



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Depression: Encouragement for the Journey – Part 2

Guest(s): Rev. Tommy Nelson

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- Dr. Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.
- Roger Marsh: What's the first thought that comes to mind when you hear the word depression? Oftentimes, especially for Christians, a sense of hopelessness can overtake you during this kind of season. Well, the good news is there is hope for the millions of people who struggle with depression each and every day. And during the next half hour, you're going to hear a powerful conversation featuring two extremely influential men of faith who understand the pain and frustration depression can bring.
- Roger Marsh: Welcome to Family Talk, with your host, psychologist, and bestselling author, Dr. James Dobson. I'm Roger Marsh. And today we're going to hear the second installment of a three-part conversation featuring Pastor Tommy Nelson. Pastor Nelson has served as pastor of Denton Bible Church in Denton, Texas since 1977. He knows what it's like to experience depression firsthand, which included a season when depression kept him out of the pulpit for four months. Here now is part two on the topic, depression, encouragement for the journey on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.
- Dr. Dobson: I want to say this to set up the discussion for today. You are a man's man. You like to hunt, you do masculine things, and you were a great athlete as a kid. And yet, you went through a yearlong bout with depression, and that had to be very unsettling and even terrifying to you. In fact, you used the word panic. Why don't you begin by summarizing what we talked about there for those that didn't have a chance to hear that program last time?
- Tommy Nelson: Well, basically I'm 57 and became a Christian when I was 23. And I'm intense. I was intense as a ballplayer and I'm intense is as a Christian. I've never recovered from just the notion of the Bible that you have a revelation from God. Absolutely true. And you can know the past and present and the future altogether. And so, the idea of communicating that to people and discipling and preaching the gospel, I've never recovered from that privilege. And so, I just overworked myself, put myself in a place where I just ran out of gas completely

and was hit by physical anxiety that became emotional depression and took me out of the ministry. And the frightening thing about it, it's outside of your paradigm. It's nothing you've ever experienced. It's not a physical pain. It's some kind of metaphysical pain though that there's something definitely wrong. You're not just discouraged. You're not just down. There's something wrong with you.

Tommy Nelson: I think sometimes we think of ourselves as our minds are some kind of platonic idea outside of data that is untouched and unhampered, just kind of evaluating everything. And you realize that your mind, whatever it is in the image of God that your mind is, that it operates within the apparatus of a brain. And you never think of the fact that your mind can be off centered. And it's a scary notion to find out that you really are just a vapor that appears for a little while and vanishes away. And it's not just that you can have a bone problem or a muscle or an organ problem, that you can get to where your very apparatus of perception doesn't work and you are crippled completely. That is a scary notion.

Dr. Dobson: And there's no way to put into a sentence or two what that experience is like. That's one of the most awful things that a person can deal with.

Tommy Nelson: I'm thinking I'm done. Because if you had asked me, how about we take off both legs and restore to you how you were, it would have been no call, take them both off and just give me my mind back because my body was fine, but I was through. I couldn't relate to my wife as a husband. I couldn't relate to my kids, my grandkids, to God.

Dr. Dobson: To your church.

Tommy Nelson: To my church, to people. Whatever it is in you and this kind of a last frontier of medicine. There's a lot of things that we are learning about it right now, but whatever there is in you that makes you emotionally responsive is gone and you're finished. And I wanted them to tell me that I had a brain tumor. I wanted them to tell me that I had a-

Dr. Dobson: At least you would know it's something you could understand.

Tommy Nelson: I wanted to know something was wrong with me. And all they kept telling me is that I was perfectly healthy.

Dr. Dobson: Tommy, I mentioned in the program last time that you're certainly not the only minister who has gone through this, you know that. I'm sure many ministers have now admitted to you that they did go through it. And I told you in my office that my father was one of them.

Dr. Dobson: My dad was an evangelist. He was so committed to the cause of Christ that he would just wear himself out. For an evangelist you're on the road, you're away from home. In those days, you're staying with the pastor and his kids and his

family and eating what they eat and being up till late at night and then driving home and leaving for the next one. And my father was a prayer warrior and he would pray sometimes three hours a day for the service that night. And he absolutely exhausted himself. And he threw his brain chemistry off, which is what essentially you went through.

Dr. Dobson: And he went into this despair. His depression mirrored yours. I saw it, I watched it up close and it was the same story. And he and my mother can hear their voices into the middle of the night with her encouraging him and telling him he was going to make it and get through it. And he didn't understand what God had done to him. Here is so dedicated to the kingdom and the Lord took him out of it. And he couldn't preach. He went to see a psychiatrist who scared him to death, told him he would never preach again, implied that he was really goofy. Did not say he'd ever seen it before.

Tommy Nelson: Nothing like encouragement. Yeah.

Dr. Dobson: No encouragement at all. And like you, my dad discovered that through tennis, through athletics, that he could get a moment of peace in between points. And we didn't know how we were going to survive because my dad and... Evangelists, I don't care what people think of evangelists. They don't have much money and we didn't have much money. And my dad would give away a lot of what he was given. I just remember us spraying as a family. I was an only child. I remember one night we prayed for two hours. I'm 13 years old. We're praying for my dad and what we were going to do because we didn't have the money to survive. And you had a church that continued to stay with you and evangelists has many churches and they don't feel a responsibility for you.

Dr. Dobson: And so, I just remember the night that I became aware that God was going to help us. The Christian college nearby, which is now called a Southern Nazarene University in Bethany, Oklahoma, they offered him a position as a professor, totally different assignment. And that gave him a lot of time to recover. And so, he would play tennis every afternoon. And gradually, and it took two years in his case, gradually recovered from it and went on to have 20 years of ministry. But I know what you're talking about. And a lot of people don't and when they see a minister going through something like this, they assume that it's a spiritual problem. Well, it can become one, but that's not the source of it. Exhaustion is the source of it.

Tommy Nelson: I tell people, you need to be aware sometime of your Christian brothers. Whenever I talk to Christians that have this, I say, you need to be careful of evangelicals because they can get real Christian sciency on you. That there's really no evil and really no problem out there. I mean, the same guys that are on Flomax, Cialis, and Lipitor are going to tell you that you're not supposed to take anything for this. Now, they'll take everything for everything, but somehow on this, we're not going to take anything.

Tommy Nelson: And of course, their assumption is that this is absolutely totally mental, emotional, and there is no physical aspect of this whatsoever. And I will assure you, there is a physical aspect to it. And so, you need to work on both ends to say, now let's first analyze this. And this is why incidentally, Jim, I tell pastors, you need to know either someone in your church who has been through it or a real good internist doctor or a real credible psychiatrist that you can refer people to because most ministers have no concept, but you better have somebody you can refer them to that's reliable. But don't go Bildad on them and Zophar and Eliphaz and these guys, and all of a sudden start assigning guilt.

Dr. Dobson: In fact, the book of Job meant something to you during that time.

Tommy Nelson: Oh boy, you telling me. A matter of fact, the book of Job was so painful to me, as I would read through it, that I couldn't read the book of Job for 18 months. That's how real it became. And I have to tell you this, just in passing, this was interesting. God used this so greatly like any injury in my life to bring a humility. Because you can get to believe in your press after a little while that you're pretty much indestructible and God used this, to where you are poured out as a drink offering and you are... when I would read of Christ, father, he would say, "I am grieved under the point of death in the garden." And I understood that, that you can be so low that you say, God, you're going to have to pick me up because there's nothing here that can help me.

Tommy Nelson: I saw the value of my wife. If I hadn't have had the wife that I had.

Dr. Dobson: Teresa.

Tommy Nelson: Yeah, Teresa, that she would put her arm around me and sit and hold me and pray with me and say, "We're going to make this. We're going to pull through this." My church gathered around me. You really need allies right here who are not just going to go preach at you, but say we're with you.

Tommy Nelson: I think God had to touch me because I couldn't read incidentally. I couldn't read.

Dr. Dobson: He couldn't either.

Tommy Nelson: For some reason I could not take sequential data and work with it. I couldn't watch a television show. I couldn't read the paper. I couldn't read the news. It's almost like you can't interact. You're like a third degree burn. And you can't tolerate touching on that thing.

Dr. Dobson: Could you pray during that time?

Tommy Nelson: Yes, I could. That's one thing I could do is I would go off into... We have a Morton building or a barn and I would go up into the top of it and I couldn't connect emotionally. Whatever there is inside of you, that bears witness with your spirit, that you are the child of God. Somehow, it was turned off. I've heard

it speculated that serotonin affects the hypothalamus that affects the emotions and it withers.

Dr. Dobson: Now, we need to explain. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter. So it takes the impulse from one nerve and gets it across the chemical gap to the next nerve. And when serotonin is not there, the nerves don't fire properly. And that is apparently the source of a lot of dysfunction.

Tommy Nelson: And their thought is, is that it affects the part of your brain that affects emotion. And that's why it's not like you're hyper emotional. You are hypo emotional. For the first time in my life, I could not feel that sense of God's love. And I found out this can't be unlike hell. Hell has to be close to this. Abandon all hope, ye who enter.

Tommy Nelson: But there was a couple of times I was out in my garden. I would feel better working in a garden. I would try to keep busy. If I would sit, it was worse, but I would try to work in a garden. And I was humming to myself, the old Ethel waters, his eyes on the sparrow. And I know he watches me. And while I'm working in my garden, I happened onto as I'm singing that a dead sparrow. I kid you not while I'm singing it, his eyes on the sparrow. And I looked down, and there was a dead sparrow. And one day on our back porch, we had a hummingbird got caught in the back porch and the screen in, and he couldn't get loose.

Tommy Nelson: And I went for him to help him because this bird, this little hummingbird was in panic because he couldn't get out and everywhere he would go, he would hit an obstacle that he couldn't see and he just collapsed. He was completely given out and I took him outside and I turned him loose and he flew off. And that all happened on the same day. And I said, God, I'm just going to believe that you know where I am and there's going to be a day that you're going to take me outside and turn me loose. So I'm here to tell you, God is even when you can't tell that he is there, he is there because I was at a child given out in his arms, laying under the shield of faith with not the power to lift it. And he was there.

Dr. Dobson: Tommy, the scripture that means a lot to me in this context. I believe it's in Matthew. You can tell me, but Jesus apparently got tired too. And he came down to the seashore and there were all these people who had needs. Who knows what was represented in that crowd. There's undoubtedly tuberculosis and cancer and all the diseases that human beings experience and they were waiting for him. And he had given all he could give apparently. And Jesus, the great compassionate Lord walked past them and went and got in a boat and rode away because he knew he had gone as far as he could go. The needs are still there. And his compassion hadn't changed. And yet, he needed time alone. And great ministers and those who are being used by the Lord do need to understand that they will come to a time when they need to walk away from those that could use the information and the touch and the compassion and get in a boat and row away.

Tommy Nelson: I delight more in the Lord and in the ministry now than I ever did. My mornings are free. I'm an early morning guy. I love to wake up at 4:00 AM in the dark. It took me four months before I could sleep on my own. I got to where I could sleep on my own. And now it's just-

Dr. Dobson: You mean without medication?

Tommy Nelson: Without medication to let me go to sleep. Now, I get up at 4:00 and I'll just read and pray. And then I may go to bed for 30 minutes, take a little nap, and then go to the day. And it's just a joy. And there's an old admonition. It says, when your output exceeds your intake, your upkeep can become your downfall. And sometimes you can, you can just get poured out to where there's nothing left in you. And I've learned now. I went and spoke to a group of Baptist pastors down in Florida a couple of months ago, and guess what they wanted to hear about?

Tommy Nelson: They wanted to hear about depression. And I got up and started speaking and the place went dead silent, because the fact is we struggle with this. A lot of us see it from a distance, a lot of us you get bushwhacked by it. You get Shanghai by it. It takes you by surprise. And I'll say this, that after you go through it, you have a paradigm of pain that you've never had before. And you tend to be a little nervous. You're like, and this may be a bad illustration, about a woman that has been assaulted let's say. And up until that time, life was just a happy, fun deal. And all of a sudden she found out that there's predators and it's scary out there. And now they become maybe real cautious and a little bit nervous when they get alone. And whenever you go through a depression, you have a sensitivity to your spirit that you've never had before.

Tommy Nelson: And you become kind of wary. Sometimes you can have what's called anticipatory.

Dr. Dobson: But you also become sensitive to the needs of others. It will make you understand.

Tommy Nelson: Yes. When a guy comes to me now and says, "I'm hurting..." People can give me the names of relatives and say, "Would you call?" And I call, because I know the panic of being in that and thinking that there is no hope for you. If you don't know about synapses and serotonin and stuff like that, you can't be a whole lot of immediate help. But what you can do is don't become Bildad on them and say you must have sinned. Job had to offer up a sacrifice for the lousy counsel of his buddies.

Tommy Nelson: That kind of knee jerk deal, if there's evil, there must be sin. God wasn't pleased at that. What you do is you put an arm around them and you say, listen, this happens to folks and it happens to the best of folks. And we need to get you to either someone who's been there or we need to get you to a pro that all they deal with is this because this is the first time you've had it. Well, this guy has seen it a hundred times. And a lot of times with these guys, because you lose a

lot of initiative in this, someone has to get the phone book out for them and find out a real reputable psychiatrist or somebody that knows about this and get them in. So somebody that is in the know.

Tommy Nelson: I felt better just when I went to Frank Minirth. I know you've had on the program, who's a top flight guy. I felt marvelous after just talking to him because he knew the terrain that I was on. That I wasn't crazy, that this happens to people. And sometimes you just almost have a placebo effect by knowing that somebody knows what you're going through, but love them right there, but get them in to see somebody that can help them.

Dr. Dobson: Tommy, here's the \$64,000 question.

Tommy Nelson: Lay it on me.

Dr. Dobson: Have you slowed it down?

Tommy Nelson: Man, I had to cut out my young guys program. I taught guys at 6:00 AM, four mornings a week since 1990. And so it was hard for me to cut that out, but I did.

Tommy Nelson: The Song of Solomon. We taught, I want to say, 100,000 people on the Song of Solomon, wrote a book on it, turned out a video on it that went around the world. And I had to shut that down. I have now gone to a three services and I'm about to turn my evening service over to one of our men. And I'm just going to take two of them. I hate to say it, but I'm getting older. I think I could have got away with this maybe at 35, but I can't get away with it now. And so I've had to cut back.

Dr. Dobson: You're still borrowing on the future though, when you were doing it. The human body is-

Tommy Nelson: I was anaerobic.

Dr. Dobson: It's a machine.

Tommy Nelson: It is.

Dr. Dobson: And you've got to take care of it. And if you don't, you'll gradually deplete it.

Tommy Nelson: You know, you can run a quarter anaerobically where you're burning more than you're breathing. Oh, you can maybe do it for 800 yards, but you can't do it for three laps. At some point, it's going to catch up with you.

Dr. Dobson: What makes this discussion so interesting to me is first of all, because I've seen it with my family and my dad, and I've also dealt with a lot of people who have been there. But I also have everything I need to have done the same thing you

did. I'm a type A person. I've got a lot of energy. Even at my age, I can still go 10 and 12 hours a day, but there's got to be some downtime in there.

Dr. Dobson: But when I finished my graduate work, the whole world opened up to me and I had the drive and the motivation to just work myself to death. And Shirley kept me from doing it. She wasn't willing to be a wife who watched her husband just destroy himself. And also our relationship with one another would suffer when I would get to working too hard. And she kept pulling me back and pulling me back. And as a result, I did not go as far as you did, but I could have. I had the genes for it in my own father and I also was studying about it. So I knew the end result of it. But just listening to you tell me a story that I've heard many times-

Tommy Nelson: Your father was identical to me. When I was listening to you talk about your father, I know at every turn that he took, I know that turn.

Dr. Dobson: He didn't think he would ever preach again.

Tommy Nelson: Sure.

Dr. Dobson: He didn't know where God was in this. It was an awful experience.

Tommy Nelson: I started reviewing all of the messages I had given, wondering if I had said something that was egregiously wrong and I was being punished.

Dr. Dobson: Yeah.

Tommy Nelson: I really would. That's how deep. And once it lifted, all of a sudden, it's like I was the Gerasene Demoniac. I was seated clothed in my right mind. Everything was fine. But during that period, it's the perfect storm.

Dr. Dobson: The only difference between you is that you have the benefit of many more years of medicine and pharmaceuticals that help you.

Tommy Nelson: I really think, Jim, that our day fosters depression and anxiety because the whole success mode and it's just intense. And especially when you're a man in the business world, and there's so many things that you're propped against, if somebody over here from somewhere comes in and buys your company and you get laid off, downsized and you're paying for your kids to be in this. And all of a sudden, you're in an emotional maelstrom out there. And then the wife that is leaning on you, now she can feel these things. I think that our day is a breeding ground for this.

Dr. Dobson: So maybe a bottom line for our listeners out there would be a message. Not only to those who have experienced it or will experience it and urging them to rest, because you've got to rest the body, but it is also a message to everybody else. Don't be too quick to criticize those who have gone through this. You may not know as much as you think you do about the spiritual condition of that

individual. Stay supportive. And for those that are in the family, let them talk, let them work through it. That there are a lot of things-

Tommy Nelson: I would go to my wife-

Dr. Dobson: That's why you got to write a book.

Tommy Nelson: I would say, "Honey," I'd apologize to her. I said, "Theresa, you never signed on for this." And she said, "Better or worse." She said, "This is one of those worse." And if she had cut out on me, I don't think I could have handled it. I really don't. We would ride, Jim, in the car and drive around and just talk. And I would just listen. She had put on 60s music, don't ask me why, and I'd lay back. And I had to have my hand touch her. She was like a steady spot, a safe person. And my hand just had to touch her. And she was my safe point. And if I hadn't had her, I don't know what I would do.

Dr. Dobson: I wish you would have brought her today.

Tommy Nelson: Yeah.

Dr. Dobson: Pastor Nelson, we were going along here at 80 miles an hour and the time has gone. I don't know how it got away from us so quickly, but it does when we're on a nerve like this. And I'm going to have to interrupt you to say that we're through with the program today, but we're not through talking. There's still other things we want to say. And there's students around us. I'm going to ask you to just stay right where you are. Let's talk some more. We'll let our listeners hear that recording next time. And we're going to bring the students into it at the end of that discussion. Is that okay?

Tommy Nelson: That's wonderful.

Dr. Dobson: Okay. Well, thank you for being with us and for sharing from your heart. Give my regards to your family. And I know the Lord is going to continue to put his arm around you and not only strengthen you, but to help you reach out to others who are going through something similar. It's a pleasure to have you here.

Tommy Nelson: Thank you, Jim.

Roger Marsh: Depression, encouragement for the journey. That's been our theme today on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and our thanks again to pastor Tommy Nelson for sharing his own personal experiences with depression and how God brought healing and hope during this tender season.

Roger Marsh: The ministry of Family Talk is committed to bringing you great messages like this one to help you stand for righteousness in the culture, but we can only do it with your help. You can make your tax deductible donation online at

DrJamesDobson.org or call 877-732-6825. I'm Roger Marsh. Be sure to join us again next time for the conclusion of our conversation with Pastor Tommy Nelson on overcoming depression. That's on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Speaker 4: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hi, this is Dr. Tim Clinton for the James Dobson Family Institute. When you think about your family after you're gone, are you worried about them or are you competent they'll hold on to what you've taught them? At the Dobson Family Institute, we're committed to helping you understand the importance of passing on your faith, not only to your children, but to your children's children too. Check out DrJamesDobson.org today. Remember this, your legacy matters. Don't waste it.