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Presentation Transcript
Mental Health and the Bible – Making a Difference
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An American walked out on the balcony of his luxurious beachfront hotel on the Baja Pacific coast early one morning. It was a glorious day and he was on vacation. As he surveyed the endless beach from his elevated vantage point, way down the deserted beach he saw a gleaming white speck. He couldn't make out what it was, but he was curious. He went back to his room, put on his beach attire and began walking toward the white speck. Great day for a walk! As he started his walk, he noticed that a number of the starfish had washed up on the beach during high tide, and now they were drying out in the morning sun. The further he walked, the more starfish he saw, until the number of them seemed innumerable. As he got closer to what had once seemed like a white speck, he saw that it was a person, dressed in white. This person was doing something active on the beach. As he drew closer, he saw that it was a man. He was picking up starfish and throwing them back in the sea. When the American finally approached the man, he saw that he was an elderly Mexican man with white clothes and a sombrero. He spoke to the man, and asked, "Sir, why are you throwing the starfish in the sea?" And the elderly man looked at him, and smiled, and he explained, "I'm throwing them back so that they will live. If they stay here for long, they will die from the heat of the sun." And the American man said, "Well, that's admirable, sir, but there are so many. You can't throw them *all* in. In the end, your efforts will not make any real difference." The old Mexican man looked at the American and smiled. Then he slowly picked up one of the starfish and tossed it into the surf. "Señor," he said, "I made a difference for that one."

I'm sure most listeners have heard this old fable before. There are many lessons we can learn from this story. One might be, that no one can make a difference for everybody, but that anyone can make a difference for a few. Another might be, that helping one at a time is a good thing, instead of useless effort. Still another might be, that organizing a morning beach party and starfish rescue is a good thing, but only if there are people who are willing to pick up starfish one at a time and throw them back in the sea. And we could go on. But what I want to do with this story is something else.

This is a presentation about how to overcome depression. And what do starfish have to do with that? Let's put it in context to see. What is depression? Well, depression is a lot about loss – the loss of a life mate, a job, the loss of status, a loss of the sense of safety. When people feel afraid, it's usually because they have PTSD.

A woman came to my office one day. She told me she was terribly depressed. She was 65. She was latino. She was Catholic. And she was a widow. Her husband had died a year before. He'd been sick for a long time. She had not been able to shake the grief after his death. She and her husband had been close and happy together. Losing him was a huge loss for her.

Now, when something like this happens, we tend to draw in. Our focus goes toward ourselves. We have so many things to think about. Who's going to fix the roof now? How am I to adjust to cooking for one? Who will comfort me in my sadness? Who will keep me warm at night? How will I ever keep the yard clean without his help? What happens if I get sick and there's no one to take care of me? It can seem overwhelming. And some of these questions don't have easy answers.

Now, all living organisms, when they're in peril, or feel some sense of serious change or loss, do the same thing. Those starfish on the beach, when out of the water and in the harsh sun, were drawing in – closing their pores – and saving as much moisture as they could. All focus was on survival of self. All organisms are designed to do this by God. So there, of necessity, self-centered thoughts when we go through a period of loss. It's not wrong to think this way. Sometimes, it's necessary. But how are we going to adapt to the changes that life has forced on us? Sometimes we get stuck in that kind of thinking, and focus on our losses and on ourselves, and we're not able to adapt to what's happened to us – to think adaptively about our situation. Instead, we go numb. When we repress our feelings, all feelings are repressed, not just the negative ones. And when that happens, we stop trying to adapt. And that's called depression. That's when the, "What's the use?" attitude sets in and life seems unbearable.

Well, I want to remind you of a man named M. Scott Peck. He was a Christian and a psychologist. He wrote a book, called *The Road Less Traveled*. Six million copies of that book sold – an incredible feat, really. Nobody buys books about psychology. There was something different about his book. Here is the first paragraph – his first sentences of this book start with:

Life is difficult. This is a great truth – one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult, once we truly understand and accept it, then life is no longer difficult. Because, once it's accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

On her second session to visit me, this depressed woman told me that she had been invited, by church friends her own age, to go to Europe for two years. And I was pretty excited about that. I

told her I thought that was a wonderful thing to do – a way to get out of the house, see the world, have fun with friends. When I asked her where she was going, she told me Poland – to visit the Nazi extermination camps. And I asked her how they decided on that trip, and she explained that it was sponsored by her church. I remember thinking, “Well, this is going to be interesting to see how she reacts to all of this.”

She was gone for two weeks. She came in for her third session after she got back. And she looked better. And I said, “You look much better. What happened?” And she said, “After seeing all the terrible things done by the Nazis to those poor people, I realized my life wasn’t so bad after all. So my take on this was that she had been lifted out of her focus on her own misery and losses, and the difficulty of her loss of her husband had caused her. Her trip had reframed her life. She said, “I have food to eat, clothes to wear, a nice home to live in, good friends who care about me. God loves me and He’s taking care of me. And then she said something that was different from all these good things that she’d just said. She said, “My kids need me.” And that brings us back to starfish.

She had a reason to live now. She always did, but she’d lost sight of that, because of the loss of her husband. She still had a purpose, and now it was time to get back to that. Once she realized that she had a purpose, she began thinking adaptively about what had happened. God still loved her. She had food to eat. She was taken care of. She had friends. And now there was a reason to go get the roof fixed, to keep the house clean, to take care of herself, and to do all that life stuff we need to do to maintain – because her kids needed her.

When we read the story of Elijah, it remarkable what we can learn from it. He was a prophet like no other before, and like no other until the end times come. He did amazing miracles that saved his nation. God caused powerful things to be done through him. I mean, he could give the word and it didn’t rain for three years! Yet, when his life was threatened by Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, it threw him into a deep depression. He was afraid for his life. And what did God do to lift him out of the self-focused state? Well, he told him that there were still seven thousand in Israel who had not worshipped Baal. So, the point there is, that he still had work to do. It’s interesting to me to think about that number. Seven thousand people sounds like a lot, but in the context of the millions of Israelites, seven thousand is just a tiny fraction. So it shows us how far down Israel had fallen – how desperate the times were, how much needed was Elijah’s work, how even though God had caused a massive revival, there was still a *lot* that needed to be done. We saw, also, that God gave Elijah a helper – Elisha – and Elisha was to be ordained to replace Elijah when he was too old to do his work any longer. He had a work of his own to do. But the point was, Elijah needed help to do his work, and God provided it. This motivated Elijah to get up out of his depression, and he took a first step toward recovery. And that step was also his first step in a journey to finish his work. They were the same thing.

And it’s true today – the same thing is true today. When the woman realized that she needed to be present for her children, then she stopped being depressed.

Now, you know, I don't think the old Mexican man on the beach went to the beach with the intent of saving starfish. I think he probably went there to take a walk, just like the American. But when he saw all the starfish drying in the sun, he just started to throw them back in. He saw a need there, and started in on it. In the same way, Elijah, when he learned that there still people who needed help, he just got up and started back to work again. God knew what he needed.

If we think about it, all the greats in the Bible all had this in common. They were all over their God-given purpose. And that faith-filled focus of purpose propelled them through terrible sufferings and discouraging obstacles. And because of that, all those people are assured of a place forever with God. You really need to go back and read the Faith Chapter to get the full impact of what Paul was saying there. But, if you do, you'll see what a purpose can do for a person.

So what am I saying here? Here's a summary. Depression occurs when we suffer loss. When we get depressed, all our energy goes toward preserving the self, and that takes us away from our purpose. When we reconnect with the purpose God has assigned to us, if we take that first step – toss that first starfish – think about those that need our help, think about what God wants us to do, depression lifts. If, when we are depressed, that can be the first step toward moving away from the self-protectiveness of depression and toward the adaptive thinking of a Christ-centered life, we can then see again that difficulty in this life is a part of the plan. We just have to keep working on it.

There was a woman in San Jose, California, in the congregation there, and she had MS. It was pretty advanced, too. She had a hard time getting around. And the members there had a plan, if I remember correctly, to get her to church on a regular basis. They took turns. It was on a schedule. I don't know that she knew that, but somebody always showed up to take her to church. She was very popular, because she was so upbeat, in spite of her deficits. She had a reason to be depressed, but she wasn't. I went to visit her one day in her home. She had a nice, clean, neat apartment with lots of healthy house plants and sunshine. I inquired about her state, and she told me that she had people who came to help her, and that all her needs were met, for the most part. I was so impressed with her. But I was also astounded when I learned that this woman, who could do very little for herself without help, had mounted and maintained a vigorous letter-writing program to minister to the sick and disabled. She didn't seem to feel disabled at all! She was going to go help those who were. No depression. No self-pity. No learned helplessness – just a purpose-driven, Christ-based life. We had lots of great people in that congregation, but of them all, looking back, I think she has to be my hero, doing so much more in such a great attitude with so much less.

Could she say that she helped everyone who was sick? No. But she could write a letter, and say, "I made a difference for that one." And that is all God expects of us. God's really big on "one-at-a-time" for us.

You know, I have a great job. God has given me a job where I get to make difference. I get to help people get past depression and other of life's roadblocks. I don't think I'm special because of it either. I think God has assigned all of us a calling that would provide meaning and satisfaction if we would just get with it. I know I derive an incredible amount of satisfaction from what He has assigned me to do. And every morning, when I get up and get ready to go to work, here's what I think and what anybody can think, if they just will. Now get ready. Here comes the only scripture quoted in this presentation. It's in Psalms 118:24. I can say:

Psalms 118:24 – *This is the day that the LORD has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

And then I can ask myself, "Who is He going to let me help today?"