



Your Body and Depression

Did you know that the Bible records the stories of people who loved God but also experienced the darkness of depression? One of these people was the prophet, Elijah. You can read about his experience of darkness in 1 Kings 18.

Elijah was a prophet who made up his mind that he was going to serve Yahweh instead of false gods, like Baal. In doing so, he was taking a stand to be distinctly different from most of the people around him. Many of his fellow Israelites had turned away from God, caving to the culture by worshipping the popular gods of neighboring pagan nations.

But Elijah wasn't content to just serve the one true God *personally*, he wanted his fellow Israelites to turn back to God and give Him the worship He alone deserves. And so, Elijah called for a showdown between the prophets of Baal (and their false god) and himself (and the true God of Israel). **Location:** the top of Mt. Carmel. **The test:** the true God would reveal Himself by setting His altar on fire and accepting the sacrifice offered by His worshippers. Even if you already know this famous Old Testament account, take some time to read about it in 1 Kings 18:17-40 and answer the questions that follow.

- Who showed himself to be the one, true God? Baal or the God of Israel?¹
- What extra actions did Elijah take to make it an ever more difficult test for the God of Israel?
- What specific actions did God take to demonstrate that He alone is the one, true God?

Not everyone was happy with the outcome of this showdown—especially Queen Jezebel (the wife of King Ahab, one of the most wicked kings in Israel's history), who was furious that Elijah sentenced the false prophets of Baal to death.² As a faithful worshiper of Baal herself, Jezebel counted these false prophets as her own special priests. Jezebel made her own death threat on Elijah's life. To escape the queen's wrath, Elijah ran over 120 miles to find a good hiding place! The Bible tells us how Elijah felt at the end of this journey. Write down what you notice about Elijah's condition in 1 Kings 18:46-19:8.

¹ Whenever the Bible uses all capital letters for the name *LORD*, it refers to God's special, covenant name: *Yahweh*.

² Elijah commanded that the false prophets be put to death out of obedience to God's law (Exodus 22:20).

From reading about his difficult circumstances and his physical condition in this passage, what emotions do you think Elijah might have experienced? What relationship do you think his emotions have to his physical condition?

What do these verses teach you about how God knew about and cared for Elijah's physical needs?

Under-emphasis on the body

The Bible clearly teaches that people have both an outer man (body) and an inner man (soul). Our bodies and our souls are distinct from one another, yet woven together in a complex way (Genesis 2:7, Job 34:14-15, Matthew 10:28). As a believer, you might be tempted to focus only on your soul to the neglect of your physical body. For example, perhaps you get sick with the flu and suffer for several days with headaches, fever, and body chills. Your schedule for the week changes drastically as you lay in bed with the curtains closed and the lights off, just trying to get through the worst of it. Along with sickness often comes sadness. At a low time like this, you might be tempted to focus only on your inner person, asking questions like: *"Why am I sad; is there something that I am doing wrong?" "Am I doubting God?" "Am I sinning?" "What is going on in my heart?"* These are all great questions to ask (and we should ask these types of questions from time to time), but what if what you most need in a time of physical weakness is simply what Elijah needed? What if your body just needs to recover?

Surely, depression can stem from disobedience to God, but there are times when our body influences our minds and emotions, and simply caring for our body can provide significant help in lifting the darkness. Has this ever been the case for you during a battle with illness? As your health progresses, the darkness lifts, and you can jump back in to serving God with the renewed strength and energy.

When fighting darkness, make sure that you take inventory of your physical needs. Ask yourself: Am I neglecting my body? How can I better care for my body? Use the chart at the end of this growth study to answer the two questions below:

List ways you may be neglecting your body:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

List ways you can better care for your body:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Over-emphasis on the body

God cares about our physical bodies, and we should too. There is, however, a hyper-fixation on the body in our world today. You may hear phrases like “It’s a chemical reaction”, or “It may be because your gut is out of balance”, or “It may be because you have a bad diet.” In our culture's evolutionary worldview, we have reduced everything down to our biology, so much so that we believe everything that is happening in our body directly determines our thoughts and our actions.

There are many teenagers who are in great shape. They watch their diet, they exercise, they spend time outside, and yet, they silently suffer with mental distress. This is because their pain is ultimately an issue with their inner, immaterial person and not their body. Many focus solely on their bodies while, all along, the ruling desires, false hopes, and lusts of their heart are wreaking havoc on their minds and in their lives. According to Jesus, our inner person is the driving force for our behavior, and not our body (Matthew 15:19-20).

To make caring for the body a priority over the guarding of your heart is an imbalance that you must watch out for. An overemphasis on the body leads to false hope and real despair. False hope in that you may begin to think if you can just take care of your body, everything will be ok, when in reality, all people fail to live up to that standard. Our hope was never meant to rest in the condition of our physical bodies. It leads to real despair in that if you fail to care for your body (which you will at some point), you may believe your failure is the cause for the darkness you are experiencing. Overemphasis on the care of the body steers you toward ungodly perfectionism and shame whenever you don’t live up to the impossible standards that you have set for your own physical health. The truth is that physical training has some value in the here and now, but godliness has eternal value (1 Timothy 4:8). So, what is a proper emphasis on bodily care in the Christian life?

Proper emphasis on the body

1. Proper Motivations

Write **1 Corinthians 10:31** in the space below; then answer the following questions.

- What does this verse tell us should be our motivation for caring for our bodies?
- What dangerous outcomes might result from taking care of your body *just* so that you can stop feeling sad?

2. Proper Priorities

Read **Proverbs 4:20-27**.

- What do these verses highlight as the most important part of our make-up as individuals?

- Verse 23 serves as the central verse (and the main point) of this passage. What reason does it give for guarding your heart?

Read **Luke 6:43-45**.

- Where does Jesus say good and evil come from?

From just these few verses, we begin to see the importance God places on our hearts. If this is God's priority for us, then we need to learn to guard our hearts from evil and to focus on the renewal of our minds through God's Word. This is the greatest responsibility you have as a believer. As you read, study, memorize, meditate on, and personally apply God's Word to your life, He works to create true, lasting whole-hearted change—change that transforms your heart, mind, and actions (2 Corinthians 3:18).³

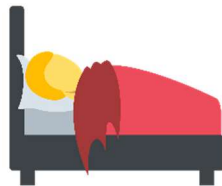
Focus first on your inner person (godliness in your heart), and secondly on your outer person (stewarding your body)—for both His glory and your good. By God's grace, what one small habit will you commit to begin practicing to better care for your soul? By God's grace, what one small habit will you commit to begin practicing to better care for your body? Write your plan in the space below:

- *My Soul:*

- *My Body:*

³ The "My Tree (Darkness)" personal growth study is a great place to begin focusing on guarding your heart (see <https://lifelineforteens.com/book/help-im-in-darkness/>).

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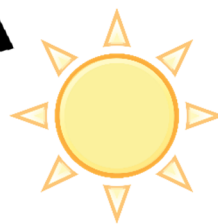
A variety of the symptoms of depression can be connected to a lack of sleep or oversleeping. Aim to consistently get 8-10 hours of sleep every night.



Exercise has been shown to be more effective in fighting depression than both antidepressant medication and secular therapy. If you haven't already started this healthy habit, talk to a trusted adult about slowly building an exercise routine to care for your body and fight darkness. (And ask a friend to join you!)



While there is no scientific evidence that an organic illness is the *cause* of depression, depression can be *connected* to a variety of bodily problems such as thyroid disease, weight changes, viruses, lack of sleep/oversleeping, etc. Consider speaking to a trusted adult about getting a thorough medical check-up.



As opposed to being isolated inside, getting outside can lift your darkness as you gaze upon God's glorious creation (Psalm 19:1).



Eating healthy to the glory of God may also help lift your darkness (1 Corinthians 10:31). Consider talking to a trusted adult about creating healthy eating habits with the right balance of vitamins and other important nutrients to support your physical health.

