

Attacked by a Monster

Depression hit me by surprise, and help came despite my foolish reactions.

by Art Greco

As my blue Mazda 626 rolled to a stop at the light, I had no idea my life would take an immediate turn. I was thinking only of getting home to watch the Cubs on cable while I ate my lunch.

The corner of Highway 99 and McDonald Street has one of those lights that always seems to be red, especially when I'm on my way home. On the left was Elmer's Restaurant, the "after worship" eatery for many families in our church, and on the right was Union Gas Station. Everything looked familiar.

I felt normal, meaning stressed. I assumed the tightness in my chest and pressure in my head (but without the sharp pain of a headache) was the expected byproduct of being a church planter. I was a little dizzy, all things I had grown accustomed to.

The thought of being with people gave me a "headache in the chest." I only wanted to be alone. How could I subdue that depression monster?

Suddenly something bizarre happened. Nothing looked familiar. It was like that feeling you get when, in the middle of the night, exhausted during a road trip, you awaken in a half-conscious, panicked fog. Your surroundings are strange and you can't remember where you are, until you realize you're in a hotel room, not in your bed back home. Only in this case, clarity wasn't returning. I didn't know where I was, where I was going, or where I'd been. I just sat there, dazed, until the car behind me honked and startled me into creeping through a now foreign light that had turned green.

I motored slowly down the highway, thinking, *I'll just keep driving until something looks familiar*. I turned left because it "felt" correct, then left again for the same reason. *I think I live on this block*. But I wasn't sure which house was mine.

Push the button on the garage door opener, I thought. *Wherever a garage door opens, that must be my house*. When I noticed a garage opening, I parked in the driveway, walked into the garage, and sat on the freezer, waiting for my head to clear. I wondered if my ministry was over because of some serious and debilitating disease.

That happened in the spring of 1991, and it started a chain of struggles, errors, and lessons that have proven to be among the most significant in my life.

One of those errors happened right there in the garage. As I sat groping and pleading with God for mental clarity, my son came home from school. "What's wrong, Dad?" he asked. "Why aren't you at work?"

I decided to keep this experience to myself. How could the family handle having a dad who couldn't find his way home for lunch? I would see my doctor because I wanted to know what the problem was. But I determined to deal with this thing alone.

After several medical tests, the doctor's diagnosis was "stress-induced depression," and he recommended that I find another profession. This, too, I kept to myself. Not even my wife knew. While my motivation was to protect her, it was a foolish, unloving, even dangerous decision.

That was the first of many bad decisions. What follows is an abbreviated list of the lessons learned in my ongoing struggle with this monster called depression.

1. Trying to handle depression alone is its own type of insanity. I eventually learned that recovering from depression requires help from other people. In fact, my martyr-like approach, had I stayed with it, could have been disastrous.

I was afraid that people would see me as weak, that the stresses of planting a church and functioning as pastor were too much for me. I wasn't going to tell the church's leadership; I wasn't going to tell my wife; and I *sure* wasn't going to tell my superintendent. Pride convinced me that I would be branded if anyone found out. But, thankfully, keeping my secret eventually turned out to be impossible.

Despite my silence, Brenda knew something was wrong. There were evenings when I would come home from work and go to bed. I didn't want to talk, I was irritable, and I began to isolate myself.

One night Brenda told me that a member of the church was on the phone with a question about a minor ministry detail. I refused to take the call. Throwing up my arms and retreating to the bedroom, I screamed, "Why do people always call *me*? Why can't they just leave me alone? When do *I* get a life?"

My church leaders and close friends were also too bright for my cover-up. I fooled them for a while, but soon I was "blanking" during sermons and depending entirely on my notes, something I hated.

In addition, I began to forget the names of folks I'd known for years. I was short with people at business meetings, when before I had been playful.

I would do anything to avoid a "get together" or follow up on a guest to our church. My close associates didn't say much at first. But eventually they began to ask probing questions. Realizing that I was not getting better, I finally confided in our church chairperson, one of my closest friends, and explained what was happening.

He wisely insisted that I tell my wife, that the leaders be informed, that the church pay for a second opinion (which eventually confirmed the original diagnosis), and that he and I sit down with our superintendent to ask for help.

Letting others help was pivotal in my healing. To my surprise, most people actually felt closer to me, even energized by the opportunity to help their pastor. While this, I suspect, would not be the case in every congregation, I am confident that many pastors struggling with stress, depression, or burnout would be encouraged by their church's ability and desire to help.

2. A pastor does no one any favors by refusing to accept help. Our leadership was sensitive and understanding. They talked with the doctor they had sent me to and decided to give me six months off (with full pay and a good therapeutic strategy) to recuperate. I was ready to accept their offer, but not without first negotiating it down a bit. Six months away was just too much.

This seemingly "noble" decision to reduce the offered time off was another mistake. I told myself that so much paid time off was unfair to an already struggling church. But really, my primary discomfort was driven by pride. There I was, a man who could hardly make it through a day without going home to hide in his bedroom, too proud to accept the very gift that was the recommended route to recovery.

At my insistence, we settled on a month off, after which I'd work 20 hours per week, finally easing back to full time over the span of two to three months. My leaders and my physician all argued for the original six months, but true to prideful form, I held firm. Now I realize I was wrong and regret the decision. It would have been better for them and me if I had humbly accepted their gift of love.

During that month away, I was able to focus on some of the unbiblical views I had formed about success. I considered their role in my struggle. I experienced wonderful talks with God as I worked in my garden and even took a full week alone to just drive south and be completely spontaneous as the Lord led me along.

I made so much progress, laughing again, sensing hope and value, experiencing occasional peace and the virtual absence of stress, that I was convinced I should get back to work as soon as the month was up.

But thinking you can go back to ministry "part time" when you've been a full-time pastor for so long is pretty unreasonable. It wasn't long before I found myself working six days and most evenings, and slipping back into the dark hole that had previously consumed me.

Once again, I began closing my blinds and locking my office door just in case someone decided to come for a visit or prayer, letting the answering machine take calls I would have otherwise picked up myself. I was retreating again. And fearing that a full-blown depression was returning.

Partly because I was learning to talk about my struggles and partly because I was being assisted by new medications, these "signs that I hadn't yet recovered" did not lead to another complete breakdown. But I clearly returned to ministry too soon and my recovery was much more painful than it needed to be.

3. Assuming that all I need is the Bible is tempting but dangerous. Some pastors resist receiving help that isn't exclusively theological or scriptural in approach. Others are so used to being the ones giving help that they find it difficult to receive any. And of course, some question the ministry of Christian therapy altogether. I was a member of the second and third groups.

"The Scriptures are my therapist," I would say, "and they don't charge me \$100 per hour."

Certainly the Bible contributed much to my recovery. Its comforts were amazing, its instructions and insights incredible. But being forced by my circumstances to ask for help from an able counselor changed my entire outlook. Without that wonderful man's prayer, honest questioning, and practical help, I don't know how long it would have taken me to heal, or if I ever *would* have.

I continue to find strength and guidance from the Word of God. But in it I read about the importance of Christian community in discerning the deep things of the Spirit. In my experience, it was the Bible in partnership with a gifted, discerning therapist that God used to loose me from the hands of this unrelenting monster.

4. Sometimes the objective isn't defeating the depression but simply getting through today for the opportunity to take another step tomorrow. At times, the depression was so strong that I could not imagine that it could ever be defeated. The thought that I would have to live with its poisonous suffocation for the next 20 years only added to its strength over me. Even before I knew that it was a good tactic, I was practicing the discipline of being concerned only for the day I was actually in, not worrying about how dark the days to follow might be.

The script played out as follows: Mornings usually served to remind me that nothing had really changed. I was still choking emotionally and my soul still couldn't breathe. Often I fantasized about how nice it would have been to die. I would need to consider three reasons to stay alive today.

So I would think about the three children I love so much, and the scars they would carry the rest of their lives if I ended mine. Reason number two might be my parents. Wouldn't they be haunted by guilt, wondering what they could have done differently or, worse, whether they might have contributed to the depression in some way? They didn't deserve that.

Most powerfully, I would think of my wife. How could I possibly consider suicide a fair payment for the sweet, selfless loyalty she had offered me all these years?

On other days I would consider different reasons, like the kids in our church who'd question the validity of faith in Christ every time they remembered their pastor who committed suicide. Sometimes those "reasons" were as superficial as wanting to watch the Dodgers game that weekend or that I still hadn't finished the lasagna in the fridge (and Brenda makes great lasagna).

It was too big a leap to think about defeating depression in one stroke. That kind of thinking only tightened its hopeless grip on me. No, my objective was just to get through the day, telling myself, "Tomorrow might be better, and I will never know unless I make sure it is available to me."

At times, I would literally recite: "My objective today is just to stay alive in order to have another chance to chip away at it tomorrow."

5. Depression can be a great teacher. Anyone reading this article while struggling with these things is probably ready to tear it out and toss it right about now. I certainly would have, those 14 years ago.

I can't forget the well-meaning but exquisitely painful platitudes offered by others during those days of depression. The most well-rehearsed was, "Well, God must love you very much and want to do something wonderful in your life to allow you to go through all of this."

It was true, of course, that God loved me. And he had at least *allowed* what I was experiencing. But those platitudes always hurt more than they helped. In fact, they never helped! So I apologize to anyone who is shaken by the assertion that God might want to use things as painful as depression to do good, or that depression can be a "companion" that enriches or helps us in any way.

But, speaking from the other side of the despair, yet aware that another episode could be right around the corner, I can say that God *did* do good things through this "uninvited friend."

Parts of me died through that trial, parts of me that I really liked. For instance, I am off the charts in my "E" (extrovert) score on the Meyers Briggs test. Previously, I could never get enough of people. Even on our honeymoon I said to my new bride, "Okay, it's been great to be alone for a couple of days. Now what do you say we go home early, get a bunch of friends together, and have a party?" (By the way, I recommend that you *not* say this on your honeymoon, or on any romantic excursion.)

During my struggle with depression, I found that I didn't want to be with folks much, if at all. The thought of answering the phone or entertaining a group brought on a "headache in my chest." Even now, I tend to go home before everyone else has left an event. I now consider it as something precious to be alone and quiet for extended periods of time. I still love gatherings and thrive on encounters, but not as much as I used to. Part of that died, and part of it needed to.

But there are new things that God birthed in me as a direct result of this nightmare too. I was humbled by my neediness and my inability to subdue that depression monster. However, the embarrassment and subsequent humiliation made me much more approachable to people.

One neighbor who had recently begun to follow Christ said to me after my return to work, "I've noticed that something has changed in you. You're not nearly so threatening as you used to be. I think I'm ready to get involved in your church now."

And now

A friend of mine, quoting an African American pastor, once said, "If you ain't got no need, your prayers ain't got no suction." I wish I could say that I no longer experience bouts with depression. I can't say that. But I can say that the monster doesn't roam the halls of my life with the lordship it once did.

I can say that I've learned that there's calm on the other side of those bouts, that I'm no longer as afraid of them.

And I can *definitely* say that depression has often been the only thing that could pin my nose to the carpet before the Lord's feet. In reminding me of my need, it gives my prayers suction.

I would never want to go through that experience again. It was as close to hell as I would ever care to wander. Yet this misery has proven to be so strategic in my life as a Christian and a pastor that I would never want to erase it from my history either. So much pain was experienced in the heat of that fire, but still, so much good has been found in the stain of its ashes.

What a mystery? to have something serve as curse and grace, at the same time.

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