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WHEN GOD SEEMS FAR AWAY

Interview with Mark

Mark: I remember waking up, having irrational thoughts, like complete, complete terror. I felt like it was too late for me, that there wasn't any hope for me at all. It's the most terrifying experience I've had in my life.

Richard: I'm Richard Fox for Messages of hope. My guest this week is Mark, a pastor who has been struggling with depression for the last 20 years. How does someone with faith reconcile a God who often seems far away?

Depression challenges us, not only physically and emotionally, but also spiritually. With me today is Mark a pastor who has struggled with depression for about 20 years. Mark is a pastor, husband, and father.

Mark, what was happening in your life when you first realized you were struggling with depression?

Mark: I've had more than a couple of episodes of depression in my life so far but I remember the first was 1998. I had been married for about two years. No children. I was in my final year of study to become a pastor. And I remember doing all the things. I was ticking all the boxes, but I was really going through the motions. It was almost like I was on autopilot, so I was turning up to things, but I wasn't myself. I was always tired. I just couldn't put my finger on it but I knew something wasn't right. Even though I was walking around and functioning, I thought I was dead.

Richard: At what point did you realise you needed help?

Mark: I remember waking up one night, and I would have what you call, a complete nervous breakdown. I felt like it was too late for me, that God was angry at me, that there wasn't any hope for me at all. It's the most terrifying experience I've had in my life. So in that moment I knew that I needed to get help.

Richard: Trying to make sense of that must've been challenging for your faith. I imagine that would have been very difficult.

Mark: Not only was I feeling this way physically and emotionally, but spiritually I felt that I was alone and that God had turned his back on me, and that was probably the hardest thing for me as a person of faith. It's like being in hell. You feel separated from the ones you love, like no one else knows what you're going through. Feeling like there's no hope whatsoever. And this is how it's always going to be.

Richard: So, what were you thinking about your faith in that moment?

Mark: I wasn't doing much thinking at all. I was just curled up in a ball in the foetal position on my bed and not wanting to do anything. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. I actually had to move out of my house, for three months because I was so scared to be in my house. I even remember one night sitting in my parents, lounge room and saying my goodbyes to them and thinking I wasn't going to wake up the next morning.

Richard: What was that like to discover the first time that something like this could actually happen to you?

Mark: Up until that point, I was a fairly happy go lucky guy. I knew I had moments, days when I was down and different things like that but I didn't think something like this could happen. And it was really hard to accept that and probably still is to this day, hard to accept. That I'm a depressed person. You always want to say that I'm okay. I'm doing okay.

Richard: What did it mean then for your journey with your studies?

Mark: I'd studied for four or five years to become a pastor and it was about six weeks before graduation and I had to put my studies on hold. To sit by and watch my classmates graduate and become pastors, that was really hard, to let go. That was one of the hardest things I've had to do, was to actually say no I can't do this.

Richard: So, how did you deal with that first nervous breakdown?

Mark: There's actually not much I could do about it. I've been blessed in my situation that I've had people, just at the right time come along and help me. I've had a very supportive wife who took me to see my pastor and we also saw a doctor. He started the process of getting me some help of medication, which I'm still on today, but also counselling.

Richard: And how did it feel for you to go through those processes and those steps?

Mark: In one sense, it was a relief to be getting some help. Things didn't immediately become better. They became worse for a while.

Richard: In what ways did they become worse?

Mark: Obviously with medications and with counselling, these things take time. It's not an easy fix or a quick fix. And so just getting those things right to start off with, took some time. And, I was still living with those same thoughts and fears I had at the start.

Richard: That must have been frustrating.

Mark: Yeah. Somebody once said to me, it's like having a broken arm, or maybe a heart condition or something like that. You've got to recognize the limitations. If you've sprained your leg or something like that, you wouldn't try and do a marathon if you've sprained your leg. You've got to recognise it doesn't heal quickly.

Richard: Who are the people who've helped you the most?

Mark: There's a friend of mine named Ken, and he always sticks out to me. Because, he came around with a couple of bottles of beer and he didn't say much that day. He sat on the porch with me, we each drank a beer, and he just offered a short prayer at the end and said, I'm thinking about you mate and then he left. But I still remember that moment and I will for the rest of my life. I don't really remember what he said so much. I just remember him being there. They don't have to say the right words or do the right things. I think that's probably been one of the most helpful things, having someone to listen.

Richard: And what did that mean for you to have him come over like that?

Mark: It didn't mean that the problems went away, he didn't fix anything. But to know that somebody cared enough to walk the journey with me, whatever that meant. That just meant the world to me. I'll never forget Ken. And that's something I've found throughout my journey with depression I've actually been blessed to have people just at the right time. And I'd say I'd call them God's messengers for me. They give me hope.

Richard: So, what does your depression look like now for you and going forward?

Mark: I see this as a lifelong journey for me. But it's not one that I have to lie down and accept, it just means I've got to live a little bit differently now. But that's an opportunity God's given me to actually use what I've been through to help others. And now it's opened so many doors for me and connected me to so many people who are going through depression, where I can perhaps offer a word of hope or help. That's satisfying. Yeah

Richard: What does a day or a week look like for you now?

Mark: A day would be much similar as it was before, but perhaps a few more spaces to take a break. I might have two days off a week instead of one. Time in prayer and meditation on God's word. I guess the thing for me is this is how it is at the moment. This is how it is for me today. I have my good days. Don't get me wrong. Good weeks, even months where things are going well, the good days and the good weeks are probably times when I can actually silence those voices that bring or drag you down, but I think I can just see my clarity is just the way I see things is a bit more glass half full rather than glass half empty.

Richard: Yeah. Mark I'm curious whether these years of struggling with depression have changed your understanding of God in any way.

Mark: I don't think it's changed my understanding. I just think it's enlarged my view. And of his, ultimately his love for me, that he's there with me, not just in the times when things are going well and when I'm tracking well, but in the times when I'm down in the depths of despair and I can't find a way out myself, but he's there for me.

Richard: Can you describe how you've experienced God being there for you?

Mark: It doesn't come in blinding lights and big experiences. It's the little experiences along the way. Like I said before, it's those people that God puts across your path. That's when I know he's there with me the most.

Richard: Looking back to that night, when you were first confronted with how bad your depression was, how do you make sense of that now?

Mark: I come back to when Jesus was on the cross. And he cried out, my father, my father, why have you forsaken, me? Now Jesus felt that his own father, his God, had forsaken him, and yet there was still a relationship there. He was still talking to his father, and if you know the end of the story, we know that he didn't forsake him. And so that's my hope. For me as well that just because we think God is silent, or not acting in our lives or that he doesn't care. That doesn't mean he's not there, with us in the depths as well.

Richard: And what does that mean for you?

Mark: Means that there's no situation that I couldn't go through, that he's not already going to be there, and it means that there's hope for me. Despite my failures, despite my, weakness, despite my sickness, there's somebody who cares. I'm not alone.

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