

COUNSELING THE FAINTHEARTED

John D. Street, D.Min.
Chair, MABC Graduate Program
Professor of Pastoral Counseling
The Master's College

Jesus Christ is the Great Shepherd and Wonderful Counselor. As part of His ministry He came to heal the broken-hearted. Likewise, those who are His shepherds are to minister to the fainthearted. This involves faithful pulpit preaching and one-on-one interaction with those suffering from the effects of a fallen world.

A look at the greatness of our Savior God provides a necessary perspective for biblical help for fainthearted Christians. Isaiah prophesies about the Messiah in Isa 9:6: “For a child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us; and the government will rest upon His shoulders; and His name will be called *Wonderful Counselor*, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” From Isa 11:1, the prophet announces: “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from His roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, *the spirit of counsel* and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” Again, Isaiah describes our Lord in 28:29: “This also comes from the Lord of hosts, *who has made His counsel wonderful* and His wisdom great.” Who can forget that classic passage in Isa 40:10: “Behold the Lord your God will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. *Like a shepherd He will tend His flock*, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes”? No wonder the apostle Peter entreats:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, *shepherd the flock of God among you*, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; not yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when *the Chief Shepherd* appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet 5:1–4).

If you are going to be a pastor who practices caring, loving counsel, you need to be like your Savior. You are not going to just preach from the pulpit. You are going to work with people; you are going to exposit the Word of God on a one-on-one basis and help them with serious problems. Of course, pastoral counseling is more than just confronting sin; you must also be proficient in comforting those who suffer physically and emotionally—those with substantial difficulties like the lonely widow in your congregation who deeply grieves the loss of her beloved husband; the brutalized wife who was beaten, punched, and battered by her drunken husband; the girl in your youth group who was raped by a gang of boys at her school; the Christian man in your church who fears being fired for uncovering dishonest practices in the company; the middle-aged single mom who suffers from severe depression and has to hold down two jobs and raise three teenagers because her husband ran off with another woman; or the Christian couple who fears their unsaved parents will report them to the authorities for spanking their children. These are true-to-life scenarios that will require an undershepherd who is willing to tenderly counsel his flock. As a minister of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, you too will be called upon to shepherd God's people through similar life experiences.

It is precisely here that well-learned theology and biblical languages become most valuable assets as you seek to minister the Word to the downtrodden and fainthearted. I remember when I was in seminary getting really excited about what I was learning in classes, the books I was reading, and papers I was writing. I would come home to my wife and say, "Hey, I've just got to share this with you. Listen to this!" She very patiently listened as I read to her, and at the end of it she would always smile and say, "That is really good, John, but what does that mean in terms of everyday life?" "Uh ... I don't know; let me work on that a little bit." How *does* that change my practical walk with Christ? Good question!

The focus of our study is 1 Thess 5:12–15. Here the apostle Paul mentions the importance of ministry to the "fainthearted":

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

Notice three imperative clauses (verse 14); especially the middle clause, "encourage the fainthearted." Four specific questions will help us understand how we are to fulfill Paul's command toward those who are fainthearted. These questions are: Who are the fainthearted? Who are the counselors? What are the causes? What is the counsel?

Who Are the Fainthearted?

The etymological root idea of the word for “fainthearted” means to be little or puny of soul (*oligopsuchos*), when a person is little-souled or puny-souled. There is something constricting the soul that is causing it to be small. Such a person has only a small amount of room for faith, or trust, and as a result, they lack courage. They lack fortitude of soul. This is a characteristic of a melancholy heart. Historically, what is today typically labeled “depression,” Christians of earlier times referred to as sloth; in the Middle Ages it became called melancholia. “Melancholia, which has been described since antiquity, corresponds to this form. Among some patients there are also manic phases with symptoms opposite to those of depression (the manic–depressives).”¹ The word appears in the New Testament only in 1 Thess 5:14. It is translated “fainthearted” in the NASB, NKJV, ESV, and the NRSV. It is translated “timid” in the NIV, and in the NLT, “discouraged.” So it seems that the more common translation and preferred term is “fainthearted” and understandably so because it has a broader semantic range than the other terms “timid” and “discouraged,” although it includes those latter concepts. The word appears in the Septuagint in both verb and noun form, carrying the nuances of despondent, cross, patient, and exhausted.² It describes the person who has a limited, or a severely limited or diminished, motivation or capacity to achieve a particular goal. Now that diminished motivation can be caused by fear; it could be caused by overwhelming grief due to a loss, significant despondency or depression. Augustine believed such a fainthearted person needed careful care and understanding even though the source of his problem was not biological (i.e. nature) but personal sin. He clarifies, “It is therefore not nature, but vice; and therefore it is said to the good who are growing in grace, and living in this pilgrimage by faith, ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.’ In like manner it is said elsewhere, ‘Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.’”³ A small-souled Christian will give up easily because they have a severely limited capacity to handle the hardships of life and will need the careful, caring help of another believer.

The three descriptions of people in verse 14 (“unruly,” “fainthearted,” “weak”) should not be thought of as merely categorizing three distinct types of people. A more comprehensive and potentially helpful analysis views this text as

¹ Günter Hole, “Depression,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, eds., Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milič, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Lukas Vischer (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999), 1:809.

² It is used in the LXX translation of Proverbs 14:29 to express the Hebrew “short of spirit.” Other LXX references are Proverbs 18:14; Isaiah 25:5; 35:4; 54:6; 57:15.

³ Augustine, *The City of God* 15.6, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series. ed. Phillip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2:287.

descriptive of one of three possible ways any one individual can be at any particular time in their life. At one point a person can be unruly, at another fainthearted, another weak. During the counseling process there are points at which your counselee will need admonition if they are unruly; they may need encouragement if they are fainthearted; sometimes they will need help if they are weak. So to be a good counselor you must do more than exegete the Scripture well; you have to exegete people well. You must be wise with people, understanding where they are coming from. That was one of the areas that I was most weak in when I graduated from seminary. I think that I was fairly well trained in biblical languages and theology and historical theology. But when it came to working with people with real problems I was sorely deficient.

The term that is used for “fainthearted” is a general term that resists the narrow definition of modern psychiatric labels,⁴ but it does describe a person with a low motivation in fulfilling certain God-given responsibilities due to laziness or fear. That is the reason some Bible versions translate this word as “timid.” “The word translated *timid* not only refers to those who are nervous in personal contacts, but to people who are easily frightened.”⁵ For example, a Christian wife may say to you, “I don’t want to go home to my husband. He is so angry with me all the time!” You may have a man in your congregation say, “I don’t want to be married to her any longer. She is such a controlling and critical person. I am tired of it! Do you realize what I have to put up with?”

Little-souled Christians lack motivation to move forward. It is much like training your child to ride a two-wheeled bike. The child is really afraid to ride without training wheels, or without you holding onto the back of the bike. Such a person is fainthearted. They are tentative. They are fearful. They find it hard to move forward because there is not a lot of room in their soul to trust God, not a lot of room for faith. Further, this person feels or even fears that their physical resources are insufficient to complete the task or face the trouble, which in and of itself from a theological standpoint is a lie that they believe. Because of this false assumption, their reluctance forces them to play it safe and sometimes to actually withdraw into a protective shell. They don’t want to take any risks. They believe that if they did, there would be a miserable consequence and they are not willing to risk that. They are timid or fainthearted. This could also include people who may have lost heart, are discouraged, despondent, depressed, fearful, anxious, and cowardly. Maybe they have already suffered

⁴ American Psychiatric Association classification of mood and anxiety disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*: “Major Depressive Disorder,” “Dysthymic Disorder,” also “Depressive Disorder Not Otherwise Specified,” “Bipolar I Disorder,” “Bipolar II Disorder,” “Cyclothymic Disorder,” “Postpartum Onset,” “Anxiety disorders such as “Panic Attacks,” “Agoraphobia,” “Social Phobia,” “Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder,” “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” “Acute Stress Disorder,” “Generalized Anxiety Disorder,” etc. (American Psychiatric Publishers, 2000).

⁵ Paul Ellingworth and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians*, Helps for Translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 119.

some type of physical or emotional pain or a loss for a sustained period of time that has resulted in some kind of physiological downturn of severe depression or despondency.

Such faintheartedness and spiritual weakness may grow out of tragedy such as is found in this following true account. A missionary's wife, while living with her family in Brazil, was backing her car from the garage to go run errands. The family's house was situated on a hill and the front yard of that house sloped right down onto the driveway. Unbeknownst to her, their two-year-old toddler had escaped the house and slipped down the slope onto the driveway. The child was crushed under the wheels of the car and died instantly. After a tragedy like that, the trauma and grief are so severe that it is rare when the marriage survives, even among Christian couples. There does not seem to be much motivation to go on. And that is what it is like to be a fainthearted person.

Who Are the Counselors?

Who are the ones called to help? Observing the text will answer this question. First of all, this admonition is directed to the brethren (plural), indicating the Christians in the church at Thessalonica. He is not referring to the pastors; he is not referring to the elders in the church at this particular point. He is referring to the general congregation. This is an appeal to all the believers. "This pastoral responsibility is not placed solely in the hands of the leadership but delegated to all the members of the church. Although the leaders played an important role within the congregation (v. 12), the task of maintaining the well-being of the Christian community did not fall to them exclusively. The members of the church shared a mutual responsibility to help one another for their building up in the faith (cf. 5.11; Eph 4.16). The type of help extended to others was to respond to the particular needs of each."⁶ The spiritual help and encouragement of counseling was not intended to be some kind of specialized clinical practice with certain more educated members in the early church;⁷ it was to be a part of the very fabric of the fellowship that occurred among the people of God as they ministered the Word of God to one another. Christians were supposed to use their theology to help one another; the very pinnacle of helping one another has to do with practical theology.

Second, this congregation was composed of a large number of God-fearing Greeks: a number of leading women (Acts 17:4), probably upper-class

⁶ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 252.

⁷ Contemporary clinical practices in the church have produced a certain Gnostic mentality among modern Christians. It is a mentality that believes that only people who have advanced academic degrees in psychotherapy are qualified to work with hurting Christians. This was not the belief or practice of the early church.

men and their wives, the wives of leaders, and many who turned from their idols to serve the living and true God. The apostle Paul admonishes each of them to practice caring counsel with one another.

Third, notice that in the immediate preceding verses 12 and 13, the apostle discussed how the congregation should support the pastors as they worked hard to minister among them. So it is very obvious that within the context that it was the elders and pastors who would set the example of care and then turn around and train the congregation how to be more effective in providing this kind of help. In verse 14, the apostle admonishes them how they should be treating one another including the idea of encouraging one another.

Here are three counseling considerations:

First, it is clear from verses 12 and 13 that the leaders must be foremost in instruction and admonishment because the oversight had been given in ministering to the congregation. Paul actually admonishes the congregation to follow them, to imitate what they do, to esteem them highly because they bring the Word of God to them.

Second, his oversight includes the public (pulpit) ministry of the word, but it also includes the private or personal (counseling) ministry of the Word because this is exactly the tone the apostle Paul set throughout his ministry. Acts 17 provides some of the context and background of 1 Thessalonians, but just a few chapters later in Acts 20 Paul speaks to the elders at Ephesus. This is his farewell address to them, and it is a tearful farewell because he had built such an intimate relationship with them on an individual level. Paul reminds them in verse 20, "How did I not shrink from declaring anything that was profitable, and teaching you publically [public ministry of Word] and from house to house [private ministry of Word]." In verse 31 he says, "Remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears." So his ministry of the Word of God was not just a pulpit ministry; it was a private ministry of the Word of God. To each one of them he ministered the gospel and the Word, and he did so with tears. He was vitally involved in their individual lives, sometimes admonishing, sometimes encouraging, sometimes helping. He is essentially admonishing the elders at Ephesus, "Hey, follow my lead, imitate what I did in the ministry because I am not coming back, this is the last time you are going to see me on this earth. Since I am not coming back, what should you do with the church? You can't rely upon me any longer, so you as elders need to do as I did among the flock." Paul makes a strong statement that will become a key to the future ministry of the church. In much the same way, Paul wants the Thessalonians to follow his example of both the public ministry and the private ministry of the Word of God. The public preaching ministry is vital to the congregation's spiritual growth and strength, with consistent, solid exposition that admonishes the congregation. But also there needs to be a private exposition of God's Word where individual people who are struggling are helped. Paul did so with tears, which is very consistent with what he wrote to the church at Rome in Romans 12, "Rejoice with those who rejoice

and mourn with those who mourn.” As people we have the capacity to be able to do that with television programs, theatrical presentations, and books.

When is the last time you saw a theatrical presentation or read a book and were overjoyed with what you read or with what you saw, and it brought you to tears? In seminary several years ago, I read through *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, and the tears just flowed for what Christians have gone through for their faith in Jesus Christ. We have the capacity to do that with books and we have the capacity to do it with others. Clearly, Christians are supposed to do that with one another. Paul says night and day I “admonished” (*noutheton*) you, each one of you with tears. You will know that you are ministering the Word personally when their sorrows bring you to tears, when their joys bring you to rejoice. You will know you are living where they are. So did Paul.

This brings us to a third counseling observation. The responsibility to counsel the fainthearted is not limited to pastors or overseers. Paul admonishes the entire congregation to minister this way to one another. “It is noteworthy that Paul here urges the church in general (note the repetition of “brothers” in v. 14) and not just the leaders to care for the rest of the congregation.”⁸ The overseers are to set the example for the flock. “The office of the Presbyters was to watch over the particular church in which they ministered, in all that regarded its external order and internal purity; they were to instruct the ignorant, to exhort the faithful, to confute the gainsayers, to ‘warn the unruly, to comfort the feeble-minded, to support the weak, to be patient towards all.’”⁹ In like manner, the church was to follow their leadership. The question is: What is your congregation going to see from you and your ministry of the Word of God? Will it be from the pulpit alone? Furthermore, the teaching ministry of the pastor is not simply limited to helping people with personal and interpersonal problems, but includes training *them to help others* with personal and interpersonal problems in the congregation while using the Word of God. Your job is not just to do the counseling. You are not the hired hit man of the congregation who is supposed to handle all the counseling. Rather you must set the example by counseling *and* teaching them to do the same. You must train them with one another. I always felt that as a pastor I was trying to work myself out of a counseling job. In fact, in the last few years, within the church I was rarely counseling. We had so many well-trained people working with difficult counseling problems that we would have numerous Sunday school classrooms full of people counseling. They were all members of the congregation counseling with each other and sometimes helping with those outside of the church. They saved the most difficult counseling situations for me. But even then I had some of our elders observe those tough cases so that they would gain

⁸ I Howard Marshall, “1 Thessalonians,” in *New Bible Commentary*, eds. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, G. J. Wenham, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1284.

⁹ William John Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul.*, new ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 1:511–12.

insight into handling the Word of God with people who were hurting. So I eventually got to the point where I worked myself out of a counseling job.

What Are the Causes?

Let us make some textual conclusions about what caused Paul's original admonition. He wrote to encourage those being persecuted, especially by the local Jews (Acts 17). In fact, Acts 16:6–18:5 gives the whole background of the founding of the church of Thessalonica. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke were a part of that missionary party that first preached the gospel there. They preached in the synagogue and several converts came to Christ, including a man named Jason. Later they were welcomed into Jason's home. There was also a man by the name of Spartacus who subsequently traveled with Paul and was jailed with him. All of these were converts that occurred in this particular encounter of the establishment of the church in Thessalonica. But their biggest response came from the fringe of Gentile God-fearers who attended the synagogue. They were the most numerous converts. It appears Gentile God-fearers made up the majority of the congregation. They knew the God of Israel, but they did not come face to face with the Messiah of Israel until Paul and his companions came along, and only then did they bow their knee and repent to Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Furthermore, this church needed to be warned about moral purity and not yielding to sexual immorality since a large number were converted out of a sensual Gentile background. This church was mostly comprised of former pagans. Another important factor was the brevity of the missionaries' first visit. They had to cut their visit short because there were a number of Jewish militants that rose up in Thessalonica who drove Paul and his team out of town. Consequently, their instruction on living a pure Christian life was incomplete. Paul wrote First Thessalonians to supplement what they had been taught.

Thirdly, they had to be admonished to not give up their care for one another or in attending to their own business and living a peaceable life. It is obvious when you read 4:9–12 and the proceeding text. Paul and his missionary companions did not have sufficient time to model how they should care for one another. So he details his instructions for one-on-one care in this epistle.

Fourth, the flock needed hope because some of them had died and those who remained were confused about the return of Jesus Christ. Paul proceeds to discuss this in 4:13–18. It is clear that not only was there persecution coming from outside the church, but there is a hint in 5:15 that there were some tempted to do evil against other members of the flock. We get a clear picture of a church with internal troubles. As a result, some of the members were fearful and this was not just due to persecution outside the church, but there seemed to be some who desired to do evil to others within the church. So what we can learn from this historical context that will help Christians minister to hurting Christians?

First of all, relentless physical suffering and persecution can be a real cause for despondency, fear, and depression. We are blessed that we live in a

society and culture that is tolerant of our Christian worship. This may not always be the case. But there are still individuals in our church who are suffering under the heavy handedness of others—senior abuse, spousal abuse, child abuse, employee abuse, and more. They are all in that broad category, fainthearted or timid. It is important for you as a pastor to be aware and be ready to help those kinds of people.

Second, under the constant pressure of sexual temptation, a Christian may feel weak, powerless, and discouraged with low resistance. Persistent sexual temptation can wear a person down to the point that they no longer have any motivation to resist. So Paul encourages them that God is at work in terms of their sanctification. He is using this temptation so that they will grow strong in their walk of holiness. They, too, can be weak and fainthearted. They are afraid they cannot refuse the nagging lust of sexual temptation.

Third, it is possible for some Christians to experience paralyzing guilt when they have not fulfilled their own responsibilities but instead have meddled in the affairs of others and have actually done other Christians harm. Maybe they have even harmed another in their congregation. There are going to be people in your ministry who have never dealt properly with unresolved guilt. They are full of regret and it prevents them from moving forward in their Christian life. You have to be ready to identify them and assist them.

Fourth, grief over the loss of a loved one can cause great despondency and a “what’s the use” type of attitude concerning life and its future. One of the professors at The Master’s Seminary has written a wonderful book on hope. Nathan Busenitz’s *Living a Life of Hope* is tremendous help to those who hurt from loss.¹⁰ I use it all the time in counseling grief and general hopelessness. Part of the ministry of hope is seen in the promise of the second coming of Christ. Paul instructs the Christians at Thessalonica that they need to encourage one another with this news. Hopeless grief is an extremely powerful emotion that will rob people of the desire to go on. Fainthearted people need comfort.

And then there are those who feel powerless and fearful dealing with a person who has violated their trust. These are people in positions of authority who have grievously abused others. This seems to have been true of influential synagogue officials in Thessalonica who wanted to persecute the church and drive it out of existence. In other cases it could have been powerful people within the church itself. When a person in authority has violated the trust of another by abusing them that is the vilest kind of evil! That is when senior abuse occurs, or spousal abuse, or even child abuse. In Dante Alighieri’s epic poem, *Divine Comedy*, the first cantica, *Inferno*, Dante describes a medieval version of hell with nine concentric circles. It is not a biblical description. But it is interesting to note that the one of the darkest centers of hell is reserved for

¹⁰ Nathan Busenitz, *Living a Life of Hope: Stay Focused on What Really Matters* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2003).

those who have betrayed trust. They have abused others who had trusted them. The darkest part of hell is reserved for them. The darkest, hottest center of hell is for those who were placed in positions of authority over other people but betrayed that trust. This shows how seriously even medieval people took the issue of the misuse of authority. From a biblical perspective, you can see a similar outcry in Scripture against those who abuse and neglect widows and orphans. Judgment awaits those who have the power and ability to help such ones as these, and yet are found guilty of violating the trust of these helpless ones. Strong judgment is against these leaders (cf. Zech 7:8–14). As a pastor it is critical to be prepared to minister to those whose trust has been betrayed—to those weakened by the evil done to them within the church. Christians need to assist one another when serious trust has been violated. This is a job the church must take more seriously.

What is the Counsel?

Ministry to the fainthearted should come in the form of encouraging, cheering up, refreshing up, and consoling them with the Word and the gospel. *Paramathuomi* is the term that is used here in 1 Thess 5:14, and it carries the idea to cheer up, to refresh, to console. It really has a very broad semantic range as well. It involves giving another person motivation to move on, to fulfill a goal. In fact it is used in John 11:19 and 31 as well to speak of the Jews who sought to comfort Mary and Martha after the death of their brother. So it is obvious in the first century that this particular term is used to speak of those who are especially grieving. You will encounter this many, many times in your ministry as you stand by the bed of a loved one in your church who is slipping into eternity. You will have the distinct privilege to walk them into heaven—that is a good thing. But then you have to help the family, friends, and extended relatives that are present, grieving their loss. That is our word—*paramathomi*. In 1 Thess 2:11 this word describes the Apostle Paul as one exhorting, encouraging, and imploring. In other words, Paul set himself as an example to follow in terms of this encouragement for the elders and the members of the church. In essence he said, “I did this when I was among you. It’s up to you do the same thing.” A very practical meaning of this term is to come close to someone’s side and speak in a friendly manner; to speak in a way to come around someone to do what ought to be done, to encourage them, to strengthen them, to comfort them. This is what the believers should have been doing in terms of fulfilling their responsibility that they currently had very little motivation to do. Paul was encouraging them to be faithful, to get back in the fight, to not withdraw. They were to trust Christ even more. And this is what you will do as well—encourage faithfulness and help the down-trodden.

Counseling Conclusions

When a member is experiencing severe grief or depression they will describe themselves as numb and without feeling. They do not feel anything that would be sufficient to motivate them to do anything worthwhile. In other words, they are describing the fact that their soul feels dead. I know some of men have talked with me about their own lives—talked about the struggles they had with depression in the past. They feel totally numb. Their soul feels dead, lifeless. Robert Burton describes it this way in the 1600s: If there is a hell upon the earth it is to be found in a melancholy heart. That is a good description. If there is a hell on earth it is to be found in a depressed heart. Fainthearted people will often be fearful, and there will be an aura of hopelessness. They will try to convince you that there is no hope in trying to help them. Charles Spurgeon recounted after one of his bouts of depression: “I could weep by the hour like a child and yet I knew not what I wept for.” Here is a man of deep passion and feeling. He struggled with depression many times in his ministry. If you take a further look into church history, some of the greatest men of church history struggled. If you read Augustine you will see the difficulties that he went through. Fast forward to Luther and you will read about his struggles and the despondency that overcame him. One time as he sat in a dark room his wife came in dressed in mourning clothes, a black veil and a black dress. He turned around and said to her, “Who died?” And she said, “You haven’t heard?” He said, “No, who died?” She said, “God did.” He said, “God didn’t die!” And his wife said to him, “You are acting like He did.” What a great wife!

I want to suggest to you that if those great men of God had psychotropic drugs in their times, we wouldn’t even know who they were today. Why? Because I think some of those men had to go through those dark, dark times and deep valleys of ministry in order to understand the provision and help of Christ. Then they could talk about it with passion! Instead of numbing themselves with psychotropic drugs, they were able to feel the deep waters of a troubled soul, and then turn around and minister God’s Word with new insight and encouragement. We wouldn’t even know those great men of the faith. It is obvious that Spurgeon was a great man of faith in Christ, and yet there were valleys in his life where he experienced smallness of soul.

The question always comes up: “How do you know if this problem is biological? How do you know?” Maybe there is a physiological problem going on that really caused this. I am compelled to address this question here because it always comes up in my classes. If you are working with someone in your congregation who persists in depression, you need to counsel them to have a medical checkup. They may need a checkup for these reasons: if there is rapid onset of severe or fearful panics of depression, then they need a medical checkup. If there is a lack of significant loss or traumatic event and yet they are still slipping into smallness of soul. If there is extreme fluctuation of emotion—when moodiness, fear or depression is not typical, and yet the complaints persist. If there are sensory accusatory hallucinations or inexplicable delusions.

If the person is of advanced age, or perhaps there is consistency in trying to follow a biblical lifestyle but symptoms still persist. If there is a use of prescription or over-the-counter drugs that have depressive side effects, then this person needs to see a medical doctor. Not a psychiatrist—a medical doctor. The real problems, not supposed psychological problems, need to be treated.

The Grace of the Gospel

Strengthen the fainthearted in the faith by recalling the grace of the gospel that both saves and sustains the Christian through the worst of times. It is the gospel that *both saves them and sustains them*. When you have people living at the foot of the cross they are able to look up and remember the Savior hanging there, and they say to themselves, “I should be hanging there but I am not.” This changes their whole perspective on life, no matter what it is they are going through.

The Mercy and Love of Christ

Show them the mercy and the love of Christ and as you do, seek to understand their suffering and pain. Paul did that and he was able to do that with tears. Encourage their faith with the sovereign care of the Lord for His people. Paul does that again in 1 Thess 4:13–18. In fact he talks about the second coming in vivid terms and in verse 18 he entreats them to comfort one another with those words. And in 5:11 he further appeals to them to “encourage one another and build one another up just as you are always doing.” So, men, encourage their faith in the sovereign care of our Lord for His people. He will come again, and He will set every injustice right, every one.

Persevere in Your Pastoral Care

You must not give up on the fainthearted. I implore you, as Paul did, to persevere in your pastoral care. Be patient with everyone (5:14). One pastoral counselor said this, “The typical pattern for those who help is that they begin with the spurt of loving and encouraging energy almost as if their enthusiasm and comfort will revive the person who is depressed; but when they see that their words and deeds go underappreciated or at least are ineffective, they begin to back away.” Sometimes those who try to comfort others notice that the depression becomes contagious. They begin to feel depressed after spending the afternoon with the fainthearted! Paul no doubt experienced some of that in his ministry, because he charged the believers to be patient with everybody, and especially the fainthearted who try to convince you there is no hope. And it’s not true! Praise God—there is help for the fainthearted!