond to your cross?
6. What benefit might you expect carrying your cross?

There are two possible views to hold with respect to your depression. You may regard your cross as a sign that God has withdrawn His love. Or you may believe that God will use your cross to draw you further into His Word. Under your cross, the Lord will create in you a longing to be free of sin and its effects. And through His Word, the Lord will encourage you. He will forgive your sin and promise to eliminate all sin in the life to come. Through His Word, furthermore, He will enable you to encourage others under their cross.

**Read Luke 22:31–32** *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.*

7. Short of God's Word and prayer, what could Peter expect from Satan's afflictions?
8. How would the other disciples benefit from Peter's cross?

### Connecting With the Cross of Christ

Having born your many sins, Jesus is the One who truly sympathizes with you in your suffering. He understands what it means having nothing to anticipate in the time that remains in this life but pain and anguish, sorrow and despair. But more than that, He's the One who will relieve you, granting you forgiveness. Consequently, you may find purpose not only in *Christ's* cross but your *own* cross. There you meet God and are presented with His mercy.

### “I UNDERSTAND YOUR SUFFERING.”

**Read Isaiah 53:3, 5** *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief ... But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*

9. Having been crucified in your place, Jesus certainly understands what you're going through. What may we deduce from Christ's cross about our own cross?

We don't have to take matters into our own hands in order to obtain the proper relief. Even when we suffer from suicidal thoughts, we may find comfort in the cross of Christ. Jesus died for our sin so that *His* death rather than our *own* might end all hopelessness!

### “I WILL RELIEVE YOUR SUFFERING.”

**Read Lamentations 3:25, 31, 32** *The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him .... For the Lord will not cast off forever ... he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.*

10. What is the Lord's reward for a patient heart?

**Read 1 Corinthians 10:13** *No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*

11. How does God give us a patient heart?

“The way of escape” of which Paul makes mention is the Word and Sacraments. Through them God conveys His faithfulness, giving us the means to endure our suffering with patience and carry our cross.

### Venting With God (Christian Lament)<sup>8</sup>

Venting with God consists of asking “why?” or “when?” “Why have You permitted me to suffer in this way? Why am I not seeing Your blessing? You've promised to relieve me of my cross! When will You do so?” Venting with God is not an expression of unbelief. And it's more than an expression of despair or anger. It's an expression of pain. It's also a plea for relief and for help filling in the blanks. “I know You're out there, Lord! Can You hear me?”

<sup>8</sup> The following two sections, “Venting with God” and “Wrestling with God,” are based partly on a couple of sections from Peter Preus, *I Will Grieve for the Suicide* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Office of National Mission, 2020).

Please answer why You haven't helped me! How long must I wait?"

**Read Job 3:11–26, especially verses 11 and 16** *Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? ... Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light?*

- 12.** What does Job ask with regards to his life?
- 13.** What answer does he receive?
- 14.** How might Job be likened to those today who despair, suffering from major depression?

*Note: In Job 1:10 Satan accused God of putting a hedge around Job, shielding him from trouble and disaster. In Chapter 3, verse 23, Job uses the word to describe the opposite. God has confined him so that he's absolutely helpless. Job shows in this section that it's not the greatness of his affliction that poses the greatest test to his faith. It is the apparent change in disposition on God's part. God is now his enemy. Job seems to be forgotten, forsaken and rejected.*

*Note: Was Job thinking of suicide in Chapter 3? He may have had suicidal **thoughts**, but there is no indication from his lamenting that he ever had suicidal **intentions**. Even when complaining, he left his life in God's hands. God allowed Job's faith to be severely tested, but by God's grace Satan would not destroy his faith.*

**Read Psalm 22, especial verses 1–2**

*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.*

- 15.** What words of Jesus from the cross convey venting with the Father?
- 16.** What was different about Jesus' venting as compared to that of the despairing Christian?

From our perspective as Christians, our crosses can make it seem that God is silent and unresponsive. In Jesus' case, He was *truly* forsaken by His Father. Why? The Lord would be crucified for our sins, so that we believers may never face God's judgment. Consequently, we are assured that our pleas for help are heard and will be answered.

**See also John 16:22** *So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

**See also John 6:40** *For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

**See also Philippians 4:4–7** *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

## Wrestling With God

Wrestling with God is what we do when we are in need of a definitive answer from God. We're not insisting on an answer to "why?" or "when?" As we carry our cross, however, we require an answer of comfort, a blessing from God's Word. And we're not going to take no for an answer. We're not going to quit in our struggle, until we receive that gem from Scripture that picks us up in our despair and strengthens and encourages us.

**Read Genesis 32:22–30, especially verses 26 and 30** *Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" ... So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."*

- 17.** What does it mean to wrestle with God?
- 18.** What purpose is served wrestling with God?

To wrestle with God, essentially, is to meditate on His Word in order to be strengthened by His Word. "Help me resolve faith's paradox! I have waited for the help You have promised to provide. Convince me that You have not rejected me, by letting me see You in Your grace." Jacob's victory against the angel of the Lord offers a picture of Christ's victory against God. As our substitute, Christ fought with God and won, not only His own victory, but also our victory. God who was once angry with us over our sin is now reconciled with us through the suffering and death of His Son, whom we see in His Word. It is very relevant that Jacob sees the Lord's face in the midst of his fight. Even when God is silent, we too may see Him face to face in Christ and the message of the Gospel. Tell the despairing Christian that his prayer is never uttered in vain. He can tell God, "I'm not going to *let go* of Your Word, until You *bless* me through Your Word."

See also Job 13:15–16 *Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face. This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him.*

Note: Luther used the word “meditation” in connection with the practice of reading and praying aloud. It was bound to the Scriptures and included a system of reading the Psalms. Meditation had to do with how you received these words and applied them to your life. Encourage the despairing Christian to meditate on God’s Word. If he is unable to engage in this practice on his own, during or outside of your sessions, consider doing the reading for him.

## Listening to God

### “MY VOICE IS LOUDER THAN YOUR VOICE!”

Wrestling with God is followed by listening to God. After you have fought the Lord for His blessing, the Lord has consented, revealing in the Word that He is both our God and Savior. The implications with respect to one’s cross are clear. Assure the parishioner that depression or mental illness will never have the last word. Neither will Satan nor the proponent of any false belief system, such as the theology of glory. God will.

Read Psalm 46, especially verse 10 *Be still, and know that I am God.*

19. The psalmist appears to interrupt himself in verse 10 of the psalm. Are his words Law or Gospel?

While the words may sound like a rebuke, for the believer they are a promise. Despite how great the turmoil in our life, despite how loud the voice of depression rages, when God speaks, we may hear His reassurance. “I will intervene and deliver you from the many threats that surround you, so that you may remain at peace.”

The Voice of Depression: “You are worthless!”

The Voice of Christ: “*You are justified!*”

Read Romans 4:5 *[God] justifies the ungodly.*

20. What is God’s last word to the listening believer?

God justifies not those who are *godly* but who are *ungodly*, who have all kinds of sin to uncover and confess. In other words, regardless of your having been identified as a hopeless sinner, your faith is counted as righteousness. In the sight of God, you have no sin whatsoever.

See also Romans 5:6 *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

See also 1 John 3:20 *For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.*

See also Matthew 17:1–5 *And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”*

See also Luke 11:28 *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!*

## Confessing Your God

To confess the true God is ultimately to confess the resurrection. Regardless of our cross and our deteriorating world, despite the legion of voices that would stifle our faith and eradicate God’s name, the last day will be the Lord’s Day, when God makes everything new. We therefore anticipate seeing Him in the flesh and in His glory.

Read Job 19:21–26 *Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! Why do you, like God, pursue me? Why are you not satisfied with my flesh? Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.*

21. Like Job, you may expect to be accused falsely, not simply by friends but by the devil, the world and your own flesh in the form of depression. How, in Job’s opinion, would he finally be vindicated?

22. How is Job’s confession of Christ and His resurrection also your confession?

See also 1 Corinthians 15:19–20 *If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

### “BUT IF NOT ...!”

Read Daniel 3:14–18 *Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego,*

that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

23. According to King Nebuchadnezzar, what was the choice facing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego?
24. Who alone may choose to save the believer from suffering, pain and shame?
25. What confession did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make in response to the king's threat?
26. What may the despairing Christian learn from this account?

According to King Nebuchadnezzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego could suffer great pain and anguish in their death, or they could choose life. As a means of escaping the king's wrath, they could abandon their God. Recognizing the king's ultimatum as a false choice, they refused to consent. The depressed and despairing Christian, at times, is also confronted with a false choice. As a means of escaping the wrath of his illness, he may choose death. As believers, however, we are not given the choice of when or whether we may confess our God and Savior. It is the Lord alone who makes such choices for us. Sometimes confessing our God means *dying* as a consequence. Other times our confession means *living* as a consequence. In the latter case, it is within God's power to deliver us from our cross, even in this lifetime. Yes, He may choose to do so. *But if not*, we still have the tremendous honor of trusting in the only true God for our salvation.

See also Hebrews 4:14–16 *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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.

### Closing Prayer

"Salvation Unto Us Has Come" (LSB 555, especially verses 2, 5, 7)

Or: "Lamb of God, Pure and Holy" (LSB 434)

Or: "O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth" (LSB 834, especially verse 3)

## Living With Your Illness Day to Day<sup>9</sup>

The Christian who suffers from major depression and other forms of mental illness often feels as though his life has been degraded, if not utterly destroyed. At best, his life has been diminished incalculably. And if he's holding out hope of beating his illness, that hope may be fading quickly. Reassure him that his victory is neither compromised nor cheapened by the fact that his illness is still plaguing him. By the grace of our Lord, he has been adopted into God's family! Inasmuch as he is baptized, washed clean every day by the water combined with God's Word, he is God's precious child! He may therefore live with his illness day to day for as long as it takes.

### You May Die God's Way!

But what if his despair and thoughts of suicide persist? The possibility, unfortunately, is very real. Insofar as his yearning for relief continues, so do his urges to bring about relief the only way he knows how. Tell him there is another way. Over and above his visits for medical and counseling support, there is a place for dying: to die *God's* way. Instead of identifying what *you* can't stand about yourself, identify what displeases *God* and put *it* to death.

Read Colossians 3:5 *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.*

1. What is your "earthly nature," also known as the "Old Adam"?
2. What does it mean to put it to death?

Luther expresses that being baptized with water "indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition

<sup>9</sup> The following section, "Living With Your Illness Day to Day," is based partly on Part 5 of Peter Preus, *And She Was a Christian: Why Do Believers Commit Suicide?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011).

and repentance be drowned and die with our sins and evil desires” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, “What Baptism Indicates”). By Baptism we have been made to share in Christ’s death. As Christ has buried our sin, that is, we too can and must daily overcome and bury it.<sup>10</sup>

### As You Get To Die, You Get To Live! (Holy Baptism: The Christian’s Reboot)

Christ, on the other hand, does not leave you in death and despair. As you get to die, so you get to live.

**Read Romans 6:4** *We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*

**3.** What does it mean by means of our Baptism to “walk in newness of life?”

Luther affirms that being baptized with water also indicates that “a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, “What Baptism Indicates”). By Baptism we have also been made to share in Christ’s resurrection. As Christ is risen from the dead and lives, we too can and must daily live a new life in Him.<sup>11</sup>

The depressed Christian can find great comfort in what Baptism indicates. Imagine your laptop suddenly locking up. All at once your work comes to a halt and you conclude that your device is worthless. That is, until you hit the restart button and reboot your device. As Christians, we count on Christ to hit our restart button. Jesus died for us and He delivers the benefits of His death to us daily through our Baptism. Each day it’s the same exercise. You get to die, and you get to rise! The Old Adam drowns and dies with your sins and evil desires. And the new man arises and lives before God in righteousness and purity. It happens to be a no-lose proposition. As you rise each day you may live not only with the knowledge that you’re still a sinner, but with the understanding that your depression is still a part of you. After all, your nature, your illness and your symptoms do not dictate who you are; Christ’s death and resurrection do.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

### Living off God’s Grace

**Read Matthew 15:21–28, especially verse 27** *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*

**4.** How is the Canaanite woman a source of great comfort to the despairing Christian?

The Canaanite woman teaches us that those with no apparent claim to God’s gifts may nevertheless expect His mercy. After she has cried out persistently for help, Jesus informs the woman, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She was a Gentile and Jesus had been called specifically to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The woman, however, would not be deterred. Acknowledging that she was nothing but a dog, a pagan with no rights, she catches Jesus with His own words, saying, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Suffering from mental illness can leave the Christian feeling that he’s the scum of the earth, worthy of nothing good from God’s hand. Acknowledging, however, that you are the chief of sinners and nothing but a dog, is what it means to live off God’s grace. What’s more, Jesus will recognize and reward such a faith.

### LIVING OFF GOD’S GRACE THROUGH THE DIVINE SERVICE (Where God Restores My Perception of Sin and Grace)

In the Divine Service, God communicates with suffering Christians. His purpose is to restore in us the proper perception of sin and grace. This is especially relevant for the mentally ill. Mental illness has to do with altered perception: altered thoughts, moods and feelings. We come to the Divine Service, however, and God gives us a reality check and helps us perceive what *He* would have us perceive. First, we confess together our sin, perceiving that we are in fact sinful by nature, sinful from the moment of conception. And secondly, we confess together God’s grace through Christ, perceiving that our hope in God’s salvation is both real and certain.

#### What Do You Hear?

Attending the Divine Service is a weekly privilege. In addition to joining other believers to hear God’s saving truth, as an individual Christian you may trade in the message of depression for the message of the Gospel. Rest assured, there is no contest. The Divine Service is not about what you, because of your illness, might *perceive*, how apparently repulsive you are, both to yourself and to



others. It's about what your Lord *declares*: that through the blood of His Son, you are precious!

**Read Romans 8:33–39** *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died — more than that, who was raised — who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,*

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 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.*

5. What Gospel message does St. Paul communicate to the despairing Christian?
6. Who gets the last word? What is that word?

#### What Do You See, Feel and Taste?

The Divine Service is where you may compare what you perceive on account of being depressed with what you see, feel and taste as a recipient of God's forgiveness. On one side you are besieged with faulty conclusions and possibly delusions and hallucinations. On the other side, you are given God's holy and saving gifts. Over here, you must deal with your personal baggage. And over here, you have cleansing water. You have Christ's body and blood. You have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Again, you may rest assured there is no contest.

**Luke 24:36–40** *As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.*

7. When Jesus presents Himself to us in His Word and Sacrament, is there ever reason to be troubled or overcome by doubt?
8. Why were the disciples to believe that Jesus was indeed the risen Christ?

9. What does Jesus give us to see and touch?

#### What Do You Believe?

The Divine Service is your chance to contrast what you believe with what we *all* believe. What you may believe, as we all believe based on God's Word, is that everyone is a sinner, but everyone is redeemed. How different are your beliefs when they're based not on your faulty thoughts, mood and feelings, but on the Gospel! The teachings of Christ are unambiguous, never changing and ever saving!

**Read Romans 3:23–24** *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

10. What should we believe with regards to every sinner on earth?
11. What should we believe with regards to Christ and His work on the cross?

#### LIVING OFF GOD'S GRACE THROUGH PRIVATE CONFESSION (Where I May Be Forgiven for the Way I Feel)

What if you have encouraged the depressed Christian to come to the Divine Service and you later determine that his attendance has not improved but declined? Perhaps you also determine that he is not feeling what he used to feel in response to the service? Invite him to private confession.

Private confession is another opportunity to confess what is really wrong and to believe what has been made right. It is different than the Divine Service, however. The parishioner receives one-on-one assurance that his sins are forgiven. As a pastor meeting with one who is despairing, however, don't expect to receive the kind of details that you might from another Christian. Anticipate a different-sounding confession, one where you hear his illness speaking. His confession, very possibly, will be based not on what he's done but what he's feeling — about himself, his life, his future, his faith. Or his confession may be based not on what he's done but what he's dared to wish. More productive than convincing him that his shame has no basis, is to let him confess what he believes to be his offense. After he confesses his sin, you may lift him up out of his shame, as you have done with others, with the words of absolution.

**Read Luke 18:9–14** *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated*

others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

**12.** What does the Pharisee perceive about himself?

**13.** What does the tax collector perceive about himself?

**14.** Whose perceptions of himself are well-grounded?

The parable of the pharisee and tax collector demonstrates that one’s feelings and perceptions, right or wrong, have no bearing on one’s status before God. What matters is how God demonstrates His mercy to one who is truly repentant, how the Lord declares a sinner righteous in His sight.

See also **James 5:16** *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

Read **John 20:22–23** *And when [Jesus] had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”*

**15.** How is forgiveness given out and received?

**16.** Is it based on how we feel or on the authority of God’s Word?

Christ’s forgiveness is delivered through the Gospel and Sacraments. This includes the words of absolution. Christ’s forgiveness is received by faith. In this regard, the pastor may relate the following to the depressed parishioner: “However foul you appear to yourself or to others, before the Lord you are without sin of any kind. When I, as your pastor, declare to you, ‘I forgive you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’ you may believe that my words are just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with you Himself.” (See *Luther’s Small Catechism*, “The Office of the Keys.”)

Read **Psalms 103:12** *As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

**17.** How far is the east from the west? How is this significant?

How far the east is from the west cannot be measured. As it keeps going, it is infinite in its distance. So far does the Lord remove our transgressions.

### LIVING OFF GOD’S GRACE THROUGH PRIVATE COMMUNION (Where My Lack of Feeling or Misguided Feelings Hold No Relevance)

What if the depressed or despairing Christian simply refuses church? He hasn’t the resolve to get out of bed, dress himself, etc. You’ve offered to meet with him for private confession or to visit about potential concerns. The understanding, however, is that he would contact you should he see such a need. And up until now he’s demonstrated a reluctance to accept such invitations. Perhaps he has experienced some difficulty listening. Perhaps he has lacked energy and initiative. What do you do? Contact him. Let him know he may still attend the Divine Service. You will bring the service to him!

#### A Possible Alternative

If the parishioner won’t engage in conversation, there are several things that you, his pastor, may still do for him.

- Bring the Divine Service to him.
- Read God’s Word.

We may compare the despairing to the person under hospice care.

God’s Word can soothe even if you’re unable to generate a response.

- Pray the prayers.
- Sing the hymns for him.
- Distribute Christ’s body and blood.

Faith is receiving. If one is not able to focus, having faith may be *the only thing* of which one is capable. (SEE **EPHESIANS 2:8**.)

Read **Colossians 3:16** *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

**18.** What do hymn singing and thanksgiving have to do with God’s Word?

Read **Matthew 26:28** *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

Read **John 6:33, 40** *For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son*

*and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

**19.** What benefits are promised in the Sacrament?

**A Visit to the Doctor: “What do you feel?”**

As mentioned earlier, if you are a pastor, you have been called not simply as a shepherd to the flock, but as a physician of the soul. Ask the despairing about his pain, what he feels. He, possibly, may not feel much of anything. He may even lack any meaningful sense of comfort after hearing the Gospel. Is this a great concern? The absence of feeling may present a spiritual danger if, as a consequence, he is avoiding church and the Divine Physician. If he is, however, attending the Divine Service, his lack of feeling may be less relevant. After all, where two or three have gathered together to receive God’s Word and Sacraments, Christ is present with His gifts. Tell the parishioner, “You don’t have to see or feel *God*. You can see and feel what *God gives* you! It is not what *you* feel that saves you, after all, but what *Christ* felt and endured in your place. Regardless of what you are *not* feeling today, you *may* feel the wafer on your tongue. You may taste the wine on your lips. You may receive the Lord’s body and blood given and shed for you!”

**Read Psalm 34:8** *Taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.*

**20.** Other than hearing and feeling, what human senses communicate the treasures Christians receive in God’s Word and Sacraments?

**21.** How might this serve as tremendous comfort for the Christian who is depressed?

**Closing Prayer**

“I Walk in Danger All the Way” (*LSB* 716, especially verses 1, 3, 5)

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