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Depression: the "Winter of the Soul"

All the seasons of the human soul have something to teach us of God. We more readily see the fruits of our spring, and summer experiences than those of autumn, and winter.

Depression can be regarded as a 'winter experience', although for some it may last for many years.

Depression and melancholia are common to us all with lesser or greater degrees of intensity, and certainly they are a common experience for those on the Christian journey to God.

I would like to define "depression" here as feelings or emotions of heaviness, oppression, inertia, sadness, that sense of being removed from the reality of existence, coupled to a lack of motivation for life and an overwhelming sense of everything being without meaning.

Depression is bound to 'passage' both of time and relationships.

Depression is invariably linked to loss, and loss brings change.

There are, of course, certain clinical conditions of which depression is a symptom, but even in those cases we have to say that because God has allowed it for that particular person in that particular set of circumstances, God must see it for their greater good

Depression linked to *loss* may be the loss of a loved one, status, a home, a place, a country, loss of possessions, esteem etc, very often it is linked to loss as the 'passage of time', loss of youth, growing old, among other things, and all that such experiences entail.

We like do not like to lose people or things; when we find ourselves in a conducive situation, we like it to stay as it is! We like things to remain as they are..... for life to be, as it were, suspended over happiness and excluding all suffering.

There is, however, as most of us have already learned, no life, no love, without suffering.

When God created man it was God's intention and will that we should abide, remain, in love, remain in that state of permanence with Him and with each other, but we lost this through the fall of Adam and Eve.

This desire, this longing, this wishing things to remain as they are, is deep down in our being a seed, a seed of eternity, that we somehow instinctively feel and desire as permanence in love and being. It is a prefigurement of what we shall be and attain in the presence of God in heaven.

It is the soul reaching upward to God, who alone is unchanging, *it is truly a seed of eternity.*

Depression can also be a great teacher, for God has allowed it, hard as it, is for our greater good.

These experiences can be a pathway to true wisdom, a growing awareness of reality and truth. An awareness of the transitory nature of this earthly life; it is a time for reflection ... a time to allow God to draw our souls to Him. Everything in the divine plan has a purpose, we may well think it is life wasted, as life only half-lived, but through it all God has something to say to our souls that perhaps He can only communicate, and that we will only receive, through suffering, in this case, the suffering of depression.

The beauty and harmony of creation is probably the initial way in which God will allure us and attract us to himself.

When we are young, or were young, our hearts were expanded, and inspired by all that surrounded us, the majesty of the sea, a brilliant sunset, the rolling hills, a blade of grass, a flower ... many of us would associate our growing years with such memories of beauty, and God lured us through it all, to question many things, the purpose and authorship of it all. Much of what we have learned of what is beautiful and good we have learned by observing the created world, and that indeed was Gods purpose in it all.

There was a lesson to learn. and as with so many many things within this earthly pilgrimage, once we have learned, God calls us onwards.

When we grow older we can look back with a degree of nostalgia and tears, to what has passed, to what was ... and wonder "why". Nothing can bring back the splendour in the grass and the glory of the flower"...

It was all part of the journey.....*we have to let go* and pass on to where God would have us be and what He would have us do.

Every single memory, every experience is a preparation for heaven.

It is the same with human relationships. So often in life we are involved with others for a time, they come into our lives and they leave our lives, we have learned and have been grateful for the experience; it all had a value and a place and always taught us something of the Lord.

In marriage one or the other will die, children grow up, leave home, and lead their own lives. But all is for the purpose of our bringing each other to God. This life truly is a pilgrimage and we need to struggle to *look forward to what we shall become in God*, to trust in His promises – for so, so much awaits us!

Loss is a poverty, it is a preparing for heaven, we must lay everything we have down before we can pass this life to the next; all we can take with us is love ...

Some of our greatest thinkers, writers, artists suffered from depression, and in so many cases it was a companion that brought great fruit to their spiritual and creative life.

Depression and loss, yes – but let us focus on *gain*, for by all these experiences we learn, we grow, and as we pass along life's journey and the external world loses its enchantment and attraction, be aware that God is calling you inward, inward on the inner pilgrimage to commune with your soul. We gain so much beauty and wisdom from suffering.

Consider the following:

"As the deer longs for running streams,
so longs my soul
for thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while men say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
These things will I remember

as I pour out my soul;
how I went with the throng
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts of thanksgiving,
and multitude keeping festival.
Why are you so downcast my soul,
and why are you so disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him,
my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me
therefore I remember thee
from the land of Jordan to Mount Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of thy cataracts
all thy waves and billows
have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love;
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God my rock;
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?"
As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
Why are you cast down my soul, O my soul
and why disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall again praise him,
my help my God.

Psalm 42.1 epitomizes much of what we have discussed. The visual imagery of this psalm evokes an immediate response, the deer bounding across the scrubland, lured by the scent of water, knowing that its thirst will be quenched at the pool of water, as we long for God. The psalmist has an aching heart, full of longing, he is a priest in exile. He longs for the invisible God to become a reality, to see his face.

The psalmist is a man of prayer, reflection, nostalgia, a man of tears and subject to depression. A man conscious of the transitory nature of life, lured into memories of things that have passed. But his depression makes him reflect on deeper things.

The cause of his depression is seeming loss: he is in exile from his native land, he experiences himself distant from God, he finds it difficult to raise his heart to God in prayer. But within it all he makes an act of hope and communes with his own soul.

If God has allowed you to know the suffering of depression, know that it will bring you to His face, speak to Him, share everything with your God ... one day you will see clearly that it was all for His purpose and from the very heart of His unutterable love.

A Poor Clare Colettine Nun



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