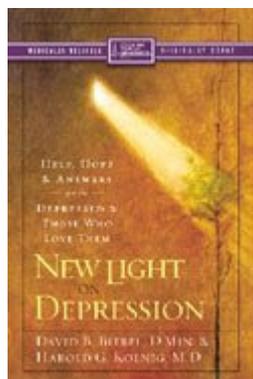


Review: New Light on Depression



I was trying to think of a short phrase that would describe David Biebel and Harold Koenig's book *New Light on Depression*. It's an overview, an introduction, but also a bit of a broad "howto." Perhaps "Depression 101" would be an adequate description.

I read the book as one who has known depression (albeit not severe) and has in the past been stalked by what Winston Churchill referred to as his "black dog." I have been close to others in my family and friends who have battled more greatly than I have ever had to do. And so my measure for this book, which claims the Christian Medical Association's motto of "medically reliable, biblically sound" was to ask two questions – Does this book engage with my own experience of depression? and Does it do it helpfully?

The answer to both questions is "yes." The book is split into three sections – the first part, broadly speaking, unpacks what depression looks like and the second part unpacks in broad terms various ways in which depression can be treated. These first two parts interact with my two questions well.

In terms of the first question – engagement with the reality of depression – the book is more than factual – it has deliberately arranged anecdotes, stories and examples. In my experience a depressed person (or their loved one) often has an "epiphany" moment when they come to the realisation that they are depressed and *know* it in themselves, rather than just being told by outsiders. (In fact without such an epiphany finding a path in and through depression is extremely

difficult). I can imagine this book providing such an epiphany – the “How do they know what I’m thinking? They are talking about me” moment.

In terms of the second question – helpfulness – this book is simply a useful but helpful introduction. The subtitle suggests that the book contains “Help, Hope & Answers” – I would agree with the first two, but not necessarily the last. There are *some* answers for sure – the broad brushstrokes of various types of counselling and the various forms of antidepressant are useful bits of information. But I think the helpfulness lies in the fact that this book would help someone to start asking the right questions, and so to seek help more deliberately.

The *third* part of the book made this book distinctly *Christian* and was the part that I, standing on the other side of depression in the present, appreciated the most. It is the most “theological” of the book’s parts. Of particular meaning for me was the chapter entitled “Faith: Acknowledging God’s Gift” where there is an excellent unpacking of how God’s grace can be found even in the valley of the shadow of death.

“We do not mean to say that the psychic pain of depression feels good (that would be masochism) or that this pain is even good in itself. What we want to affirm is that in the lives of God’s children, his grace can transform even the most abject pain into good because he is greater than and his love for us stronger than anything the Evil One sends our way. Satan’s objective is our demise – spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and physically. God’s primary objective is our growth toward Christlikeness.” (pp257-258)

They quote a colleague, Stephen Mory – “Depression is an opportunity for grace unlike any other. I wish no one ever had to experience its peculiar power to devastate body, soul, and spirit. The person who has experienced the blackest depths of depression knows the cold power of death and fear

that descends on the one who is still living but seems as though dead. He cries out like Paul, 'What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?' (Rom 7:24) The answer is in the next verse, 'Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.' In other words, 'I have already been rescued.' Depressed people know Christ as their deliverer, and rejoice in his coming more than most Christians because they know that no one else could have rescued them from that overwhelming darkness." (pp264-265)

And finally, "...to equate something evil with the good that God can bring from it is to confuse cause and effect. Something very difficult may be the occasion for growth, and this is good, but the pivotal truth is that the grace of God is so powerful that he can transform even our suffering into something that advances his kingdom purposes in our pain-filled world." (p265)

This book is an overview and an introduction. It will shed light, clear away some fog, and maybe lead to an epiphany that starts a healing road. If you are a friend or have a loved one who you think is depressed I wouldn't recommend sticking it in the face of the one for whom you are concerned unless they are genuinely beginning to recognise a problem and are beginning to seek for handles to hold on to. Rather, read the book yourself, it has wisdom and advice – and pray and proceed with wisdom. Pave the way and use this book with love and gentleness.

[Update: An edited version of this review was published in the June 2008 edition of the *Tasmanian Anglican*]

